

Transferring Educational Capital After Forced Migration: Education, Language, and Embedding of Resettled Afghans in the UK

Aknowledgment

This project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. The paper draws on one strand of a large, mixed-methods study 'Afghan Resettlement in England: Experiences and Opportunities', funded by the Nuffield Foundation (2024–2026).

Wider research team: Caroline Oliver (PI), Mustafa Raheal, Mursal Rasa and Olga Cara (University College London), Louise Ryan and Maria Lopez (London Metropolitan University), and Janroj Keles (London Middlesex University).

Research Overview

This paper examines the role of education and English language proficiency in the embedding of resettled Afghans in the UK. Drawing on large-scale survey data, it focuses on the transferability of pre-arrival educational capital, its links with employment and the mediating role of English language during the resettlement.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this paper is to understand how education contributes to the embedding of resettled Afghans in the UK, with particular attention to whether educational capital acquired before migration is transferable and how English language knowledge and learning mediate this process. While education is often positioned as a key driver of refugee integration, existing research demonstrates that migrant and refugee educational capital is unevenly recognised and constrained by institutional, linguistic, and labour market structures (Bourdieu, 1986; Erel, 2010; Baxter, 2025). This study addresses gaps in empirical evidence by examining how resettled Afghans navigate education, language learning, and employment simultaneously.

The analysis is informed by embedding theory, which conceptualises settlement as a relational, differentiated, and temporally evolving process rather than a linear set of outcomes (Ryan, 2018). Within this framework, education is understood as a form of capital whose value is continually renegotiated through encounters with education systems, language regimes, and labour markets (Erel & Ryan, 2019; Van Praag, 2025). The study explores how English language proficiency operates as a key educational bridge that enables or constrains the conversion of prior educational capital into meaningful participation in employment and education.

Research Methods

This research was carried out over a two-year period (2024–2025) and employed a collaborative, mixed-methods approach to understand Afghans' experiences as they were resettled across localities in England. While the wider project comprised a

large-scale survey alongside four complementary strands of qualitative research, this paper draws specifically on the survey component.

The research examines experiences and outcomes of the UK's Afghan resettlement schemes established following the 2021 evacuation, under which 37,950 Afghans had been relocated to the UK by 2026 (Home Office, 2026). Participants were resettled under government programmes supporting Afghans and their immediate family members who faced risk due to their association with British and wider interventions, including work in the military, democratic governance, women's rights, and media. This population should not be confused with individuals who arrived not using legal routes or sought asylum independently.

The survey was carried out with Afghan adults aged 18 and over who had moved into settled accommodation and were no longer residing in transitional settings such as temporary service family accommodation on military sites. Afghan peer researchers were employed and trained to conduct face-to-face interviews either in person or through pre-arranged video calls. Responses were entered directly into Qualtrics during interviews.

Surveys were conducted in four regions: London, the South East, the West Midlands, and the North West. The 115-question questionnaire was offered in English, Pashto, and Dari and structured into eight thematic sections covering education, language learning, employment, social participation, and future aspirations. The survey achieved 819 responses (789 valid), accomplishing gender parity and diversity in age and ethnicity, with response rates between 45% and 55% of resettled Afghan households in each locality.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that pre-migration educational capital among resettled Afghans is substantial but unevenly distributed and transferable. Many, particularly male respondents, reported secondary or higher education qualifications and, in many cases, professional experience prior to displacement. However, these assets were frequently devalued or suspended following resettlement, reflecting broader patterns of deskilling and blocked mobility among refugees (Bloch, 2004; Muñoz-Comet & Miyar-Busto, 2018; Bygnes, 2021).

English language proficiency emerged as a central mediating factor shaping whether and how educational capital could be mobilised. Respondents with higher levels of English proficiency reported greater access to further and higher education, vocational training, and employment aligned with their skills. Language learning facilitated engagement with institutional processes, and labour market pathways, supporting deeper embedding over time (Simpson & Whiteside, 2015; Hsieh, 2021; Kanas & Kosyakova, 2023). In contrast, limited English proficiency was associated with deskilling, restricted educational progression, and weaker labour market participation.

The findings demonstrate that English language proficiency functions as more than a complementary support and is shown to be a core mechanism through which educational capital becomes usable, recognised, and convertible within the host-country context (Norton, 2013; Rössel & Schroedter, 2021). Engagement in further language learning also supports social connection and network-building, both of which are crucial for the conversion of educational capital into employment and participation (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Ryan et al., 2026). However, gaps in ESOL availability and alignment with learners' prior education and social needs continue to limit its effectiveness as an educational bridge for some participants.

Keywords

Refugee education; English language learning; educational capital; employment; embedding