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Asylum seekers want to work — why are we not letting them?

Ryan Bourne

Thursday April 14 2022, 12:01am, The Times

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Imagine a policy that could ease labour market pressures, improve the public finances and enhance the life chances for a vulnerable group, with little downside. That's the prize on offer in allowing asylum seekers the right to work sooner. The law today bans those seeking refuge from finding a job for a year as they wait for claims to be processed, while limiting them after that to designated "shortage" occupations only. The result is a human catastrophe of inactivity and wasted potential.

Some 62,000 asylum seekers have waited longer than six months for their claims to be processed. Four-fifths of them are of working age. Tens of thousands of willing workers are therefore left twiddling their thumbs on inadequate government support, or working in the shadow economy, as their skills atrophy, their morale evaporates and businesses cry out for labour.

The need to rethink these rules is overdue and overwhelming, not just because of current conditions. [The UK's 12-month wait period](#) is more draconian than Canada or Sweden (no time restriction), Germany and the Netherlands (three and six months respectively). It costs the Treasury hundreds of millions

of pounds a year in spending and foregone revenues: costs eclipsed only by the legacy of refugee joblessness and crime that later results from prolonged inactivity.

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Business leaders, unsurprisingly, support making work easier. A 2019 Survation poll found that more than two-thirds agreed with granting asylum seekers work rights after six months. Job vacancies since have jumped to a record 1.3 million, with companies struggling to fill roles from agricultural workers to security guards. The National Farmers' Union and the Recruitment and Employment Confederation are lobbying the home secretary to change the law.

Asylum seekers themselves obviously suffer most from the status quo. Current inflation rates expose the precariousness of vulnerable families' ability to afford life's essentials, yet asylum seekers' government support stands at just £40.85 a week. Aside from the inhumanity of restricting earned income through work bans, research from economists Francesco Fasani, Tommaso Frattini and Luigi Minale shows that they scar refugees' future labour market participation and language proficiency, too. An inability to work when seeking asylum in a country reduces your longer-term employment probability by 15 per cent.

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Why does the government oppose relaxing these rules? The Home Office worries about a “pull factor” — the idea that more people would come here if it became easier to get a job, with even economic migrants perhaps encouraged to pursue the asylum route. Whether attracting those keen to work is a major “problem” is debatable. But though we'd expect incentives to

encourage this effect, it's the magnitude that matters. How many additional people are we talking about?

Remarkably, the government has provided no data to indicate the problem's scale, with its own Migration Advisory Committee challenging it to provide evidence. A University of Warwick review of existing studies found no "long-term correlation between labour market access and destination choice". Instead, asylum seekers' location decisions appear to be largely shaped by perceptions of how welcome they would be, and cultural or linguistic ties.



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Unfortunately, economists' favoured recommendation — remove work restrictions entirely — is a bridge too far in a post-Brexit environment. But with the labour market backdrop and sympathy [for those fleeing Ukraine](#), might it be time for a modest rethink?

Dominic Raab has previously expressed open-mindedness on relaxing restrictions. Next week, the Commons will vote on Tory peer Baroness Stroud's amendment to the national and borders bill, which would shorten the employment ban to six months and eliminate the shortage occupation list.

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This compromise reflects political realities but would be a significant improvement that makes financial, economic and moral sense. Absent some explosive countervailing evidence, it's a no-brainer.

Ryan Bourne is R Evan Scharf chair for the Public Understanding of Economics at the Cato Institute and author of the recent book Economics in One Virus

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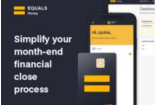
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It is logical that genuine refugees such as the people from Ukraine are allowed to work as soon as they arrive in the UK.

Economic migrants who are trying to get around the system by paying for places on boats across the channel are completely different. - If they were genuine asylum seekers they ...[See more](#)

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70% of Syrian refugees in Germany are still on benefits after 5 years in the country.

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Because it would create a 'moral hazard' type of situation. The more work provided and the more this becomes known about

globally then the more it would act as an additional pull factor. Give it time and this cumulative effect would surely grow. *(Edited)*

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No. Those arriving in dinghies must not be allowed to work and keep down wages for everyone else.

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Agreed, the employers do like cheap labour market.

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As a trade union member i would say:

(1) it may encourage illegal immigration

(2) wages of the working poor (those paid hourly) were depressed during our membership of the EU it is only now that moral wrong is being corrected.

(3) there are large numbers of economically unactive people who should be ...**See more**

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S

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If you were an employer trying to fill vacancies, you would know that your point 3 is not correct. There are far too many people who are not willing to train / take a job, but would prefer to take benefits.

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Correct. brown who introduced in-work benefits just depressed wages so that employers could use low paid eastern European migrants on the posted worker directive.

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'Unfortunately, economists' favoured recommendation — remove work restrictions entirely — is a bridge too far in a post-Brexit environment.' These will be similar to the economists who, back in the early 90s, suggested that e.g. EU free movement would only add a few hundred thousand to the populati...**See more**

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Vastly more than 4-6 million.

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- S SurreyBadger** • 14 APRIL, 2022

Economic migrants not asylum seekers thank you

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- S Stephen Burnett** • 14 APRIL, 2022

We have difficulty filling vacancies in our economy RIGHT NOW. These migrants are more motivated to work than many idle locals.

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- P PSG** • 14 APRIL, 2022

Really they want to work, I think most are happy to relax by coffee shops have some money in their pocket, come to Hounslow and let's see how many you get to work.

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- S SimpleEconomics** • 14 APRIL, 2022

Because its not just an economic decision.

If you allow them to work then you encourage economic migrants to come as asylum seekers.

Not saying this is right or wrong but the above article only thinks about economics hence is a flawed analysis in my opinion....**See more**

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- A Augie March** • 14 APRIL, 2022

..... A University of Warwick review of existing studies found no “long-term correlation between labour market access and destination choice”.

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- H Homerton85** • 14 APRIL, 2022

This is a ridiculous idea that is effectively asking the government to abandon any control over who is allowed to come into the country. The idea that this wouldn't be another huge pull factor is beyond parody. It also presupposes that these economic migrants want to do the jobs we can't currently ...**See more**

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- C Chris Craft** • 14 APRIL, 2022

I'm no fortune teller but I bet your a middle aged man, working for the state, in a pension watching job, probably

divorced or unhappy, that thought they'd have done better in life by now financially?

When in fact if you had the world you'd be no different.

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A brilliant article and makes sense for everyone. Foreign workers pay for old peoples pensions, fact. Let the work

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