

Pathways to Research Employment: Reflections and suggestions from a research organisation's experience

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About the Jigsaw Learning Brief Series

The Jigsaw Learning Brief Series provides an open-access contribution to building evidence for education. Each brief focuses on a different issue in education and research in low- and middle-income countries, sharing insight and thought leadership to help shape the sector.

Key messages

- There is a lack of guidance currently available relating to the long-term employment of refugees, and even less in relation to refugee employment within research.
- Employing refugees within research teams is an enriching experience for all concerned, provided that the organisation strikes a good balance between understanding different refugee researchers' specific needs and making proactive adjustments to address these, and treating refugee researchers in the same way as other employees to avoid tokenism.
- To ensure that this balance is achieved, organisations should be guided by the refugee researchers themselves wherever possible, and also be prepared to constantly reflect on the power dynamics and structures at play in these employment relationships, remaining willing to learn and adapt where necessary.

The purpose of this brief

For the past nearly two years, Jigsaw has employed six refugee research assistants (RAs): three based in Rwanda and three in Pakistan. This learning brief offers insight into this employment experience from RAs themselves and other team members with whom they work. The aim of the brief is to reflect on the successes, challenges and lessons learned from this experience; it is hoped that other research organisations (and indeed other organisations more broadly) may use this brief to reflect on and plan their own efforts to create successful employment opportunities for refugees. It should also be noted that, while it is important to think carefully about how to approach refugee recruitment processes, this brief will focus specifically on what happens next: how to embed refugee researchers successfully within an organisation once they have received the job offer.

Introduction and context

In February 2022, after a rigorous application and interview process, Jigsaw welcomed six research assistants (RAs) to the team, all with refugee backgrounds. With three based in Rwanda and three in Pakistan, all RAs work completely remotely on a permanent basis. Their job is to support other members of the research team with a variety of projects and tasks, from literature searches and reviews to data collection, analysis and presentations.

Expanding the team in this way came as a result of several years of fruitful

collaboration with these individuals and their colleagues as part of [Voices of Refugee Youth](#), a participatory research initiative exploring the impact of post-primary education on refugees in Pakistan and Rwanda. This initiative highlighted the unique and valuable insight that refugee researchers can bring to research processes, but also exposed the lack of opportunities for young refugees to continue their professional development and access stable employment. Study participants in both Pakistan and Rwanda frequently reported a lack of employment opportunities, as well as discriminatory factors such as legal barriers to employment or employer prejudice against refugees ([Daltry et al., 2023](#)). This is supported by findings from the British Council that refugees are up to six times more likely to be unemployed than non-refugees ([British Council, 2018](#)). In parallel, young refugee voices continue to be excluded from the research sphere; literature searches conducted within the Voices of Refugee Youth initiative revealed a pronounced lack of refugee education studies conducted by refugees themselves.

Jigsaw was, therefore, keen to build on and activate the lessons learned from this experience; employing selected members of the Voices of Refugee Youth cohort on a longer-term basis would enrich projects with refugees' contextual knowledge and perspectives, while also providing vital opportunities for young refugees to develop their professional knowledge and skill sets in a stable, nurturing environment.

This brief is based primarily on the reflections of RAs themselves. Key reflections and lessons were drawn from employment narratives drafted by two RAs

within the team. These were then supplemented by the reflections of the staff member most involved in supporting RAs in their employment with Jigsaw, as well as learnings taken from two of the Voices of Refugee Youth deliverables: a [participatory research toolkit](#) and a field note on participatory approaches to research published by the Journal on Education in Emergencies (forthcoming). Ten key reflections were selected for final inclusion in the brief based on the extent to which they provide transferable lessons for other organisations seeking to follow in Jigsaw's footsteps. The brief has been reviewed by the four other RAs employed by Jigsaw, as well as other members of the wider team who have worked closely with the RAs over the past two years.

While the aim is for these reflections to be useful to other organisations, it is also important to bear in mind that the views and experiences of the refugees employed by Jigsaw are not necessarily representative of refugees in other displacement contexts, or even those from the same contexts. Conversely, while effort has been taken to draw out reflections that are likely to be particularly linked to refugee experiences, some of the content included below may also be applicable to or useful for the employment of other groups, especially those in the early stages of their careers who are members of other marginalised communities.

It may also be helpful to note that we have chosen to refer to Jigsaw's refugee employees as 'RAs' at points where we are reflecting directly on experiences from within the Jigsaw team, as this is the level at which they work within Jigsaw's organisational structure. However, we switch to using the term 'refugee

researchers' when suggesting learnings that may be taken on by others, as they may be given a variety of different responsibilities depending on each organisation. This being said, the majority of insights in this brief are specific to refugees who are entering the research field at entry level, and would likely not apply to more experienced refugee researchers.

Relatedly, it is also important to note that the RAs working with Jigsaw are working in English, which is their second, third or even fourth language in some cases. All RAs have high spoken and written English proficiency, though gaps in language knowledge and skills remain. Some of the points below might therefore be less relevant to refugee researchers working in their first language, for whom language-related challenges are less of an issue.

Finally, we recognise that Jigsaw is an organisation based in the Global North and therefore works according to the established systems, structures and cultures of its location in the UK. The organisation has attempted to tread a careful path between adapting to the structural and cultural norms of RAs' settings, while also maintaining the expectations and conditions of UK-based organisations in its employment of RAs.

Literature review

There is an absence of literature concerning research companies recruiting refugees on a long-term basis. Instead, existing literature focuses on employing refugees in co-produced research on a project-by-project basis ([Baqir Bayani et al., 2023](#)), or the dynamics of Global

North-Global South research partnerships more broadly ([Getachew et al., 2022](#), [Haelwaters et al., 2021](#)). Haelwaters et al. created a list of ten rules that should be followed to avoid “helicopter research” (when researchers from the Global North conduct research in the Global South without working with local communities) and Carbonnier and Kontinen ([2014](#)) explored best and worst practices in Global North-Global South research partnerships.

Some authors have, however, discussed post-job offer workplace practices for refugees outside the research sector. For example, Ortlieb and Weiss ([2020](#)) argue that job quality for refugees extends beyond economic factors to workplace culture and learning opportunities. Furthermore, Hurstfield et al. ([2004](#)) conducted a study of ten UK-based companies’ experiences of employing refugees. While the study primarily focuses on the recruitment stage, there were some examples of aiding refugee integration in the workplace. For instance, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue have made their diversity training programme compulsory and Travel West Midlands want their staff to be aware of their refugee colleagues’ stories (ibid).

Similarly to Hurstfield et al., Hirst et al. ([2021](#)) discuss the recruitment process and onboarding. The authors recommend that refugee employees should be partnered with colleagues who act as mentors. Ortlieb and Knappert ([2023](#)) also stress the importance of an inclusive organisational culture. They suggest moving away from the refugee label and refugee employees’ backgrounds in the workplace, focusing instead on employees’ skills.

While these studies are helpful, it is clear that significant knowledge gaps continue to exist in terms of how to successfully employ refugees within research organisations specifically, and ensure that they are embedded and supported beyond the recruitment process. This learning brief offers an initial attempt to address this gap.

Ten good practice suggestions

1. Consider initial practicalities

It is crucial that some initial, practical steps are taken as soon as refugee researchers have made it through the recruitment process. The first of these is to issue them with a clearly worded, comprehensive contract, which includes key information such as salary, working hours, and leave entitlement. This is especially important from a refugee perspective, given the additional levels of instability to which refugee employees may be more vulnerable in their lives.

Good hardware and a strong, stable internet connection are vital for conducting research work, especially in instances where refugee researchers are working completely remotely (as is the case for Jigsaw). Jigsaw supplies all its employees, including RAs, with high-quality hardware, such as laptops. Refugee researchers may not be in a position to buy the high-quality hardware and internet package needed to complete their work effectively. In cases where refugee researchers struggle to access the technology required, the employing

organisation should step in to cover additional costs.

Once refugee researchers are happy with contract terms and have the equipment they need, it is important that they are shown how to use all internal systems (such as Slack and Harvest, in the case of Jigsaw) through a robust onboarding process. For refugees who have not previously worked in formal settings, internal systems and processes are likely to be unfamiliar. It is therefore important to guide them through how to use each tool and ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for questions. A good way of doing this is having a staff member model use of each internal tool. While this can be achieved online via screen-sharing, Jigsaw has learnt that effort should be made to run such activities in person wherever possible as this enables a greater level of immediate and clear communication.

“As refugees and citizens of a developing nation, the contract terms and financial benefits associated with the job always hold significant importance. Having a clear upfront understanding of aspects such as salary structure and leave policies proved to be very helpful.” (Noor, Research Assistant)

“It could have been better if Jigsaw had organised a physical induction week for me and other RAs. This could have helped me to easily understand some tools... For instance, it was not easy for me to understand how Trello works, and it might have been helpful if it was taught in person so that I might be able to ask questions on how to use it [more immediately] whenever I face difficulties.” (Aimée, Research Assistant)

“Access to a stable internet connection is paramount for remote work. Employers should ensure that refugee researchers

have reliable internet access and alternatives to participate in online meetings in a timely and smooth manner, access research resources, and communicate effectively... Providing necessary hardware such as laptops, smartphones, and software tools required for the job also ensures that researchers can perform their tasks efficiently.” (Noor, Research Assistant)

2. Create context awareness

Refugee researchers may have to contend with practical and emotional difficulties that are associated with their geographical location, refugee status, or displacement experiences. Conversely, their experiences may afford them valuable insight into project contexts, and they may have other prior knowledge that can be harnessed during project work. Creating an awareness of refugee researchers’ backgrounds across the team enables the team to understand where flexibility may be required, but also where refugee researchers may be uniquely placed to contribute to project work.

At Jigsaw, this contextual awareness has been built in a variety of ways; the first is through setting up one-to-one sessions between RAs and other members of the research team shortly after they were recruited, in which RAs discussed their experiences and interests to the extent that they felt comfortable. RAs also have fixed weekly check-in meetings (and additional bookable ring-fenced time) with their line managers, which provide regular opportunities for RAs to update their line

manager on new experiences and challenges that they may be facing (though, as noted in the quote below, line managers could perhaps invite the sharing of context information more explicitly during check-ins). With RAs' permission and if it is considered relevant, line managers can then pass this information to project managers, who can use it to plan RAs' tasks accordingly. Ensuring that RAs are in control of what information gets shared and what remains confidential enables the team to gain meaningful insights into refugees' experiences while avoiding tokenisation of those experiences.

“Jigsaw tried to ensure team members' awareness of my context during the first months after I joined by arranging sessions for me to meet other staff. This was really helpful as I was new to the team and it helped me to get to know other staff members and also helped them to understand my background. To improve further, I think Jigsaw could resume these sessions and shift them to line managers, so I could discuss any changes in my context regularly even a long time after joining Jigsaw. Furthermore, I suggest that my line manager or I could record details about my context in writing and make this document accessible to other staff members.” (Aimée, Research Assistant)

3. Clearly outline expectations

Organisational expectations should be made clear from the start, even those that may seem obvious. This information should be provided in written form and reiterated verbally during induction and wherever necessary thereafter. Whether due to being accustomed to engaging in more

informal work (due in turn to restrictive employment laws in host countries), or to differing cultural norms when it comes to employment, employees from some refugee communities may not be immediately aware of some expectations and practices that may be commonplace in the country where the hiring organisation is located. Examples include giving advance notice when taking leave and communicating schedule conflicts in good time.

“Before starting work, my role and expectations were well communicated by Jigsaw through written documents and later emphasised and reiterated by our supervisors and line manager. So understanding my role and responsibilities from day one helped me set clear goals and expectations for my job.” (Noor, Research Assistant)

“I am aware of Jigsaw's expectations of employees as they are stated in my contract letter... In addition to this, I get reminded about some of the expectations through meetings that Jigsaw staff arrange for me and other RAs whenever they realise that there is an issue in meeting them.” (Aimée, Research Assistant)

“Jigsaw explained clearly their expectations to me at the beginning of the job. Knowing them helps me in my day-by-day job at Jigsaw for I work accordingly” (Gentile, Research Assistant)

4. Provide regular training

Refugee researchers may have knowledge and skill gaps that are not immediately apparent, or which are less predictable due to disrupted education journeys. Jigsaw

has learnt that it is crucial to identify knowledge and skill gaps early on to be able to quickly put training activities in place that address them. Ongoing, structured training ensures that refugee researchers are equipped to carry out their work.

RAs at Jigsaw report that having a 2-hour training session every week plus follow-up activities and a review session the following week has been very effective at building their knowledge, skills, and confidence. The topics of these training sessions are chosen based on gaps identified by RAs themselves, as well as their line managers, and are run on a rota by different members of the Jigsaw team. They cover a range of areas, including sector knowledge, research skills, and broader professional skills.

In addition, it is equally important that refugee researchers are given regular opportunities to put these skills into practice through live project work. This consolidates learning, builds confidence, and enables refugee researchers to contribute meaningfully to project outputs from the start. Furthermore, the variety of training helps to bridge the gap between RAs and senior research roles as RAs are able to contribute an increasing number of skills to projects, creating a clearer pathway of career development.

“The training topics I have found most useful include structured writing, quant analysis, running a meeting, and many more. Every training session has been immensely helpful in learning new complementary skills to succeed as a professional researcher. Besides formal training, I have also found embedded learning opportunities very helpful while working on a project, like shadow writing, reviewing and reworking already completed tasks.” *(Noor, Research Assistant)*

“During training, I particularly remember learning the PEE writing strategy, which means to first write a point, state its evidence and explain the evidence that supports the point. This was really a great session because most of the work I do at Jigsaw is based on writing, so the session was really necessary. As a result, there has been a great improvement in how I develop pieces of writing at work; this really helps my supervisors as well as other audiences to understand my work.” *(Aimée, Research Assistant)*

5. Set up regular line manager check-ins

Regular sessions with a line manager enable refugee researchers to discuss any queries or issues in a supportive environment and also to reflect on professional progress. These sessions should be adapted to refugee researchers' needs and preferences. For example, some RAs working with Jigsaw have expressed a preference for small-group sessions rather than one-to-ones, as they like to learn from each other's feedback and feel more comfortable discussing their work with other RAs present. In addition to regular meetings, line managers should make themselves available for ad hoc meetings

to be able to respond quickly as issues arise. They should ensure that refugee researchers are aware of their availability and of the best channel through which to communicate.

“Regular team meetings, one-on-one discussions, and feedback sessions have been instrumental in addressing any concerns and keeping me aligned with organisational goals. For instance, one day I had a problem with completing my assigned task, and was feeling insecure to ask. Without me saying anything, the line manager understood my issue and guided me through the task and made it really easy for me to complete.” (Noor, Research Assistant)

“I appreciated the initiatives from line managers to have protected time for RAs during the week. During that time, I could reach out to my line manager (or anyone else) if I needed advice or support. It helped me to feel more supported. Such initiative is helpful for me as a refugee and for any new remote employee for their mental well-being.” (Aime Parfait, Research Assistant)

provide refugee researchers with an additional layer of practical support. It is therefore important that refugee researchers are encouraged to communicate regularly and given opportunities to collaborate on tasks through proactively setting up in-person or online meetings to discuss task instructions together.

“Peer support has been instrumental in helping me navigate challenges and excel in my role. For instance, if I am not able to get into a meeting on time due to the internet or other challenges, I message other RAs to help communicate my message to the rest of the team. Sometimes, if we have to miss training sessions, we communicate and collaborate to fill in each other’s gaps.” (Noor, Research Assistant)

“For one project, it was helpful to find myself working with another RA because we used to discuss tasks together and figure out how to follow the guidance given. This helped me to enhance my teamwork skills... We could learn from one another through discussions on how we might work on the tasks. This led me to complete tasks without many difficulties.” (Aimée, Research Assistant)

6. Encourage peer support

RAs report that they benefit significantly from receiving support from other RAs who are at a similar stage in their professional development journeys. Working together enables them to fill gaps in each other’s knowledge, and provides valuable opportunities for cross-cultural awareness raising. Given that RAs working with Jigsaw work remotely, collaborating with others based in the same locations (in this case, in the same area of Peshawar in Pakistan, and in Kigali, Rwanda) can also

7. Ensure that tasks are appropriate to skill and knowledge levels

It is important to identify early on the areas in which refugee researchers have relevant pre-existing knowledge. This enables project managers to understand where refugee researchers may bring additional value, and starting from a place where refugee researchers already have some experience is a good way to build

confidence. Determining pre-existing knowledge and skill levels can be done through in-depth conversations with line managers about past experience and qualifications during the induction period, as well as internal inception meetings with project managers. It is also crucial that both line and project managers constantly evaluate refugee researchers' skills and knowledge by reviewing the extent to which they have successfully completed set tasks. They should then ensure that they communicate observed progress and development needs regularly amongst each other. This ensures that tasks are manageable while maintaining an appropriate level of challenge and that the relevant support is put in place to enable refugee researchers to develop further.

“I remember once I joined Jigsaw I was selected to be among a team working on data analysis and writing an article within the first few days I think! This lifted up my confidence that I can do it.” (Aimée, Research Assistant)

“I made the team aware of my background in IT through my CV and quarterly performance reviews, so the team would then assign me tasks relevant to that domain. For instance, one project included a website evaluation task, which exactly matched my previous experience. This was assigned to me and I completed it to a high standard.” (Noor, Research Assistant)

“Understanding which languages RAs have a working knowledge of has been extremely valuable during project work; this knowledge has enabled project managers to assign work that RAs are uniquely well placed to complete, and which also increases their confidence. So far, RAs have used their language skills to perform non-English literature searches, review report content, and conduct

primary data collection.” (Katrina, Research Manager)

8. Build feedback time into project management time allocations

In order to meaningfully support refugee researchers' development, it is essential that they receive regular feedback, and suggestions for how to incorporate this feedback, for all contributions to project tasks. However, doing so requires a significant time investment from project managers or other team members responsible for overseeing these tasks.

To ensure that refugee researchers maximise the available learning opportunities and that the quality of output is maintained, team leaders must factor in the extra time needed for project managers to provide detailed feedback when calculating staff time allocations for each project. Alternatively, internal time must be set aside in which to provide and work through feedback with RAs.

“Beside formal training, I have also found embedded learning opportunities very helpful while working on a project, like shadow writing, reviewing, and reworking already completed tasks.” (Noor, Research Assistant)

“Reviewing RAs' work and guiding them through on-the-job learning is one of my favourite parts of my job. Having more time to provide detailed feedback and reflect on

arising challenges with RAs would help to ensure that giving this feedback doesn't lead to additional pressure being placed on myself or on other research team members." (Katrina, Research Manager)

questions they need in a more private space. We have recently converted this into a live Slack channel so that I can see as soon as new questions have been asked." (Katrina, Research Manager)

9. Create awareness around language use across the team

While some exposure to new language is helpful for linguistic development, overusing language that contains a lot of idioms, context-specific slang or acronyms can feel alienating and can prevent refugee researchers who are not working their first language from contributing confidently to discussions. It is therefore important to remind other team members of this to ensure that the language used in team discussions is generally accessible to all present.

In parallel, line managers could explain terms that they feel may be unfamiliar to refugee researchers in a private chat during meetings, or set up a live document in which refugee researchers can ask language-related questions that arise through their work.

"In addition to adding explanations into team discussions where appropriate, we recently created a shared document where RAs can add any language-related queries. As the member of staff who oversees their training, I check this regularly and respond to queries, adding links to relevant grammar exercises or YouTube videos. RAs have made great use of this opportunity; it gives them a space where they can ask the

10. Encourage reflection and critique of organisational processes

Some refugee researchers may be used to lower levels of job security in their contexts, which may make them nervous to be critical of organisational processes. They may also be used to working in more rigid organisational structures, or to broader cultural norms that promote the concept of strict hierarchy. It is therefore important to reassure refugee researchers that providing criticism is a safe and valuable thing to do.

Demonstrating that the voices of all team members, from directors and managers to early-career researchers, are equally valid in team discussions, and that these voices can be critical without negative consequences, will also help to build refugee researchers' confidence. This should be modelled regularly in team discussions and explicitly reiterated to refugee researchers during line manager check-ins. Indeed, encouraging refugee researchers to raise issues and make suggestions for improvements is directly beneficial and important for the organisation's development.

“I have noticed that some of the RAs may conceptualise the Jigsaw team in a more hierarchical way than other team members do. When asked how they feel about different aspects of their work, they are often eager to point out positive experiences, but are usually reluctant to note areas that they are less happy with. I often wonder whether they fear negative consequences from being critical, so I have made a point of explicitly telling them that criticism, when constructive and sensitively delivered, will always be viewed as a positive thing.” (Katrina, Research Manager)

“Jigsaw accepts my suggestions regarding how work can be done more effectively. I remember one of my suggestions that Jigsaw agreed on was letting RAs conduct Jigsaw Journal Club (an internal session during which team members share their thoughts on recent journal publications). This really reassured me that Jigsaw understands me and is happy to apply my suggestions. As a result, I felt more a part of the team.” (Aimée, Research Assistant)

Concluding thoughts

There is no single way to ensure that refugee researchers are successfully onboarded and embedded within a research team. This learning brief has illustrated some ways in which Jigsaw has supported and worked with RAs through their almost two years of employment. Over time, it is hoped that the strategies employed by Jigsaw through this process will enable RAs to develop their knowledge and skills to the point where they are able to operate as autonomous researchers, whether within Jigsaw or elsewhere.

It is also hoped that this brief will encourage other research organisations to employ refugees and will collaborate with them to create a working environment that responds to their preferences and needs, and which enables them to flourish.

Recommendations

While we consider that the process of employing refugee researchers within Jigsaw has been a success, we continue to engage with the issues that this process highlights: how can we best strike the balance between maintaining the structures and ways of working that enable us to function smoothly as an organisation, while also adapting and making space for new ways of working that may better suit the contextual needs of RAs? How can we ensure that we celebrate the unique contributions that RAs are able to make to the Jigsaw team, while also looking beyond the refugee label and ensuring that they are never ‘othered’ within our work?

In addition to the suggestions and recommendations made, we view this brief as a valuable moment of internal reflection on some of these questions. Similarly, it is hoped that the brief causes readers who are engaging with these issues to reflect on these questions as they relate to their own work with refugee researchers

The key recommendations from this learning brief are as follows:

1. **Other research organisations should explore the feasibility of providing similar long-term opportunities for refugee researchers.** These reflections can be viewed by other organisations as a starting point to ask questions about their own practices.
2. **Any practical points taken from this learning brief should be adapted to be made suitable for other contexts and individuals..** The reflections made above are based on the experiences and contexts of RAs living outside the UK who have been employed at entry level by Jigsaw, a UK-based company.
3. **There should also be an ongoing discussion about power dynamics and contexts within organisations employing refugees to ensure that refugee researchers are being supported correctly throughout their employment.** Although contextual awareness is vital, it is important to not consider refugee researchers as being wholly defined through their refugee status. Many of the reflections outlined in this learning brief would also be applicable to employees from other backgrounds, demonstrating that employers should not presume that marginalised groups should and want to be treated differently to others. This emphasises the importance of maintaining a constant dialogue with employees to ensure that employment practices are inclusive and also tailored to individual needs.