



Engaging Employers in Growing Refugee Labor Pathways

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Executive Summary

As the global community grapples with how to meet growing mobility demands and diverse protection needs, complementary pathways have taken center stage. These programs enable refugees and other displaced people to access safe and legal migration opportunities beyond government-run resettlement schemes, for example through family reunification, humanitarian admissions, or work or study visas. Labor pathways have received particular attention in recent years and offer a potential win-win solution for refugees with in-demand skills and industries facing acute labor shortages. Some of the most eye-catching innovations in this space have been pilot programs that enable refugees and other displaced individuals to access existing work visas by addressing barriers that can deter employers from extending job offers to such candidates. This can involve measures to address strict documentation or work experience requirements, concerns about costs and uncertain and/or lengthy processing times, and the perception that hiring refugees is riskier than other international recruitment.

Labor pathways have received particular attention in recent years and offer a potential win-win solution for refugees with in-demand skills and industries facing acute labor shortages.

Refugee labor pathways have been implemented in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom as a partnership between governments and the multinational nongovernmental organization Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB), with support from other implementing organizations. To date, these programs have resulted in more than 916 job offers for displaced individuals and the opportunity to migrate with them for nearly

1,100 additional family members. Programs have been established in Italy and Portugal as well, though individuals have yet to move through these pathways. Each program relies on a combination of policy adjustments to facilitate refugees' visa access and civil-society actors to engage and educate prospective employers, screen candidates, subsidize recruitment and legal costs, and support the integration of new arrivals and their families. While these labor pathways programs, which usually include a requirement for employers to offer jobs to sponsor displaced talent, have yet to achieve scale, policymakers and civil-society actors are enthusiastic about their potential benefits for both refugee professionals and destination-country labor markets.

This research, conducted by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) in collaboration with TBB, examines the experiences, motives, and constraints of employers who have participated in refugee labor mobility programs, or considered doing so, and uses these insights to chart routes to scale. Survey data, interviews, and focus groups point to largely positive experiences among employers who have participated to date. Companies are attracted to these programs by a diverse set of motives, from fulfilling corporate social responsibility goals to tapping into additional talent pipelines. Employers hiring through these programs report broad satisfaction with the quality of candidates and the degree to which TBB and other partner organizations support them through the process. Data from TBB's Talent Catalog, an online platform used to connect employers with refugee candidates and to manage candidates' cases through the process, suggest

considerable scope for scale; as of July 2024, refugees interested in these programs had created more than 114,000 profiles, with skills and experience in more than 170 occupations.

However, significant barriers remain that are limiting these programs' expansion. Larger firms able to recruit for multiple positions at once can provide a faster route to scale, but securing these companies' engagement takes time and requires navigating rigid hiring protocols that can be ill-suited to assessing refugees' qualifications and work experience, since refugees may lack the required documentation or have an interrupted work history due to their displacement. Employers have also reported concerns about uncertain timelines. This uncertainty has, to date, meant that recruitment through these pathways has gravitated toward jobs that are hard to fill but not time sensitive as well as roles for which there are regular, predictable vacancies. Costs also remain a concern for employers in some of these programs, despite fee reductions or waivers and other accommodations afforded by government immigration agencies, private legal services providers, and implementing civil-society organizations. Employers have expressed anxiety about ancillary expenses resulting from unexpected delays in recruitment or their responsibility for providing temporary accommodation or post-arrival support to new hires and their families. Finally, the implementation of refugee labor pathways in some countries involves navigating challenging politics around migration and protection issues as well as volatile hiring trends in important fields such as the technology sector.

Addressing barriers to employer participation will be crucial if refugee labor pathways are to meet their potential. This research suggests more could be done to address employer concerns, including:

- ▶ **Tackling the issue of costs.** While the costs of hiring through refugee labor pathways can be close to or even below those in other recruitment channels, consultations with employers point to a need for clarification about what costs employers are responsible for. This is especially the case when it comes to gray areas such as temporary accommodation or post-arrival supports, where the norms around employer assistance can vary significantly by sector or occupation. Some of these costs are currently covered by employers, while others are subsidized or met by the state or by civil-society organizations, reflecting these pathways' dual humanitarian and economic motivations. As programs grow, there will need to be frank discussions about how to sustain services and efficiency for larger numbers and, concretely, which costs should fall to employers or industry bodies and which should continue to be absorbed by governments or philanthropic actors. Going forward, policymakers and program implementers should also explore ways to reduce costs where possible, for example by further streamlining immigration processes and promoting cohort hiring (which saves time and resources compared to hiring on an individual basis).
- ▶ **Showcasing refugees' skills more effectively.** As refugee labor pathways grow and more employers interact with this talent pool, the organizations implementing these programs could expand their work with industry or employer associations to help build knowledge of how refugees' credentials map onto destination-country standards and best practices for assessing their skills. Train-to-hire pathways, through which candidates are trained for a specific skill or job role in their country of first asylum before seeking work either locally or abroad, could help bridge gaps in refugees' skills and experience too. This model could be particularly promising for regulated professions that

require a license to practice, and in scenarios where high salary thresholds or strict work experience requirements would otherwise exclude refugees from qualifying immediately for a work visa. It is also worth exploring ways to connect refugee labor pathways to other livelihoods investments, including options for refugees to access remote training to keep their skills sharp in fast-moving sectors such as information technology.

Finally, policymakers and program implementers should seek to develop a broader strategy for working with employers as refugee labor mobility initiatives scale. This raises strategic questions around the vision for scale, including which sectors or occupations to focus on given current and projected labor market needs and the opportunities afforded under immigration systems. It also requires strategizing about how best to develop programs that can rely less on resource-intensive, personalized services while still offering a competitive recruitment channel for employers. As programs expand and new ones come online, it is also important to think about ways to track how employers interact with these pathways, in order to collect and keep feeding lessons into program design.

1 Introduction

Refugee labor pathways, which focus on helping displaced people with in-demand skills access economic immigration channels, have attracted considerable attention in recent years alongside other complementary pathways to help refugees access education and family immigration streams. The appeal of refugee labor pathways is two-fold: (1) from a humanitarian perspective, they open additional opportunities for refugees and other displaced people to move to safety at a time when other options (notably, resettlement and local integration) are unable to meet demand, given the historically high and growing number of displaced individuals around the world; and (2) from a labor market perspective, they offer access to an additional talent pool at a time when many employers are struggling to recruit qualified workers. Increasing employers' access to refugee talent is seen as particularly promising in the health-care sector, which has hired the most people through refugee labor pathways to date, and in other high-need industries with projected continued growth, including green jobs, construction, hospitality, and information technology.¹

Programs that aim to facilitate refugees' labor mobility reflect a recognition that displaced people can struggle to access existing labor migration routes, for several reasons. A job offer from a destination-country employer is usually required, but refugees may not be able to connect directly with prospective employers and may struggle to demonstrate their qualifications and experience to employers and immigration authorities. The circumstances of forced displacement often mean that individuals have lost access to documentation proving their credentials or relevant work experience, for example, and a lack of legal status or work authorization in their countries of asylum can prevent refugees from maintaining up-to-date skills and gaining recent work experience. Some refugees also encounter other significant hurdles along the way, such as issues meeting identity documentation requirements or covering visa fees and other relocation costs.

¹ Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB), "Roles_hiring" (unpublished dataset shared with the authors in May 2024).

Since 2018, several countries have introduced dedicated programs to help refugees access economic immigration channels. The largest of these include the refugee labor pathways introduced in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, which were designed and implemented in collaboration between these countries' governments and Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB), a multinational nongovernmental organization focused on increasing labor mobility opportunities for displaced

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populations. Between 2021 and 2024, two EU-funded projects in which TBB is also involved have similarly sought to connect refugees with employers in Belgium, Ireland, Italy, and Portugal.² To date, 916 job offers have been made through these programs to candidates assisted by TBB and other participating organizations, opening up migration opportunities for more than 2,000 individuals (including both primary candidates and their accompanying family members).³ And at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023, several countries pledged their support for skills-based complementary pathways, including Italy, which announced its plans to launch a new refugee labor pathway.⁴ Global governance on this topic has also blossomed, with governments, international organizations, businesses, civil society, and refugee representatives participating in the Global Task Force on Refugee Labour Mobility (established in 2022) to advocate for and support efforts to scale up refugee labor pathways.⁵

The growing interest in refugee labor pathways comes at a time when governments and other actors are thinking more broadly about how to facilitate access to safe and legal migration pathways. The United States' Safe Mobility Offices, launched in 2023, provide an administrative framework to connect people on the move along established routes in Latin America with humanitarian and other legal pathways in participating destination countries, while Germany established Centres for Migration and Development in 2023 to provide information on legal pathways to migrants and local populations in several countries

² Displaced Talent for Europe is a three-year pilot project (2021–24) funded by the European Union and led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in partnership with TBB, the Belgian agency for asylum seekers (Fedasil), and Portugal's High Commissioner for Migration (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações). As of July 2024, five candidates (and one spouse) participating in the project had relocated to Ireland and one more had been approved for a visa. In Belgium, 18 candidates (with 10 dependents) had received job offers, but had yet to relocate. No job offers had been made in Portugal. See TBB, "Hiring Displaced Talent in the UK & Europe," accessed July 10, 2024; author conversation with Sarah Walder, Global Monitoring and Evaluation Lead, TBB, July 10, 2024. The EU-Passworld project (also EU funded) runs from 2022 to 2024 and seeks to test complementary pathways for work and education in Ireland, Italy, and Belgium, with some elements of community sponsorship.

³ TBB, "Refugee Labour Mobility – Global Impact Dashboard," accessed July 10, 2024.

⁴ As of April 2024, 85 financial, policy, advocacy, and operational pledges had been made by states, civil-society actors, and the private sector in support of skills-based complementary pathways under the Global Compact on Refugees. The compact framework, adopted at the UN General Assembly in December 2018, aims to improve global refugee protection, in part through the expansion of third-country solutions for refugees (Objective 3), including labor, education, and other complementary pathways. See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Multistakeholder Pledge: Skills-Based Complementary Pathways," accessed April 23, 2024.

⁵ Founding members of the Global Task Force on Refugee Labour Mobility are the governments of Australia and Canada, UNHCR, IOM, TBB, RefugePoint, Fragomen, and the International Chamber of Commerce. See Government of Canada, "Global Task Force on Refugee Labour Mobility," updated August 17, 2023.

in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.⁶ The International Organization for Migration, meanwhile, has placed facilitating access to legal pathways, including labor migration opportunities, at the center of its strategic plan for 2024–28.⁷ Refugee labor pathways provide an important complement to this work by attempting to identify and address the concrete barriers that prevent displaced people from accessing legal economic migration opportunities.

To date, work to open up labor pathways to refugees has focused on policy adaptations and tailored supports to make visa processes and relocation more accessible. The central role employers play in many of these pathways and their impact on efforts to achieve scale have gone largely unexplored. Looking more closely at how employers engage with these programs and their experiences in doing so can provide crucial insights for future policy design. This report aims to fill this gap by shining a light on employers' experiences with recruiting displaced talent through refugee labor pathways, opportunities for further reforms, and ideas for scaling up promising initiatives. The analysis, conducted by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) in collaboration with TBB, draws in part on consultations with employers, policymakers, and civil-society stakeholders as well as unpublished data collected by TBB on employer engagement efforts and pathway participation.

2 Refugee Labor Pathways: The Story So Far

The refugee labor pathways that have sprung up in recent years to help skilled refugees qualify for mainstream economic immigration channels follow different policy parameters and exist in varied migration policy contexts. Chief among these are Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP), which grants access to economic migration streams at the federal and regional levels; Australia's Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot, which allows employers to hire candidates through three existing visa channels; and the United Kingdom's Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot and Healthcare Pilot, which enable employers to hire and sponsor candidates through the Skilled Worker Visa route.

6 Safe Mobility Offices have been established in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala. They currently serve specific populations, screening them for protection needs and referring them to or providing information on various legal migration pathways to the United States, Canada, and Spain. This model has garnered interest in several European nations looking into the creation of similar mechanisms to address unmanaged migration through the Central Mediterranean. Germany launched its Centres for Migration and Development in June 2023, which repurposed and expanded the mandate of some advisory centers (e.g., those in Egypt, Ghana, Iraq, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Tunisia) and launched two new centers (in Indonesia and Jordan) to focus on opportunities for regular migration as well as to promote returning migrants' sustainable reintegration. See U.S. Department of State, "[Safe Mobility Initiative](#)," accessed March 13, 2024; UNHCR and IOM, "[Movilidad Segura – General Information on the 'Safe Mobility' Initiative](#)," accessed March 13, 2024; German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, "[Centres for Migration and Development](#)" (news release, November 2023).

7 IOM's strategic plan for 2024–28 includes an objective on facilitating pathways for regular migration. Several of the actions listed under this objective could cohere with efforts to grow complementary pathways, such as plans "to make existing and new regular pathways accessible and inclusive to enable more individuals to benefit from opportunities for development and protection" and to "increase access to legal identity through technical assistance related to national civil registration, identity management systems, and consular services"; the latter could, for example, benefit displaced populations without travel documents. See IOM, *IOM Strategic Plan 2024-2028* (Geneva: IOM, 2024).

A. *How Do Refugee Labor Pathways Work?*

Employer recruitment is at the heart of refugee labor pathways. A job offer is required by most economic immigration channels in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, although each program sets different requirements for both candidates and employers to participate (see Box 1). Canada's EMPP also allows candidates who meet certain human capital criteria to migrate without a job offer in hand.⁸ The EMPP has connected refugees with employers in a range of sectors, including health care and software development, while the United Kingdom's Healthcare Pilot has created a more targeted pipeline for refugees seeking nursing and other health-care jobs.

Some pathways offer permanent residence straight away, including all of the visas available under Canada's EMPP and Australia's Employer Nomination Scheme visa, one of several visas used by the country's Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot. Other pathways offer a temporary work visa with an option to later transition to permanent residence. Beyond visa-related eligibility criteria that refugees must meet (such as having language and other skills, work experience, and a job offer that meets a minimum salary threshold), some refugee labor pathways set out additional requirements. Australia's pilot, for example, requires an employer to be endorsed by TBB before entering into an employer-specific labor agreement with the Department of Home Affairs.

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⁸ Canada has an admissions stream that does not require a job offer for skilled refugees who can meet more stringent eligibility criteria around work experience, education, and English or French language skills. It is capped at 150 applications per year. See Government of Canada, "Immigrate through the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot: Who Can Apply," updated July 18, 2023.

BOX 1**Key Features of Refugee Labor Pathways in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom**

The refugee labor pathways that exist in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have all been designed in partnership between the countries' governments and the nonprofit Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB). TBB plays a critical role in the pathways' implementation, including securing employer participation, screening refugee candidates for eligibility, matching them with job opportunities, aiding in hiring and immigration processes, and supporting both employers and workers after refugees arrive in the destination country. To participate, candidates must meet the eligibility criteria for the visa and demonstrate their status as a displaced person in need of protection.

- ▶ **Australia's Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot**, established in 2021, aims to admit 500 primary applicants between June 2023 and July 2025. The pilot allows employers endorsed by TBB to enter into a labor agreement with Australia's Department of Home Affairs. Employers can then sponsor displaced people who have been endorsed by TBB for a job in a skilled occupation that meets a minimum salary threshold, using one of three visas: Employer Nomination Scheme (subclass 186) visas, Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional (subclass 494, for jobs in areas outside of major capital cities) visas, and Temporary Skills Shortage (subclass 482) visas. While the Employer Nomination Scheme offers permanent residence, the other two visas offer temporary status with a pathway to permanent residence. The labor agreement permits a greater degree of flexibility when determining a refugee's eligibility for these visa classes; for example, refugee candidates do not have to undergo a skills assessment or meet minimum work experience requirements, they must demonstrate "functional English" rather than a higher level of English language proficiency, and they can be up to age 55 (rather than the standard threshold of 45). In addition, employers do not need to submit the positions in question for labor market testing, as is otherwise standard.
- ▶ **Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP)** was established in 2018 and expanded in 2023, with a goal of admitting 2,000 primary applicants. At the Global Refugee Forum in 2023, the Canadian government pledged to make the program a permanent pathway by 2025. The EMPP has two categories. The first is the Federal EMPP, which has a job offer stream (with accompanying language, education, and work experience requirements) and a smaller capped stream that does not require a job offer (for candidates with more advanced qualifications, work experience, and English/French language skills). The second category is the Regional EMPP, which requires a job offer and sets accompanying language skills, qualifications, and work experience requirements. The Regional EMPP uses three immigration pathways: the Atlantic Immigration Program (for job offers in the Atlantic region), the Provincial Nominee Program (which requires endorsement from the participating province or territory), and the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (which requires a recommendation from participating communities). All the visas used for the EMPP offer permanent residence on arrival.
- ▶ The **United Kingdom** operates two refugee labor pathways. The **Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot** was established in 2021 with a goal of admitting at least 100 primary applicants by October 2023. It has been extended for one more year, to November 2024. The pilot uses the Skilled Worker Visa, which offers temporary status with a pathway to permanent residence and requires candidates to have a job offer in a qualifying occupation that meets a minimum salary threshold and proof of English language skills. The **Healthcare Pilot**, which is uncapped, uses the Health and Care Worker Visa, which offers temporary status with a pathway to permanent residence and requires candidates to have a job offer (though with a lower minimum salary threshold than the Skilled Worker Visa), accompanying qualifications in a qualifying health or care occupation, and proof of English language skills.

Sources: Australian Department of Home Affairs, "Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot," accessed April 23, 2024; Government of Canada, "Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot," accessed April 23, 2024; UK Government, "Skilled Refugees Contributing £1m to UK Economy Each Year" (new release, November 17, 2023); TBB, "Hiring Displaced Talent in the UK & Europe," accessed April 23, 2024.

In addition to labor market and human capital criteria, applicants must meet certain protection criteria to qualify for these pathways. Although the term “refugee” is frequently used to describe these programs’ target population, this is often shorthand. The programs in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, for example, are open to displaced people whose circumstances may or may not qualify them as refugees under the criteria of the 1951 Refugee Convention, allowing for participation by those who would face danger should they return to their countries of origin but who have not received an individual refugee status determination (RSD).⁹ Although the first phase of Canada’s EMPP did require an individual RSD made by a qualifying UN or state agency, applicants can now provide a trusted partner referral letter affirming that TBB or another authorized nongovernmental organization has assessed and affirms the circumstances of their displacement, which could open the program up to groups such as displaced Venezuelans who generally lack RSDs. Similarly, neither the Australian nor the UK program requires an individual RSD, deferring instead to TBB to assess eligibility.¹⁰ Outsourcing eligibility determinations in this way marks a significant departure from the intense scrutiny states apply in other parts of their protection systems (including resettlement and asylum procedures), while the relatively broader qualifying criteria indicate a willingness among policymakers to cast a wider net in complementary pathways to include people displaced by conflict or climate events, for example.

Refugee labor pathways often involve various policy concessions to give displaced people more equitable access to economic immigration channels, without compromising on the quality of candidates’ qualifications and experience. Broadly speaking, these measures target three major barriers to refugee participation (and indirectly, employer uptake):

- **Difficulties providing proof of qualifications and/or work experience.** As part of their application, candidates for work visas are often asked to submit evidence of their academic and professional qualifications (e.g., a degree certificate, proof of previous study) and paid work experience. The circumstances of their displacement means that refugees often lack proof of these credentials, and restrictions on work in some countries of first asylum can make it difficult to access and verify formal work experience. In response, some refugee labor pathways offer waivers or workarounds to help refugees demonstrate that they meet eligibility criteria. For example, the Australian program waives the requirements for a formal skills assessment or minimum work experience (employers instead verify skills and experience themselves), does not require businesses to submit open positions for labor market testing (instead relying on TBB endorsement of eligible businesses), and offers more flexibility for applicants’ age and English language proficiency.¹¹ Similarly, two of the three Regional EMPP

9 The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as an individual who is outside of their country of origin and who is unable or unwilling to return owing to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” In some contexts, these criteria have been expanded through regional instruments to apply to a greater number of factors resulting in forced displacement. Refugee status determination (RSD) is the process whereby government officials or UNHCR representatives determine whether an individual meets these criteria and therefore qualifies for protection under international, regional, or national law. See United Nations General Assembly, “[Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#),” July 28, 1951; UNHCR, “[Refugee Status Determination \(RSD\)](#),” UNHCR Emergency Handbook, updated January 25, 2024.

10 To register on the Talent Catalog, TBB states that an individual must be “a refugee, a stateless person, or in a situation where you are displaced from your home country and unable to return because you would face danger there.” The individual must also be “in a country where you do not hold legal status that allows you to work.” See TBB, “[Am I Eligible to Register on the Talent Catalog?](#),” accessed March 13, 2024.

11 Australian Department of Home Affairs, “[Nominating a Position](#),” updated February 8, 2024.

programs in Canada waive the requirement of an educational credential assessment, and neither the federal nor the regional streams specify a timeframe within which work experience must have been gained, unlike some of the country's other economic immigration programs.¹²

- ▶ **Costs.** Applying for a work visa and relocating to a new country can be very expensive. Depending on where refugees apply from, these costs can include visa application fees (and related legal services), testing requirements (e.g., language tests or credential recognition procedures), travel expenses (including exit permit fees for some locations), and initial support on arrival (e.g., temporary accommodation). With limited means, refugees can struggle to meet these expenses, and employers may be deterred if costs significantly outweigh those for other international hires. This can be the case in Australia, for example, where employers are asked to cover the costs of any family members who accompany new hires migrating to Australia, unlike other visas. The Canadian and UK pilots have certain features designed to make their costs comparable to or even lower than hiring workers through other routes (see Box 2 in Section 3.D.). In the United Kingdom, costs are roughly equivalent to other labor mobility pathways due, in part, to recruitment cost savings because TBB's matching services are provided free of cost. Meanwhile, Canada waives most of the government fees that are typically borne by employers of behalf of an international hire (such as application and biometrics fees); as a result, the overall costs to employers for hiring workers via the EMPP are typically as low as half the cost of traditional international hires.¹³
- ▶ **Lengthy (and uncertain) processing times.** Though processing and relocation timelines can be lengthy for all applicants in economic immigration channels, refugees often face especially long and unpredictable processing times linked to their displacement, the need for flexibility around documentation requirements and eligibility criteria, and additional security checks that may be carried out.¹⁴ For example, refugees may have to travel longer distances to sit for language tests, and they may run into issues if they do not have valid ID. The Australian, Canadian, and UK pilot programs all include provisions that guarantee priority processing, aiming to bring wait times in line with or less than those for other international hires. Australia offers expedited processing in three months or less, which outpaces the processing times for other skilled worker visa applications. Canada offers EMPP candidates its fastest permanent residence processing standard, which is six months or less. And the United Kingdom offers free priority processing in just five days (although the UK visa is temporary with a pathway to permanent residence, rather than offering immediate permanent residence as the others do).¹⁵

Individual cases where employers sought to hire refugees, with support from TBB, helped to inspire the creation of the pilots. For example, Australia's minister for home affairs greenlit the country's pilot program in 2017 following a pitch that highlighted the first successful recruitment through this model—a

12 Government of Canada, "Immigrate through the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot"; Government of Canada, "[Regional Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot \(Regional EMPP\): Assessing the Application against Economic Program Selection Criteria](#)," updated June 13, 2023.

13 Information provided by TBB directors for Australia and Canada, September 2023.

14 Susan Fratzke et al., *Refugee Resettlement and Complementary Pathways: Opportunities for Growth* (Geneva and Brussels: UNHCR and Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2021).

15 TBB, "[Hiring Displaced Talent in Australia](#)," accessed July 10, 2024; Government of Canada, "Immigrate through the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot"; author interview with a Senior Policy Advisor with the UK Civil Service, November 10, 2023.

Syrian refugee recruited by a financial technology firm, Iress, to work as a software developer.¹⁶ And an unsuccessful effort to recruit a refugee to work as a roofer in British Columbia helped spur the creation of Canada's EMPP.¹⁷ Such cases provide important insights into the barriers to mobility that refugees can encounter (e.g., around documentation, access to temporary work permits), strategies for matching workers and employers, and refugee and employer needs during recruitment and immigration processes and on arrival, all of which can feed into program design.

Some of the mobility barriers that have been identified to date are not specific to refugees, such as difficulties getting qualifications recognized.

The first generation of pilots has subsequently helped some refugees to successfully access economic immigration channels by tackling identified barriers to mobility. But to date, this has occurred on a relatively small scale and required considerable visa policy adjustments and resources

on the part of implementing partners, including tailored support during the selection, immigration, and reception phases, which may be difficult to maintain. As countries look beyond the pilot phase, they will need to explore how this model can be ramped up sustainably to meet new numerical targets. In addition, some of the mobility barriers that have been identified to date are not specific to refugees, such as difficulties getting qualifications recognized. This points to the need to connect feedback from these pilots to discussions about addressing broader inefficiencies in immigration and immigrant integration systems.

B. Who Is Moving through These Pathways?

Refugee labor mobility programs have, to date, remained fairly small as they work to meet their initial targets. As of July 2024, 2,003 displaced people had moved or were in the process of moving via a refugee labor pathway (whether facilitated by TBB or another organization), including 916 primary applicants who had received a job offer and 1,087 accompanying family members.¹⁸ Most of these candidates have relocated from Lebanon, Kenya, Jordan, or Pakistan, although this may shift as new pilots are launched and existing pathways are scaled up; Canada, for example, is exploring ways to include people displaced in Latin America in the EMPP going forward.¹⁹

Table 1 provides an overview of the number of job offers made to primary applicants assisted by TBB, broken down by destination country and sector. This includes some countries with well-established pathways (e.g., Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom) and others where the idea is still being tested or introduced (e.g., Belgium, Germany, Ireland, and the United States). These data demonstrate the breadth of sectors in which refugees can secure job offers, such as health care, construction, manufacturing, and food and beverage. They also reflect the priorities of destination-country immigration systems, some of which only offer permanent or temporary-to-permanent routes for more skilled and highly paid occupations.²⁰

¹⁶ TBB, *Global Evaluation: Labour Mobility Pathways Pilot 2016-2019* (N.p.: TBB, 2020).

¹⁷ TBB, *Global Evaluation*.

¹⁸ See TBB, "Refugee Labour Mobility – Global Impact Dashboard."

¹⁹ See TBB, "Refugee Labour Mobility – Global Impact Dashboard"; TBB, "Refugee Labour Mobility – Global Impact Dashboard: Talent Beyond Boundaries," accessed July 10, 2024.

²⁰ However, some exceptions exist, such as roles in elder care or ancillary health care that are in high demand but are often relatively low paid.

The pledges made at the December 2023 Global Refugee Forum illustrate the considerable interest among national policymakers and others in growing refugee labor pathways. The multistakeholder pledge to expand skills-based complementary pathways (as part of work toward objectives in the Global Compact on Refugees) set a goal of facilitating the movement of 200,000 refugees through such pathways within five years, for example, while TBB has set a series of near-term goals for 2027 that include supporting the migration of more than 15,000 displaced people through labor mobility pathways.²¹

Data on the pool of job candidates suggest significant potential for expanding refugee labor mobility pathways, in terms of both numbers and diversity of skills. As of July 2024, 114,067 profiles had been created in TBB's Talent Catalog—an online database where displaced people can register their skills and experience, and the primary mechanism to date for connecting employers with job candidates in these pathways. Although not every registered candidate would be eligible for refugee labor pathways as currently designed, and some may need additional language or job readiness training, these profiles highlight a considerable range of skills, including in sectors experiencing shortages or projected to see growing demand for workers. Those registered reported skills and experience in more than 170 occupations, including health-care and caregiving roles, information technology, professional services, engineering, and skilled trades.²² Most of those registered (88 percent) possessed some English language skills, and 40 percent had completed a postsecondary education.²³

TABLE 1
Number Job Offers Made to Displaced People Receiving TBB Assistance, by Destination Country and Sector, as of July 2024

Destination Country	Total Job Offers	Top Sectors
Australia	269	Construction (87)
		Food and beverage (31)
		Health care (20)
		Manufacturing (19)
Belgium	18	Consulting (15)
		Health care (14)
		Agriculture (2)
		Engineering (1)
Canada	172	Manufacturing (1)
		Health care (77)
		Manufacturing (25)
		Construction (16)
Germany	1	Food and beverage (8)
		Information technology (5)
Ireland	6	Biotechnology (1)
		Health care (4)
United Kingdom	296	Information technology (2)
		Health care (271)
		Legal (5)
		Consulting (6)
United States	9	Information technology (4)
		Engineering (3)
		Health care (8)
		Other (1)

Notes: These data capture candidates assisted directly by TBB, as of mid-July 2024, to access a work visa, including in settings where a refugee labor pathway has yet to be formally introduced; the data do not include candidates helped by other organizations. These data represent job offers made, not the number of people who have relocated to destination countries.

Source: TBB, "Job Offers by Industry and Country" (unpublished dataset shared with the authors in July 2024).

21 Other targets include expanded access to skilled admission programs, 320 private-sector entities integrating displaced people into their talent acquisition strategies, and an increase in the number of entities using the Talent Catalog to assist access to labor mobility. See TBB, *Forging Pathways for Displaced Talent: Summary of Global Strategy 2023-2027* (N.p.: TBB, 2023).

22 TBB, "Talent Snapshot," accessed July 10, 2024.

23 TBB, "Talent Snapshot."

Ramping up refugee labor pathways will take time and sustained investment both to support refugee candidates as they go through this process and to tackle more systematically the barriers to mobility that many encounter. It will also require policymakers and civil-society partners to consider their vision and strategy for scale, and how to prioritize resources accordingly. For example, a focus on reaching an overall numerical target might suggest prioritizing the expansion of existing programs and working with employers interested in extending multiple job offers at once. By contrast, a focus on expanding the number of pathways available would point to a strategy of creating more test cases in different sectors and countries, including roles that may be more difficult to recruit for, which, while slower, could encourage new partners to engage. While these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, the resource-intensive nature of these pathways does indicate a potential fork in the road ahead.

Regardless of the vision for scale, employer engagement will be a key piece of the puzzle. Reaching pilot projects' quotas and moving toward more ambitious targets will require continued efforts to connect destination-country employers with displaced talent and, more indirectly, to address the barriers to mobility that can deter refugees and employers alike from participating in these pathways.

3 What Is Known about Employers' Experiences with Refugee Labor Pathways?

Surveys of employers who have extended job offers via refugee labor mobility pathways, conducted by TBB, provide some insight into these employers' motivations, profiles, and experiences. However, these survey responses represent only about 17 percent of employers who have hired through the Australian and UK programs with TBB's help and skew heavily toward experiences in the health-care sector.²⁴ To supplement these findings and learn more about the factors that prevent certain organizations from participating, MPI and TBB conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups in 2023 with employers in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States who have either hired candidates through the pilot programs or who have engaged with TBB to some extent but not gone through with hiring for a variety of reasons. These conversations, as well as a series of interviews with TBB and Jumpstart Refugee Talent staff members in charge of employer engagement provide important insights into the opportunities and challenges that have shaped employer participation in these pathways to date.

A. *How Employers Engage*

So far, employers have tended to participate in refugee labor pathways through one of three ways: self-referrals (or "autonomous access"), whereby employers have connected with a job candidate independently and seek TBB support to access the pathway; referrals of employers to TBB by industry associations or corporate partners to explore hiring refugees; and targeted outreach conducted by TBB and other partner organizations to encourage employer engagement. For one employer operating a network of elder-care facilities and retirement communities in Canada, experience hiring individuals displaced by the war in Ukraine spurred the organization to seek additional ways to support displaced populations while building a

²⁴ TBB, "30March2024 – Employer Responses" (unpublished dataset shared with the authors in May 2024).

talent pipeline to help address chronic staffing shortages.²⁵ This experience may be somewhat of an outlier, however. In Australia, autonomous access—where employers come to TBB with a candidate in mind—is on the rise. Word of mouth has also encouraged more employers to participate, although this is most likely to result in successful hires among employers who have experience with international recruitment and can set their expectations around costs, process, and timeline accordingly.²⁶

Successful employer engagement requires coordination with the different teams involved in hiring decisions, including senior leadership, human resources, and legal departments. One UK-based focus group participant noted that while their company’s human resources and diversity, equity, and inclusion teams may be most open to the idea of hiring displaced talent, successful engagement ultimately relies on securing sustained support from “whoever carries the budget” and ensuring they are willing to steer other teams’ involvement in the process.²⁷

Experience suggests that engagement at the leadership level, while often important to spark initial engagement, does not always translate to successful hiring since priorities can diverge substantially at different levels in an organization; instead, participation can often be more dependent on the corporate culture and, to some degree, the specific personalities involved. The CEO of a digital production studio in Australia noted in an interview that in order to obtain the corporate buy-in required for investment in this type of hiring, the impetus has to come from the top and speak to a longer-term view. “You really need to have the patience from the top down. It means me having to say to my hiring managers, ‘This person might come and not have the skills they thought they had, but that’s okay.’ It’s part of the business goals and culture of our organization.”²⁸

Successful employer engagement requires coordination with the different teams involved in hiring decisions, including senior leadership, human resources, and legal departments.

To date, governments operating these pilot programs have played a limited role in promoting the pathways to employers, instead relying on civil-society actors to conduct outreach and facilitation. The programs implemented in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom were all created in partnership with TBB and rely on its implementing support, including to work with employers.²⁹ This entails identifying prospective employers, pitching the program to them, and securing their participation—a massive undertaking requiring many hours spent interfacing with employers, setting expectations, and providing information about the realities of displacement. This also involves identifying viable candidates from the Talent Catalog to match with job offers, facilitating interviews and hiring, shepherding both sides through the immigration process, and, eventually, monitoring newcomers’ integration outcomes and connecting them to post-arrival support. Employers vary widely in their hiring motivations, recruitment protocols, qualification

25 Author interview with the human resources director of a Canadian long-term care and retirement community network, October 20, 2023.

26 Author interview with John Cameron, TBB Co-Founder and Chief Technology Officer, October 10, 2023.

27 Participant comments during a Migration Policy Institute (MPI) focus group with UK employers, December 8, 2023.

28 Author interview with the CEO of a digital production studio in Australia, November 8, 2023.

29 Australia and the United Kingdom largely rely on TBB to manage employer engagement. Canada relies on a network of trusted partner organizations, which include TBB, RefugeePoint, TalentLift, Jumpstart Refugee Talent, HIAS, FOCUS Humanitarian Assistance, International Rescue Committee, and World University Service of Canada. See Government of Canada, “[Hire through the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot: Find a Candidate Program](#),” accessed April 25, 2024.

requirements, and internal structures, meaning that messaging aimed at securing employer participation cannot be one-size-fits-all. Developing a persuasive pitch requires TBB and other partners to quickly ascertain a company's culture, identify potential champions internally, and ensure that motivations at crucial organizational levels are aligned.

B. Why Employers Engage

Employers who have successfully hired or considered hiring through the Australian, Canadian, and UK pilot programs indicated a range of intersecting motives. These include human capital considerations, such as the desire to hire the best talent for the job and to have access to additional talent pools for hard-to-fill positions, and the appeal of a high-quality ethical recruitment channel.³⁰ Another set of motives connects to the company's broader values (for example, seeking to ensure they hire the best candidate for a role regardless of life circumstances, diversifying their workforce, and fulfilling social responsibility goals).³¹

In some cases, the desired skill sets are in extremely short supply. Andrew Walsh, former CEO of the Australian financial services software company Iress, the first employer to hire through TBB, noted that at the time, "the motivation was purely about finding skilled talent and was completely business oriented," pointing out that "access to the top quartile of software engineers was already challenging" and that Australia had made policy changes that restricted access to the temporary skills shortage visa pathway, leading the company to investigate other options.³² For the digital production studio CEO in Australia, the impetus stemmed from a personal desire to shape their organization's culture and hiring philosophy: "Talent comes in many different forms. This is my personal push to my team to look at a different lens of talent. As we're talking shortages, we need to be looking at different avenues and what benefits different points of view bring to our organization and industry."³³ The human resources director of the Canadian elder-care and retirement community network recognized a distinct mix of motivations for their organization, noting "the demand for labor [in elder care] is so intense and there is a need to create a sustainable stream of talent. At the same time, the [founders of the organization] are humanitarians. They care for people for a living and they are partners in many charities, so part of it is about contributing to the greater good."³⁴

Priorities and motivations can also differ across different parts of a company. In interviews, several TBB staff members in charge of employer engagement, employers, and an industry recruiter noted how this can be a challenge—such as when CEOs see the potential benefits of program participation from a corporate responsibility or broader talent acquisition strategy standpoint, but human resources representatives or hiring managers are more skeptical due to unfamiliar and time-consuming immigration processes or concerns over demands on departmental budgets. This disconnect can also affect the hiring process itself

30 This can be especially relevant for recruiting in sectors such as health care where there are sensitivities around international recruitment contributing to brain drain in workers' countries of origin, whereas displaced people are often unable to work in their chosen profession in countries of first asylum and thus would not be counted among the workforce in these sectors.

31 According to TBB employer survey data from March 2024, the main reasons employers chose to hire through the pilot programs include: a wish to achieve greater diversity (80 percent), the opportunity to achieve social impact (77 percent), the addition of new perspectives and approaches to the organization (65 percent), and a desire to test a new talent sourcing strategy (62 percent).

32 Author interview with Andrew Walsh, former CEO of Iress in Australia, October 23, 2023.

33 Author interview with the CEO of a digital production studio in Australia, November 8, 2023.

34 Author interview with the human resources director of a Canadian long-term care and retirement community network, October 20, 2023.

if the staff members interviewing job candidates are not familiar with the challenges displaced candidates face and give them a harsh score as a result. To reduce this, TBB helps prepare interviewers and set expectations across a company's different teams.³⁵

C. Which Employers Participate

To date, roughly half of the job offers made to TBB-assisted candidates through the Australian, Canadian, and UK programs have been in the health-care sector, with other prominent sectors including construction, manufacturing, and information technology (see Table 1). This reflects the design of economic immigration channels, which generally favor skilled occupations that require advanced degrees or other professional qualifications, multiple years of experience, and strong destination-country language skills; sectors that are experiencing shortages; and employer preferences. Because the timelines for immigration and relocation processes can be unpredictable, prospective employers typically seek to participate in refugee labor pathways if they are looking to recruit workers for jobs that are hard to fill *and* experience regular and predictable vacancies. This includes jobs that experience ongoing shortages, such as nurses and caregiving roles, and jobs that have predictable hiring needs, such as engineers for large construction projects. Another important factor is employers' hiring culture. Refugees often have untraditional career pathways shaped by their displacement, and as a result, employers may need to use their discretion when assessing their skills and potential suitability for a job.

To date, roughly half of the job offers made to TBB-assisted candidates through the Australian, Canadian, and UK programs have been in the health-care sector.

According to survey data, employers have generally been satisfied with the quality of candidates put forward by TBB, with most of those who hired a refugee candidate indicating they would consider using this route again.³⁶ But in interviews, some noted that the duties for the positions they seek to fill do not always match up exactly to candidates' qualifications, and that, where possible, taking a flexible approach to hiring practices can help facilitate engagement with the programs. The financial services software company Iress implemented one such approach, as described by Andrew Walsh: "There wasn't always necessarily a perfect match between the candidate pool and the specific job, so what we ended up doing was looking for people with skills and not necessarily tied to a role, so we could look for a bundle of people. And we'd know that we'd get candidates in and get them into different teams."³⁷ Overall, 40 percent of surveyed employers stated they "offered some hiring flexibility for refugee candidates," and 12 percent offered "a lot of flexibility."³⁸

35 Author consultations with TBB directors and staff members for Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, September–November 2023.

36 Employers largely reported being either very satisfied (40 percent) or satisfied (34 percent) with their experience hiring displaced people and either very satisfied (33 percent) or satisfied (57 percent) working with TBB. Most employers also reported they were somewhat (50 percent), very (23 percent), or extremely (20 percent) likely to recruit displaced people again in the future. In addition, employers said the candidates had adapted either very well (47 percent) or well (32 percent) to their organizational culture. TBB, "30March2024."

37 Author interview with Andrew Walsh, former CEO of Iress in Australia, October 23, 2023.

38 TBB, "30March2024."

Looking ahead, employers who can hire multiple people at once, and thus realize economies of scale, may be more inclined to participate in refugee labor pathways. So far, of the 309 employers who have participated in the Australian, Canadian, and UK pilot programs, 207 have hired single candidates, 83 have hired small cohorts, while 19 have hired cohorts of five or more people.³⁹ But cohort hiring can be difficult to achieve in practice. Sizeable corporations that may be best able to hire larger cohorts of candidates are more likely to be restrained by rigid hiring protocols, standardized qualifying criteria, and a large number of internal stakeholders that can take time to navigate. Though challenging, the payoffs of such engagement for a pilot program can be great, including more hires and the public relations benefits of having a prominent firm participating. On the other hand, smaller employers can often act more nimbly, adjusting hiring and skill verification processes to account for a candidate's individual circumstances, but they may only be able to hire one or two people at a time.⁴⁰

D. Ongoing Challenges

Employer consultations revealed several barriers to participation that could impede efforts to expand refugee labor pathways. Pilot programs can include a range of policy measures and supports to make it more straightforward and cost-effective to recruit refugees, but they must nonetheless contend with broader hiring, economic, and political dynamics. UK employers who participated in a focus group, for example, discussed how an economic downturn combined with rising visa fees are deterring some employers from international recruitment in general, and instead making some lean toward offshoring more of their operations to countries such as Poland where the costs of hiring and establishing remote work practices are comparatively lower.⁴¹ Recent changes to the UK Skilled Worker Visa have also increased the minimum salary threshold for most occupations, limited the ability of workers entering certain professions to bring dependents, and reduced the number of occupations qualifying for an exception to the minimum salary requirements due to shortages—all factors likely to affect refugees' access to labor mobility options.⁴² National or federal regulations governing employer interactions with foreign-born nationals can also influence employers' motivations to engage with these programs. For example, the United States' International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) places restrictions on defense and military technology sector companies' sharing of sensitive data and technology with nationals of certain countries. Although these regulations do not prohibit the hiring of candidates from these countries, compliance concerns and

39 Author email exchange with Sarah Walder, Global Monitoring and Evaluation Lead, TBB, July 10, 2024.

40 Author interview with Beth Nichols, UK Partnership Lead, TBB, September 14, 2023.

41 Participant comments during an MPI focus group with UK employers, December 8, 2023.

42 In April 2023, changes to the UK Skilled Worker Visa came into force. These changes include a ban on social care workers bringing in dependents on their visa, an increase in the minimum salary to be sponsored for a Skilled Worker Visa (from £26,200 to £38,700), the reduction and renaming of the list of jobs for which someone can be sponsored at a reduced minimum salary, an increase of the minimum income requirement to sponsor someone for a spouse/partner visa, and a review of the Graduate Visa for overseas graduates of British universities. See CJ McKinney and Melanie Gower, "[Changes to Legal Migration Rules for Family and Work Visas in 2024](#)" (research briefing, UK House of Commons Library, April 11, 2024).

additional authorization requirements can hinder program participation among employers who have a large U.S. presence, regularly interact with the U.S. government, or otherwise default to ITAR standards.⁴³

Hiring timelines also remain a challenge. Processing times vary significantly across programs, but even with expedited procedures that compare to or even outcompete other immigration streams, delays are common. This can be the case, for example, when refugees face unique challenges to completing language tests, medical checks, or biometrics and other requirements for their visa application or to obtain an exit permit (where necessary), or when employers must apply for a license or endorsement to recruit through this pathway (as in Australia and the United Kingdom). Dynamics within a company can also contribute to longer timelines if using this new recruitment channel requires additional approvals. In interviews and focus groups, employers noted the knock-on effects for their operations if they cannot predict roughly when a new recruit will arrive, which can delay activities or affect future budget allocations.⁴⁴ This uncertainty and longer timelines will shape which sectors and occupations are likely to be good fits for refugee labor pathways as they grow.

Employers also cited their inability to predict costs as a major barrier to participation. Many of the costs associated with refugee labor pathways are comparable to those for hiring through other immigration channels, and the waiving of visa fees combined with reduced rates or subsidies can even result in fewer direct costs to employers who hire through refugee labor pathways, though Australia is an exception in this regard (see Box 2). But other costs also factor into these pathways, such as the costs associated with supporting newcomers' reception and settlement, particularly for family members. Many of these expenses

Many of these expenses are hard to predict upfront, which can make it challenging to provide a clear cost breakdown for employers on the fence about participating.

are hard to predict upfront, which can make it challenging to provide a clear cost breakdown for employers on the fence about participating. In addition to upfront fees and expenses, concerns about cost can reflect the perceived risk of participating in a new recruitment channel and uncertainty over whether employers will see a return on their investment if they hire refugees.

43 Under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), the U.S. government prohibits access to export-controlled data or technology relating to defense and military technologies for nationals of Belarus, China, Cuba, Iran, Myanmar (also known as Burma), North Korea, Syria, and Venezuela. Additional checks are required and approval is needed to grant access to nationals of Afghanistan, Cambodia, the Central African Republic, Cyprus, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Russia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. See University of Iowa, "Hiring Non-US Persons in ITS for ITAR-Related Roles," updated May 11, 2023; U.S. Department of State, "Prohibited Exports, Imports, and Sales to or from Certain Countries," *Code of Federal Regulations* Title 22, Chapter I, Subchapter M, 126.1 (last amended June 14, 2024). In interactions with TBB, some employers have cited ITAR as a reason they cannot hire through refugee labor pathways, while other employers in these sectors have cited inexplicit "legal issues" as a reason for not participating.

44 For some employers, their general business cycle, in which hiring must be done rapidly once the budget becomes available, cannot accommodate the potential for delays in candidate start times linked to their displacement or immigration processes. Hiring timeframes can also be unpredictable on the employer side, since broader economic forces may prevent a company or even an entire industry from participating in refugee labor mobility pathways, even if hiring managers wish to explore a new talent pool. Participant comments during an MPI focus group with U.S. employers, November 21, 2023; author interview with Beth Nichols, UK Partnership Lead, TBB, September 14, 2023; author interview with the human resources director of a Canadian long-term care and retirement community network, October 20, 2023.

BOX 2**What Costs Can Employers Expect to Pay in Refugee Labor Pathways?**

Breaking down the costs to employers in refugee labor pathways is challenging. This is, in part, because some costs are indirect (e.g., post-arrival supports to help refugees find housing, or staff hours spent providing support during the recruitment, immigration, or post-arrival stages), ancillary (e.g., additional expenses incurred by processing delays or unforeseen integration needs), or currently met through government concessions, loans, or in-kind contributions that may be difficult to maintain as programs scale. Nonprofit partners may also ask for donations to help cover the costs of the services they provide. Generally speaking, employers interested in hiring through the three established refugee labor pathways can anticipate the following direct costs, taking into account the concessions built into these programs' design:

Australia's Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot. Overall costs: AUD 15,000 (USD 9,937) for an individual, AUD 30,000 (USD 19,874) for a family of four. Note: Australia's program requires employers to cover costs for accompanying family members, unlike other refugee labor pathways. These costs include:

- ▶ Immigration fees: AUD 9,000–11,000 (USD 5,964–7,289) for an individual, AUD 16,500–23,500 (USD 10,934–15,572) for a family of four (which includes a levy of AUD 3,000–5,000 to the Skilling Australians Fund, based on annual turnover, and a separate visa charge of nearly AUD 5,000 to provide 510 hours of language training for primary applicants' spouses who do not have a functional level of English)
- ▶ Flights and accommodation: AUD 4,000–7,000 (USD 2,649–4,637)
- ▶ Because employers in the Australian program must secure a labor agreement with the government (see Box 1), this can result in additional costs for legal services.

Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot. Overall costs: CAD 5,125 (USD 3,749) for an individual, 6,220 (USD 4,550) for a family of four. These costs include:

- ▶ Immigration fees: CAD 2,125–3,220 (USD 1,554–2,355), including a CAD 350 language test fee. These costs are lower than other immigration streams since Canada does not assess a visa fee for the federal EMPP (although some fees still apply the Regional EMPP streams).
- ▶ Flights and accommodation: CAD 3,000 (USD 2,194). Employers are asked to provide a minimum of two weeks of housing, which averages CAD 3,000 for a family of four. Flights are typically covered by job candidates with help from the Government of Canada's interest-free travel loan (the Immigration Loans Program) or by the nonprofit Miles4Migrants.

United Kingdom's Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot and Healthcare Pilot. Overall costs: £12,000 (USD 15,073). These costs include:

- ▶ Immigration fees: £9,000 (USD 11,305), including the cost of a Certificate of Sponsorship (£239)
- ▶ Flights and accommodation: £3,000 (USD 3,768). Employers are asked to cover one month's rent with additional support toward a deposit or three months' rent, with the exact costs varying based on the location in the United Kingdom. Employers also cover flight costs.

Note: Currency conversion rates are as of May 13, 2024.

Source: The data in this box are internal estimates provided to the report's authors by TBB staff in April 2024.

For employers willing to meet the expenses of international recruitment, concerns about cost were often framed around a lack of clarity about what their responsibilities would be toward refugees and their families, especially after they arrive. Some employers expressed hesitancy to participate in these programs as they were unclear about what refugee candidates' support and integration needs would be and the degree to which they would be responsible for meeting these needs, including for temporary accommodation.⁴⁵ Although TBB recommends that employers cover initial relocation and settlement costs at a level commensurate to other international hires, and offers assistance connecting new arrivals with local refugee service providers for further support, some employers remain concerned that they are unequipped to meet what they assume to be the additional psychosocial or material needs of this population, relative to traditional hires.⁴⁶ People entering a country through these pilots typically do not have access to the same level of government-funded services, including settlement services, available to resettled refugees. This is especially relevant for accompanying family members, who may need additional support as they access education, English language training, and work opportunities. However, they may have access to some broader government programs. In Canada, EMPP candidates have access to the settlement services offered to all economic immigrants, including services for accompanying family members.⁴⁷

Lastly, regulatory barriers can prevent employers in key industries from participating in these programs (or indeed, from recruiting any foreign-trained professionals), even when they are keen to do so. Although the list of regulated professions differs by country, several sectors that are experiencing chronic labor shortages—and where employer

Regulatory barriers can prevent employers in key industries from participating in these programs... even when they are keen to do so.

interest and TBB Talent Catalog profiles suggest significant potential to expand refugee recruitment—are also those that are most highly regulated, including health care and skilled trades such as engineers, mechanics, and technicians. In health care, for example, employers are eager to hire in large numbers and are often willing to be flexible with the jobs they create, offer pre- and post-arrival training to bridge technical or context-specific gaps in knowledge, and provide generous integration supports.⁴⁸ The ability to hire refugee workers in this and other sectors can be stymied, however, by licensing requirements that take time and money to meet, including the need for additional testing or training to meet local standards (including the potential need to retrain from scratch if a candidate's qualifications are not recognized at all)

⁴⁵ Author consultations with TBB directors and staff focused on employer engagement for Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, September–October 2023.

⁴⁶ All companies and organizations surveyed by TBB provide support to candidates upon arrival, both in terms of integration and on-the-job support. Integration support includes airport pickup, transitional housing, assistance with opening bank accounts and finding permanent housing, orientation and English language training, cash allowances, communication devices (such as cell phones or computers), help connecting with local resettlement organizations, and financial/tax advice. TBB also monitors cases they have facilitated for 12 months after arrival to ensure good integration outcomes. One employer noted that, in speaking to other employers regarding Australia's pilot program, most expressed concern that they would not be able to provide the level of support they believed refugee candidates would need, having been influenced by fundraising appeals portraying refugees in situations of poverty and tent camp settings. Author interview with the CEO of a digital production studio in Australia, November 8, 2023.

⁴⁷ Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, "Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP)," accessed April 28, 2024.

⁴⁸ According to feedback received by TBB staff working with employers in the United Kingdom, UK health-care providers generally found that displaced people hired as nurses (mainly from Lebanon) have good technical skills and do not necessarily need more technical training, so training has instead focused on nursing in the UK context.

and the need to acquire transcripts and other proof of qualifications.⁴⁹ Notably, as of early 2024, nursing licensing bodies in Canada and the United Kingdom had taken steps to introduce more flexible assessment policies to take into account missing documents and other issues displaced professionals may face.⁵⁰

These insights into the factors that drive employers to hire displaced individuals through refugee labor mobility pilots, and those that prevent them from doing so, could shape future adaptations to policy frameworks. The pivotal role employers play in realizing the potential of refugee labor mobility suggests that efforts to expand these programs will need to address the primary limitations facing employers while also amending policy and program structures to support greater efficiency in employer engagement and to ensure that arrivals receive the necessary integration support.

4 Approaches to Scaling Employer Participation

Any path to scaling refugee labor pathways must reflect on how to bring in more employers and what steps are needed to translate early engagement into concrete job offers. Key areas include addressing employer concerns over costs, whether refugees' credentials meet destination-country standards, uncertain timelines, and barriers to candidate mobility.

A. *Addressing Cost Concerns and Clarifying Employer Responsibilities*

The costs associated with hiring through refugee labor pathways are among the top concerns cited by employers. Such apprehensions relate both to the overall cost of participation (and whether it is comparable to hiring internationally through other channels) and the risk of additional expenses or responsibilities cropping up (for example, due to delays in recruitment or immigration processes or the need to provide post-arrival support for new hires and their families). Greater transparency about these costs and the proposed role for employers, coupled with messaging around the potential benefits of hiring displaced talent (e.g., the high rates of employer and candidate satisfaction to date), could help assuage some of these concerns and bring more employers on board.

As programs take root and scale, some of the arrangements that currently ensure hiring through refugee labor pathways is comparable in cost to other forms of international recruitment may be difficult to sustain. However, there are other approaches that could be used to keep costs low. These include opportunities to

49 In a November 2023 focus group held by MPI with U.S. employers, a health-care recruiter noted that displaced individuals seeking to work as nurses in the United States face potential challenges in obtaining the necessary credential, since the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) only administers the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) at in-person testing facilities in a limited number of countries, meaning that employers would need to support candidates' relocation to the United States *before* they become certified. In Canada, employers seeking to hire foreign nurses require an official transcript to be sent from the institution where they were trained, posing particular challenges for candidates who no longer have access to such records due to their displacement or conditions in the country where they earned the credential. Author interview with the human resources director of a Canadian long-term care and retirement community network, October 20, 2023.

50 Canada's National Nursing Assessment Service created an Alternative Assessment Process that can be accessed by candidates who are unable to provide all the necessary documents for reasons outside their control, and the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council offers guidance for displaced candidates including alternative evidence to submit if they are missing required documents. See National Nursing Assessment Service, "[Alternative Assessment](#)," accessed April 16, 2024; Nursing and Midwifery Council, "[Applying to Register as a Forcibly Displaced Person](#)," updated January 20, 2023.

create efficiencies and economies of scale, including through cohort hiring, which could make providing services to groups of new hires more cost-effective, or the use of technology to facilitate a greater degree of employer self-referral to these programs (for example, by leveraging virtual tools such as the Talent Catalog) and reduce overall costs. But in areas where costs are likely to remain high, strategies for scale will need a plan for managing these costs, including what share should fall to employers and what could be covered by other parties, such as refugees themselves, governments or local communities, and philanthropy or civil society.

Costs to employers could also be minimized through continued efforts to streamline the selection, immigration, and relocation of refugees through these programs and by tackling sources of persistent delays. Over time, the introduction of complementary pathways for work and other visas has led some governments to allow more flexibility in procedures and requirements related to travel documents, proof of qualifications and work experience, and proof of financial means to support accompanying family members. Ensuring this policy flexibility is fully implemented and providing training for consular officers responsible for processing visa applications can help to simplify and speed up this process and reduce applicants' need for tailored support.⁵¹ Further accommodations could also be considered to help refugee applicants meet biometrics requirements or attend visa interviews, given potential restrictions on refugees' travel within their host country and the associated costs.⁵² These efforts could be accompanied by investments in countries of first asylum to improve refugees' access to the resources needed to meet other program requirements, such as biometrics collection or document preparation, and thus minimize delays in completing visa applications. This could also include options for refugees to preemptively verify their qualifications and experience (for example, through internationally recognized language tests) as a way to strengthen their candidate profiles.

Refugee labor pathways should seek to clearly delineate employers' responsibilities for costs related to immigration and recruitment processes.

Going forward, refugee labor pathways should seek to clearly delineate employers' responsibilities for costs related to immigration and recruitment processes, such as travel and lodging expenses, administrative costs (e.g., visa or exit permit fees), medical checks, and language and other skills testing. In broader conversations about international recruitment, there is a growing consensus that employers should bear responsibility for recruitment fees (that is, payments made to recruitment companies or employers for recruiting and placing candidates), but the issue of how to allocate other costs related to recruitment or placement (such as travel, accommodation, medical tests, skills testing, or orientation) can be more contentious.⁵³ The International Organization for Migration and International Labor Organization, for example, would argue that both sets of expenses fall under the responsibility of employers, but in practice,

51 Fratzke et al., *Refugee Resettlement and Complementary Pathways*.

52 See, for example, TBB's proposal to the U.S. Department of State to allow refugees complete visa interviews in their country of residence, where possible. See Betsy Fisher, *Refugee Labor Mobility in the United States: Obstacles and Opportunities* (N.p.: TBB, 2022).

53 Kate Hooper, *Consolidating Gains: Lessons and Priorities for Promoting Fair and Ethical Recruitment* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2023). For a definition of recruitment fees and related costs, see International Labor Organization, *General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment and Definition of Recruitment Fees and Related Costs* (Geneva: International Labor Office, 2019).

these costs are often shared between employers, recruiters (if used), and workers themselves, who are often asked to cover these costs upfront. Notably, these global discussions of recruitment costs do not address the costs of relocating accompanying family members. And while these discussions consider the risks facing people as they move for work, they pay less attention to preexisting vulnerabilities such as displacement.

This broader conversation about who is responsible for international recruitment fees and related costs is important to consider when devising a strategy for scaling refugee labor pathways and reaching out to employers. In these pathways, many expenses that fall into the “related costs” category have been covered to date through a mix of policy adjustments or flexibility, waivers, and grants or loans. TBB issues guidance for participating employers, including a recommendation to cover four weeks of temporary accommodation for new arrivals, but it is difficult to establish hard-and-fast rules across contexts and sectors. One challenge is that employer norms and capacity vary widely; for example, in some highly remunerated occupations, a generous relocation package that covers moving expenses and temporary accommodation is not uncommon, whereas in other occupations (such as lower-wage roles in health care or caregiving), employers cite tight profit margins, high turnover, and industry hiring norms as reasons why they cannot provide temporary accommodation or subsidize travel.⁵⁴

Another grey area is post-arrival support for refugees and their accompanying family members beyond initial accommodation. While primary candidates usually enter with a job and strong destination-country language skills, their family members may need more support to find work, access educational or language-learning opportunities, and to settle into the local community. Because these newcomers are entering a country through a labor immigration stream, and thus typically do not qualify for the same state-sponsored support offered to resettled refugees and other humanitarian entrants, it will be important to explore alternatives. Canada has opted to allow entrants through the EMPP to access government-funded settlement services for economic migrants such as language training, but in countries without such provisions, networks have been developed to foster positive integration outcomes for refugee labor pathway entrants and their family members. The UK Alumni network, for example, brings together people who previously arrived through refugee labor pathways to provide a year of support for newcomers. Community networks also play a role, such as the UK-based charity Reset’s Neighbours for Newcomers, which taps volunteers to help welcome newly arrived refugees working in health care and has supported nurses through the NHS Refugee Nurses pilot (although this has moved to a lighter-touch model in which Reset trains colleagues and volunteers to provide support to nurses).⁵⁵ In Australia, some employers have directly supported the settlement of new arrivals with the help of community members, while others contract with a service provider recommended by TBB to provide, for example, airport pickup, case

54 As noted in a September 2023 interview with Nariman Alkaddour, a Marketing Executive and Displaced Talent Ambassador in the construction recruitment field in the United Kingdom, an exception to this is the construction industry, where skills shortages have meant that employers are recruiting laborers from further afield, often providing temporary accommodation at or near the worksite. By contrast, for industries such as health care, the lack of available housing can prevent employers from being able to fill vacancies that require candidates to relocate, even when an employer is willing to provide housing support, as noted by the human resources director of a Canadian long-term care and retirement community network in an October 2023 interview with the author.

55 Author conversations with TBB staff member for the United Kingdom, September 2023; Reset, “[Neighbours for Newcomers](#),” accessed July 10, 2024.

management, and short- and long-term housing support.⁵⁶ However governments, employers, and civil-society organizations decide to deliver and fund these services, it is important to ensure that the specific needs of refugees and their families are recognized and do not fall through the cracks.

As refugee labor pathways grow, some of the cost-sharing arrangements utilized for the first generation of programs may need to evolve. For example, visa fee waivers may be difficult to introduce or maintain for higher numbers of applicants if these fees are an important source of revenue for the government (for example, for fees-based agencies such as U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) or if doing so raises concerns about preferential treatment or attracting pressure to lower fees elsewhere. When employers are open to hiring refugees but unwilling or unable to assume all related costs, policymakers and their implementing partners could consider alternative approaches that would allow these employers to still participate. Grants or loans could help refugees cover some costs (for relocating their family members, for example) or address gaps in support for pre-arrival costs (such as travel to language testing centers), provided safeguards are in place to ensure these costs and the correlating debt burden are limited, clearly delineated, and do not leave refugees in a precarious financial situation. This type of arrangement could draw inspiration from initiatives such as Miles4Migrants, which provides grants to cover refugees' airfare, and Pathway Club, which provides grants for relocation expenses (it asks recipients to pay these forward to support other candidates if/when they are able). Government-led programs such as Canada's Immigration Loans Program, which can be used to cover transportation, arrival, and permanent residence application costs, and microloan initiatives such as Canada's Windmill Microlending (offering up to CAD 15,000 in low-interest loans for career development and meeting proof of settlement funds requirements) constitute other feasible models.⁵⁷

B. Showcasing Refugees' Skills Effectively

Scaling these pathways will hinge on increased recognition among employers that refugee candidates could be a good fit for their workforce. To date, TBB estimates that approximately one-third of job offers made through the Australian, Canadian, and UK pilot programs have come from employers who identify skilled refugees themselves through their existing networks and then approach TBB or another implementing partner for help with navigating the immigration process through a refugee labor pathway.⁵⁸ Other employer engagement scenarios—such as when an implementing organization approaches employers to encourage them to participate or when employers make contact on their own without a specific candidate in mind—require TBB or other implementing partners to showcase refugees' skill sets and potential suitability for hard-to-fill roles and, eventually, to help match employers with refugee candidates

56 TBB works with a range of settlement service providers in Australia, including SSI (Settlement Services International, Ltd.), AMES Australia, and the Australian Red Cross. Together with the employer, TBB discusses the settlement needs of refugee candidates and the typical package employers provide, and TBB connects the employer to settlement services that operate in their area. Depending on the needs of the employer and the candidate, the employer then engages the settlement service provider. Costs for settlement services can range from approximately AUD 1,800–8,000 (USD 1,192–5,300), with some employers spending more than AUD 15,000 (USD 9,937). Conversion rates are as of May 13, 2024. Information provided by TBB senior staff member for Australia, May 2, 2024.

57 Government of Canada, "Immigration Loans Program," accessed April 25, 2024; Windmill, "Affordable Loans for Skilled Immigrants," accessed April 25, 2024.

58 The percentage of self-referred cases is much higher in Australia; as of July 2024, they accounted for around two-thirds of total job offers in that country. Author email exchange with Sarah Walder, Global Monitoring and Evaluation Lead, TBB, July 10, 2024.

for their consideration. This is where databases such as the Talent Catalog that collect data on refugees' skills and experience, coupled with compelling success stories (highlighting how well refugees have fit into companies' workforces and the skills they have brought to their jobs, for example) can play an important role.

One challenge to converting employer interest into participation is that a refugee's displacement history can mean that a degree of flexibility is required when assessing their qualifications or experience, and employers must be satisfied that this flexibility does not translate to a compromise in quality or organizational fit. In the United Kingdom, TBB has held lunch-and-learn sessions to educate hiring teams about alternative ways to assess the unfamiliar skills and experience of refugee job candidates, such as through interviews that allow them to demonstrate their abilities. Refugees can also utilize services such as those provided by the

In the United Kingdom, TBB has held lunch-and-learn sessions to educate hiring teams about alternative ways to assess the unfamiliar skills and experience of refugee job candidates.

European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) – National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC) Networks or by World Education Services in Canada to obtain statements of comparability for formal academic qualifications, although this does not cover work experience or vocational or informal on-the-job training.⁵⁹

One way to enhance alternative skills recognition practices would be to foster discussions within employer or industry associations or chambers of commerce about developing best practices to assess the skills and experience for of unconventional candidates (including refugees, but also other groups with interrupted work experience or overseas training), including guidance on how training curricula in other countries might map onto national standards.⁶⁰ This can be especially useful for employers who have less experience with hiring foreign-trained workers or people with different employment histories. Inspiration could also be taken from models such as the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia's Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) program, which provides free online competency assessments and job-hunting guidance to qualified immigrants and refugees in several sectors.⁶¹ Another possible approach to consider is whether there are options to verify refugees' skills when they create profiles in databases such as TBB's Talent Catalog (this could, for example, draw inspiration from LinkedIn's use of recommendations and badge programs to certify proficiency or expertise).⁶²

59 The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) – National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC) Networks operate in 55 countries, focused on qualifications recognition. See ENIC-NARIC, "About the ENIC-NARIC Networks," accessed February 27, 2024.

60 One interviewee suggested that for applicants in the tech sector, employers could utilize coding tests, for example. Author interview with Andrew Walsh, former CEO of Iress in Australia, October 23, 2023.

61 As of early 2024, these sectors included carpentry, power engineering, automotive services, culinary arts, biotech and life sciences, accounting and finance, IT and data services, and seniors care. See Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) Canada, "FAST Program," accessed April 25, 2024.

62 An evaluation of the UK pilot program, conducted by the Refugee Studies Center at Oxford University, points out that registration in the Talent Catalog currently does not include a verification process, nor does the registration expire, creating a reliance on individualized job matching to verify a candidate's information and interest in a job opportunity—a process that will need to be streamlined for the program to scale. See Nour Moussa and Olivier Sterck, *Skilled Worker Visas for Refugees: An Evaluation of the UK's Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot (DTMP)* (Oxford, UK: University of Oxford Refugee Studies Centre, 2024).

At the same time, it may be useful to explore ways for refugees to keep their skills sharp, especially in fast-moving sectors such as information and communications technology (ICT). Remote training modules may be one option for refugees to verify or update their skills, especially if this can then translate to a destination-country credential with which employers are more familiar. Examples of this approach include a pilot project run by TBB and Ryerson University (now Toronto Metropolitan University) that offered access to the latter's cybersecurity training program and provided three types of certification; the work of the nonprofit Kiron, which offers free online courses in language and technical skills (e.g., data analytics or coding); the remote bootcamps offered by the nonprofit Re:Coded, which focus on a variety of digital skills and whose graduates have found jobs through TBB; job readiness programs for refugees, such as those operated as a partnership between TBB and Coursera; and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Emerging Talent initiative, which offers an online Certificate in Computer and Data Science to refugees (and members of other vulnerable or marginalized communities).⁶³ Such initiatives can provide access to skills training without requiring displaced professionals to relocate or running into issues around work authorization and employer liability. And although these initiatives depend on infrastructure such as a reliable internet connection that many refugees lack, there is scope for (and some momentum behind) efforts to involve development and humanitarian actors in expanding digital and labor market access for refugees (as well as local populations) in several major asylum countries,⁶⁴ which could, in turn, increase labor mobility opportunities for displaced individuals.

Train-to-work pathways present another option for employers seeking to recruit refugees who have promising skills but may lack specific training or in-country experience. For regulated professions, such as nursing or engineering, this can be a way to meet labor needs in related roles that are unregulated while providing a route for refugees to work toward licensing requirements (which may entail additional training and/or work experience as well as sitting an examination). The United Kingdom's Healthcare Pilot offers a pathway for refugees to enter as health-care assistants and, while working, study for the registration exam with the Nursing and Midwifery Council to become registered general nurses, and there are plans to expand this option to other health professions.⁶⁵ This approach could also be considered for regulated professions in other settings as a way to provide refugees and their families with an opportunity to relocate and employers a chance to meet pressing labor market needs, while laying the groundwork for licensing or retraining that can reduce the risk of underemployment and skills waste. Employers might be willing to support such career pathways and some of the associated costs, especially if they view this as a tool to promote worker retention. Grants or loans could also help facilitate refugees' access to such training opportunities.

Employers might be willing to support such career pathways and some of the associated costs, especially if they view this as a tool to promote worker retention.

63 Kiron reports that more than 100,000 students have accessed its courses since its establishment in 2015. See Kiron, "Learning beyond Limits," accessed February 27, 2024. See also TBB, "Language learning resources," accessed July 10, 2024; Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), "MIT Emerging Talent," accessed February 27, 2024; Katherine Orr, "Piloting Cybersecurity Training for Skilled Refugees" (news release, March 2, 2022); author conversations with TBB staff, April 2024.

64 Globally, refugees are 50 percent less likely to have an internet capable phone than the general population. This applies to both rural and urban refugees, who often have access to a phone but cannot afford to go online. See UNHCR Innovation Service, "Connectivity for Everyone," accessed April 25, 2024.

65 Information provided by Sarah Walder, Global Monitoring and Evaluation Lead, TBB, April 2024.

Another option is to enable refugees to embark on the credentialing process before they leave their country of first asylum. While predeparture orientations for refugees usually focus on providing general information about life in the destination country, there are some precedents for providing more in-depth career support, such as the various Canadian pre-arrival programs for refugees and other immigrants that offer more detailed sector-specific information about licensing processes, workplace culture, and employment opportunities.⁶⁶ Similarly, some countries have test centers where would-be migrants can take the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) exam for nurses prior to departure (a requirement for licensing in Canada and the United States), although many of these locations are inaccessible for refugees who may lack travel documents, supporting funds, and the authorization to make such a journey.⁶⁷

More generally, train-to-work pathways could open additional opportunities where employers may otherwise be reluctant to hire someone without local experience or where refugees lacking recent work experience may struggle to qualify for visas.⁶⁸ Inspiration could be drawn from recent mobility projects for nondisplaced talent, such as the EU-funded Digital Explorers project that places ICT professionals from Armenia, Kenya, and Nigeria with companies in the Baltics, providing a trainee track for entry-level data analysts and a professional track for more experienced developers and engineers.⁶⁹ This dual track approach was developed after an initial phase of the project found many qualified professionals could not obtain an EU Blue Card because they could not meet the salary or work experience requirements.⁷⁰ An evaluation of an early phase of the Digital Explorers project, which placed 30 Nigerian ICT professionals in either six-month traineeships or one-year work placements with Lithuanian companies, resulted in 18 people staying to work in Lithuania (others returned to work in Nigeria, including for a new branch of a Lithuanian software development company, or found work in Australia or Canada).⁷¹ Amid recent commitments to developing new skills or talent partnerships, it is worth exploring whether refugees could be included in this future programming.⁷²

Should this train-to-hire approach be explored for skilled refugees with gaps in training or experience, additional safeguards would need to be put in place. Such mobility opportunities usually involve temporary visas, so to protect refugees against refoulement,⁷³ these initiatives would need to provide a clear pathway to permanent residence and backstops if, for example, an employer declined to hire a trainee at the end of their training period. At the same time, programs could explore options for refugees to safely return to their countries of first asylum and apply their new skills there. Training could be designed with both destination- and first-asylum-country labor market needs in mind, so that refugees could potentially apply their new skills in multiple settings, although this would need to navigate barriers such as access to work authorization as well as the challenges of reconciling different countries' training standards.

66 Pre-arrival programs are offered by a variety of organizations; some offer general support, while others focus on specific industries and/or provinces or territories. See Government of Canada, “Pre-Arrival Services: Prepare to Work in Canada,” updated May 15, 2024.

67 As of late 2023, there were NCLEX international test centers in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Hong Kong, India, Israel, Japan, Mexico, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Qatar, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. See NCLEX, “International Pearson Professional Center Sites and Addresses,” updated December 2023.

68 For example, one interviewee noted a strong preference for local work experience among UK construction employers. Author interview with Nariman Alkaddour, Marketing Executive and Displaced Talent Ambassador, United Kingdom, September 14, 2023.

69 Digital Explorers, “Digital Explorers II,” accessed February 27, 2024.

70 Author interview with Mante Makaускаite, then Co-Founder and International Consultant at AfriKo, November 2021.

71 AfriKo, *Final Report: Making Sense of the Journey of Digital Explorers* (Abuja and Vilnius: Digital Explorers, 2022).

72 These commitments include, for example, the World Bank's pledge in December 2023 to launch ten new global skills partnerships.

73 Refoulement refers to the forcible return of a person to a country where they may face persecution.

C. *Working Effectively with Employers as Programs Scale*

For programs to grow, their operations will need to become self-sustaining. To date, employer involvement in refugee labor pathways has resulted from a mix of personal connections (for example, through TBB's industry networks or an employer's previous experience hiring displaced talent) and targeted pitches to employers in promising industries. But translating initial interest into concrete job offers often requires tailored, resource-intensive engagement. Many features of programs' current operations—including hands-on employer expectations setting, employer-candidate matching, and assistance through hiring and immigration processes—will be difficult to sustain as existing programs set new ambitious targets for refugee mobility and as additional pilots are launched in new settings.

As programs scale, resource constraints mean that employer engagement strategies will likely need to evolve. Implementing partners will need to ramp up their outreach to employers and, in doing so, get other parties involved. Through its work to expand refugee labor mobility globally, TBB has developed a network of industry partners that are well placed to support, or even assume, the work of pitching these programs to new employers and securing their participation. Employers who have successfully recruited through these pathways could also spread the word to their networks and industry representatives, and they are well placed to speak to the economic case for hiring displaced talent and to address their peers' questions or concerns. Implementing partners such as TBB can create efficiencies and economies of scale in this process of diversification by educating industry associations and other sector-specific entities on the specificities of pathway programs and the realities facing displaced candidates.

While Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada has done some outreach to industry associations and employers about the EMPP, the UK and Australian governments have done limited outreach to date.

Another opportunity to move toward scale is for the government institutions administering these pathways to play a more substantial role in their promotion, both to raise awareness broadly and to secure the participation of large employers capable of hiring regularly and in higher volumes. To date, governments' involvement in refugee labor pathways has varied. While Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada has done some outreach

to industry associations and employers about the EMPP,⁷⁴ the UK and Australian governments have done limited outreach to date.⁷⁵

There is also growing interest in group hiring to achieve scale more quickly. The United Kingdom's Healthcare Pilot has seen the most hires of any refugee labor pathway to date, due to the ability of the National Health Service (NHS) and local NHS trusts to facilitate cohort hiring. In Canada, employers in the

⁷⁴ Author interview with Elizabeth Kennedy, Assistant Director, Regional Economic Programs and Policy, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, October 20, 2023.

⁷⁵ Following the extension of the Australia pilot in July 2023, the Department of Home Affairs made commitments to proactively promote the program. The agency hosted a webinar for employers in December 2023 and intends to engage in other promotion activities, including sector-specific outreach sessions held in collaboration with TBB. Author interview with Karin Maier, Assistant Secretary, Immigration Programs Division, Australian Department of Home Affairs, November 23, 2023.

long-term care sector are now hiring in cohorts of up to 20 candidates at a time.⁷⁶ Working with an employer interested in cohort hiring, and ideally with international recruitment experience, can lessen the load on implementing partners. For example, the NHS has taken on more of a direct role in managing its cohort hires than some other employers, including outreach to and coordination with local trusts to manage the immigration process.⁷⁷ This model may prove useful in other industries where there is a similar ability to hire at scale.⁷⁸ But there is a balance to strike. Larger employers in a position to hire multiple people at once may have more rigid hiring protocols that make it harder to use discretion when assessing refugee candidates. In addition, an emphasis on cohort hiring may skew employer engagement toward sectors such as health care where staffing needs are more consistent, but such shifts should not preclude options for smaller employers to participate, including self-referred employers looking to hire an individual refugee.

Policymakers and implementing partners could also explore ways to make it easier for employers to recruit for these pathways more directly. One option to consider is allowing employers a greater degree of direct access to databases such as the Talent Catalog to post job openings, review profiles, and invite candidates for an interview—something TBB is testing with two trusted employers, who can now search the Talent Catalog for potential job candidates.⁷⁹ This could potentially result in more hiring overall, as employers develop firsthand knowledge of the talent profiles available and are able to tailor their recruitment accordingly. Increased interaction with these digital platforms by both employers and candidates may also boost the pathways' online visibility. However, for such an operational shift to occur, program processes would need to be updated in a variety of ways, including careful consideration of how to carry out any required employer screening (for example, to ensure employers are recruiting for shortage occupations, if this is not done as part of the visa application).⁸⁰

Opening up access to digital platforms such as the Talent Catalog would also require additional digital infrastructure and platform moderation policies. Particularly important is ensuring data security and privacy for candidates, for example by permitting employers to view anonymized profiles and signal interest but leaving it up to candidates to initiate direct communication. Consideration should also be given to how to ensure the platforms' viewable profiles are active and accurate. Automation tools that remind registered job candidates to keep their profiles up to date and that archive inactive accounts could play a role, but active management of the digital infrastructure and moderation of content on the sites will be necessary to ensure a positive experience for both employers and candidates—a key element of program growth.⁸¹ Although automating aspects of these pathways' operation will be necessary to achieve and maintain scale, building and administering digital tools will require significant financial and human capital investments on the part of implementing stakeholders, which may be difficult to plan for amid competing budget priorities,

76 Information provided by Patrick O'Leary, Chief Operating Officer, TBB, April 2024.

77 Author interview with Rabia Ceylan, UK Healthcare Manager, TBB, September 20, 2023.

78 Some examples could include information technology for government agencies at the federal or state/regional level, education, or certain health-care contexts, such as the United States' Veterans Affairs hospital system.

79 In 2021, TBB made the Talent Catalog software open access and has pledged to support the development of job matching capacity among 24 partner organizations. See Dalia Ezzat, "Talent Beyond Boundaries' Pledge for the Global Refugee Forum 2023," TBB, November 19, 2023; John Cameron, "We're 'Open Sourcing' Our Talent Catalog Software," TBB, February 24, 2021; additional information provided by Patrick O'Leary, Chief Operating Officer, and Sarah Walder, Monitoring and Evaluation Lead, TBB, April 2024.

80 This certification is done by TBB as part of Australia's Skilled Refugee Labor Agreement Pilot. See Box 1 for details.

81 Canada's Express Entry system automatically removes candidates from its pool after 12 months if they do not receive an invitation to apply, for example.

including other efforts to scale participation up and create new pathways in additional countries. Moreover, removing some of the tailored services currently on offer (for example, identifying and vetting candidates) could dampen these pathways' allure for some employers relative to other international recruitment tracks.

Another function, in addition to tailored job matching, that has to date been part of TBB's use of the Talent Catalog and that would need to be rethought if employers are given more direct access to these platforms is how to verify candidates' eligibility for refugee labor pathways. The Canadian, Australian, and UK pathways were created on the premise that TBB (and some other partnering organizations, in the case of EMPP) would be responsible for safeguarding the pathways' integrity by verifying the circumstances of applicants' displacement. This role has been accompanied by some flexibility in eligibility criteria, allowing displaced people whose circumstances may or may not qualify them as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention to participate. Unless states make the substantial investments needed for their migration agencies to conduct eligibility assessments directly (a move that would almost certainly involve setting more readily verifiable eligibility standards like an RSD), civil-society actors will likely need to continue to perform this function for refugee labor pathways to expand. Efficiencies could be accomplished, however, through adjustments to the workflow of implementing partners. For example, rather than the implementing organization spending significant time on developing and presenting employers with a list of preverified candidates, employers viewing the Talent Catalog could identify and connect with prospective candidates who could then reach out to TBB or another authorized organization to confirm their eligibility (this would, however, require employers to understand that a candidate they identify may or may not, in fact, be eligible). Similarly, adjustments could be made to the platform whereby candidates proactively seek eligibility verification, which TBB or others could selectively provide to promising candidates, and this eligibility could then be noted on their profile. Such adjustments could help to produce economies of scale in managing these pathways.

5 Conclusion

In an era when most migration issues are highly politicized, refugee labor pathways stand out as an innovation that benefits from the support of many segments of destination-country societies, including in government, the private sector, and civil society. This reflects a growing recognition that these pathways could offer a win-win solution for refugees with in-demand skills looking to rebuild their lives and employers in destination countries who are struggling to find workers. Hence, more countries are introducing their own pilots to test this premise and see what it would take to connect this talent pool with mainstream labor immigration pathways.

With the first generation of pilots providing proof of concept, the conversation is now turning to what achieving scale could (or should) look like in different settings.

With the first generation of pilots providing proof of concept, the conversation is now turning to what achieving scale could (or should) look like in different settings. While refugee labor pathways have enjoyed considerable policy attention, they have to date moved modest numbers of people. Scaling up these pathways requires careful consideration

of where growth opportunities lie and how to manage potential tradeoffs, including ways to shift away from resource-intensive, tailored services while still providing employers with a competitive, high-quality recruitment channel. Looking ahead, governments will remain in control of immigration processes, and governmental and civil-society partners may need to step in to connect refugees with integration supports, but these pathways will ultimately only take root and grow if employers see them as a competitive channel for recruiting the workers they need.

Priorities for growing refugee labor pathways and promoting employer participation should include:

- ▶ **Deciding which sectors or occupations to focus on.** Hiring through refugee labor pathways has been concentrated in sectors such as health care and skilled trades. This focus reflects both immigration priorities, including the availability of visas (which tend to focus on high-skilled jobs and jobs with chronic labor shortages), and hiring dynamics within these sectors, including the availability of jobs that could be filled on a rolling basis and those with steady or rising demand for workers. But as with all economic immigration streams, these pathways are vulnerable to broader economic conditions, such as the slowdown that resulted in layoffs in tech in 2022–23.⁸² To move toward scale, policymakers and program implementers will need to develop overarching engagement strategies that are responsive to employer demand, while considering which sectors and occupations are a good fit for the skills and experience of this talent pool and identifying the employers within those sectors that are best prepared to participate. Pursuing scale by efficiently matching employer demand to the supply of displaced talent will also require a policy framework capable of continued adaptation as areas of greatest potential become clearer and shift over time.
- ▶ **Balancing the quest for scale with consideration of sustainability.** The tailored services offered during a program's pilot (or pre-pilot) stage will be hard to replicate should larger numbers of people move through these pathways. Policymakers and implementing partners should explore ways to streamline employer engagement and lessen the need for tailored services, without compromising on the high-quality recruitment experience that has attracted employers in the first place. This could include considering options for cohort hiring and expanding the potential for employer self-referral to the program or independent employer-candidate matching. More employers could be encouraged to help implementing partners promote refugee labor pathways, including by sharing their experiences of recruiting displaced talent with peers and addressing common concerns such as costs. At the same time, it will be important for all stakeholders in these programs to have a clear, shared understanding of the pathways' dual economic and humanitarian underpinnings and of each party's responsibilities. While some employers may be willing to provide additional support for refugees and their families, linked to corporate social responsibility values, program expectations for the level of employer assistance will need to be made more concrete and coupled with sustainable commitments from governments and civil society to reduce costs where possible and to ensure an appropriate level of integration support is available to arriving refugees.

82 See, for example, Belle Lin, "IT Employment Grew by Just 700 Jobs in 2023, Down From 267,000 in 2022," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2024; Moussa and Sterck, *Skilled Worker Visas for Refugees*.

- **Thinking creatively about ways to tackle gaps in skills or experience.** Pilot projects have offered rich insights into options to create career pathways for refugees to work toward licensing or more senior roles in their profession, which can open opportunities within regulated professions or occupations where in-country experience is at a premium. Train-to-hire programs can also help refugees freshen up their skills (for example, in fast-moving sectors such as tech) and potentially gain valuable destination-country training and/or experience. Relatedly, language skills requirements can hinder refugees' access to some employment opportunities and visas, particularly when the destination-country language is not widely spoken elsewhere. To maximize access to these pathways, policymakers and employers could thoughtfully design pre- and post-arrival language training. Policymakers, employers, and international organizations all have a central role to play in building well-designed and targeted skills training programs to guarantee a robust pipeline of job-ready candidates. Development actors with long experience facilitating livelihood programming in countries of first asylum are particularly well placed to support such efforts. Increased and strategic cooperation between development agencies and actors focused on refugee protection and mobility has the potential to support greater and more orderly labor mobility among refugees and host-country nationals alike, while also enhancing opportunities for refugees' local integration and meaningful skill-building and labor market access for both populations.

Achieving scale is more than just growing numbers. It is also about feeding best practices from refugee labor mobility pilot programs into mainstream recruitment strategies and immigration channels to make them more generally accessible to displaced people and other vulnerable populations. These pilots can provide important insights on broader issues such as improving access to legal pathways, encouraging employers to consider hiring refugees and other people with nontraditional backgrounds, and streamlining labor market integration processes that could be applied to immigration and immigrant integration systems more broadly. For example, innovations around alternative ways to assess job candidates' skills and supporting career pathways that include a route to licensure could be relevant for other immigrants, including those already residing in destination countries—enriching local workforces and expanding employers' recruitment options in the process. Insights gleaned from these refugee labor mobility pilots into how to effectively address documentation issues and connect refugee candidates with destination-country employers could also prove highly relevant to broader efforts to connect migrants and refugees with legal migration pathways, such as the Safe Mobility Offices in Latin America.

In the end, refugee labor mobility pathways, even if scaled up, are likely to remain just one tool in the broader toolkit, both for providing refugees with opportunities to restart their lives and for helping meet pressing destination-country labor needs. Still, these pathways show considerable promise on both fronts, and engaging employers effectively will be essential to realizing that potential more fully.

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