



Building Refugee-Inclusive Labour Mobility Pathways

A visa evaluation framework

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Introduction

Helping refugees access mainstream work, education, and family mobility channels, alongside dedicated humanitarian pathways, can expand refugees' opportunities to find safety and stability while easing pressure on oversubscribed resettlement systems.¹ In the case of work-related channels, this can also help destination countries tap into an underutilised pool of talent and meet labour needs. To date, at least nine countries have set up pilot projects to facilitate the admission of refugees using work visas, including Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP), the United Kingdom's pilots for refugee health-care workers and other skilled professionals, and Australia's Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot.² But the very need for such bespoke initiatives speaks to the immense difficulties that otherwise-qualified refugees can encounter when trying to access mainstream work visas.

As demand in many countries grows for workers in key sectors, the economic case for recruiting refugees with relevant qualifications and experience is compelling, though doing so has proved difficult in practice. To date, the number of people moving through these pilots has been comparatively small. Canada's EMPP has admitted the largest number of refugees, with more than 1,000 skilled workers relocating to

The economic case for recruiting refugees with relevant qualifications and experience is compelling, though doing so has proved difficult in practice.

work in sectors such as health care, construction, engineering, and information technology by August 2025,³ though the programme was paused in late 2025.⁴ Meanwhile, the United Kingdom's pilot for refugee health-care workers admitted 249 principal applicants to work in the National Health Service and private health-care roles between 2021 and 2023.⁵ Elsewhere in Europe, Italy's Labour Corridor

for Refugees had admitted 16 refugees on work visas for jobs in shipbuilding, information technology, and goldsmithing by September 2025;⁶ Belgium had seen 20 job offers issued and 12 principal applicants

- 1 For simplicity, this framework uses 'refugees' to refer both to individuals with a formal refugee status determination (RSD) and those recognised on a prima facie basis. Some parts of the framework use other terms, such as 'displaced individuals' or 'displaced applicants', in recognition of the impacts of displacement broadly. In the wider field, terms such as 'displaced talent' and 'displaced workers' are often also used. Acknowledging that legal status distinctions (e.g., possession of an RSD) can affect access to visas and application support, this framework underscores such differences where relevant, while focusing on shared barriers and opportunities in general.
- 2 The nine countries identified through an internal mapping exercise as having piloted labour pathways for people in need of international protection are: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Portugal, United Kingdom, and the United States. Additionally, France, Germany, Slovakia, and Spain are in the process of designing such programmes.
- 3 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Canada, 'Skilled Refugees in Canada Call Pilot Program "Life-Changing"; 94% Would Recommend It to Others', updated 10 June 2025; Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB), 'Canada Extends Groundbreaking Economic Mobility Program for Forcibly Displaced Workers', updated 12 June 2025; Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), 'Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP): Canada's First Complementary Pathway for Refugee Labour Mobility' (presentation, August 2025).
- 4 Marie Woolf, 'Immigration Department Halts Skilled Refugee Jobs Program, Leaving Employers in Limbo', *The Globe and Mail*, 30 December 2025.
- 5 TBB, 'The UK Welcomes a New Cohort of Healthcare Workers with DT4E', updated 3 August 2023.
- 6 As part of this corridor, a humanitarian visa stream is being designed to expand mobility opportunities further. See UNHCR, 'Memorandum of Understanding Signed for Labor Pathways for Refugees and Stateless Persons' (press release, 27 June 2025); TBB, 'Italy Launches Labour Mobility Corridors for Refugees' (press release, 27 June 2025); author interview with representative from UNHCR Italy, 4 August 2025.

arrive with their families as of August 2025;⁷ and Ireland had admitted six refugee workers through similar pathways as of August 2025.⁸

There are various factors behind these small numbers, and refugees' limited participation in labour mobility channels more broadly. Many reflect the difficulties displaced individuals face in meeting work visa requirements and completing related processes, even if they have in-demand skills. Pilot projects have sought to help refugees navigate these challenges—from connecting with sponsoring employers to obtaining required documents and covering application costs—but these tailored services are resource intensive and difficult to expand, especially as political commitment to protection pathways falters.⁹ Making work visa systems truly accessible to refugees instead calls for a careful review of these visas' criteria and processes—a critical first step towards refining them in ways that can make them more transparent, easy to navigate, and predictable not only for refugees but for all applicants and employers.

This visa evaluation framework, developed by the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) as part of the Skills, Talent, and Empowerment through Pathways (STEP) project, aims to help policymakers and other stakeholders gauge how accessible existing labour-based migration pathways are for people in need of international protection. This framework and accompanying scorecard¹⁰ identify elements of work visas and related work permits that can inadvertently present barriers for well-qualified refugees and other workers in need of international protection, and potential adjustments that could make work visas more accessible.

About This Visa Evaluation Framework

This visa evaluation framework is intended to help governments, civil-society organisations, potential employers, and others systematically assess whether and how work visa requirements and processes facilitate—or hinder—refugee access to job opportunities in safe third countries. The information and questions in this framework, and the related scorecard, aim to help users identify obstacles within a specific visa. In the scorecard, responses to these questions feed into an overall estimate of accessibility for the various design- and process-related elements of a visa. The corresponding sections of this framework provide additional information on why certain features are better or worse for accessibility, where bottlenecks can occur, and what promising practices can help to address the identified issues.

The focus of this framework is primarily on work visas rather than work permits. Though sometimes used interchangeably, these terms refer to distinct legal documents: A **work visa** is a travel document that permits entry into the destination country for employment purposes and is typically issued by consular authorities abroad, while a **work permit** (or work authorisation) is usually issued by labour or immigration

7 Author interview with representatives from the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Belgium, 29 August 2025.

8 Emma Dorst, Kate Hooper, Meghan Benton, and Beatrice Dain, *Engaging Employers in Growing Refugee Labor Pathways* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2024), 4.

9 According to UNHCR estimates, approximately 2.9 million refugees were in need of resettlement as of 2025, with needs continuing to grow every year. At the same time, avenues for resettlement are constrained by restrictive criteria in some states, limited use of remote processing, and reduced reception capacity. See UNHCR, *Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2025* (Geneva: UNHCR Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Service, 2024).

10 The visa evaluation scorecard can be found at: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 'How Accessible Is a Work Visa to Refugee Applicants? A Visa Evaluation Scorecard', updated February 2026.

authorities, grants permission to take up paid work in a country, and defines the permit holder's employment rights.¹¹ In many countries, noncitizens must have both to work legally. While examining both can help paint a fuller picture of the accessibility of labour migration pathways to refugees, this framework focuses primarily on work visas because their requirements and procedures can pose particularly high barriers for refugees and other people in need of international protection and prevent otherwise qualified candidates from moving to a destination country, at which point the accessibility of work permits is irrelevant.

It is also worth noting that this framework is designed from a destination-country perspective, as it is a destination country's government that sets requirements for and issues work visas. However, policies, practices, and capacities in the country where a refugee is located (sometimes called the country of departure or country of first asylum) can also significantly influence their access to work visas specifically and to migration opportunities more generally (see Box 1).

BOX 1 Why the departure-country context matters

Even when destination-country visa policies are inclusive of refugees and other displaced professionals, practical barriers in departure countries can make it difficult for them to benefit from mobility opportunities. These barriers can include:

- ▶ **Limited access to travel documents.** Refugees are generally unable to safely use the most common travel document—a passport issued by their country of origin—and must instead rely on alternative forms of identification to apply for visas and travel legally. Access to these alternatives (such as machine-readable convention travel documents) varies considerably across countries of departure. For instance, access is extremely limited in countries that are not parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention. And even in states where relevant legal frameworks exist, authorities may not have processes in place to issue these documents.
- ▶ **Exclusion from local systems.** Depending on the departure country, systemic barriers may prevent refugees from accessing legal employment, education, financial services, or economic resources. This can make it difficult to meet visa eligibility criteria or produce required documents (for example, proof of recent work experience or financial means).
- ▶ **Security and mobility restrictions.** Refugees living in camps or conflict-affected areas may face restrictions on their movement, with some needing permits to leave camps or travel within the country. Insecurity and violence can also pose serious risks to personal safety and constrain movement. These conditions make it significantly harder for visa applicants to attend in-person steps in the visa process (such as biometric appointments, medical exams, or language assessments), which are often available only in specific urban centres.
- ▶ **Limited access to residency documents.** To submit a visa application, some consulates require applicants to prove they are residents of the country in which the consulate is located. This can be challenging for displaced individuals, who may lack the necessary residency documents—especially refugees without formal recognition of legal stay or those holding documents issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) instead of state-issued residency documents.

11 Author interview with representatives from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025; IOM, 'Access to the National Labour Market', accessed 5 September 2025; IOM, 'Key Migration Terms', accessed 5 September 2025.

BOX 1 (cont.)**Why the departure-country context matters**

- ▶ **Exit permits.** Some countries require refugees (and other populations) to have an exit permit to leave, introducing additional administrative hurdles and costs. The fees can be particularly high for individuals without legal status in the departure country, as they may be required to pay steep fines calculated based on the duration of their irregular stay; this is the case in Pakistan and Iran, for example. Once granted, exit permits often require individuals to depart within very narrow timeframes, which may not be possible for some displaced applicants.

In addition, refugees' mobility options are influenced by how destination-country authorities engage with departure-country counterparts and what operational capacity they have in these settings. Challenges can include:

- ▶ **Limited visa processing capabilities.** A destination country may have little or no consular presence in some departure countries, or its consulates may operate with inadequate staffing or administrative capacity. This can result in long visa processing delays or backlogs, creating uncertainty for applicants and employers alike.
- ▶ **Differential decision-making and access to support.** Even when refugees are technically able to apply for a visa, applicants who are not citizens of the departure country may face different treatment from assessing officers, including heightened or uneven scrutiny. Refugees and other displaced individuals may also have less access than other applicants to administrative support services, which can be crucial for navigating complex visa procedures.
- ▶ **Migration agreements and exclusionary stipulations.** Bilateral or regional migration agreements between departure and destination countries shape how visa policies are implemented on the ground. Often, these agreements prioritise the mobility of departure-country nationals and may exclude refugees or noncitizens more broadly.

Sources: author interview with representatives from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025; author interview with representative from Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, 28 July 2025; author interview with representatives from RefugePoint, 25 August 2025; author interview with representatives from Talent Beyond Boundaries and Fragomen, 30 July 2025; Global Compact on Refugees, 'Enhancing Refugee Mobility through Issuance of Machine-Readable Convention Travel Documents (MRCTD)', accessed 5 September 2025; Samuel Davidoff-Gore, *The Mobility Key: Realizing the Potential of Refugee Travel Documents* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2024); UNHCR, '2019 Compliance Update: Machine-Readable Convention Travel Documents for Refugees and Stateless Persons', accessed 5 September 2025; UNHCR, 'Addressing Refugee Security', in *The State of The World's Refugees 2006: Human Displacement in the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Key Design and Procedural Elements of Work Visas

This visa evaluation framework is structured around three interconnected pillars:

- ▶ **Visa eligibility rules and work and residence conditions,** which determine the profiles of refugee workers who could qualify as well as what rights and conditions are attached to the visa and associated work and residence permits (for both applicants and their families), affecting how viable and appealing a mobility pathway is.
- ▶ **Application requirements,** including the types of documents, financial requirements, and supporting materials typically needed to apply for the visa (and any associated permits) and how feasible these are for refugees to obtain.

- **The visa process**, including screenings, interviews, processing times, and options to apply online, and the implications of those elements for refugee applicants.

Each subsection encourages reflection on the legal and practical barriers refugee workers may face, and the trade-offs and policy implications of different eligibility criteria, requirements, and systems. These thematic sections also showcase promising practices that governments or other stakeholders have used to overcome barriers and make work visas more accessible.

Pillar 1: Preliminary applicant eligibility and residence conditions

Most labour mobility pathways are designed for specific categories of economic migrants, and some have eligibility rules that further narrow the pool of potential applicants (such as age limits or nationality criteria). The rights granted by a visa, or associated work permit, can also affect the types of workers a route is suited to and what level of future stability it offers. For refugees and other disadvantaged individuals, certain visa design elements and conditions can inadvertently close off labour pathways even when candidates possess skills and experience that would be valuable in destination countries.

General applicant profile

An important first consideration is what work-related and profile-specific eligibility criteria a work visa has, and whether these criteria render the visa accessible to a broad or very small group of refugees. For example, while some pathways require a bachelor's degree or technical training, others may require advanced degrees or proof of senior-level professional experience. Visas with high skill thresholds are only open to a limited pool of migrants and may be even less accessible to refugees, whose education and career paths have been disrupted due to displacement or who may struggle to prove their qualifications.

Some visas also aim to attract specific profiles of workers, for example those in certain sectors or industries or those taking up jobs on a shortage occupation list. Some of these jobs may be regulated professions, which require a license to practice and formal recognition of a person's academic or professional credentials. The process of obtaining a license often involves additional requirements and can be challenging for many foreign-trained workers, particularly so for refugees and others in need of protection. Even when visa or work permit rules do

Guiding questions

- Does the visa (or work permit) require formal academic or professional qualifications? If so, what level?
- Is the visa open to all nationalities?
- Are there age limits for applicants and/or is preference given to applicants below a certain age?
- Is the visa restricted to a specific sector or industry (e.g., health care, information technology, or construction)?
- Does the visa (or work permit) require applicants' occupation to be listed as a shortage or in-demand profession/skill at destination?
- Is the visa linked to a regulated profession?
- Are there annual caps for this visa? If so, are these caps often met?

not impose specific requirements (as in Belgium), professional bodies often insist on proof of licensing, credential recognition, or sector-specific language proficiency. These ‘hidden’ requirements—unwritten in migration law but embedded in the sector—can be decisive barriers for refugees, who often lack access to credential recognition systems, face financial barriers to certification, or may struggle to demonstrate their technical skills in the destination-country language.¹²

Beyond work-related criteria, some visas are only available to applicants of a certain age or nationality.¹³ For example, some work visas target recent graduates or set an explicit age limit (e.g., workers under 35 or 45 years old). Yet displacement-related interruptions to education, restricted access to work opportunities, and disrupted professional training can all delay refugees’ career progression. As a result, strict age limits—designed around conventional assumptions of uninterrupted education and early career development, and concerns about older arrivals putting pressure on retirement systems—can exclude many workers in need of protection. Visa systems without age limits or with higher limits (as in Australia, where recent policy changes raised the threshold to age 55) can be more accessible for well-qualified refugees.¹⁴

Finally, some countries impose numerical caps on work visas. In most cases, a single cap applies across all applicants, and some caps are quickly met. Few countries reserve a certain number of visas within a visa category specifically for refugees; Italy’s Decreto Flussi (Immigration Flow Decree) is an exception,¹⁵ with its separate quota for applicants in need of protection within broader caps on the number of non-EU workers who can be admitted each year—a feature that boosts refugees’ access to capped admission slots, while also creating an incentive for employers to recruit talented refugees to meet labour shortages. Italy also has an *uncapped* labour pathway for third-country nationals (including refugees) who have completed an approved vocational and civic language training course abroad.¹⁶ Spain has an uncapped work visa and permit as well, though the high skill threshold limits the pool of potential applicants (refugee or otherwise).



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Openness to a range of skill levels and sectors:** This flexibility can allow refugees of varied profiles to apply (not only high-skilled professionals but also sought-after workers for mid- and low-skilled jobs).
- ▶ **Higher age thresholds:** By allowing older applicants, a visa is more inclusive of refugees (and others) who have had interrupted education or nontraditional career trajectories.
- ▶ **Uncapped visa categories or dedicated quotas for refugees:** Such features mean refugees’ access is not limited if demand is high from other migrant groups.

12 Author interview with representatives from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025.

13 Michelle Manks, Mehrangiz Monsef, and Dana Wagner, *Sponsorship in the Context of Complementary Pathways* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Refugee Hub, March 2022), 13.

14 TBB, *Global Evaluation: Labour Mobility Pathways Pilot 2016-2019* (N.p.: TBB, 2020), 69–70.

15 Author interview with representative from Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 13 August 2025.

16 This is based on the new art.23 of DLgs 286/1998 (Testo unico immigrazione) and as modified by Decree 20/2023 (converted into Law 50/2023). See Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, ‘*Work and Live in Italy*’, accessed 28 August 2025.

Visa and work authorisation conditions for the main applicant

Beyond eligibility criteria, the status, rights, and conditions attached to a visa and/or work permit play a major role in determining the viability of a mobility pathway for refugees. Some are designed to facilitate only brief stays (such as circular migration schemes), while others offer a pathway to permanent residence—features that can make them suitable for different groups of workers.

Some governments require visa applicants to prove that they do not plan to settle permanently in the country and, instead, have the intention to return to their country of origin or habitual residence. This requirement, which is particularly common for temporary or circular work visas, can present a notable barrier for refugees who cannot return either to their country of origin or to their country of first asylum after departing for the destination country. While some refugees have the right to re-enter their country of first asylum, others would lose their right to stay or tolerated status if they were to leave for another country. This can make it challenging for refugee applicants to prove they do not intend to stay in the destination country permanently, and raises a risk of *refoulement* should their status at destination end and they be forced to return to their country of origin.¹⁷

Visas that offer a pathway to permanent residence—whether automatically or conditional on meeting certain criteria—can be a more viable option for individuals who do not have permission to re-enter their country of first asylum. However, some thresholds or requirements for permanent residence are more challenging to meet than others. For instance, while some temporary visa holders only need a minimum period of lawful residence before they can transition to permanency (ranging from two to five or more years, depending on the country and the visa), others must meet income thresholds or integration requirements, such as by demonstrating language proficiency or knowledge of local legal and social systems. How easy or difficult it is to access permanent residence can make a visa more or less attractive to refugees and others in need of protection.

Guiding questions

- What temporary or permanent status is granted? For visas granting temporary status, is it possible to transition to permanent status?
- Is the visa open to people who hope to settle in the country permanently, or do applicants have to prove they intend to return to their country of origin or habitual residence after the visa term ends?
- Are there protections against *refoulement* at destination for refugees entering with this work visa?
- For temporary admissions, how long is the initial work authorisation period?
- After any mandatory initial employment period with the sponsoring employer, does the work permit allow the holder full access to the labour market at destination?
- Does the work permit allow the holder to access public funds and social services (e.g., government benefits, social welfare, public health care)?

¹⁷ Susan Fratzke et al., *Refugee Resettlement and Complementary Pathways: Opportunities for Growth* (Geneva and Brussels: UNHCR and Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2021), 42; TBB, *Global Evaluation*, 134.

In most EU countries piloting refugee labour pathways, refugees are initially admitted on a temporary basis, albeit with a route to permanent residence through continued legal presence. Their residence and work permits are typically tied to a single employer, though, which presents a risk if the permit holder loses their job or wishes to change employers.¹⁸ In Europe and beyond, permit holders are typically given a short grace period to find new employment and file the necessary paperwork, although the duration of this window varies by country. For instance, certain permits historically allowed only 90 days to search for a job (as used to be the case in Australia, and remains so under Belgium's Type C permit). Other, more recent arrangements (such as Australia's updated scheme or the Irish Critical Skills Employment Permit) extend this period up to 180 or 190 days, providing workers with additional time to secure employment.¹⁹ By contrast, under Canada's EMPP, refugees admitted through labour pathways are issued permanent residency from the outset, offering a more secure foundation for long-term integration and protection for those who need it.

Temporary mobility channels can still play a vital role in broadening the opportunities available to refugees, provided they have the right to return to their country of departure. For such countries, refugees' temporary stay abroad can ease pressure on local economies, while their return can bring new skills and connections forged abroad. To support this, governments in destination countries can work with countries of departure to ensure that refugee workers retain their status and can be readmitted after short-term work placements.



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Flexibility on intent-to-return requirements:** Because it can be challenging for refugees who are interested in circular or temporary work programmes to meet such requirements, visas that do not require this or that allow some flexibility could be more accessible. Flexibility may take the form of humanitarian or protection-based waivers, more flexible standards for showing ties to the country of prior residence (rather than the country of origin), or acceptance of proof of a right to re-enter the departure country.
- ▶ **Portable work permits and extended grace periods for job loss:** Enabling workers to change employers without jeopardising their legal status and allowing permit holders sufficient time to secure new employment can create greater stability for refugees (and other workers).
- ▶ **Safeguards against refoulement for refugees leaving countries they cannot re-enter:** This could take the form of agreements between destination countries and countries of first asylum to guarantee re-entry and status retention for refugees on temporary visas, or the destination country offering a pathway to long-term stay and permanent residence.

¹⁸ Zvezda Vankova, 'Refugee Labour Mobility to the EU: A Tool Contributing to Fairer Sharing of Responsibilities in the Context of Forced Displacement?', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2024): 55.

¹⁹ Author interview with representatives from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 7 August 2025; author interview with representatives from TBB Ireland, 31 July 2025.

Provisions regarding family unity and family reunification

Provisions linked to family unity (that is, moving with accompanying family members) and family reunification (having family join a migrant who is already in the destination country) can be crucial in determining the attractiveness and viability of labour mobility pathways for refugees and others in need of international protection. Unlike other migrants, refugees often cannot travel back to visit relatives in their country of origin or country of first asylum, making prolonged separation particularly difficult.²⁰ For many, especially women with caregiving responsibilities or cultural restrictions on travelling alone, migration without family is simply not an option.

Work visas vary widely in their provisions for families. Some do not permit family to join the principal applicant, while others not only allow families to travel together but facilitate this via a single application for the applicant and their family (for instance, Spain).²¹ In practice, even where family unity provisions exist, procedures can be so restrictive or lengthy that they make the visa less attractive. In Belgium, for example, migrant workers can only begin the process of applying to have family join them after receiving a work permit, and the process often takes 9–12 months.²²

Furthermore, the salary threshold for faster processing was recently increased to 5,000 euros per month, which is far above what most shortage-occupation or mid-skilled jobs pay, delaying or rendering family unity out of reach for many workers.

The procedures for family reunification also vary. Refugees entering on mainstream labour visas may not always be eligible for refugee-specific reunification procedures, which are more flexible (e.g., by accepting alternative documentation, easing income or housing requirements, or allowing for faster processing). General family reunification procedures for economic migrants typically require original civil certificates (e.g., marriage certificate, a child's birth certificate), higher income levels, and sometimes predeparture language tests. These conditions are often impossible for refugees to meet, making family reunification unattainable. In an attempt to bridge some of these gaps and reduce the risk of prolonged family

Guiding questions

- Does the visa allow family members (partner, children, other dependants) to travel alongside the main applicant?
- Does the visa allow the main applicant to apply for family reunification after arriving in the destination country?

For families seeking to travel together or reunify:

- What proof is required to establish family relationships?
- Do visa applicants need to fulfil specific income and/or accommodation conditions at destination to have their families accompany them?
- Do family members need to prove knowledge of the destination-country language?
- Do family members have the right to work and study at destination?

²⁰ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, *Family Reunification of Refugees and Migrants in the Council of Europe Member States* (Brussels: Council of Europe, Committee on Migration, Refugees, and Displaced Persons, 2018); Naomi Alboim and Karen Cohl, 'Expanding Refugee Pathways to Canada: Strategies for Welcoming Afghan and Other Refugees' (policy brief, Ryerson University, Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration, Toronto, November 2021), 4; author interview with representatives from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025.

²¹ Author interview with representative from the Spanish Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration, 7 August 2025.

²² Author interview with representative from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025.

separation, UNHCR Italy is piloting the use of the country's visa for accompanying family members (familiare al seguito) for Syrian refugees.²³ This arrangement links the labour visa with a parallel family reunification request filed by a lawyer in Italy on behalf of the main applicant. While family members usually cannot travel together with the main applicant, the process allows them to join within a few months, reducing separation.

Even when family unity or reunification is allowed, practical barriers—such as restrictions on family members' work or study—can limit families' ability to integrate, strain family finances, and reduce the overall feasibility and attractiveness of a pathway. For example, in Ireland, spouses of principal applicants were previously not allowed to work, and the lifting of this restriction has made this labour mobility pathway more accessible and attractive. The EU Blue Card in Germany offers a positive example of family member inclusion: spouses of Blue Card holders are exempt from demonstrating German language proficiency at an A1 level when applying for a dependant permit and are granted full access to employment and self-employment.²⁴



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Procedures for family unity:** Visas that allow dependants to be included in the principal applicant's initial application, rather than requiring a separate process, are more inclusive of refugee (and other) workers for whom a period of family separation would be difficult.
- ▶ **Refugee-specific flexibility for family reunification:** This may include accepting alternative documentation, easing income or housing requirements, and expediting procedures for refugee recipients of work visas.
- ▶ **Reasonable income thresholds:** Setting salary requirements at attainable levels can help ensure family unity or reunification is not out of reach for most workers.
- ▶ **Work and study rights for dependants:** Such rights can help a worker's spouse and children integrate meaningfully into their new community rather than being left without opportunities.

Pillar 2: Application requirements and documentation

A second set of obstacles pertains to the document and work-related requirements for a visa or work permit, which can be particularly difficult to meet for refugees and others in need of international protection. Visa processes typically assume ready access to travel documents, diplomas, employment records, and other official documents, which many refugees lack. Conditions in a refugee's country of first asylum (including informal work and limited access to formal banking) can also make it hard to meet professional experience and personal finance requirements. As such, even when refugees have sought-after skills and qualifications, they may be excluded because they cannot produce the necessary paperwork.

²³ Author interview with representative from UNHCR Italy, 4 August 2025.

²⁴ Tereza Matos and Marina Brizar, *Germany Baseline Assessment* (N.p.: TBB, 2024).

Travel documents

A major obstacle refugees face to accessing mainstream work visas is restrictive travel document requirements. Most visas require applicants to have a valid national passport. Yet many refugees have lost their passports while fleeing war or persecution or hold expired documents because they cannot safely contact their origin country's authorities to renew them.

Some governments have sought to mitigate this challenge through more flexible identity or travel document policies. In certain cases, destination-country governments may accept expired passports or other government-issued identity documents in lieu of valid passports (for instance, in Australia, Canada, and Ireland), or otherwise offer refugee applicants greater flexibility in meeting standard document requirements (as in Canada's EMPP).²⁵ Countries may also recognise convention travel documents or UNHCR-issued papers, which serve as alternative travel documents and protect their holders from being returned to their country of origin. Finally, destination countries may choose to issue a laissez-passer to certain individuals who are unable to obtain a passport or other travel document, as is done by Italian embassies for some refugee work visa applicants, for example.²⁶

Some destination countries also require visa applicants to demonstrate legal residence in the country from which they are applying for the visa. For some refugees, this can be a difficult requirement to meet. Displacement forces many people to live in countries where they either lack regular status or only have a temporary stay permit, one that allows them to be present in the country (tolerated status) but does not confer full legal residence as is generally defined by visa applications. Work visas that strictly require proof of legal residence and do not offer exemptions or flexibility are thus inaccessible to many refugees.

Guiding questions

- What types of travel documents are accepted by the destination country for visa applicants (e.g., only national passports, or also other government-issued documents, laissez-passer, and/or refugee travel documents)?
- Is proof of legal residence in the country of departure required to apply for the visa?

Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Acceptance of alternative documents:** Refugees are more likely to be able to meet visa requirements when the destination country is willing to accept expired passports, other government-issued identity documents, convention travel documents, UNHCR-issued papers, or temporary travel documents such as a laissez-passer in lieu of a valid national passport.
- ▶ **Flexible proof-of-residence requirements:** This could entail exemptions for refugees from strict criteria regarding legal residence in the country of departure, or recognition of tolerated or temporary statuses as sufficient to meet this requirement.

²⁵ Author interview with representatives from IRCC, 19 August 2025.

²⁶ Author interview with representative from Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, 28 July 2025; author interview with representative from Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 13 August 2025.

Financial requirements

Although not all work visas have financial requirements, some require proof of personal savings (typically held in a bank account and free from debt) as a demonstration of the applicant's capacity to cover initial settlement costs at destination. In some cases, authorities also review the applicant's banking history. For instance, Irish authorities may check an applicant's income over the past two years.²⁷ For refugees, such criteria can be particularly challenging to meet because of restrictions on formal work in many countries of first asylum, limited access to banking services, and a lack of documented financial history.²⁸

Guiding questions

- Are visa applicants required to have a bank account?
- If a bank account is required, do applicants need to demonstrate a minimum amount of funds in the account at the time of application?

In some countries, authorities have introduced measures to mitigate this barrier. Canada's EMPP, for example, waives the financial requirement entirely for applicants with a signed job offer (the programme's 'job offer' stream), ensuring that a lack of personal savings does not block the mobility of applicants who will start earning an income shortly after arrival. For applicants in the 'no job offer' stream of the programme (who have a certain level of training or experience but no job lined up yet), low-interest loans from partner nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) can help meet minimum settlement fund requirements.²⁹



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Waivers or access to affordable financing:** Waivers to settlement fund requirements for refugees and others in need of international protection, or access to low-interest loans, can help well-qualified applicants meet minimum costs when savings are insufficient.
- ▶ **Flexibility in assessing financial capacity:** Visa systems that do not rely solely on a formal banking history to assess applicants' financial means are more inclusive of refugees, given the barriers many face to formal work or financial services in countries of first asylum.

Education and credential recognition

Depending on the level of documentation and the processes involved, education criteria and associated requirements that credentials be officially recognised can be easier or harder for refugees to meet. Some visa pathways require proof of all educational qualifications, often in the form of original (hard-copy) certificates, while others only request copies of an applicant's most recent qualification or only higher education credentials. Requiring original documents can present a challenge for refugees, who may have lost or be unable to access their certificates due to displacement.

²⁷ Author interview with representatives from TBB Ireland, 31 July 2025.

²⁸ TBB, *Global Evaluation*, 72–73; IRCC and UNHCR, *The Economic Mobility Pathways Project – Policy Principles and Lessons Learned* (Ottawa: IRCC and UNHCR, 2019), 9.

²⁹ Author interview with representatives from IRCC, 19 August 2025.

On top of diplomas, some countries require visa applicants to get foreign educational or professional qualifications validated through formal equivalency assessments. These processes often rely on review of official documents by credentialing authorities or additional testing and training. Because refugees may not have access to the necessary official documents, such requirements can be particularly hard to meet. Assessment procedures, meanwhile, can be costly or time-consuming. These challenges are especially pronounced in regulated professions such as medicine, nursing, and law, where strict licensing and public safety standards make recognition processes complex and demanding.³⁰

Where more flexible requirements and procedures exist—whether for refugees specifically or applicants in general—accessibility tends to improve. This can include, for example, accepting scanned or digital copies of documents, letters from educational institutions, or other forms of verification besides original certificates, or granting waivers based on an applicant having relevant work experience, recognised training, or participating in pre- and post-arrival bridge courses. In Canada, for example, the EMPP waives the official educational credential assessment for applicants who can demonstrate eligibility through a combination of training and work experience.³¹ Similarly, Germany’s visa for professionally experienced workers allows candidates to demonstrate their skills through relevant work experience instead of formal qualification recognition.³² And in Australia, while formal skills assessment is required in regulated fields (such as medicine and engineering), it is not for other professions and, instead, a visa applicant’s employer confirms their qualifications.³³

In some contexts, industry actors and NGOs have experimented with flexible approaches to credential recognition. For example, the Canadian Welding Bureau has adopted a skills-based approach that places less emphasis on formal documents and more on evaluating what candidates can do via affordable micro-credentialing.³⁴ In Italy, the Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence issues statements of comparability free of charge for holders of international protection, easing access to employment and

Guiding questions

- Do applicants need to provide proof of formal education qualifications? If so, just for postsecondary or the latest degree, or for all education levels?
- If proof of education is required, what type of documents are accepted (e.g., original vs. scanned copies)?
- Is there any flexibility in these qualification requirements (e.g., waivers, or acceptance of work experience or recognised training)?
- Is the applicant required to have foreign educational or professional credentials officially recognised or validated (e.g., through equivalency assessment or credential evaluation)?
- If official recognition or validation is required, what methods are accepted (e.g., review of credential documents, work sample assessment, or in-person skills tests)?

30 TBB, *Global Evaluation*, 71–72; IRCC and UNHCR, *The Economic Mobility Pathways Project*; Matos and Brizar, *Germany Baseline Assessment*.

31 Author interview with representatives from IRCC, 19 August 2025.

32 Matos and Brizar, *Germany Baseline Assessment*.

33 Author interview with representatives from Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 7 August 2025.

34 Author interview with representatives from RefugePoint, 25 August 2025.

education opportunities for this group.³⁵ Finally, some mobility pathways have been designed with lower education requirements and complemented by targeted training, such as Malengo's Kenya–Germany Vocational Training Program, which aims to facilitate the movement of refugees with secondary school diplomas to pursue training for nursing jobs in Germany.³⁶



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Acceptance of alternative education documentation:** This may include scanned or digital copies, letters from educational institutions, and other forms of documentation beyond original certificates.
- ▶ **Flexibility in credential recognition requirements:** Alternatives to formal credentialing, such as recognising relevant work experience, training, or pre- and post-arrival micro-credentialing, offer more opportunities for refugees (and other applicants) to demonstrate their skills.
- ▶ **Free or low-cost equivalency services:** Such services may provide statements of comparability between foreign-earned and domestic credentials or facilitate official recognition of foreign qualifications at no or minimal cost for holders of international protection.

Language skills

Language requirements can be a significant barrier to work visas and permits, particularly when a destination country's language is not widely spoken internationally (unlike English, French, or Spanish). In addition, meeting language requirements often involves formal testing or certification and, at times, training courses to pass those tests, processes and resources that refugees may not have access to in their country of first asylum.³⁷ Or, if they are available, they may be costly or require travel to attend in person, creating additional barriers for candidates facing economic hardship or restricted mobility. As a result, even refugees with sufficient language skills for destination-country employment may fail to satisfy visa language proficiency criteria.

Guiding questions

- Do visa applicants need to provide proof of proficiency in a destination-country language?
- If language requirements exist, what level of proficiency is required?
- If language requirements exist, which tests are accepted as valid proof of proficiency?
- Is there any flexibility around a visa's language test requirements?

Language requirements vary widely. Some countries, such as Canada, have strict language requirements for visa applicants, viewing language proficiency as a key component of successful integration and requiring International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test results.³⁸ By contrast, other countries such as Belgium, Germany, Ireland, and Spain leave it to employers to decide if a candidate has the necessary

³⁵ Author interview with representative from Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 13 August 2025.

³⁶ Malengo, 'Kenya–Germany Vocational Training Program for Refugees and Kenyans', accessed 25 August 2025.

³⁷ TBB, *Global Evaluation*, 70; Matos and Brizar, *Germany Baseline Assessment*.

³⁸ Author interview with representatives from IRCC, 19 August 2025.

language skills, rather than requiring formal proof of proficiency for a visa or work permit.³⁹ Yet even when not part of a country's visa rules, language proficiency can be a 'hidden barrier' in regulated professions such as health care and education, where licensing depends on formal language certification.⁴⁰

While language proficiency can play an important role in long-term social and economic integration, flexibility in meeting language requirements can benefit of both employers and workers. Options include improving access to (and accepting) not only in-person but also remote testing, reviewing what level of proficiency a worker needs to perform a role successfully, and expanding access to pre- and post-arrival training to help applicants fill knowledge gaps. For instance, some countries accept alternative assessments such as the Duolingo English Test or employer-approved evaluations, rather than accepting only internationally recognised certifications.⁴¹ Australia's labour pathways for refugees, for instance, accept a declaration of a candidate's English skills from their prospective employer and Talent Beyond Boundaries, the NGO that helps facilitate the programme.⁴² In Germany, the Job-Turbo initiative supports ongoing language development among refugees already in the country through part-time vocational training alongside employment—a model that could work well for refugees entering a country with a work visa.⁴³



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Employer verification of needed language skills:** Visas that allow employers to certify that a worker has the language skills for a specific role are often more accessible than those requiring formal language testing, plus they acknowledge variation in employer needs.
- ▶ **Flexible and alternative assessments:** This may involve accepting the results of tests beyond traditional internationally recognised exams (such as the Duolingo English Test or employer-approved evaluations), enabling remote testing, or providing pre- and post-arrival language support to help workers meet proficiency requirements.

39 Author interview with representative from Spanish Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration, 7 August 2025; German Federal Government, 'The New Skilled Immigration Act at a Glance', accessed 28 August 2025.

40 Author interview with representatives from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025.

41 See, for example, a list of institutions worldwide that accept the results of language tests from the language-learning app Duolingo: Duolingo English Test, 'Accepting Institutions', accessed 4 September 2025. For work in certain regulated professions under the UK Skilled Work Visa, applicants may meet the English language requirement if they pass an English language assessment accepted by their professional regulatory body, rather than a formal test such as those from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

42 Author interview with representatives from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 7 August 2025.

43 Germany's Job-Turbo initiative, which aims to accelerate refugee entry into the labour market by placing them in jobs immediately after integration courses, facilitates further language development through part-time vocational courses alongside employment. See German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 'The Job-Turbo Initiative Has Started' (news release, 2 February 2024).

Proof of work experience

Labour visa pathways often require applicants to demonstrate previous work experience. In many cases, this includes a requirement that experience be recent (e.g., last two to five years), paid, and/or directly relevant to the position for which the visa is being sought. Yet for refugees, contacting former employers in their country of origin may be unsafe or impossible, particularly for individuals who fled persecution or conflict. Additionally, regulatory and practical restrictions in countries of first asylum may force refugees to work informally or in jobs unrelated to their professional qualifications, leaving them without contracts, payslips, or formal references to document their experience. As a result, highly skilled refugees with many years of work experience may fail to meet recency or sector-specific experience requirements, particularly after prolonged displacement.⁴⁴

Guiding questions

- Is proof of previous work experience required? And if so, does the experience need to be recent?
- If proof of work experience is required, what documentation is accepted?

By contrast, visas with broader definitions of experience—such as work accumulated over a longer time period and including paid volunteer roles—or that simply do not have such conditions may be more accessible to refugees. The Czech employee card, for example, does not have any requirement regarding proof of experience for applicants with a job offer.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Canada's EMPP takes a flexible approach to assessing work experience. For the 'job offer' stream, applicants must have at least one year of full-time (or equivalent part-time) paid work, which can include nontraditional roles and self-employment.⁴⁶ For the 'no job offer' stream, applicants must have one year of full-time (or equivalent part-time) paid work within the last three years, but self-employment does not count. Points-based systems are another mechanism that does not automatically disqualify applicants for interrupted or nonlinear careers. For instance, Australia's subclass 189 and 190 visas award points for overseas skilled employment earned within the last ten years, with more points granted for more years of experience.⁴⁷



Refugee-friendly features

- **Flexible definitions of experience:** Visas that recognise work experience accumulated over longer periods, paid volunteer roles, informal or nontraditional work, and self-employment are more accessible to refugees (and others) with interrupted career trajectories. This flexibility may be part of a visa's standard definitions or the result of a points-based systems.

44 Anita Orav, 'Labour Market Integration of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees' (briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service, Brussels, June 2022); author interview with representatives from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025; TBB, *Global Evaluation*, 68.

45 Official Information Portal for Foreigners of the Czech Ministry of the Interior, 'Employee Card', accessed 25 August 2025.

46 Author interview with representatives from IRCC, 19 August 2025. The types of flexibility described in this section for the 'job offer' stream apply to Training, Education, Experience, and Responsibilities (TEER) categories 0–5, while flexibility for the 'no job offer' stream applies to TEER categories 0–3.

47 Australian Department of Home Affairs, 'Subclass 189 – Skilled Independent Visa', accessed 27 August 2025; Australian Department of Home Affairs, 'Subclass 190 – Skilled Nominated Visa', accessed 27 August 2025.

Job offers

Many work visas require candidates to secure a job offer (and often, a signed contract) before applying. Some also specify that the job must match the applicant's qualifications or satisfy additional criteria, such as meeting a minimum salary threshold, number of working hours, contract duration, or specific working conditions. In certain cases, employers must conduct labour market tests (advertising positions to local workers) before work authorisation can be issued to a foreigner. These steps are often designed to protect both local and migrant workers (for example, by ensuring migrants are not being hired to undermine wage and working conditions), but when cumbersome to meet, they can turn away both employers and workers.

Refugees can struggle to secure a job offer for several reasons. Limited internet connectivity—disproportionately common among refugee populations—can make it difficult to identify and apply for jobs or build professional networks, for instance. And employers may be deterred by gaps in refugee candidates' resumes tied to their displacement or to restrictions on their ability to work formally in their country of first asylum.

Some visa programmes have introduced measures to address these barriers. Canada's EMPP includes a pathway to permanent residence for refugees who have sought-after skills but do not yet have a job offer and who will pursue employment upon arrival. The programme also helps connect some refugees with job offers before arrival through partner employers or NGOs. Point-based systems, including Canada's Federal Skilled Worker Program⁴⁸ and Australia's Skilled Independent Visa,⁴⁹ evaluate candidates on a variety of criteria (such as qualifications, work experience, language ability, and other factors) and may admit high-scoring candidates who do not have a job offer. And Germany's Opportunity Card (Chancenkarte) expands access to the German labour market by allowing skilled workers without a prior job offer to enter the country to seek employment.⁵⁰

Where a job offer is required, complementary resources—such as matching platforms or activities highlighting job opportunities—can help bridge the gap between employers and refugee workers. For example, Talent Beyond Boundaries connects skilled displaced workers with employers in countries with

Guiding questions

- Do candidates need to secure a job offer to apply for the visa?
- If a job offer is required, does it need to align with the candidate's qualifications?
- Do employers need to conduct a labour market test before the work permit and/or visa can be granted?
- Is a signed employment contract required at the time of the visa application?
- Are there any contract-related conditions that candidates must meet to be eligible for the visa (e.g., salary, number of working hours, contract duration, specific working conditions)?
- If the visa or work permit has a salary threshold, what is the minimum gross salary required to qualify?

⁴⁸ Government of Canada, 'Express Entry – Federal Skilled Worker Program', accessed 29 August 2025.

⁴⁹ Australian Department of Home Affairs, 'Points Table for Skilled Independent Visa (Subclass 189)', accessed 29 August 2025.

⁵⁰ Matos and Brizar, *Germany Baseline Assessment*; German Federal Ministry of the Interior, 'Launch of Opportunity Card to Encourage Immigration of Skilled Workers' (news release, 31 May 2024).

labour shortages. Local NGOs, community organisations, and private-sector actors can also play a role in disseminating information about mobility programmes and in facilitating professional connections in destination countries. For instance, in Italy, Fondazione Adecco, in coordination with civil-society organisations such as Caritas and the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, supports refugee recruitment via connections with employers. Such initiatives make it more feasible for refugees to access visa pathways that require a job offer, but they are also often resource intensive and involve case-by-case support, raising questions about their scalability.



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Admission not contingent on a job offer:** Visas that allow applicants to enter a country without a prior job offer and seek employment upon arrival (as done through some points-based systems and job-search visas) can benefit workers with sought-after skills but lacking professional connections in a destination country.
- ▶ **Job-matching support:** Services that connect refugees with employers through online platforms, NGOs, or community organisations can make visas requiring a job offer more accessible, while helping employers engage with a new pool of talent.

Pillar 3: Checks and visa processing

A third and final set of considerations relates to how visas are processed. Many visa procedures require multiple in-person visits to an embassy or consulate—for example, to request an appointment, submit an application, give biometrics, and collect the visa—resulting in significant travel and accommodation costs and often posing logistical hurdles for refugees whose mobility is restricted. Other challenges can arise when consular officers have limited training on how to process applications from people affected by displacement, creating further barriers and delays. And where applicants rely on employer sponsorship, long and unpredictable processing times can cause job offers to lapse and, potentially, discourage employers from considering hiring refugees in the future.

Application locations and systems

The mechanics of where and how a visa application can be filed often determine whether it is genuinely accessible to refugees. Systems that require applications to be lodged in the applicant's country of origin effectively rule out refugees, for whom return may be life-threatening. Even when applications can be submitted from the country of first asylum, accessibility is far from guaranteed. Consular offices are typically concentrated in capital cities or major urban centres, while refugees are often housed in remote camps or secondary towns. For many, long travel distances, transport and accommodation costs, or legal restrictions on refugees' movement within the country can make reaching a consulate nearly impossible. And in some cases, the nearest consulate or embassy is located in a neighbouring country, and refugees may require travel permits to leave and return to their place of residence.

Emerging tech-based and decentralised practices—such as partially or fully online application systems, and mobile visa processing centres (e.g., VFS Global’s Mobile Visa Application Centre⁵¹)—can help mitigate logistical and financial barriers for refugees. For example, under the Italian university corridor (UNICORE) for refugee students, refugees are permitted to submit applications remotely if no visa-issuing office is nearby.⁵² In various countries, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) operates visa facilitation centres that assist applicants (refugees and others) by collecting biometric data and application documents and forwarding them securely to the relevant consular authorities.⁵³ Finally, some countries have online tools that allow applicants to test their eligibility before beginning the visa process, such as the Italian visa pre-assessment tool and Germany’s Chancenkarte, though these tools have thus far been designed with mainstream applicants in mind and do not flag forms of flexibility or waivers available to refugees and others in need of international protection.⁵⁴

Guiding questions

- Where can the visa application be filed?
- In which language(s) can the application be filed?
- Are any requirements or rules waived for refugee applicants? If so, what proof is needed to qualify for the waiver?
- Are applicants allowed to appeal a visa refusal?

The language(s) a visa process takes place in can pose another barrier. Many systems only accept applications in the official language of the destination country, leaving refugees (and other applicants) to navigate complex bureaucratic forms that may be difficult even for those with some proficiency in the language. By contrast, countries that allow submissions in English or multiple languages (such as Germany and Japan),⁵⁵ and that provide translated guidance materials, significantly lower these barriers.

Procedural discretion may in some cases compound challenges for refugee applicants. For example, visa officers may demand documents not explicitly required by law (such as original birth certificates) or apply stricter scrutiny to applicants who are not nationals of the departure country. Such practices can create delays and, in some cases, lead to arbitrary denials, making appeal mechanisms an important means by which refugees can challenge such decisions and present alternative forms of proof that they meet visa requirements, despite not having access to the standard documentation.⁵⁶

51 VFS Global, ‘[Mobile Visa Application Centre](#)’, accessed 20 August 2025.

52 Author interview with representative from UNHCR Italy, 4 August 2025.

53 Author interview with representative from IOM, 21 August 2025.

54 Italian Visa, ‘[Questionario per il visto Italiano: verifica se sei idoneo](#)’, accessed 27 August 2025; Chancenkarte Deutschland, ‘[Application Assistant](#)’, accessed 27 August 2025.

55 See, for example, German Federal Government, ‘[Job Search Opportunity Card](#)’, accessed 25 August 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘[Other Languages](#)’, accessed 27 August 2025.

56 Author interview with representatives from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025.



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Remote or online application systems:** When applicants are allowed to submit their documents without travelling to embassies or consulates, refugees are less likely to face insurmountable safety risks and travel costs.
- ▶ **Mobile and decentralised processing:** Mobile visa centres or local facilitation points can collect application materials closer to where refugees reside.
- ▶ **Pre-assessment and guidance tools:** Online eligibility checks and multilingual guidance can help refugees and other applicants navigate bureaucratic requirements and reduce errors.
- ▶ **Appeal mechanisms:** Visa systems that enable applicants to appeal negative decisions offer a way for refugees to present alternative evidence of their eligibility, even if they cannot furnish the standard documents.

Document verification

As part of the visa application process, many embassies and consulates require notarised copies of key documents—such as birth certificates, identity papers, civil status records, and educational qualifications—sometimes supplemented with an apostille⁵⁷ or official certification for these documents. Often, sworn translations are also required. As mentioned in earlier sections, it is often not possible for displaced individuals to obtain original documents or certifications from their issuing authorities. And even when it is possible, doing so can be costly and time-consuming.

In some cases, these document authentication requirements are set out in national laws or regulations, which can limit flexibility for consular staff. However, in many other cases, these requirements stem primarily from common practice or internal guidance rather than law, meaning that with clear information for consular officers and agreed-upon alternatives, some of these barriers could be reduced.

Some countries have introduced more flexible approaches to document verification, whether for all applicants or specifically for refugees. This can include accepting certified copies, UNHCR-issued documents (where an applicant lacks a state-issued one), or alternative proof of identity and education. Such measures

Guiding questions

- Do embassies or consulates require notarised copies of an applicant's documents?
- Is an apostille or other official certification required for these documents?
- Is official translation (e.g., by a sworn translator) required for these documents?

⁵⁷ An apostille is a certificate issued by a designated authority in the country of origin, or where a document was issued, that confirms the origin of the document.

can help ensure that verification procedures do not exclude otherwise qualified applicants solely due to displacement-related circumstances.



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Acceptance of alternative documents:** Visa processes are more inclusive of refugees and other applicants for whom accessing original, notarised documents is difficult if they accept documents issued or certified through other trusted channels, such as UNHCR-issued papers or documents from other recognised authorities.
- ▶ **Selective notarisation requirements:** Visa processes that require notarisation only for a small number of key documents also lower this hurdle.

Health and security screenings

Health and security screenings are common elements of visa processes, and the nature of these steps can make them more or less accessible for refugees. Some countries mandate only limited screenings (such as proof of vaccinations or testing for specific diseases), while others require full medical examinations before a worker departs for the destination country. Certain destination countries (such as Ireland) also require visa applicants to provide proof they will have health insurance valid in the country as part of the visa process.⁵⁸ These requirements can be particularly challenging for displaced applicants who lack access to endorsed medical providers or cannot afford costly exams and insurance coverage.

Certain process design features can help mitigate these issues. In Australia, for instance, an in-person medical examination is mandatory, but this is the final step of the visa process; this sequencing can ease the logistical and financial burden for refugees who need to travel to a major city for the exam, allowing them to complete it once their departure is likely and the visa is close to being granted, rather than as an additional trip earlier in the process. Facilitating access to medical screenings (e.g., through organisations such as IOM) or waiving the requirement for health insurance at the point of application (as is done for refugees by Italy's UNICORE) can also help reduce barriers or delays and enable candidates to progress with their applications.⁵⁹

Guiding questions

- Do candidates need to undergo a medical examination before departure?
- Is a medical transcript or health certificate required for visa processing?
- Are applicants required to prove they will have health insurance in the destination country for visa processing?
- Where can applicants complete fingerprinting or other biometric steps (e.g., an embassy, third-party service, or upon arrival)?
- What type of background check is required as part of the visa process?

⁵⁸ Ireland requires applicants to have private health insurance for three months post-arrival.

⁵⁹ Author interview with representative from UNHCR Italy, 4 August 2025.

On top of health checks, most visas require police clearance or criminal background checks from the applicant's country of origin or current residence. For refugees, obtaining such documents from origin-country authorities is often impossible due to conflict, persecution, or lack of functioning institutions. Police and other authorities in countries of first asylum, meanwhile, may refuse to issue certificates to nonresidents or individuals without recognised legal status. As such, visas that strictly require security checks by countries of origin (as is required for visas to enter Belgium) are out of reach for most refugees, even those who have lived in a country of first asylum for many years and who may be able to receive clearance documents from that country's authorities. Where certificates from a refugee's country of residence or alternative security-related documents (such as UNHCR attestations or affidavits) are accepted, these barriers are reduced.

Finally, the collection of biometric data can pose challenges for refugees. Some visa systems require applicants to provide fingerprints or photographs at embassies or consulates that may be difficult for refugees to access, whether due to travel costs or restrictions on travel internationally or within their country of residence. While most destination countries require that biometrics be collected during the visa application process, some have allowed this step to take place on arrival under certain circumstances. For instance, Ireland's refugee labour pathway allows for the collection of applicants' biometric data on arrival, which has made the process more accessible.⁶⁰ However, these forms of flexibility must be carefully weighed and balanced against broader security considerations.



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Flexible timing and facilitation of medical screenings:** Smart sequencing of the steps in a visa application process can limit the number of trips needed to embassies or consulates and lower associated costs and risks. Similarly, supporting access to medical exams and other checks through organisations located closer to applicants (such as IOM and others) can reduce travel, cost, and delays.
- ▶ **Waivers or deferrals for health insurance:** Allowing applicants to meet insurance requirements after visa issuance and/or upon arrival can help avoid delays in visa processing and reduce upfront costs.
- ▶ **Alternative documentation for security checks:** Visa processes that accept UNHCR attestations, affidavits, or certificates from a refugee's country of residence are more inclusive of displaced applicants than those strictly requiring police or criminal background checks from an applicant's country of origin.
- ▶ **Post-arrival biometric collection:** By collecting certain visa applicants' fingerprints and other biometrics upon arrival, a visa system can avoid excluding those without easy access to biometric services before travel.

Costs and fee waivers

Labour migration pathways often involve substantial upfront costs for applicants. This may include visa application charges, legal or migration agent services, language proficiency and credential assessments, medical exams, background checks, document notarisation or authentication, translation services, and

⁶⁰ Author interview with representative from TBB Ireland, 31 July 2025.

travel to consular offices. In some cases, applicants must also pay high exit permit fees to leave their host country.⁶¹ In Pakistan and Iran, for instance, individuals must pay a fee for each day they were irregularly in the country to obtain an exit permit, meaning migrants who have been in the country irregularly for six months may have to pay more than 5,000 euros.⁶²

The costs associated with different pathways, as well as how they are split among employers, workers, and governments, vary considerably by country. Guidelines from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) specify that employers should cover the costs of recruitment, but in practice, workers often bear some of these costs (e.g., paying for a portion of their travel) in certain pathways.⁶³ There is less consensus around who pays for what the ILO describes as ‘related costs’—those more tangentially related to recruitment such as predeparture trainings or the costs of relocating family members. Combined, these expenses can prove prohibitive for refugees, who are often excluded from financial systems. In Belgium, for instance, most costs are borne by employers, but workers must pay for the notarisation of documents (ranging from 50 to 300 euros), which is still a prohibitive cost for many refugees without access to resources or loans.⁶⁴

In some cases, governments have played an active role in reducing financial barriers to labour mobility by waiving some fees—such as those for visa applications, background checks, or medical examinations—for specific groups or under exceptional circumstances. For example, under Canada’s EMPP, the government waives application and biometric fees for applicants, and facilitates predeparture services such as medical exams; language tests, which can cost up to USD 400–500 (approximately 340–430 euros), are one of the remaining expenses for refugees in the programme.⁶⁵ While such waivers can ease access, they are difficult to sustain at scale and may raise questions of equity when other disadvantaged applicants are not offered similar support.

There may also be opportunities for governments to streamline visa processes in ways that reduce logistical and travel-related costs for all applicants, for example by bundling multiple steps into a single in-person appointment or enabling remote processing, where possible.⁶⁶ Additionally, providing affordable

Guiding questions

- Which costs are visa applicants responsible for? Consider: legal services/migration agent fees, visa application fees, travel expenses to embassy or consular offices, medical examinations, background checks, notarisation of documents, translation of documents, authentication or apostille of documents.
- Are there any exemptions or forms of flexibility to assist applicants with fees for the visa application, medical exam, background check, or language test?
- To what extent does the destination country bundle steps of the visa application process and/or allow remote processing to minimise repeated travel to consular offices and associated costs?

61 Author interview with representatives from IOM, 21 August 2025; TBB, *Global Evaluation*, 77–78; IRCC and UNHCR, *The Economic Mobility Pathways Project*.

62 Author interview with representative from Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, 28 July 2025.

63 International Labour Organisation (ILO), *General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment and Definition of Recruitment Fees and Related Costs* (Geneva: ILO, 2019); ILO, *A Global Comparative Study on Defining Recruitment Fees and Related Costs: Interregional Research on Law, Policy and Practice* (Geneva: ILO, 2020).

64 Author interview with representatives from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025.

65 Author interview with representatives from IRCC, 19 August 2025; author interview with representatives from RefugePoint, 25 August 2025.

66 Author interview with representatives from RefugePoint, 25 August 2025.

financing options can help refugees cover expenses as they occur and avoid debt bondage. For example, Australia's Pathway Club provides cash grants of USD 500–5,000 (roughly 430–4,300 euros) to refugees to cover pre-arrival expenses such as exit fees, passport applications, and interview-related expenses.⁶⁷ Canada's Immigration Loans Program also provides low-interest loans that can be used to cover the right of permanent residence fee, transportation to Canada, and post-arrival expenses.⁶⁸



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Clear cost-sharing policies:** Such policies improve transparency on which fees can be waived or covered by employers, governments, or other partners.
- ▶ **Access to affordable financing:** This may include cash grants, low-interest loans, or revolving funds to help applicants cover unavoidable expenses.
- ▶ **Well-designed application procedures:** Bundling multiple steps and enabling remote application processing, where feasible, can lower financial and logistical burdens on applicants who may otherwise need to travel repeatedly to consular offices.

Timelines

Visa application timelines—covering both the wait for an embassy or consulate appointment and subsequent processing—are among the least transparent aspects of labour migration systems. Delays can stem from several factors, including procedures that require a work permit before a visa, sequential vetting at regional and national levels, processing backlogs, extensive document requirements (often notarised), and how complete initial applications are.⁶⁹ These delays matter not only for applicants, who face uncertainty and prolonged waiting times, but also for employers, who rely on workers arriving within a predictable, short timeframe to meet labour needs effectively. If too unpredictable, some employers may be reluctant to recruit refugees or retract job offers.⁷⁰

Securing an initial appointment at an embassy or consulate can take weeks or even months, and the systems used (such as online booking portals, lotteries, or limited in-person slots) can affect how predictable this process is and how quickly applicants are able to book. In some contexts, available slots are resold through intermediaries, further disadvantaging applicants without connections or resources.⁷¹ Refugees who lack stable internet access or the means to travel on short notice may struggle to make use of certain systems.

67 Pathway Club, 'The Peter Ferguson Fund for Refugee Families', accessed 2 September 2025.

68 Government of Canada, 'Immigration Loans Program (ILP)', updated 29 August 2023.

69 In Australia, for example, visa applicants have 28 days to provide missing documents, which provides more flexibility but also can add to the timeline of the process.

70 Dorst, Hooper, Benton, and Dain, *Engaging Employers*; TBB, *Global Evaluation*; Manks, Monsef, and Wagner, *Sponsorship in the Context of Complementary Pathways*.

71 See, for example, Shanti Das, 'Overseas Students and Workers Targeted in Illicit UK Visa Trade', *The Guardian*, 29 October 2023. Poland is developing a new system that will require biometric verification before applicants can book appointments, aiming to curb abuses. See Bleona Restelica, 'Poland to Launch Special System That Blocks Intermediaries From Exploiting Visa Appointments', *SchengenNews*, 19 February 2025.

Adding to this, application processing times for standard visa channels can be lengthy. In Belgium, for instance, processing typically takes three to four months at best, and six to nine months in less favourable cases.⁷² Similarly, obtaining an Italian work permit can take around four months, a step applicants must complete before scheduling a visa appointment.⁷³ Processing times may be even longer for refugee candidates, as consular officers may request additional documents or conduct more extensive reviews. Lengthy procedures can have costly knock-on effects, for example if a refugee's exit permit or temporary travel authorisation expires before a visa is issued.⁷⁴

The sequencing of steps in a migration pathway can have a major impact on overall timeline. In some systems, work permits and visas are integrated into a streamlined, one-step process. In others, applicants must complete a two-step process, first obtaining a work permit or labour clearance from the relevant destination-country authority before applying for a visa. Meanwhile, some systems have multiple, sequential layers of review—for instance, first by regional and then national authorities, as in Belgium and in Canada's provincial nominee programmes. Both kinds of multi-step processes can create additional costs, delays, and administrative complexity. To simplify its process, Ireland introduced a new online application system in early 2025, which is still being tested.

Other promising practices include publishing average wait times for appointments, as is done by the United States and Australia, since this can help create greater transparency, mitigate concerns, and enable applicants and employers to plan more effectively. Tackling some of the bottlenecks that can slow down visa processing for refugees would also go a long way towards addressing long and unpredictable processing timelines for these applicants. In the meantime, enabling refugee applicants to access priority processing could help speed up this caseload. For instance, Canada's EMPP commits to a six-month maximum processing time, and the United Kingdom's Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot provides free priority processing to applicants within five days (an option that would normally cost around £500 per applicant); however, such bespoke arrangements can be hard to sustain financially at larger numbers and raise concerns about equity with other disadvantaged applicants.⁷⁵

Guiding questions

- Does the visa require applicants to apply for a separate work permit? If so, do applicants need to obtain that permit before applying for the visa, or can the two processes occur simultaneously?
- Are significant wait times (i.e., more than two months) common for visa appointments at some embassies or consulates?
- How are visa appointments or application slots allocated?
- What visa processing options are available (standard only, priority processing for certain groups, or expedited processing for a fee)?
- How long does the entire visa process take on average, from first appointment or submission to visa issuance?

⁷² Author interview with representative from Fedasil and IOM Belgium, 29 August 2025.

⁷³ Author interview with representative from Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 13 August 2025.

⁷⁴ Fratzke et al., *Refugee Resettlement and Complementary Pathways*.

⁷⁵ Author interview with representatives from IRCC, 19 August 2025; Nour Moussa and Olivier Sterck, *Skilled Worker Visas for Refugees: An Evaluation of the UK's Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot (DTMP)* (Oxford: The University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre, 2024).



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Greater transparency on timelines:** Publishing average wait times for appointments and processing can help both applicants and employers plan effectively.
- ▶ **Priority or expedited processing:** Dedicated appointment slots or premium processing options can help ensure refugees' applications are processed on similar timelines to other international hires.
- ▶ **Streamlined or one-step application processes:** Integrating work permit and visa applications reduces sequential steps, administrative burdens, and overall delays.

Consular capacity and available support

Work visa processes are often complex, vary substantially across countries and schemes, and can change frequently, making them difficult to navigate for refugees and other applicants.⁷⁶ But unlike economic migrants, refugees typically lack the financial resources, professional networks, and legal support to help them through these processes,⁷⁷ and they may face additional barriers such as limited digital access.⁷⁸ Ultimately, this means displaced individuals are often not aware that they may qualify for labour migration pathways, unless they receive clear information on visa options and additional support, such as from pro bono lawyers or others legal assistance providers.⁷⁹



Guiding questions

- Is assistance available to support refugees in navigating the visa process if needed?
- Is specific training or guidance provided to consular staff on processing visa applications from displaced individuals in the country of departure?
- Is there a dedicated or centralised consular office or staff for processing labour visa applications from refugees?

At the same time, consular staff who process visa applications may not be aware of or fully understand the challenges refugees and other displaced applicants face, unless provided with specific training. Without such guidance, there is a risk that staff may impose additional procedural steps or request documents not mandated by law, be unaware of applicable fee or requirement waivers, or deny an application if not accompanied by the standard documents (even if alternatives are accepted). Some missions provide ad hoc or optional training, but mandatory training on how to handle work visa applications from refugees (as conducted by Canada) can improve processing consistency, transparency, and efficiency.

Dedicated assistance can also make a significant difference, helping applicants navigate complex procedures, reduce errors, and avoid delays. As part of the Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot, the UK Home Office has designated a single point of contact within the Visa and Citizenship Special Handling team to support applicants who lack access to required documents due to displacement.⁸⁰ Similarly, Ireland has introduced a dedicated help desk for queries from refugee candidates and guarantees that work visa

⁷⁶ TBB, *Global Evaluation*; Matos and Brizar, *Germany Baseline Assessment*.

⁷⁷ Author interview with representatives from RefugePoint, 25 August 2025.

⁷⁸ Fratzke et al., *Refugee Resettlement and Complementary Pathways*.

⁷⁹ Author interview with representatives from RefugePoint, 25 August 2025.

⁸⁰ Moussa and Sterck, *Skilled Worker Visas for Refugees*.

applications submitted by refugees will be processed at a dedicated office in Dublin.⁸¹ This application support, at times combined with priority processing, can reduce the time between candidate selection and arrival, helping migration pathways respond more effectively to labour market needs.



Refugee-friendly features

- ▶ **Accessible, clear, and centralised information:** Easy-to-access guidance on visa eligibility and application procedures—via websites, multilingual portals, or mobile apps—can raise awareness among refugees of potential labour migration options, while help from pro bono lawyers or legal aid providers can help applicants navigate complex processes.
- ▶ **Mandatory training for consular staff:** Compulsory training on the specific challenges displaced applicants face can reduce unnecessary document requests or procedural delays.
- ▶ **Dedicated consular assistance or case management:** Dedicated desks or points of contact within consulates can help applicants troubleshoot documentation issues and coordinate with authorities.

Final Thoughts

As countries facing skills shortages review and rethink their visa strategies, and as civil-society and other stakeholders consider how to maintain opportunities for refugees amid limited resettlement commitments, boosting qualified refugees' access to work visa systems could offer multiple benefits. Although an option for only a limited segment of the world's refugee population, this is an important complementary pathway—enabling displaced individuals to move safely and pursue their career aspirations. Moving beyond the bespoke, resource-intensive forms of support that have facilitated refugee labour mobility to date and instead improving the accessibility of mainstream work visa systems can help reduce costs, make procedures more predictable, and ensure that mobility opportunities are not limited to small, highly tailored schemes.

An important step towards this goal is understanding the degree to which the design and procedural elements of existing visas are inclusive or exclusive of well-qualified refugees and other displaced people. This visa evaluation framework, and the accompanying scorecard, can help policymakers, practitioners, and other interested parties to explore these questions—from eligibility criteria and application requirements to visa processing and costs. Crucially, while this framework focuses on features that make a visa more accessible for refugees, the promising practices identified in this framework could in many cases benefit all applicants and their potential employers.

While this framework focuses on features that make a visa more accessible for refugees, the promising practices identified in this framework could in many cases benefit all applicants and their potential employers.

⁸¹ Author interview with representative from TBB Ireland, 31 July 2025.

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