

## Refugees' Career Capital and its Short- and Long-Term Transferability

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**Refugees' Career Capital and its  
Short- and Long-Term Transferability**

## 1. Introduction

During the years 2014–2020, Austria has granted asylum and work permits to more than 90,000 refugees, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. Unemployment remains extremely high in this group, with more than 30,000 refugees looking for jobs by the end of 2020. In this study, we use the concept of relational career capital (see Latzke et al. 2015, 59) that is based on Bourdieu's (1986) notion of capital and his understanding that the value of an agent's capital depends on its relation to the social field. Based on 35 semi-structured interviews with Syrian and Afghan refugees, we explore how they strive to transfer their career capital from one institutional and cultural context to another and to accumulate new career capital. We discuss our findings in the light of long-term viability, using the concept of sustainable careers (see Van der Heijden/De Vos 2015, 7)

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that focuses on the four core dimensions *time*, *social space*, *agency* and *meaning*. Based on our findings we show how refugees' transfer of career capital lacks a long-term perspective because of problems in all of these dimensions.

## 2. Theoretical background

The obstacles and boundaries which refugee job-seekers encounter go beyond those faced by voluntary migrants (see Akkaymak 2017, 660). They often need to flee at short notice and thus lack the time to prepare; they are separated from their families, experience fear, anxiety and even trauma throughout their long and cumbersome journeys and many of them cannot deliberately choose their ultimate host countries. Having arrived, most refugees have few, if any, economic resources and suffer prejudice and discrimination. They are disadvantaged due to their precarious legal status (see Jackson/Bauder 2013, 366) during the long process of obtaining asylum and face difficulties in adjusting to a new cultural environment, having their formal qualifications acknowledged and obtaining employment. In fact, opportunities to find meaningful employment appear to decrease with every year of a refugee's temporary status (see Codell et al. 2011, 220). Once employed, many get stuck in precarious employment relationships and jobs for which they are overqualified (see Colic-Peisker/Tilbury 2006, 220). In 2016, for instance, 24 per cent of the migrants residing in Austria felt that they were overqualified for their jobs while this was the case for only 9 per cent of native employees (see Kirilova 2016, 17). A more recent Austrian survey shows that while 13 per cent think that they are under-qualified and 45 per cent say that their qualification level corresponds with the demands of their current position, as many as 42 per cent of the participating refugees have a higher qualification level or more work experience than is required for their current job (see Ortlieb et al. 2019, 10).

The concept of relational career capital (see Latzke et al. 2015, 59) is well-suited to explaining refugees' struggles for proper labour-market integration. It is based on the Bourdieusian notion of social, cultural and economic capital and his theory of practice (see Bourdieu 1977/1986, 242/1990) and contributes to career studies by emphasising contextuality and boundaries (see Chudzikowski/Mayrhofer 2011, 22). In Bourdieu's approach, the contexts of careers are viewed as fields, each of which has its specific rules and power dynamics (see Schneidhofer/Latzke/Mayrhofer 2015, 23). While agents compete for positions in social fields, they accumulate, invest, and convert economic, social, and (embodied, institutionalised, and objectified) cultural capital. The value of these forms of capital only presents itself in relation to a specific field (see Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992). Consequently, career capital includes those forms of capital that allow agents to advance their positions within a particular career field (see Iellatchitch/Mayrhofer/Meyer 2003, 732). Within these fields, agents equipped with their individual capital portfolios apply strategies to accumulate and invest social and cultural capital (see Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992). The careers of migrants and refugees inherently entail a

change of field. Upon arrival in their host countries, migrants do not just 'unpack' their capital; they have to reshape it, create it anew and develop ways to re-validate it (see Al Ariss/Syed 2011, 301; Erel 2010, 655).

Refugees' difficulties in transferring their career capital to a social field with radically different rules and the challenge of creating new capital that would enable long-term success in the new social field are all obstacles to maintaining, regaining or starting sustainable careers. A sustainable career is characterised by four dimensions: time, social space, agency and meaning (see Van der Heijden/De Vos 2015, 2). Refugees' careers in the host country represent a paradigmatic example of challenges in all four dimensions. With regard to *time*, career continuity is disrupted as refugees have to abruptly end their employment relationship in their home country and then experience a long period of unemployment during their troublesome journey to a safe host country. Furthermore, being displaced implies that a person's career becomes insecure and unpredictable with regard to any future employment status and to the length of time until he or she is permitted to work again. On leaving their home country, refugees lose most of their ties to actors in their previous *social space*. In the host country, they not only lack the social ties that would help them to achieve adequate employment within a reasonable period of time but also face both a foreign culture that exacerbates their societal integration and, more specifically, labour-market regimes that are unfamiliar to them so that they face difficulties in understanding and playing by the – often implicit – rules established by these regimes. Overall, the structure and content of the social space surrounding them changes radically. Within these boundaries, refugees apply various strategies to approach the labour market, which points to individuals' *agency* and ability to make choices. While refugees are expected to take the initiative in acquiring or extending the competencies that would increase their employability, a number of structural boundaries in the long legal asylum and recognition process appear to work against them. In addition, agency is impeded both by refugees' unfamiliarity with labour-market regimes and by mental conditions such as depression or even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), from which many refugees suffer due to their experiencing life-threatening events. Finally, due to a lack of formal qualifications or obstacles to the official recognition of their existing qualifications as being equal to the national standards of the receiving country, many refugees fail to find jobs that correspond with their previous occupations. This means that they need to construct meaning by reconsidering their career goals in the light of the opportunities and constraints embedded in their new social environment. In the long term, this may have implications for their self-concept and occupational identity.

### 3. Method and sample

We conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with 14 male and 5 female Syrians and 13 male and 3 female Afghan refugees who were actively looking for jobs. The sample (see Table 1) mirrors the demographic characteristics of Afghan and Syrian refugee job-seekers

**Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profiles**

Person code	Family/children	Education	Main occupation
S1	m 39 single -	(B) IT	Commerce
S2	m 41 married 3	(B) Chemistry	Real-estate agent, food tester
S3	m 30 single -	(B) Marketing	Carpenter
S4	m 37 married 2	(B) Mechanical engr.	Hospital technician, admin.
S5	m 27 single -	(B) Electrical engr.	Interpreter
S6	m 26 single -	(B) Business*	Sales
S7	m 42 married 4	(B) Engineer	Oil industry technician
S8	m 31 married 2	(B) Electrical engineer	Battery factory owner
S9	m 30 married 2	LS	Upholstery business owner
S10	m 52 married 4	(M) Electrical engineer	Leader Engr. Department
S11	m 34 married 3	(B) Business administration*	Cell retail business owner
S12	m 25 single -	(B) Construction engineer*	Nurse, surgery assistant
S13	m 30 single -	(B) Archeology*	Combine harvester servicing
S14	m 47 single -	(B) French Linguistics	French teacher, tourist guide
S15	f 28 single -	(B) Archeology	Public relations, private tutor
S16	f 43 married 3	Post-secondary Nursing	Nurse/midwife, hairdresser
S17	f 35 married 3	(B) English-Arabic	Translator, English teacher
S18	f 28 single -	(B) Business administration	Clerk
S19	f 45 widowed 4	(B) Primary school teacher	Primary school teacher
A1	m 26 married 2	Primary	Fruit retail worker
A2	m 25 single -	US, Police school	Police officer
A3	m 30 married 1	(none)	Retailer, cleaning services
A4	m 33 married -	US*	Tailor, construction worker
A5	m 26 married 1	LS, Electrician*	-
A6	m 31 married 3	Primary	Food retail
A7	m 32 married 3	(M) Landscape Manager	Province extension coord.
A8	m 27 single -	(B) History/Geography*	-
A9	m 27 single -	US*	Retailer
A10	m 26 married -	Apprenticeship	IT
A11	m 22 single -	Primary*	Grocery helper, electrician
A12	m 29 single -	(none)	Farmer
A13	m 31 single -	US*	Photographer, carpet retailer
A14	f 28 single -	(B) Business administration*	Finance, miscellaneous
A15	f 39 married 2	(B) Primary school teacher	Primary school teacher
A16	f 35 married 2	US, Apprenticeship as tailor	Tailor, Urdu trainer

Note: Person code: Nationality (S=Syrian; A=Afghan)/number/gender (m=male; f=female)/age; LS=lower secondary, US=upper secondary, (B)=Bachelor, (M)=Master, \* not completed. Engr./engr. = engineering.

in Austria (see Buber-Ennser et al. 2016, 8). We used purposive sampling, which means that we selected those interview partners whom we expected to deliver informative and rich answers to our research questions (see Flick 2018, 50), and a circular research process taking insights from previous interviews into account when looking for the next participant (see Flick 2014, 141) to reach theoretical saturation – a state in the research process where no more 'new' data appear (see Glaser/Strauss 2017, 61).

Participants were approached through our own personal networks, public agencies and snowball sampling. The interviews took place at their homes, in our research institution or at training centres. The interviews were conducted bilingually, in German and either Arabic, Dari or Pashtu. We used episodic interviews wherein narratives are linked to concrete situations (see Flick 2000, 85) and participants generate narrative accounts of subjectively meaningful experiences (see Flick 2014, 199). We asked about capital acquisition in the home countries, efforts to transfer capital to and acquire new capital in Austria, their job search experiences, career plans and strategies for overcoming hurdles. Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average. The literal transcripts were coded using a scheme that was extended throughout the analysis (see Lieblich/Tuval-Mashiach/Zilber 1998). In the theory-driven qualitative categorical content analysis, we started with existing categories and allowed new categories to emerge (see Mayring 2007). Among these were cultural distance, language proficiency, implied labour-market rules, responses to obstacles in finding a job in one's occupation, proactivity, volunteer work and the interdependencies of forms of capital.

#### **4. Findings**

In the following section, we present our findings on forms of capital. These will be connected to the sustainable careers concept in the discussion. To be sure, we aim for theoretical generalisation (see Payne/Williams 2005, 299) since the number of participants does not allow any statistical generalisation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to briefly characterise our sample in terms of qualification levels and previous work experiences in order to give a rough overview. Many of the 19 Syrian interviewees have upper-secondary education or a college degree. In their countries of origin, they typically gained their first work experience in their relatives' businesses. Six were exclusively self-employed, four were both employed and self-employed. In their home countries, social and embodied capital were more relevant to work success than institutionalised capital. The search for employment was informal, with written applications and interviews being the exception rather than the rule. Before coming to Austria, some interviewees had temporarily lived in a nearby country, such as Egypt or Turkey, where they could use their skills in adequate jobs. Most Syrians aimed for the Netherlands, Germany or Sweden because they had relatives there and were just stranded in Austria. The Afghan refugees' educational levels varied from college degrees to not having finished or, in one case, not even having attended school at all. In their home country, social capital was crucial for their early work experiences.

They started their careers in their relatives' businesses or obtained job opportunities through friends. Due to the latent Taliban threat, many had left Afghanistan years ago and had lived in transition countries such as Pakistan or Iran before fleeing to Europe, with no clear destination.

#### **4.1. Capital transfer to the host country**

In trying to transfer their capital to the host country, refugees experienced its radical devaluation. The highly qualified found it hard to build on this capital, as working in their profession – e.g. teaching – would require an excellent command of German. This either appeared impossible to achieve or it took a very long time until certificates were formally recognised – and then usually at a lower level only.

Many refugees' embodied capital was devalued as they encountered unknown rules and behavioural norms in occupations that had formerly been in their areas of expertise.

My work as a salesperson [...], the behaviour, the interactions between retailer and customer, are not the same as here.<sup>2</sup> (S6/male/26 years)

Other hurdles based on cultural differences illustrate the interconnectedness of embodied capital with other capital forms. Whereas in Austria many jobs require formal education, in Syria and Afghanistan job experience can be acquired through informal apprenticeships and can then be used to find another job in this occupation. Refugees realised that their job skills and experiences were devalued in Austria simply because they had no formal vocational education.

In my home country [...] nobody asks if you have job experience or training ... [Imagine that] someone repairs a plug socket: if he succeeds, he'll be regarded as the best electrician, even if he has not been trained as an electrician. Here, I can't do anything without laws, everything is regulated. (A12/m/29)

Many refugees could not formally prove their specific job skills because, in their home countries, it is uncommon to issue employment certificates in the private sector. Others were self-employed, as was the case with this owner of a real-estate business:

I learned everything about the construction of beautiful houses, [but] never received any certificates. At the Labour Market Services [Employment Agency] I was told that, without documents, I'd just be regarded as a construction worker. (S2/m/41)

Many interviewees faced occupation-related identity issues. Some held on to their occupational identity even if it reduced their job opportunities. One participant with a Master's degree in engineering emphasised that working in a different occupation would

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes were translated into English by the first author.

negatively affect his efforts to remain up-to-date regarding professional knowledge, so that his chances of finding an appropriate job later on would decrease. Others upheld their occupational identity due to their prior investment in education, their pride and their fears of a loss of status:

I think I should try to find better work [...]. I was a teacher and tourist guide; now I am supposed to work as a dishwasher or waiter? That's difficult for me. (S14/m/47)

Others entirely relinquished their occupational identity, especially in the face of economic hardship, as did this single mother of three:

It would be difficult for me to work as a teacher here [...]. I'd need to speak the language very well. So I try to find a different job, perhaps at a supermarket cashpoint. (S19/f/45)

Yet, embodied capital was easier to transfer in jobs requiring lower qualifications:

I found a job [...] in a snack shop at the Central Station [...] I told him [the owner] I had worked in a grocery store, that I knew how to interact with customers. He said, 'No problem but you need to speak German' [...]. I asked him to give me a chance [...]. I learned fast and it worked out. After only two weeks he offered me a permanent job. (A11/m/22)

Only a few interviewees had relatives who already lived in Austria or a culturally similar country and who were able to help them to obtain visas or provide tangible support, e.g. regarding accommodation, or informational support in the search for employment.

#### **4.2. Capital acquisition and conversion**

Unlike in the participants' countries of origin, social capital may, in itself, be insufficient for a successful job search but it may help in acquiring other forms of capital needed to obtain employment. For instance, volunteers helped refugees to acquire embodied capital (e.g. language) and socially responsible entrepreneurs even provided them with institutionalised capital.

There's a hairdresser in Vienna where I did my internship; they offered to let me continue with vocational training. [My boss] contacted Caritas, so I could continue for three months and do my apprenticeship with them. (S16/f/43)

Proactivity was key to social capital. While some remained within their communities only, others actively established contacts which helped them to quickly build embodied cultural capital.

I did an internship at Interface [a non-profit organisation that supports migrants' societal integration] and told the project leader that once they had a job opening, I'd be prepared to do the job [...]. Wherever I volunteered [...], I talked to people in charge, gave them my number [...]. This way I try to build social networks. (A15/f/39)

The devaluation of their existing capital urged refugees to acquire new embodied capital, including language, job skills and knowledge of local job application practices. Refugees found that knowledge of the host-country language was required for admission to job training and thus for building institutionalised cultural capital and it could also support the acquisition of social capital:

Because of these language difficulties we can't be properly integrated. If I do something that others don't understand, I can't explain it. This creates this wall between us. But if I speak fluently, I can explain it and it becomes easier. (S1/m/39)

As job-search processes differ considerably between Austria and their home countries, refugees needed to adopt local practices. Again, the key to this kind of embodied capital was proactivity.

I [voluntarily] attended an integration course. I learned a lot about Austria, its history, culture, etc. I now know a lot more than before [...]. If I want to make an appointment, how I should do that, what I should say. When I go to an office, how I should open the door. I also learned such things. I'm a person who asks a lot. I always have a notebook with me where I write down everything that I learn. (A4/m/33)

Proactivity also helped to find internships and volunteer work that provided job-relevant skills, social capital and even institutionalised capital. As such, voluntary work may serve as a stepping-stone to the 'regular' job market.

I now work as an interpreter and have experience with the Red Cross and how things work there and what is going on. My boss wrote a recommendation letter for me that portrayed me really well – a letter about me that can help me find a job. (S15/f/28)

The devaluation of qualifications necessitated the acquisition of new institutionalised capital. To this end, some refugees sought to extend their existing qualifications through additional training in their occupation; however, many preferred to obtain formal training in a different occupation and thus to start all over again. Nevertheless, the acquisition of institutionalised capital could be inhibited by a lack of economic capital, as is the case for this father of three:

Yes, I have thought about vocational training. But it would take three years. This is too long, I need to get a job sooner. (S11/m/34)

## 5. Discussion

The following discussion connects the above findings with the existing literature and shows the longer-term consequences of refugees' struggles to transfer and acquire career capital with regard to the career sustainability dimensions of time, social space, agency and meaning.

### 5.1. Capital transfer to the host country

Our findings show that not only do the long journey to a safe country and the process of obtaining a work permit disrupt refugees' careers in terms of *time*, but also that, as migrating involves a disruption in *social space*, refugees' cultural capital undergoes a strong devaluation and can rarely be moved between fields. One reason is that social norms, work practices and labour-market rules – in particular the regime that governs the entry of refugees into the labour market and the use of their work-related capital – radically differ between the refugees' home countries and Austria. Both Afghans and Syrians portray their home cultures as socially framed and relationally driven, giving leeway for opportunistic improvisation and the ad hoc crafting of skills and careers. They depict people there as relying on social capital for career entry and transitions and, to some extent, job-relevant skills (embodied capital) but not necessarily on institutionalised capital. This points to the dominant role of *Wasta*, a culture of using social capital to find jobs that are not obtainable in a system more strongly based on merit (see Kropf/Newbury-Smith 2016, 3).

By contrast, interviewees regard Austria as highly transactional, regulated, bureaucratic and formalised. They perceive a heavy emphasis on institutionalised capital and specialisation and that individuals are expected to follow formalised application procedures via official channels and to engage in deliberate career planning, an activity unfamiliar to them. The rules of their fields of origin have shaped how they navigate the labour market (a kind of embodied capital); however, strategies that were successful at home rarely work in the new field. This implies that the forced move between fields hinders the transfer of existing embodied capital. At the same time, they lack the embodied capital needed to easily play by the rules of the new field, so that their scope of action shrinks considerably. In contrast, refugees did not have these negative experiences in culturally similar 'transition' countries such as Egypt or Pakistan. Similarly, research shows that expatriates' sociocultural adaptation depends on cultural distance to the homeland (see White/Absher/Huggins 2011, 333) and that sharing social norms with the majority improves immigrants' employment outcomes (see Gorinas 2014, 240). In conclusion, national and institutional cultural distance plays a core role in capital transfer. Due to this experienced inappropriateness of their embodied capital in their new social field, refugees also lose their agency – the capacity to actively control the job-search process. The loss of *agency*, in turn, disrupts their careers' sustainability (see Van der Heijden/De Vos 2015, 8).

Refugees face major obstacles in finding jobs that fit their knowledge and skills. The highly skilled run into a double wall. On the one hand, their institutionalised capital is devalued because formal qualifications are assigned the status of a lower educational level (see Colic-Peisker/Tilbury 2006, 213) – suitable work seems harder to obtain for them than for the low-skilled (see Akkaymak 2017, 668). On the other hand, their occupational identity is strong (see Sienkiewicz et al. 2013, 21; Zikic/Bonache/Cerdin 2010, 675) so that many refuse to accept a job in a lower-skilled segment. Apart from their prior investment in their education (see Zikic/Richardson 2016, 162) and concerns that their specialised knowledge and skills would deteriorate over time (see Smyth/Kum 2010, 513), professional pride and the fear of status loss (see Morrice 2013, 666) make them stick to their occupations. In this way, rather than being a positive resource and facilitating moves between social fields, institutionalised capital becomes more of a burden.

Refugees who are under economic pressure tend to use a flexible job search directly aimed at regular employment. Those following this path tend to go for jobs implying qualitative underemployment, sometimes under precarious conditions. This is in line with findings showing that most refugees become stuck in the secondary labour market (see Colic-Peisker/Tilbury 2006, 220). Thus, the lack of economic capital makes refugees neglect their cultural capital and contributes to its further devaluation – an example of interdependencies between forms of capital. These experiences present refugees with a challenge to or even a disruption of the *meaning* of their careers. While they were able to pursue careers based on their cultural capital – their education or previous work experiences – back in their home countries, they experience radical disruption in their host country. Gaining employment of whatever kind becomes a more pressing need than maintaining a career logic. Consequently, they are obliged to reconstruct their careers to give them a new meaning.

## **5.2. Capital acquisition and conversion in the host country**

The challenge to career sustainability in terms of *meaning* also becomes apparent as far as efforts for the acquisition of new capital through training are concerned. For the highly skilled sticking to their occupations, it is essential to legitimise their devalued institutionalised capital by further training in their field of expertise. By contrast, less-qualified refugees strive for a formal qualification that may differ considerably from their previous job experience. In line with previous research (see Morrice 2013, 656), our findings reveal that the acquisition of local credentials is key for refugees with devalued or low foreign qualifications. However, those living in economic hardship tend not to strive for any training but to look for a job right away. This hints at another interdependency of capital forms.

The role of the *social space* for career sustainability is also visible in terms of the enabling function of language – a type of embodied capital. Its acquisition is key to refugees' societal integration (see Cheung/Phillimore 2014, 532) and thus to the reconstruction of a sustainable social space. Only after achieving a certain level of language

proficiency can refugees successfully connect to natives and build new social capital, undergo training to obtain institutionalised capital or do volunteer work to acquire more embodied capital. In this way, language can be converted into other forms of capital. In turn, social capital is crucial for building embodied capital such as language proficiency and cultural adaptation. Our findings seem to indicate that, for refugees, connecting with natives is easier in rural areas and harder in urban areas, where they face the risk of social isolation or cultural segregation.

Finally, refugees can slowly rebuild their *agency* – another crucial enabler of sustainable careers – by trying to be proactive. Proactivity helps refugees to learn the local language, adapt to the culture, identify training opportunities and connect with locals. We find that proactive refugees extensively explore their career options. The low-skilled with a broad spectrum of hands-on skills seek to craft their careers in the host country by building on job experience (embodied capital) that they have been loosely connected to in their previous occupations, thereby also re-establishing a certain degree of career meaning. For the highly skilled, volunteer work and internships are attractive options via which to build new social capital, embodied capital (local job experience) and institutionalised capital (employment certificates). Likewise, research has shown the positive effects of voluntary work on re-employment (see Konstam et al. 2015, 160). However, regaining agency and rebuilding capital require much time, which leads to a further disruption of refugees' career sustainability in terms of *time*.

## 6. Theoretical implications

In this study, we heed the recent call on Bourdieusian scholars to examine what happens to capital when it is moved across fields (see Fernando/Cohen 2016, 1295). The crucial role of the field for the value of career capital (see Duberley/Cohen 2010, 196) is clearly evident in our sample of refugees who cross fields with strikingly different rules. We also show what happens after the loss or devaluation of career capital and note the options needed to acquire and convert career capital (see Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992). Our findings stress the considerable duration of the process and the boundaries experienced. The process of acquiring career capital in the home country, the experience of its profound devaluation and the strategies for building up new forms of capital and converting them, illuminate the relevance of the field (see Bourdieu 1986) and the existence of multiple interdependencies of the various forms of capital.

We also provide empirical insights for the research stream on sustainable careers (see Van der Heijden/De Vos 2015) by showing how refugees represent a paradigmatic example of those with careers facing challenges in all four dimensions: time, social space, agency and meaning. Finally, we show how the sustainable careers concept can add a long-term perspective to the issue of the transfer of career capital that we have discussed using Bourdieu's capital concept. This helps to generate deeper insights into the constraints and opportunities for refugees' labour-market integration.

## **7. Practical implications**

Our findings imply a need to facilitate refugees' social and labour-market integration through the support of capital transfer and acquisition which will ultimately help them to rebuild sustainable careers. Political decision-makers should actively support initiatives in civil society that seek to improve refugees' social integration. Targeted governmental programmes could encourage refugees who strive to start their own businesses by facilitating the acquisition of trade licences and by offering training, guidance and material support for nascent entrepreneurs. To make better use of well-educated refugees' cultural capital, certificate approval processes need to be accelerated by adjusting the responsible authorities' resources to the current need. Volunteering and publicly sponsored internships should be promoted more strongly, as they offer stepping-stones to regular employment. To support capital acquisition, refugees' access to vocational training ought to be facilitated.

Whereas the public employment agency indeed provides information on job offers, refugees may benefit from additional comprehensive training in local job-search practices and coaching that would help them to become more proactive. Competence assessment procedures should be redesigned and used more comprehensively and effectively so that they can better validate refugees' existing capital, reveal any need for further training and provide potential employers with meaningful information for hiring decisions. Also, advanced training measures need to become more targeted and individualised in order to help refugees to develop capital portfolios that better fit the host country's labour-market demands. Furthermore, the public employment agency should actively contact potential employers and seek to collaborate more closely with them – e.g. at jointly organised job fairs for refugee job-seekers or through the joint mentoring of refugee workers or apprentices. The employers' active involvement in these processes may alleviate existing concerns regarding the hiring of refugee workers and would particularly benefit industries lacking labour supply.

Also, because refugees often suffer setbacks in the job search, counselling would help them to restore and advance their resilience and self-efficacy. Moreover, as PTSD and depression are common among refugees, early therapeutic measures and long-term care may help to improve and sustain their mental health – a prerequisite of societal participation and the ability to work.

## **8. Conclusion: refugees' career capital and sustainability**

Our findings show the challenges for refugees striving for sustainable careers. First, many reach their host country after many months during which they have hardly had any opportunity to work. After their arrival in the host country, they have to wait for several months or even years to be granted asylum, a period during which their access to the labour market is extremely restricted. Clearly, this feature of the Austrian asylum system does not fully comply with EU law, in particular the 2013 Reception Conditions Direc-

tive, which requires that asylum-seekers be given access to the labour market after nine months.<sup>3</sup> The need to develop a certain level of proficiency in the local language further prolongs the period of joblessness. This means that refugees lack the opportunities to transfer their institutionalised and embodied cultural capital to the host country, with the result that careers are radically disrupted. The findings from our interviews illustrate how these disruptions undermine refugees' efforts towards greater career continuity (*time*). Second, the substantive differences between the cultures – particularly the labour-market rules of their home and host countries – lead to a massive disruption in terms of *social space*. This is aggravated by the lack of social contact with natives and compatriots who might be able to share information on training opportunities or job offers. Third, highly qualified refugees experience a challenge to their professional identities when they cannot find adequate employment in their prior occupations. This illustrates the disruption of *meaning*. Consequently, refugees are obliged to reconsider their career goals and set new priorities. Finally, *agency* is constrained by the social, economic and legal context of the host country. At the same time, it can serve as a crucial enabler of first steps into the labour market and may eventually help to rebuild a sustainable career.

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<sup>3</sup> Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast), *Official Journal of the European Union* L 2013/180, 96.

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