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Becoming Actors of their Lives: A Relational Autonomy Approach to Employment and Education Choices of Refugee Young People in London, UK[1]

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1 Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene

According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at end 2012 there were more than 45.2 million displaced persons globally, resulting from new or continuing conflicts, and out of these, 15.3 million are refugees (UNHCR 2013). In 2011, those applying for asylum and their dependants in the United Kingdom (UK) comprised approximately 7% of net migration (Blinder 2013). There are approximately 270,000 recognised refugees in the UK (2% of the world's refugee population) yet they suffer high levels of unemployment. In 2012, the number of working-age, foreign-born people in the UK was nearing 6 million, the majority living in London and mostly employed in low-skilled sectors (Rienzo 2012). White British employment rates are 75%, ethnic minority employment rates are 60%, whilst refugee rates are half this, at 29% (Barrett 2010).

For many working-age, recognised refugees employment is identified as the most durable solution for integration, providing income, social status, independence and recognition (UNHCR 2007). However, refugees face multiple barriers to employment and they have differing and individualised needs. Challenges are listed as, *inter alia*, discrimination and xenophobic attitudes, necessity to bridge cultural and language barriers, previous work experience and qualifications not recognised, and preference given to national employees by employers. If in employment refugees are more likely to be in part-time and temporary work, with poorer terms and conditions and lower rates of pay (Bloch 2004). Research in relation to refugees' access to the labour market has concluded that policy 'strategies need to focus on individual employability as well as measures to overcome personal and structural barriers' (Bloch 2007b: 21).

Research has found that for asylum-seeking and refugee (ASR) young people education is a central aspiration (Hopkins and Hill 2010; Walker 2011; Refugee Support Network 2012; Doyle and O'Toole 2013). In the case of compulsory school age ASR children it is important in 'promoting social and emotional development needs, structure and routine' (Hek 2005: 29) whilst also facilitating friendships, language and role and status (Rutter 2001). A recent study of post-16 ASRs found that the majority who wished to enter colleges of further education did

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so to gain employment, enter university, as well as to make friends, gain qualifications, and integrate into their new communities (Doyle and O'Toole 2013).

A central barrier in accessing education and employment for refugee young people is the distinct lack of information and advice in order to make 'informed choices' about their futures (Bolloten 2003). Research has established that young refugees find it hard to access relevant educational advice, or where they have received it, it has been inaccurate or confusing (Refugee Support Network 2012). Despite their precariousness, policy no longer demarcates refugees as a group requiring specialised integration support, which was a policy of the previous government New Labour. Refugee integration has been widely debated with differing definitions and critiqued as being normative. However, for the purposes of this study it is identified as a multidimensional and two-way process that includes participation in economic, civil and political life, and cultural aspects (ECRE 2002). This study investigated the experiences of refugee young people aged 18-29 of getting into employment and education.

1.2 Refugee young people in the UK

The UK has adopted the European Convention on Human Rights and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and thus cannot deport asylum-seekers if they are likely to face persecution or torture in their country of origin. Since 2005, a change in policy has meant that the UK Border Agency (currently the UK Home Office) grants differing permissions, depending on individual circumstance. Refugee status is granted to those recognised as refugees and humanitarian protection for those who are not recognised as refugees but cannot return to a country for humanitarian reasons. In each case 'leave to remain' is given for a five-year period and thereafter, 'indefinite leave to remain' can be applied for. 'Discretionary leave to remain' is granted to an individual who does not qualify as a refugee or for humanitarian protection and is usually given for a three-year period, in limited circumstances only. Once refugee status has been granted in the UK than employment, education, social welfare, health and other rights are granted.

Since 2000, the main nationalities claiming for asylum in the UK were from Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and China, with most being young, single males (Rutter and Alexandrova 2012). The highest numbers of asylum-seekers, refugees, or forced migrants reside in the Greater London area (Rutter and Alexandrova 2012). It is more difficult to estimate numbers of refugees of specific age groups (Candappa 2007), as the UK Home Office does not have centralised data. It is thought that there are 60,000 compulsory school age refugee children (Rutter and Alexandrova 2012) and in 2009 it was estimated that 3,175 unaccompanied and separated children, aged 14-17, applied for asylum mainly from Afghanistan (almost 50%), Iran, China, Iraq and Eritrea. Refugee young people in UK are diverse; they come from many different socioeconomic backgrounds, have varying religious beliefs, some with little or no education whilst others come with university level qualifications with mixed English language ability. They may have come to UK alone or with family, escaped to refugee camps or arrived via boat or trucks, are different in age and length of time spent in the UK (Dimitriadou 2006; Walker 2011).

2 Study design

2.1 Research questions

This paper presents some findings resulting from a doctoral research study, for which the central research questions investigated were:

1. To what extent do refugee young people become actors of their lives?

2. How does the institutional framework support refugee young people's autonomous decision-making?

3. To what degree do third-sector interventions assist refugee young people to achieve positive educational and employment outcomes?

2.2 Case study

A qualitative case study design was utilised for the purposes of this research, which has been found to be an optimal approach when researching educational programs and social services (Stake 1995). There were two case study organisations that were examined as part of this research, located in London, UK. The first, London Refugee Organisation (LRO) and the second, Young Refugee Association (YRA) (pseudonyms are used for both organisations). LRO is one of the largest UK charities that support refugees and asylum-seekers and operated the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES), a UK Border Agency funded intervention.

RIES provided the main source of research participants, as it supported refugees with integration generally, and employment and education specifically. The education support that was provided was carrying out National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) comparisons of overseas qualifications as well as assisting access for free English language training and other Further Education courses. Advisers would also provide advice in applications for Higher Education and Student Finance and give intensive advice relating to course of study and education institutions. The employment support took the form of job search strategies and employability workshops, such as one-to-one help with CVs, job applications, and preparing for interviews. Advisors also advocated on behalf of refugee service users to prospective employers given ongoing confusion regarding refugee documentation and eligibility to work.

The second organisation, 'Young Refugee Association' (YRA), is a small, London-based charity, which was established of and for young people with a refugee background. It operated a participatory approach and provided various activities as well as ad-hoc employment and education support. The majority of the young people who are members of YRA are also receiving support from LRO, and therefore this was the reason it was chosen as it provided a separate location to access LRO service users.

2.3 Research methods

When researching potentially vulnerable groups, such as refugees, it is advised to gain as much understanding about the participants as possible as to avoid intrusive questioning (Bloch 2007a). Therefore a pre-study was conducted that consisted of observing lessons for asylum-seeking young people, employment workshops, and education advice sessions for refugee young people. Two expert interviews were conducted, one with the director of a

refugee charity specialising in employment and education and the second with a consultant who has over 20 years of experience working in the field of refugee education in the UK.

The RIES Project Coordinator and one Employment Adviser were interviewed in LRO in addition to a volunteer teacher who worked in the LRO's day-centre. Two staff members were also interviewed in YRA, a Youth Worker and Development Officer (who had daily, direct contact with the young people). Documentary evidence such as annual reports, organisational research, and assessments were also utilised in the analysis. In total, 42 (24 male and 18 female) refugee young people aged 18-29 were reached through a mixture of face-to-face interviews, a small-scale, open-ended questionnaire and a focus group. The findings from the questionnaire were used to inform the focus group participants about initial research findings, in order to engage them with the research process (both were conducted in YRO). The refugee young people were from Afghanistan, Iran, Somalia, Syria, Uganda and Eritrea.

The face-to-face interviews consisted of problem-centered interviews (PCI), a qualitative interviewing method that combines narrative and semi-structured styles (Witzel and Reiter 2012). Problem centering is the identification of a socially relevant problem, which the research questions aim to address, in this case on the challenges faced by refugee young people in gaining positive education and employment outcomes. It has an 'underlying image of humanity…that considers people as self-reflective and capable of acting and communicating' (Witzel and Reiter 2012: 8). Anonymity, written and informed consent and strict adherence to research ethics was ensured throughout the research. Ethics was paid particular attention to, due to the previous experiences of some of the research participants, who had come from conflict areas. The interviews and focus group were audio recorded and transcribed and conducted by the researcher in English, as all participants were proficient in the language. The main limitation of this qualitative research study is that the findings are not generalisable.

3 Conceptual scheme

3.1 Capability approach

This study is theoretically underpinned by the capability approach (CA) of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which is a normative framework used to assess states of affairs and alternative policies in welfare economics, development and poverty reduction. It looks at justice and how to judge human progress and is evaluative, rather than explanatory (Robeyns 2005). The CA offers an avenue to interpret specific areas of human concern, such as well-being, poverty, gender, and social exclusion, among others (Alkire 2005). The aim of the CA is to provide an alternative to current policy-making and to move on from economic growth and utilitarian approaches to measure quality of life and instead focus on human dimensions. A better focal point when looking at an individual's wellbeing and standard of living is on the 'capability to achieve valuable functionings' (Sen 1993, 31). Functionings are the achieved beings and doings of an individual, 'Living may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated 'functionings', consisting of beings and doings' (Sen 1992:39). Robeyns (2005) states that to focus on a person's capabilities is an enormous theoretical difference in the polices it leads to, in comparison to utilitarianism. 'Sen argues that in social evaluations and policy design, the focus should be on what people are able to do and be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacle in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life which, upon reflection, they find valuable' (Robeyns 2005:94). The CA is an interdisciplinary approach and has been applied in a variety of contexts, as well as in refugee research such as

on the higher education experiences of Burmese refugees in Thailand (Zeus 2011) and gender-based violence in a Rwandan refugee camp (Ho and Pavlish 2011).

The primary research focus of this study was on 'whether people are empowered to make decisions and act on those decisions in critical areas of their lives' (Burchardt et al. 2010: 8). This focus has been adapted from a framework developed by Burchardt et al. (2010) that is based on the CA that looks at the extent of choice and control an individual has over key aspects in their life. The specific area of the young people's lives that was focused upon was in relation to future education and employment decisions. It should be noted that this study focuses on the freedoms and opportunities that individuals have in making choices pertaining to their futures, rather than measuring capabilities per se (Zimmerman 2006). The central area of the capability approach that it hinges on is autonomy, which is related to the notion of substantive freedoms, 'what people are able to be or do in their lives, and autonomy, … being able to form and pursue your own goals, is an essential component of this freedom' (Burchardt and Holder 2012: 1). The scheme has three main components of autonomy: 1. self-reflection; 2. active and delegated decision-making; and 3. opportunity structure.

3.2 Relational autonomy and vulnerability

Human agency has many differing definitions, mainly within sociology and psychology, and in a broad sense is the ability to formulate strategic choices and control decisions effecting central life outcomes (Malhorta 2003). It refers 'not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place' (Giddens 1984: 9). Autonomy encompasses a person's ability to critically reflect on their preferences as well as wishes, desires and the 'capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are' (Dworkin 1988: 20). The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a psychological theory of motivation and has also been used in autonomy research. Autonomy occurs when behaviour is freely enacted and when such actions are fully endorsed by the actor. As such, people are most autonomous when they can act in accordance with their own true interests, values and desires (Chirkov et al. 2003).

In terms of the capability approach, 'the quality of life a person enjoys is not merely a matter of what he or she achieves, but also of what options the person has had the opportunity to choose from' (Sen 1985: 69-70). Therefore, the opportunity structure is the formal and informal institutions that constrain or facilitate people's ability to exercise agency (Dudwick, Yaron, and Holland 2008). The opportunity structure provides the preconditions for effective agency given that the process of empowerment cannot be complete if there is no consideration regarding a person's ability to act, non-institutional changes or institutional structures which prove to be instrumental to increasing a person's agency (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007). Alkire (2005) suggests that empowerment is a subset of agency and that an increase in empowerment will result in increased agency (though not the reverse). There are two elements which are central to empowerment, the first being agency and the second focuses on the institutional environment, which offers people the opportunity to exert agency (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007). Empowerment involves the 'expansion and freedom of choice and action' and can be applied to disadvantaged and socially excluded groups (Malhorta 2003: 2). Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as the expansion in the ability of people to strategically make choices about their lives where the context may have previously been denied them this. An empowered agent has improved provision of, and access to, information, such that they are empowered to

provide information about their own preferences and also to gain information from external sources, which may in turn influence choices. Influence and bargaining power is central in access to information, given that an agent may have the ability to share information but they must also have the ability to influence decisions, and more importantly, know that they have this ability (Khwaja 2003).

For the purposes of this research, these definitions of autonomy required an additional conceptual interpretation of autonomy when considering the specific context of refugee young people. Therefore, although values, goals, self-reflection and self-motivation were focused upon, a relational autonomy approach was applied. Relational autonomy is the reinterpretation of autonomy from a feminist and social justice orientated perspective. This interpretation of autonomy does not view autonomous agency as being undermined by the refugee experience. It rests on the conviction that people are socially embedded, and an individual's identity is shaped by intersecting social determinants, such as class, race, ethnicity and gender. Actors are seen within their social and historical contexts and autonomy is a characteristic of agents who are also emotional, desiring, creative, feeling as well as rational persons (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). Self-determination is recognised as an essential value and critical in order to flourish. Autonomy is a social capacity with the skills and capabilities a person needs for self-determination acquired in and through social relationships. Specific attention is given to relational, social and political conditions essential for autonomy. Given that autonomy is socially acquired, oppressive relationships, social institutions, as well as norms and practices can restrict it (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007).

This also entails a recognition of an individual's dependency on others, and also vulnerability to others. There are three types of vulnerability defined by Rogers, Mackenzie and Dodds (2012), the first being *inherent*, by being human we are inherently vulnerable (corporeality, neediness, dependence on others, our affective and social nature). S*ituational* is context specific vulnerability and is exasperated by personal, social, political, economic, or environmental contexts and may be short term, intermittent or continuous. Both of these types of vulnerability are dispositional or occurrent and give rise to a political and moral obligation to support those who are occurently vulnerable. This might be done through interventions to remedy specific vulnerabilities and 'the background aim of any such interventions must be to enable or restore agency of vulnerable persons or groups' (Rogers, Mackenzie and Dodds 2012: 25). The final vulnerability, *pathogenic*, arises in a situation where a social policy intervention or other response may in fact increase vulnerabilities or generate new ones. Pathogenic vulnerabilities can be caused by morally dysfunctional social and interpersonal relationships that are disrespectful, abusive, or prejudiced and found in socio-political situations that are oppressive, dominating, repressive, and characterised by injustice, persecution, and political violence (Rogers, Mackenzie and Dodds 2012).

Concerning refugee young people, it is important for policy-makers and others to better understand what vulnerability means to differing people under varying contexts and relationships, as well as identifying and assessing power structures (Clark 2007). Vulnerability is shifting and dynamic, and a refugee young person who is vulnerable can also have agency, 'vulnerability does not preclude agency and similarly where young people show agency, one cannot assume that they are not vulnerable.' (O'Higgins 2012: 85). We should move away from binary notions about vulnerable/resilient, passive/active to establish more complex and nuanced views of the experiences of young refugees and 'by recognizing young refugees' abilities to identify their individual strengths, needs and vulnerability, it supports

them to engage constructively with appropriate services and professionals and make better decisions about their needs.' (O'Higgins 2012: 88).

4 Findings

4.1 Moving beyond vulnerability: Self-reflection and future aspirations

There is a dominant, potentially pre-dominant assumption, around refugees that is routed in a discourse of vulnerability. Refugees are more often than not associated with victimhood and vulnerability (Judge 2010), as passive victims of circumstance or helpless recipients of relief aid or welfare (Essed at al. 2004). Refugee children and young people are particularly identified as a problematic and vulnerable group within such discourses (Clark-Kazak 2009).

A recurrent finding in this research study related to the perception of refugees as victims, which none of the young people allowed themselves to be compared with. The term 'survivor' was often used and the necessity for those who work closest with refugee young people, such as teachers, youth-workers and social workers to look beyond the refugee experience and its associations with victimhood. This is an attempt to move beyond the discourse of vulnerability, although recognising previous experiences, not allowing those to predetermine their future. Another aspect that was discussed was to see past an individual's legal status and the label of 'refugee'.

> "How can you (*referring to the general public*) say that a person is a victim when they have been through so much? I am a survivor, I am not a victim…You are the one who is making me a victim…you put this label on me" (Female interview participant).

> "Refugees will survive, because they have very good survival skills… It would take longer for them to find the right thing. But having (bespoke) services will speed up the process" (Refugee and director of refugee charity).

> "People's identity isn't defined by their immigration status. It's just something that they have to deal with but then there is much more to people than that" (Development Officer, YRA).

This proved to be a significant point of departure in terms of the autonomy conceptual scheme given that young people's life goals and future aspirations were being sought, and taking a view embedded in vulnerability would have led to quite a different study. Autonomy was interpreted as a strength, and although many of the young people interviewed had very real problems, which should also be recognised, these should not take precedence. Their hopes for the future and gaining education or employment was what they found most valuable and was a central biographical aspiration. It enabled them to be more positive about the future, and often education became the catalyst for change, and a sense of regaining some control in their lives.

Self-reflection and choosing a life that one has reason to value (Sen 1999) was the starting point in understanding autonomy. The majority of the participants in this research study expressed a strong motivation and desire to work or study concurring with other research (Refugee Support Network 2012). Education was a central feature in the lives of research participants, understandably so given their ages, and more often than not education was chosen as a route into a career that was of value to participants. When questioned about future career aspirations, all participants were clear on their preferences and expressed a high degree of self-motivation in achieving their goals. The majority also gave justifications and reasons

for why they had chosen the specific career or education paths, based upon their personal interests and passions.

> "All I wanted in my life was to go to school…so when the chance came I was like, 'Okay. I have to grab it with two hands.' It was the biggest opportunity in my life" (Female interview participant).

> "I want to teach in a university… I always thought of architecture as the main thing in the world…I really have this passion for architecture and the way you teach architecture, more than practicing it" (Female interview participant).

> "I don't know, maybe some people say I am a dreamer or something but I think that everyone… should think about what is their dream work, dream job…don't look for any easy way…each one should do what you like in your life in my opinion" (Female focus group participant).

4.2 Fostering autonomous decision-making

What is pivotal at this juncture is how these educational and employment goals are enacted in the form of decision-making. Support proves critical in this context especially when a refugee has been in the UK for a short period of time and is making key decisions about their future. Support provided and the degree to which the desires of the individual are listened to and acted upon by advisors is often pivotal for that individual's future. That is, the individual must have the *opportunity* to choose, know that they have this opportunity, and be given the *space* (time) to make that choice. Thus, freely exercise their autonomous agency in decision-making processes for goals to be realised.

The holistic and multi-dimensional nature of the RIES intervention gave advisors the opportunity and time required for successful support. One advisor interviewed believed that the structure of the service allowed her the freedom and flexibility to work holistically.

> "There is always more you can do, because it is quite a holistic service. It is not like a drop in…they are always coming back…you can think about them, you can do research…the way the service is, you can actually spend time with the client and help them a lot" (RIES Employment Advisor).

Furthermore, multi-dimensional support provided the *space* (time) necessary for individual's to make decisions. There are many practical challenges that refugee young people must deal with and there are immediate, even basic 'needs' that must be dealt with. Both organisations supported the young people with these domains. This allows the refugee young person the *space* they need to focus on future decisions. Resolving other, immediate issues, such as benefit entitlements or housing problems, allowed *space* for decisions about education or careers. In some of the responses, it was difficult for young people to make decisions and choices when they had to think about these other, more pressing problems such as dealing with emotions, temporary accommodation, accessing health care, lack of money, and immigration status.

> "I do not have enough stability to make the choices I want" (Female questionnaire respondent).

> "I think everyone gets involved at their own pace. Some people have been around for six years and they are only just starting to step up and properly get involved. Some people come and sit for months and not even talk to anyone and then suddenly they will find what they want to get involved in and then some people will come and take leadership straight away" (Development Officer, YRA).

> "The main issues when people come to this country the first time…they know nothing…issues like housing or like education or like health care…all of them is issues" (Male interview participant).

Being given the *opportunity* to be listened to was identified as necessary for decision-making of the participants. Essential also was that the young people did not feel they were being steered in a certain career direction, and felt comfortable to discuss their hopes for the future. It was deemed important that they had the opportunity to be heard, and that their desires were being taken into account.

> "I discussed with her (RIES advisor) everything and the thing that I love to teach later on and stuff. So she listened to me and she is supporting me and she helped me" (Female interview participant).

> "My voice was listened to. I was sat down. They (RIES) heard my point. They heard my story, and they guided me through. They gave a solution to it, and I would say, yes, my voice was heard and listened to" (Female interview participant).

> "If you can also experience being in an environment where…people do respect you and see you as a person and listen to what you say, then hopefully that can impact on how you feel about yourself and how you see yourself in the world" (Development Officer, YRA).

After some of the most urgent pressures are alleviated, focus required a shift to supporting future choices of the young people. The project coordinator of the RIES intervention was very clear in terms of how they supported decisions of refugee service users, with an emphasis in discovering individual preferences and establishing long-term aspirations encouraged.

> "The refugee will meet an advisor and go through an in-depth assessment. The advisor is looking at their current situation, where they want to go and what we can do to help them get there…talking about their hopes and aspirations and putting that into an action plan" (RIES Project Coordinator).

4.3 Supporting choices and enhancing opportunities

Central in enhancing opportunities of refugees can relate to the degree of institutional trust and belief in refugee service providers that they have (Hynes 2003). Trust has been shown to develop over time between social workers involved in supporting unaccompanied young people (Kohli 2006), and the structure of this service allowed time for establishment of trustful relationships. This in turn resulted in a free and trusting dialogue where the young person was more likely to be honest regarding their situation, and in turn, trust the advisor's advice. The institutional ethos of organisations, that is the collective disposition, character, and fundamental values (Williams 2010), has a very high level of impact on the type of experience or provision given to a refugee, and can also affect trust. An advisor that views 'clients' with compassion and humanity, but without pity, can transform the way in which individual desires are listened to, and more importantly, acted upon. Nussbaum (1997)

observes one of the capacities for humanity as narrative imagination, and the ability to be able to empathise and being able to place oneself in that of another. She challenges the 'concept of compassion as pity, describing it as "victimhood"… moral social judgements of compassion need to be based on a notion that the "other" who suffers has agency and is only a temporary victim of circumstances' (Arnot, Pinson and Candappa 2009: 254). Therefore it is not enough to aim to work in a multi-dimensional way, but also to view individuals as a whole, their strengths, experiences, aspirations, and expertise as well as the necessity of emotional rebuilding. Staff and volunteers who have direct contact with the young people are key. One advisor's working attitude was routed in a reciprocal and respectful relationship with her clients. A second adviser from YRA also advocated for using a more human approach when working with refugee young people, where everyone makes a contribution and all knowledge is respected.

> "I am lucky. Every day at work I meet people that are just like amazing, and they have risked so much to stand up for things (human rights) so it is really nice to have contact with people like that. It makes you have that bit more faith in people" (RIES Employment Advisor).

> "The kind of values and the methodology that we base our work around…is about coming together, everyone coming together…and also about recognising and valuing the knowledge that comes from everybody's different experiences" (Development Officer, YRA).

Providing advice regarding differing options in terms of employment or education, as well as information regarding what funding entitlements might be available for training or education can be pivotal. Additionally, other areas of support that bolstered individuals, related to creating a CV, filling out application forms, contacting employees to advocate on the behalf of a refugee, as well as interviewing techniques and ongoing emotional support and encouragement. Marshall (1992) discusses the need for 'moral-boosting' where an individual is in disillusionment and depression. An advisor can play a pivotal role in strengthening confidence of an individual, 'perhaps by looking at his or her skills, specific and transferable, and at experience and qualifications' (Marshall 1992). This was an area also that was cited by one of the RIES advisors who observed that creating a CV was also a way to encourage, even empower refugee clients.

> "One thing I do think is a really amazing tool is making someone's CV with them… people can really change in a CV appointment…but I think sometimes just doing things like that can help people think about what actually it is they want to do, and help them make their own decisions" (RIES Employment Advisor).

Admission procedures in the UK for further and higher education can be complex, especially in terms of filling out application forms and knowing what the entry requirements are. In this study, many participants would not have known how to apply for university or college, or where to gain relevant information, without specified support. One advisor explained the many differing routes that could be taken, thus indicating the level of strategic thinking required to enter university or college, where someone is confronted with a new and bewildering system.

> "I had one client who was a very intelligent from Iran… he really wanted to get back into university here, but he had no proof. He didn't have his pre-university certificate which is considered to be the same level as A levels…because it had been taken by the Government….his options were do an access course and then go to university. Do A levels and then go to university. Or basically write to lots of different universities, explain his experience and see what they think" (RIES Employment Advisor).

Often even where certificates are available, previous qualifications are not recognised (Bloch 2007b). Issues relating to comparison of qualifications from abroad can be resolved through NARIC, the UK's National Agency responsible for providing information, advice and expertise on qualifications from abroad. However, where a young person is unable to access their certificates, advisors can advocate by writing letters to universities to explain the circumstance in which they found themselves without certification. This approach might prove successful where a university is sensitive to the lived situations of refugees and where practical assessments such as admissions tests are compatible with the course of study (Hannah 1999).

5 Conclusion

The findings of this paper tentatively suggest that a shift in focus is required, from needs to strengths. For refugee young people to become actors of their lives their preferences are crucial; they should be given the space to set their own goals as well the chance to voice aspirations. Given the range of experiences and constraints that refugee young people face it might be good practice for interventions to work in a holistic and multi-dimensional way. Interventions should balance the necessity to address real problems without undermining human agency. Refugee specific initiatives operated by value-driven, third-sector organisations might be better suited to deal with the multiplicity and diverseness of the exile experience and to expand autonomy and support autonomous decision-making regarding central education and employment choices. Nevertheless, a focus on autonomy and usage of the capability approach should not overshadow or become a distraction to the core inequality in the UK, economic inequality, and the 'exploitative nature of capitalism' (Dean 2009: 261). Interventions should bolster the agency of vulnerable groups through engaging 'their agency and participation, wherever possible and to the greatest extent possible' (Rogers, Mackenzie and Dodds, 2012: 25). An alternative starting point for social policy might be human agency and the freedom an individual has to act on behalf of what is important to them, 'people have to be…actively involved - given the opportunity- in shaping their own destiny' (Sen 1999: 53). Providing this kind of intensive casework and support requires that sustainable funding be provided for third-sector organisations, and in turn, the funding and accompanying deliverables should not restrict the autonomy of such organisations.

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