Chapter 5
Left to Their Own Devices: Refugees' Labour-Market Integration Challenges in Austria during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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5.1   Introduction

Labour-market integration is understood as an important pillar in the successful integration processes of refugees[1] into host societies (Heckmann, 2015; Struck, 2019). In the European Union at large and in Austria specifically, refugee integration processes regarding societies and the labour market have become hotly debated topics in public and scholarly debates.

The challenges and opportunities of the labour-market integration of refugees are visible in the interplay of the macro-institutional, meso-organisational and micro-individual levels. The challenges are, on the one hand, associated with de-qualification processes or qualification mismatches, health issues, the lack of – and obstacles to accessing – support programmes, language barriers and a lack of networks (e.g. Aumüller, 2018; Heckmann, 2015; Pallmann et al., 2019; Struck, 2019; Worbs & Baraulina, 2017). On the other hand, employment – being one of the main integration mechanisms[2] – continues to be understood as an opportunity leading to

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[1] For the purpose of this chapter, we define refugees in a broad sense (e.g. Bešić et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020) as individuals who have fled and cannot safely return to their home country and who have either applied for or already been granted international or national protection.

[2] Social and systemic integration processes can take place in differing social spheres, such as at an institutional, social, political and/or cultural level. Thus, alongside the labour market, the education sector and the participation in everyday life settings (e.g. politics, sport, entertainment) can be considered important platforms for integration processes.

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a successful integration of refugees in host societies, additionally fostering their financial independence, psychological well-being, possibilities of socio-economic upward mobility and social inclusion in the host countries (Ager & Strang, 2008; de Vroome & van Tubergen, 2010).

While integration into the labour market is challenging at the best of times, in crises such challenges tend to be exacerbated, as has been the case with the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to an amplified vulnerability for the already disadvantaged refugees (Falkenhain et al., 2021). When entering labour markets in host societies, refugees are often in need of institutionalised support, provided by both public and private-sector organisations whose work has also been intensely affected by the pandemic.

This chapter adds new insights to the scholarly analysis of the challenges and barriers associated with the labour-market integration of refugees during times of crisis and beyond, drawing on theoretical frameworks with a specific focus on refugees (e.g. Aumüller, 2018; Brücker et al., 2014; Hillman & Toğral Koca, 2021). Methodologically, 18 semi-structured interviews with representatives of support organisations (7) as well as refugees themselves (11) were utilised. The analysis of the collected data followed a deductive-inductive content-analysis approach (Mayring, 2015).

Our contribution will firstly outline the theoretical foundation, focusing on the barriers and challenges in labour-market integration at the macro, meso and micro levels. Subsequently, the Austrian context with regard to the formal and structural requirements of the labour-market integration of refugees and the impacts of the pandemic will be explained. In the following section, the methodological approach of the study will be outlined. Then, the findings of the study, emphasising the impact of the pandemic on finding work, on qualification mismatch processes and on feelings of disorientation, will be presented. The amplification of digitalisation as a result of the pandemic will also be debated. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the multiple effects of the pandemic on the national, organisational and individual levels regarding the workforce integration of refugees in Austria.

5.2 Theoretical Base: Challenges in the Labour-Market Integration of Refugees

In order to analyse the differences in the labour-market integration processes of refugees before and during Covid-19, theories of their labour-market integration form the theoretical basis of this chapter.

Refugees face several barriers and challenges in their labour-market integration (e.g. Fasani et al., 2018). At the macro level, migration and integration policies as well as overall labour-market conditions affect integration (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Delaporte & Piracha, 2018). The concentration of migrants – and specifically of refugees – within a segmented labour market in the low-wage professions and

sectors such as care, transport or cleaning, which are characterised by short-term contracts, insecurity of employment, unfavourable working conditions and little likelihood of socio-economic upward mobility (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Piore, 1979; Sassen, 1991a, b), is further accelerated by the pandemic due to overall high unemployment levels. A further barrier to the successful labour-market integration of refugees relates to processes of qualification mismatching. Refugees are often overqualified but employed in low-skilled, underpaid jobs as a result of such a mismatch (e.g. Hillman & Toğral Koca, 2021; Landesmann & Leitner, 2020; Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020).

At an organisational level, support organisations face a lack of funding for labour-market integration programmes during times of crisis, at a point in time when support programmes such as language courses or job placements are the most essential for refugees in search of employment. Specifically, the provision of language courses by support organisations is essential to guide refugees' integration processes successfully. In this respect, language ability is considered the most influential in defining successful work placements and, in turn, socio-economic upward mobility during the acculturation process (Aigner, 2012; Berry & Sam, 2004; Struck, 2019).

At the individual level, the entry into and success of refugees in host-country labour markets is additionally impacted on by their unplanned relocation (Bakker et al., 2017), lack of knowledge of the host-country language (Esser, 2006), potential presence of mental-health issues (Bogic et al., 2015; Kılıç et al., 2016) and absence of professional and other social networks (Barslund et al., 2017; Eisnecker & Schacht, 2016; Verwiebe et al., 2019; Struck, 2019), all of which are also essential for acculturation processes (Berry & Sam, 2004). In turn, a lack of social contacts in general – but specifically in times of crisis – enhances the isolation of refugees and therefore hinders integration processes at large and specifically related to the labour market. For example, Falkenhain et al. (2021) have identified that the pandemic causes set-backs in social and systemic integration processes and find that instability and insecurities in the everyday working experiences (advice-seeking from support organisations; prolonged asylum procedures; endangerment of job losses) result in a general feeling of disorientation amongst refugees during the Corona crisis.

5.3 Refugee Labour Market Integration in Austria

Austria has been at the forefront of incoming asylum and refugee applications from the most recent refugee-migration movements since 2014 (see Table 5.1). For example, in 2015, at the peak of asylum applications received, Austria hosted the fourth-highest absolute number – 88,000 – of asylum-seekers within the EU (Eurostat, 2021). In the same year, the most asylum applications were received by Germany (approximately 476,000), followed by Hungary (*circa* 177,000) and Sweden (around 162,000) while, in the United Kingdom, just under 39,000 asylum

Table 5.1 Asylum-seekers in Austria 2014–2020

Year	Numbers
2014	28,064
2015	88,340
2016	42,285
2017	24,735
2018	13,746
2019	12,886
2020	14,775

Source: BMI (2021); own calculations (2021)

Table 5.2 Asylum-seekers in Austria by country of origin in 2015 and 2020 (%)

Country of origin	2015 (%)	2020 (%)
Afghanistan	29	21
Iraq	15	5
Iran	4	3
Kosovo	3	1
Nigeria	2	1
Pakistan	3	1
Russian Federation	2	2
Somalia	2	5
Syria	28	35
Other	12	26
Total	100	100
N=	88,340	14,775

Source: BMI (2021); own calculations (2021)

applications were received (Eurostat, 2021). In 2017, 2.8 asylum applicants were counted per 1000 inhabitants in Austria, which manifests as the fifth-highest number amongst EU member states (Eurostat, 2021; ÖIF, 2016). In Austria after 2015, the asylum-seeker numbers started to slowly decrease and, by 2020, only 14,775 asylum applications were received (Eurostat, 2021).

In recent years in Austria, most asylum-seekers arrived from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq (see Table 5.2); more specifically, in 2015, they came mainly from Afghanistan (29 per cent), Syria (28 per cent) and Iraq (15 per cent) whereas, in 2020, the highest number of asylum applications was received from Syrian nationals (35 per cent) (BMI, 2021). Comparatively the country-of-origin profile of the asylum-seekers differed considerably: in 2015, for instance, Germany received 36 per cent of asylum applications from Syrian nationals, 12 per cent from Albanian nationals, 7.5 per cent from Kosovans, 7.1 per cent from Afghan nationals and 6.7 per cent from Iraqi nationals (BAMF, 2016). On the other hand, in the same year,

the United Kingdom received most applications from Eritreans (11.5 per cent), 10 per cent from Iranian nationals, 9 per cent from Sudanese nationals and 8 per cent from Syrians (ONS, 2021). However, only a minority of asylum-seekers tend to be granted asylum – in Austria, in 2020, a total of 39 per cent of asylum-seekers were granted a positive asylum decision and, in 2015, 40 per cent – whereas Syrian asylum-seekers exhibit the highest acceptance rate (80 per cent in 2015) (BMI, 2021).

The legal framework in Austria regarding refugees and asylum-seekers is defined by two main legislative acts which were introduced in 2017: the Integration Act and the Labour Market Integration Act. These distinguish between (1) asylum-seekers with a high probability of staying, (2) refugees and (3) beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. The last two groups are obliged to sign an integration contract and participate in an 'Integration Year' programme. Asylum-seekers can participate in the Integration Year under certain conditions (e.g. German at A1 level, completion of compulsory schooling). The Integration Year Act bundles existing labour-market measures into a comprehensive package, focusing on competence, language courses, value/orientation and job preparation measures (Ortlieb et al., 2021).

Three agencies implement labour-market integration policies in Austria: the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (FOIA), the Austrian Integration Fund (AIF) – which manages the Integration Year – and the Austrian Public Employment Service (APES). All the three agencies have regional branches in the nine federal states. In cooperation with the agencies, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other private service-providers are involved in delivering labour-market support measures across the country. Table 5.3 shows the organisations involved and outlines their main activities.

However, access to employment and the labour market, even in times of economic growth, remains challenging. Asylum-seekers have very limited access to the labour market, only being allowed to engage in seasonal work and harvesting or

Table 5.3 Main actors involved in integration activities in Austria

	Austrian Integration Fund	Austrian Public Employment Service	NGOs and other (private) service providers	Private employers
Main activities related to (labour market) integration	Organising the Integration Year and other activities aimed at integration	Financing and managing support measures	Implementation of support measures (mainly financed by APES)	(Weak) cooperation with APES and other support organisations in providing jobs
Expertise in integration initiatives/ projects	Organising integration activities, including value courses; experience with recent refugees' limited knowledge of work-related integration	Knowledge of the local labour market and cooperation with other actors	Experience of engaging closely with refugees	Knowledge of the requirements for employment

community services on a minimum wage basis (Asylkoordination Österreich, 2021). A positive asylum decision allows them full access to the labour market. Despite the support of APES, access to employment remains difficult. For example, during a time of economic growth in Austria, only 35 per cent of individuals who were granted asylum in 2016 and 39 per cent in 2015 were employed by 2019 (AMS, 2021). Thus, even though the quite low unemployment levels in Austria before the Corona crisis might indicate that refugees have a good likelihood of employment, it remains problematic (e.g. Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020; Ortlieb et al., 2021). The main barriers include refugees' unfamiliarity with the labour market and their lack of social networks and credentials (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Ortlieb et al., 2021; Verwiebe et al., 2019). These obstacles and existing barriers have been further intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic, partially as a result of the overall economic downturn and high unemployment levels it caused.

In a bid to control the pandemic, the Austrian government introduced the first lockdown in mid-March 2020, which led to the widespread closure of businesses. During the summer of 2020, most restrictions were lifted. Due to the subsequent worsening of the epidemiological situation, a second nationwide lockdown was introduced in mid-November 2020 (Böheim & Leoni, 2020) with a third lockdown in January 2021 continuing to severely affect the labour market. Unemployment figures (by national definition[3]) rose to around 9 per cent in October 2020 and 11.4 per cent in January 2021 (AMS, 2021; Statistics Austria, 2021). The average unemployment rate (by national definition) in 2020 was just under 10 per cent; however, the average unemployment rate for migrants in 2020 was considerably higher at 15.3 per cent (AMS, 2021; Statistics Austria, 2021). The Austrian job market additionally faced a substantial number of furloughed workers (around 300,000) and a 7.7 per cent drop in GDP for 2020 (WIFO, 2020). Once vaccines against Covid-19 were introduced in early 2021, the lockdowns were partially – and at first only regionally – lifted by late February 2021 and ended on a national basis in May 2021; at the same time, the unemployment rate dropped from 11.4 per cent in January 2021 to 7.7 per cent in May 2021 (Statistics Austria, 2021).

The Covid-19 crisis therefore arguably accelerated the challenges and barriers relating to the labour-market entry of refugees in Austria.

5.4   Methodology

A qualitative methodology based on 18 semi-structured interviews with officials and experts from support organisations, as well as refugees in the county of Upper Austria, was utilised in this study. One set of questions was directed at experts, the other at refugees. The questions for the experts compared organisational support

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[3] The unemployment rate by national definition (in Austria) is based on the registered unemployed persons at the AMS (Labour Market Service) comparative to the overall – at the Main Association of the Austrian Social Security Institutions (HVB) – registered employees (AMS, 2021).

processes before and during the pandemic, whereas the refugees were questioned about their perception of these support programmes, labour-market integration programmes and employment search processes, both before and during the pandemic.

Deductive theoretical construct sampling and snowball sampling methods were utilised (Patton, 2015). Gatekeepers – for example, representatives of NGOs or support agencies – helped to organise contacts with refugees and, as a result, interviews were held with 11 refugees (six women and five men) of whom five originated from Afghanistan, three from Iran, two from Syria and one from Armenia. The interviews with officials included one manager, four handling officers, one social worker and one trainer supporting refugees entering the labour market. Tables 5.4 and 5.5 list the interviews conducted, which were each complemented with a short questionnaire.

The interviews were predominantly conducted online or by telephone (due to Covid-19 restrictions). Three interviews with Afghan refugees were conducted with a translator. All interviews were conducted between July 2020 and June 2021 and took between 30 and 110 min. They were digitally recorded, transcribed and coded with MAXQDA. The qualitative data analysis followed a deductive-inductive content-analysis approach (Mayring, 2015). Applying this approach, we firstly and – prior to the coding process – theoretically established categories arising out of the main themes of interest (e.g. evolving out of the set of interview questions) and subsequently subsumed codes to those categories. Secondly, during the coding process, further

Table 5.4 Overview of interviewees (refugees)

Refugees	Gender	Country of origin	Age	Arrived in Austria	Status	Interview date
R1	M	Armenia	31	2014	Employed	2020
R2	F	Iran	40	2015	Job-seeker	2020
R3	F	Iran	32	2014	Job-seeker	2020
R4	M	Afghanistan	31	2006	Student	2020
R5	M	Syria	n.a	n.a	Employed	2020
R6	F	Iran	34	2014	Job-seeker	2020
R7	F	Afghanistan	37	2015	Job-seeker	2020
R8	F	Syria	33	2016	Asylum-seeker	2021
R9	M	Afghanistan	30	2015	Asylum-seeker	2021
R10	F	Afghanistan	34	2016	Job-seeker	2021
R11	M	Afghanistan	40	2017	Asylum-seeker	2021

Table 5.5 Overview of interviewees (officials/experts)

Officials	Job type	Organisational type	Interview date
E1	Handling Officer	Private support organisation 1	2020
E2	Project Manager	NGO1	2020
E3	Handling Officer	Private support organisation 2	2020
E4	Handling Officer	NGO2	2020
E5	Handling Officer	NGO3	2020
E6	Trainer	NGO1	2020
E7	Social Worker	NGO1	2020

categories were created inductively, evolving from the data themselves. The data-analysis process focused on shedding light on the challenges and barriers to labour-market integration, the resulting themes of which are presented in the following sections.

5.5   Findings

Our findings highlight the following four research themes; (1) impediments to finding work caused by the pandemic; (2) repercussions of the Covid-19 crisis on qualification mismatching processes; (3) the role which digitalisation played during times of social distancing; and (4) subjective experiences of disorientation caused by Covid-19 restrictions.

5.5.1   The Pandemic Has Made it Much Harder to Find Work

The data suggest that the high unemployment levels in Austria during the Covid-19 crisis had a negative effect on the employment of refugees, meaning fewer opportunities for them to enter the labour market as well as an increase in job losses. It appeared increasingly problematic to reallocate new jobs during the crisis. The overall results indicate that the perceptions and experiences of higher barriers to finding employment for refugees at the organisational meso sphere and the individual micro sphere appear similar. At the organisational level, E6, a trainer with an NGO, demonstrated the accelerated hurdle to placing refugees in employment:

> A lot of companies are now not open to accepting new employees, of course, due to Covid – it is not like before Covid. The labour market is in crisis; there is a general lack of jobs.

Amongst the group of refugees, similar observations were made. A Syrian man (R5) reported:

> I have a friend [refugee], he is unemployed. He received an offer from APES and was employed for two years before Covid, then his boss made him redundant: he was unemployed. While he was unemployed, he received no job offers and no German courses, nothing, nothing, he was able to get really nothing. […] Because of Covid he was made redundant and now he is on emergency assistance. […] He is a young man, 35 he is.

R5's own situation further documented job losses due to Covid-19:

> I have been working since November 2019. I started my employment in a hotel, for five months. And for one month I worked in a hospital but was unfortunately made redundant. Then from July 2019 to August 2020 I worked for a cleaning company […] and then I was made redundant.

A 37-year-old woman from Afghanistan (R7), who came to Austria in 2015, reported in a similar manner:

> I have tried with other companies and they said 'Yes, OK, you are registered, but we have no work at the moment'.

We can thus conclude that the pandemic which caused the economic downturn and higher unemployment levels in Austria, in turn reinforced obstacles for refugees to find work. The findings on the organisational and the individual level correspond strongly.

5.5.2   Qualification Mismatch

De-qualification or qualification mismatching processes remain a substantial barrier for refugees trying to enter the labour market (e.g. Hillman & Toğral Koca, 2021; Struck, 2019). Such processes arguably intensified during the Covid-19 crisis. A handling officer (E6) reported that:

> A large proportion of the women who attend my support sessions already have a qualification from their country of origin which is not recognised in Austria. […] I tell them to do further education here: it is not that easy to get a place but it is doable […] and, because of Covid, a lot has become more complicated.

An Iranian chemist (R6), who had studied chemistry in Iran and had already been employed in a laboratory in her country of origin, reported that it was problematic during the pandemic to find a job in Austria in her profession, which led her to consider accepting employment in the retail or catering sectors.

> Well, I will definitely continue to look for a job in the field of chemistry but I will not wait for too long and remain unemployed. […] Maybe my expectations are high but I am qualified and I offer a lot. And I will try to get that – what I want – in the field I already worked in [in Iran].

The Iranian woman's case exemplifies that, in general and arguably more so during the pandemic, highly qualified migrants and refugees whose qualifications are not recognised by their host countries are frequently pushed into to the less-skilled segments of the labour market and find themselves in low-wage, insecure employment with short-term contracts, unfavourable working conditions and little chances of socio-economic upward mobility.

On the other hand, R9, an Afghan refugee aged 30 who is still waiting for decisions on his asylum application, reported on his personal coping strategy with the de-qualification process – and of starting to study over again in Austria:

> I completed university education in Afghanistan but it is not recognised and acknowledged in Austria. I cannot work, because I am still waiting for the official decision on my asylum application. I can only work in self-employment for a minimum wage. Because of my qualification not being recognised, I have started to study in Austria and hope to complete my degree here but I cannot keep up with the others because of the language; and the problem lately was that, due to the digital online teaching because of the lockdowns, I was not able to ask questions, only email the teachers [university lecturers] and sometimes – well, often – I do not get an answer.

As the findings suggest, in Austria in light of the pandemic, qualification mismatch processes persist and possibly increase – for support organisations and refugees alike – as a hurdle to the latter's efficient labour-market integration. A cyclical process is evident of highly qualified refugees, whose qualifications are not recognised in the host countries, being pushed to enter the labour market at the less-skilled end of the spectrum, in which unfavourable working conditions are predominant (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Piore, 1979; Sassen, 1991a, b).

5.5.3   The Impact of Digitalisation on Refugees Looking For a Job

Overall, in recent decades, tools to support labour-market integration have become increasingly digitalised; however Covid-19 lockdowns additionally served as a digitalisation multiplier regarding the different social spheres, including the labour-market integration-support measures (Bešić et al., 2021). Thus, due to specific social distancing measures during the lockdowns, the digitalisation of most communication increased the work load for migrant support organisations, but also posed additional challenges for refugees. Language courses, online training courses, counselling sessions, job searches and application procedures were suddenly offered solely online. Subsequently, communication with clients took place mainly via telephone, email, Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype or other digital tools. Employees of migrant support organisations reported that the initial switch to sole digital contact and social distancing not only increased the work load, raised work pressure and time involvement, but also forced personnel into home offices, which often had to be equipped with additional printers or scanners. E1, a handling officer, stated that:

> No, it was like that with us, the courses continued. […] The trainers sat at home, engaged in their home office, and managed it from there. […] but on the whole it continued, it was just a lot more work for the trainers…

For refugees, the digitalisation of support measurements expanded the need to possess technical computer knowledge and experience. Experts found that the younger and more-educated refugees appeared to have less difficulty with digitalisation than their older and less-educated compatriots. E1 reported that:

> Well, that Zoom… we gave them [refugees] directions, and that worked OK. I have to mention, we have participants who are under 25 and they are good at those things.

However, some refugees, especially the older and less-educated ones, found the use of computers and online support measures more demanding. Such challenges were often intensified by a general lack of digital tools, such as PCs, tablets or phones, in the households, a lack arguably corresponding to the socio-economic characteristics of individuals and families (Bacher et al., 2020). R11, a 40-year-old Afghan man, who lived in a one-room flat with his two children, reported:

> Well, it was more difficult to stay in touch with organisations, I had to drop out of the language course as a result of the digital teaching because we did not have enough computers at home. My children needed the one computer we have here for their [home]-schooling.

Support programmes, particularly language courses, are important tools with which to pave the way for a job search and successful labour-market integration. However, these have inevitably been affected by the switch to online teaching, accelerated by the Covid-19 crisis. Both officials of support organisations and refugees alike highlighted the obstacles associated with predominantly digitally implemented online support programmes. Some refugees, as stated previously, were unable to complete digital courses due to the lack of tools or their inability to operate them. A handling officer (E1) explained:

> I have some hesitation at this stage in regard to language teaching; well, to do this [language teaching] online is not totally new – this has existed for decades, this online studying – but I think the personal direct contact is still important and now […] you cannot just do it that way. Personal interaction is great for practising, for strengthening the language […] in my experience – a group, a social situation, […] that is beneficial, there is cooperation, one attends; because there are people, one can talk to them, because they are in the same situation.

The pandemic also caused the cancellation of some support programmes, hence slowing down the process of refugees' attaining language abilities and, in turn, labour-market integration possibilities. A 37-year-old Afghan job-seeker (R7) stated:

> Yes, I have completed an A1 language course and I paid for it out of my own pocket since January. But I have not done the exam yet, which I also paid out of my own pocket. But there is no [language] course now due to Covid.

Digitalisation also led to an upsurge in the general lack of human – personal and social – interactions which arguably increased the isolation of many. During the early months of the pandemic, on the one hand, the contact between handling officers and refugees became extraordinarily limited (e.g. EMN/OECD, 2020). A social worker (E7) reflected on the significance of personal social interactions between representatives of support organisations and clients:

> No, well, for us, work conditions changed, because we worked from home, direct contact became very rare and we only rarely had direct [personal] contact with clients in emergency situations; everything else was done by telephone. This was very difficult for the clients, because they often did not have the technical ability to fill out an online application form or to send it by email to the officials in the social security or finance office, so this had a massive impact on them. Unfortunately, well with us, normally we have regular client open hours; those clients who need something from us visit us and we finalise everything for them – for example, forms regarding child benefits, forms regarding child-care benefits and such like. But then they were left to their own devices. Those people, the clients, were left to their own devices for three entire months.

On the other hand, social contacts and networks are considered essential for successful systemic and social integration processes and, in turn, labour-market integration; the lack of these arguably leads to less-effective acculturation processes (Berry & Sam, 2004). A 31-year-old man from Afghanistan (R4) said that the lack

of personal interaction, now replaced by digital interaction, was not only burdensome but also directly created disadvantages regarding labour-market integration:

> Human contact was lacking; it was not possible to talk to the support officer and have a personal conversation and get personal advice. The job search and job mediation at this point was all on the phone or by email…and so on.

Both the support organisations and the refugees highlighted the integration challenges related to the digitalisation of support structures and the subsequent lack of personal interaction. Both found the intensification of digitalisation, as a result of the pandemic, burdensome. One impediment arose out of a frequent lack of digital tools for refugees, consequently hindering their participation in online support sessions, the online teaching of languages and online job-application procedures. Additionally, a lack of social interaction appears to obstruct acculturation processes. Even though younger and more-educated refugees have less difficulty operating digital tools, they nevertheless identified the lack of personal contact due to Covid-19 social distancing measures as unfavourable.

5.5.4   The Feeling of Disorientation

As argued by Falkenhain et al. (2021), the pandemic reinforced already complicated administrative procedures concerning refugee settlement processes, leading to feelings of disorientation amongst refugees. This study confirms these insights. Our refugee participants mentioned the already prolonged asylum procedures being further perpetuated as a result of the pandemic, causing experiences of disorientation leading to an amplification of vulnerability and distress. R6, a 34-year-old Iranian woman, for example, elaborated on the prolongation of her asylum application procedure from 2014 to 2020 and the subsequent hurdles during the lockdowns regarding work placements and employment:

> I have been here in Austria since September 2014. I instantly applied for asylum. In June 2020, after six years, my asylum application was accepted – all those years, I was here as a refugee, as an asylum-seeker. I had no possibility of accessing the labour market. I worked voluntarily as a caretaker in an old people's home and did a placement as an old people's caretaker; then I was a student for one year at the local university. I started with informatics [IT] but dropped out after a year because I was, at that point in time, able to work and no longer able to study. Since September I have been registered as seeking employment. But it is difficult now with Covid, because many companies do not accept new employees and, unfortunately, one cannot get a placement either, because of the first and the second and then the third lockdown.

Intersections between the lack of social contact (e.g. with support officers) and the prolongation of already complicated asylum procedures appear to have caused insecurities around the legal status of refugees – not only increasing their vulnerability but also impacting their health. An Afghan refugee (R9), explained his experiences and feelings of insecurity regarding his legal status and overall situation in Austria during the pandemic, leading to his need for therapy sessions.

I have been waiting for five and a half years now for a positive asylum decision; my wife and children are in Afghanistan. I cannot work here and my family is in danger. I cannot see my children but my kids need their father. But there is nothing I can do about the situation – my lawyer says I cannot do anything, I have to wait. If I am not granted asylum, […] I might have to work for three years without a break. Only if I complete three self-sufficient years on the labour market can my family can join me. I worry and I cannot sleep anymore. Worries, worries haunt me at night. I had to start going to therapy; I see my therapist twice a week now, to calm down. It is hard, yes, it is really hard.

5.6   Conclusion

This study has analysed the labour-market integration of refugees in Austria in light of the Covid-19 pandemic from a multi-level perspective, including the macro national, meso organisational and micro individual levels. The data highlighted the challenges, barriers and impediments arising out of the pandemic concerning these processes.

Firstly, at the macro level, the overall conditions of the labour market during the pandemic were increasingly unfavourable, due to relatively high unemployment rates throughout 2020 and early 2021 (AMS, 2021; Statistics Austria, 2021). Since the Austrian government's policies focused on individuals who had recently lost their jobs, the long-term unemployed, including refugees, were not prioritised, resulting in both a further rise in unemployment for refugees and in difficulties entering the labour market. Additionally, refugees are frequently – and more so during times of crisis – employed in professions which involve low wages and little likelihood of socio-economic upward mobility (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Piore, 1979; Sassen, 1991a, b). Moreover, the qualification-mismatch barrier to the successful labour-market integration of refugees, resulting in the placement of overqualified individuals in low-skilled, often underpaid jobs (e.g. Landesmann & Leitner, 2020; Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020; Struck, 2019), appeared to be intensified by the Covid-19 crisis.

Secondly, at the organisational level, due to the restrictions in personal interaction and social contact during the Covid-19 lockdowns, support organisations had to provide assistance digitally. The switch from personal teaching to digital online language courses appeared challenging to manage not only for support organisations but also for refugees. For support organisations, going digital resulted in managerial, technical, organisational, and financial challenges, both on an individual as well as organisational level (e.g. Orru et al., 2021). For refugees, the digitalisation of support could have a long-term effect on the successful integration processes of refugees, who often lacked digital skills or were unable to participate due to the lack of digital devices in their households. It appeared, however, that the younger and more-educated refugees were more likely to cope with the digitalisation of support measures than the elderly and less-educated. Language ability is, on the one hand, considered of the utmost importance for the successful labour-market placement of refugees (Brücker et al., 2014; Esser, 2006, 2010; Struck, 2019). A lack of language

ability, on the other hand, can have negative effects on labour-market integration and acculturation processes as well as systemic and social-integration processes at large (Bogic et al., 2015; Esser, 2006; Kılıç et al., 2016).

Thirdly, at the individual level, an absence of social networks and personal interaction hinders acculturation processes (Barslund et al., 2017; Eisnecker & Schacht, 2016; Verwiebe et al., 2019; Struck, 2019). Restrictions in social interaction not only cause a lack of language practice but can also affect mental health (Bogic et al., 2015; Kılıç et al., 2016). Our findings demonstrated how personal contact was limited during the Covid-19 crisis in Austria, which consequently amplified the isolation of individuals and caused experiences and feelings of disorientation which, in some cases, led to the onset of mental-health issues. The interviews additionally indicated that the prolongation of asylum applications as a result of the pandemic hindered labour-market access and caused further experiences of disorientation (regarding legal status) amongst refugees, corresponding to the findings of Falkenhain et al. (2021).

This qualitative study aimed to provide an insight into the effects of the pandemic on the labour-market integration of refugees and, in so doing, to contribute to scholarly research about the consequences of the Covid-19 crisis on refugees. The highlighted challenges and barriers associated with the labour-market integration of refugees in light of the pandemic could arguably have long-term disadvantageous effects for them. As the data show, the labour-market integration of refugees was challenging even before the pandemic and, during the crisis, other policy issues were emphasised, pushing challenges concerning refugees further to one side.

The current labour-market support policies and measures in Austria need to address those specific issues for refugees that were either consolidated during the pandemic or emerged during this time. For example, the digitalisation of support measures is likely to persist in the long term; however, this study has shown that, for many refugees, there are considerable difficulties both in accessing and in operating digital tools, while support organisations are and will be faced with organisational, managerial, technical and financial challenges in pursuing the digitalisation of support measures beyond the pandemic. It remains unresolved whether policy-makers at the macro level and support organisations at the meso level will be able to implement policies and practices that will integrate marginalised groups such as refugees or whether refugees will continue to be 'left to their own devices'.

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