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The experiences of temporary grants of leave to remain among former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK: a qualitative study

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This study explores the lived experiences of young adults in the UK who arrived as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and were subsequently granted successive short periods (≤ 30 months) of discretionary leave under the Ten-Year Pathway. We draw attention to the impact of temporary leave arrangements on young people's development and functioning. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former UASC who experienced protracted immigration insecurity were analysed. Three core group experiential statements (GETs) emerged: (1) 'What I could have been' – lost educational and career and relationship opportunities due to interrupted stability; (2) 'The trauma every day you relive' – how ongoing uncertainty impedes psychological recovery from pre-migration and journey trauma; and (3) 'Why would I be lying to you' – the emotional toll of being disbelieved within the asylum process. These findings underscore the need for asylum policies that prioritise developmental continuity and emotional security for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.

Keywords: Asylum seeker; qualitative; mental health; discretionary leave; IPA.

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Introduction

There is a large body of literature that documents the mental health effects on young people of forced migration and the trauma that many migrants experience in their countries of origin, as well as the difficulties during their exodus (Blackmore et al., 2020; Fazel et al., 2012; Hodes & Vostanis, 2019). It is recognised that young people continue to experience significant challenges following arrival in the countries in which they seek asylum, particularly because of long periods of 'waiting'

before being granted stable status, and sometimes as a consequence of their credibility being challenged (Pobjoy, 2015). Studies have tended to focus on delayed asylum decision-making and the resultant damaging states of 'limbo' in which asylum seekers exist (Griffiths, 2013). The effect on young people of granting only short periods of discretionary leave has not been examined.

Around 70% of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) arriving in the UK and claiming asylum are granted asylum

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(refugee status) on the basis that they have a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country on the basis of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (Top Facts from the Latest Statistics on Refugees and People Seeking Asylum – Refugee Council, n.d.). Some UASC who are not considered to meet criteria for refugee status (based on the Refugee Qualification Directive) may be granted ‘humanitarian protection’ on the basis that they nonetheless face a real risk of serious harm in their home country if returned.

Prior to 2005, people granted asylum in the UK were commonly granted Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) immediately. However, in 2005 the Home Office decided that a majority of those granted asylum or humanitarian protection would only be granted an initial five years leave to remain, after which they could then apply for ILR (HM Government, 2005). UASC who are refused asylum and humanitarian protection are often granted limited ‘UASC leave’, until they turn 17 years and six months of age, on the basis of being children. They must then reapply for leave to remain in the country or be mandated to return to their country of origin. If at this stage they are not given refugee status or humanitarian protection, such UASCs may be offered Discretionary Leave (DL). This is granted in circumstances where removal of the person is successfully argued by the applicant’s legal team to violate their human rights as set out in The Human Rights Act 1998.

Grants of DL, whether indefinite or limited, usually confer the right to work, study, and recourse to public funds in the UK. Since 2012, the recommended period for DL has been a maximum of 30 months, which is commonly referred to as 2.5 years. Asylum seekers granted DL must complete a continuous period of at least 120 months’ residence (through successive grants of temporary leave) before being eligible for permanent settlement. This is referred to as the ‘Ten-Year Pathway’. Each

application involves significant financial costs, with delays frequently resulting in further uncertainty (Migrant Observatory, 2021).

In 2024 more than two-thirds of the people applying for asylum had waited over a year for a decision on their initial claim (Refugee Council, 2024). Further long waits are often involved while preparing and submitting an appeal against a refusal decision. While a bar exists against a person’s removal from the country pending a decision and during an appeal, the person continues to have restricted access to the labour market, education, and long-term accommodation. Applications for renewal of DL often take up a significant amount of each 2.5-year grant, and it has been noted that in cases where a decision has not been made by the time the 2.5-year grant lapses, the person becomes de facto undocumented as they have no document to prove the bar on their removal.

Psychological and developmental impacts of the asylum system and periods of waiting on young asylum seekers

In a review of the published literature on UASC, Hornfeck et al. identified 10 studies demonstrating a detrimental effect of the experience of the uncertainty of waiting for asylum decisions, as well as the receipt of adverse decisions on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Hornfeck et al., 2022). Temporary periods of leave have been reported to lead to young people existing in a state of ‘limbo’ which in turn impacts young asylum seekers’ social and emotional development (Chase, 2010). It may also contribute to their poor mental health in addition to the many other stressors associated with seeking asylum – such as insecure housing and finances, and family separation (Allsopp et al., 2015). The transition to adulthood among UASC is linked to the notion of ‘ontological security’, which requires a sense of projected self in a future trajectory (Allsopp et al., 2015). UASC have been found to be unable to imagine a future

self in the country in which they are seeking asylum due to the potential for removal that hangs over them.

Developmentally, the lack of such ontological security affects the identity-building of young people, diminishing their future sense of self. In qualitative studies carried out across Europe, UASC have expressed their inability to realise their dreams or plan their future due to long waits for status (Allsopp et al., 2015; Brekke, 2010; Kohli & Kaukko, 2018). Being in a state of limbo while seeking asylum may lead to ‘developmental stuckness’, causing UASC to become unable to transition to independence, with implications on their future functioning as adults (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). After experiences of sequential traumatisation including loss of key attachment figures, the usual progress of development temporarily stops and development may either become stuck (arrested development) or even go backwards (regression). Stigma and racism might further impact on their sense of worth and their willingness to share their difficulties with others (peers and professionals), potentially impacting on their identity development (Côté-Olijnyk et al., 2024). This means that, whatever their chronological age, this group of young people tend to function at a much more immature level than their chronological age would suggest. Emotional and intellectual maturity are often impacted as well as quality of relationships.

Additionally, the reapplication structure of the Ten-Year Pathway echoes the protracted periods of asylum seeking that produce confusing overlapping temporal states of both ‘little change over long periods of time’ and ‘rapid change without warning’ which is postulated to undermine psychological security (Griffiths, 2013).

Impact of length of asylum claim on mental health and economic integration in adults

While research specifically looking at the impact of *length* of waits for definitive

asylum decisions in UASC is limited, it has been explored amongst those seeking asylum as an adult. In the Netherlands, Laban et al. (2004) compared two groups of asylum seekers from Iraq and found that the prevalence of psychiatric disorders was significantly higher in those who were in the asylum procedure for more than two years. This finding complements studies showing that rates of psychiatric illness diminish post-migration following grants of leave to remain (Beiser & Hou, 2001; Weine et al., 1998). In Sweden, Esaiasson, Lajevardi & Sohlberg (2022) found lower subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction among people seeking asylum when compared to people whose claim has been accepted. Hainmueller et al. (2016) found that increased length of wait for a positive asylum decision for asylum seekers of all ages and arriving from various countries to Switzerland lowered the probability of subsequent employment by 4–5% for each year of waiting. This was thought attributable to the psychological distress of long waits rather than simply skill atrophy.

Rationale and aim for the current study

Long waits for asylum decisions have been found to impact on young people’s development and ability to plan for the future. Most such studies have been in European countries, with the lived experiences of former UASC in the UK remaining little-explored. The experience of being granted successive short periods of temporary leave (as opposed to delays within the asylum process) is also relatively unexplored. Given the ever-changing immigration policies in the UK and the differences in legal systems across Europe and the UK, it is pertinent to examine the experiences of former UASC in the UK, particularly following the UK’s departure from the European Union.

The aim of the research is to understand the lived experiences of former UASC who are now young adults and have at some point

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Year of arrival in the UK	Current status
Peter	30	M	Sierra Leone	2010	British Citizen
Idris	26	M	Pakistan	2012	Refugee status
Hailu	24	M	Ethiopia	2015	Refugee status
Afrim	22	M	Albania	2017	DL
Abdullah	25	M	Afghanistan	2014	5 years ILR
Ying	32	M	China	2008	ILR
Romesh	28	M	Sri Lanka	2008	Refugee status
Ali	24	M	Afghanistan	2016	DL

in their lives been awarded short (≤ 30 month) periods of immigration leave in the UK.

Method

Context and setting

This study was developed in collaboration with a UK-based non-residential therapeutic community for young people ('the Centre') who arrived in the UK under the age of 18 as UASC after experiences of violence, loss, and unplanned change in their home countries and traumatic experiences on their journeys to the UK, such as physical and psychological ill-treatment by smugglers.

Participants

Service users of the Centre, who came to the UK as UASC and received a grant of limited leave (regardless of their current asylum status), were eligible to participate in the study (hereafter referred to as 'former UASC' (FUASC)). They were recruited via the Centre from the population currently accessing their services. Potential participants were recruited by purposive sampling – they were invited to participate by the Centre, on the basis that they may practically be able to take part in interviews, and that they had received a grant of limited leave. Participants were told that involvement in the study would have no bearing on their asylum claim, or future claims, or their access to services. Participants were given a £20 voucher to thank them for their

time. In total, 14 young people fitting the inclusion criteria were approached; eight chose to take part in the study. Three declined due to life events (e.g. navigating work or personal issues, personal injury), one declined without citing a reason, and two did not respond. Table 1. shows the participants' demographics. The names indicated are pseudonyms.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the University College London (Project ID number: 25939/001). All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the University College London and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants in the study. Written consent was obtained, using an interpreter where necessary. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information has been removed.

Data collection

To allow participants to elaborate on their experiences, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The topic guide (Appendix A) was co-produced with an expert by experience of being a FUASC and was structured in a broadly chronological way, to allow participants to describe their experiences since arriving in the UK. The expert by experience also took part in a pilot interview with the authors to ensure subsequent interviews were trauma-

informed. The interview schedule included broad initial questions (e.g. first mapping the overall experience) and then prompts to explore in more depth (e.g. ‘tell me how you felt when you received your first grant of leave’).

Semi-structured interviews took place either face-to-face at the Centre or on Microsoft Teams, depending on the participant’s preference. Interviews ranged from 47 to 61 minutes and were audio-recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were conducted by two of the authors: SHY, who is a clinical psychologist, and SC who is a medical doctor and a volunteer at the Centre (both present in five of the eight interviews). Five interviews were conducted in English, one interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and two interviews were conducted with the help of Oromo and Pashtu interpreters. None of the participants were previously known to the researchers who conducted the interviews, except for ‘Romesh’, who was known to SC in his capacity as volunteer at the Centre.

Data analysis

Transcripts were transcribed verbatim by SC and another Centre volunteer. For the interview conducted in Mandarin, SHY (who is fluent in Mandarin and English) transcribed and translated the interview into English. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the approach fits with the overall aims of the study, i.e. to focus on the *lived experience* of participants in relation to a topic of deep personal significance – in this case, their personal experience of one aspect of the immigration process in the UK (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Focusing on depth rather than breadth, IPA is suitable for studies such as this one, which have a relatively small number of participants, taking an inductive approach, in which understanding is built from ‘the bottom up’. IPA also allows the researchers to play an active role in understanding and interpreting the participants’ experiences, appropriate for facilitating marginalised

groups to give voice to their individual lived experience.

Primary analysis of the interviews was conducted by SC and SHY, who wrote reflexivity statements ahead of the qualitative data analysis. They immersed themselves in the transcripts, then independently analysed the first transcript. They then discussed and reflected on the codes and collaboratively generated Experiential Statements (ESs) and Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) in discussion with senior author NM. SC and SHY then independently analysed the rest of the participants’ transcripts and identified themes separately before cross-examining the ESs and PETs for convergence and divergence, and eventually co-developing Group Experiential Themes (GETs). During analysis, the researchers paid attention to content (descriptive), use of language (linguistic), emotional responses, and researchers’ interpretations of the data (conceptual).

Reflexivity

As a collaboration with the Centre – and including the director as a member of the core team – we have a natural identification with/support for UASC and brought our own doubts and criticisms of British policy and laws. However, we tried to ensure that this did not prevent us from exploring the participants’ experiences from their perspective, e.g. by being careful to exclude leading questions from the interview schedule, or by ensuring that we actively looked for any positive aspects of their experience of being given short-term stays.

Throughout the study, we remained reflexive about how our positionality and professional backgrounds may influence our interpretation and attempted to ensure that the participants’ voices were prioritised.

Results

Figure 1 displays a simplified approximation of the time spent by each participant with

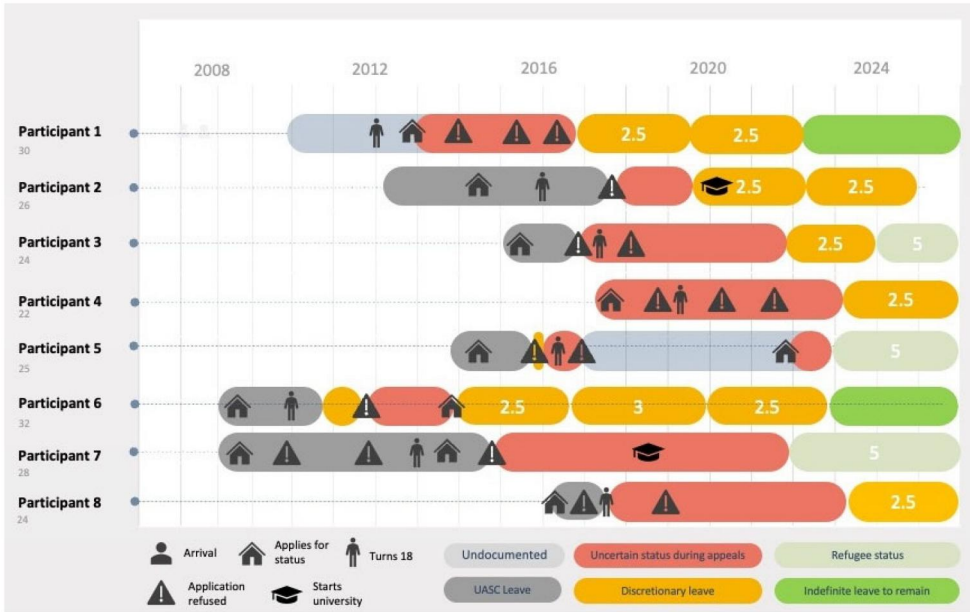


Figure 1. Time spent in the UK with uncertain status since arriving as an UASC.

varying types of leave. These timelines were created after listening to the young peoples’ testimonies, in order to provide a visual representation of their journeys through the asylum system since arriving in the UK. These journeys are legally complex and were often only partially understood by the participants themselves. Thus, simplified schemata of their journeys are displayed, depicting absolute immigration insecurity (grey and red bars; undocumented periods, UASC leave and periods awaiting outcomes of requests for asylum and subsequent appeals following a refusal), relative immigration insecurity (yellow bars; representing periods with short periods of DL) and immigration security (green bars; refugee status, humanitarian protection or ILR).

Figure 1 demonstrates that the summed period of status insecurity (whether absolute or relative) averages roughly a decade and frequently comprises over a third of the participants’ lives. Also notable are the lengthy times required for appeal processes and subsequent outcomes to be decided. In three cases this appeal period was over 5 years.

Our analysis generated three experiential statements/themes described below and in Table 2.

Theme 1. ‘What I could have been’ – barriers to self-actualisation during journeys to secure immigration status

This theme explores the ways in which participants felt their time in the asylum system had hindered or prevented them from realising a vision of their future self. The principal pillars of self-actualisation described by participants were education and employment, which will be explored in turn. Participants displayed a strong sense of opportunities having been taken away from them, both during time waiting for grants of leave, but critically also during periods of brief discretionary leave.

The challenges of imagining a personal future

Speaking about his efforts to achieve a job in public service (which were unsuccessful because of his immigration status), Ali

Table 2. Summary of themes.

Group experiential theme	Subthemes	Participant voices
‘What I could have been’ – Barriers to self-actualisation during journeys to secure immigration status	The challenges of imagining a personal future A yearning for education as a cornerstone of self- actualisation 2.5-year grants not conducive to stable employment	Ali Romesh Peter Idris Abdullah
‘The trauma every day you relive’ – Sustained instability impeding psychological healing, settling, and community integration	2.5-year grants giving temporary space to heal Status insecurity generating shame and otherness	Peter Abdullah Hailu Romesh Ying
‘Why would I be lying to you?’ – Disbelief and short periods of leave		Peter Afrim Hailu

demonstrates a sense of longing for a version of himself that did not come to be: ‘I mean, it’s still my dream but the problem is as I said, because they [Home Office] wasted my time’. When asked whether he still looks forward to the future, he remarks ‘Future? I don’t see any future.’ Ali presents as confident in his abilities but, having seen his potential curtailed by the vagaries of the asylum system, he repeats his assertion that his time was ‘wasted’. He conveys bemusement with the length of time spent in insecurity but also mourns it as time taken away from him in which he could have developed to ‘be someone’.

I mean, I’m kind of lost in my mind, but maybe I could do something, but I’m not sure ... seven years is no joke ... So I could be, I could study, I could do a course. I could work in seven years. (Ali)

He confirms his conviction that the system is one that treats the futures of the young people within it with contempt, repeating the phrase ‘they [the immigration authorities] are playing’.

But you know, I’m just saying they’re just playing with people’s feelings. That’s the

problem I have with them. They’re just playing, and they just don’t care about people’s feelings.

Romesh shares this sense of wasted time as he describes his six years in difficult appeal processes which jeopardised his ability to study at university, ‘[Other people] build their life because of their status and without any hindrance, they were able to go to university, get a job ... make best out of their life’. This feeling of his life being slowed compared to his peers during appeal processes contrasts with his subsequent ability to see a future for himself when he was finally granted more secure status:

For my futures ... at the moment I’m focusing on my career development. And to see myself in a place where I can have a stable financial income, a stable job, and to feel comfortable with what I do ... something I never expected, something that I never had understanding about.

While a sense of loss of time and potential was shared between multiple participants, Peter and Romesh (who now have British

citizenship and refugee status respectively), were two of the three participants who now had stable jobs. Both were keen to demonstrate that the rigours of the asylum process had also contributed to forming the people they are today, despite having curtailed their opportunities: ‘Yeah, despite the setback and everything, I used it as a positive way to build myself and to have the opportunity’ (Romesh). Peter, who takes pride in his charitable work mentoring other young asylum seekers, now demonstrates a stoic attitude towards his past asylum insecurity:

If you ask me to go 10 years back, do I need to change anything, I’d absolutely say no. I wouldn’t, because that’s what makes me who I am right now. I’m too resilient to give up on that kind of aspect. So, I can’t change it. I value it. I appreciate that journey, because if I change it now, I wouldn’t be the person I am. You know, I could be something else, but that is what probably that’s what I needed at that time. Even [if] it wasn’t the right way or the good way. (Peter)

Peter notably discusses his time being a child soldier with a similar timbre to his time in the UK asylum system, seeing both as formative despite the adversities they involved.

A yearning for education as a cornerstone of self-actualisation

Accessing and progressing through education, with a view to gaining a stable job, was discussed by multiple participants as a cornerstone of self-actualisation: ‘My main aim was to start [university] like a typical college student and then studying’ (Idris). While asylum seekers may access education such as school, college, or even university whilst waiting for their decision, many participants highlight their difficulties in accessing education during their asylum journeys, thus halting their progression to become the image they had imagined of their future selves. Unaccompanied young people are likely to have less emotional and practical support than students who have

family support. They have to survive on very little money unless they are working, and work is often hard to find due to their status insecurity. They also often have to contend with mental health symptoms, difficulties in bereavement and mourning, cultural transitions, and problems with identification, in addition to the rigours of education that other students face.

After like having a full-on student life of like four years in college and then suddenly being slammed down, not even gradually, it was a big hit. (Idris)

The choice of the words ‘not even gradually’ by Idris conveys his sense that the asylum system does not try to diminish its adverse effect on young people’s development.

Various practical challenges to completing educational courses were described by the participants. These included difficulties in accessing funding for university fees, long travel times to places of education and difficulties with accommodation affecting their ability to attend classes.

I couldn’t attend university because I needed to find different accommodation ... it can be quite expensive as well, you know, paying the deposit and this and that. So it was quite challenging. (Romesh)

While practical difficulties were abundant, other participants also described how they frequently felt they did not have the mental stability to be able to be able to engage in education or work. For example, when asked about any plans that had been impacted by immigration insecurity, Hailu responded, ‘Even though I had the opportunity for education, still I was suspicious. So I was not confident enough to continue with my education due to this short time leave to remain.’ He describes his hopes for the future at that point as being limited only to ‘learning English’ but explains that he was not able to engage with this ‘because the circumstance in which I was,

was not happy and it's not motivating for me to go to education'.

'It takes time to find a good job' – 2.5-year grants not conducive to stable employment

Participants frequently discussed having a stable job as fundamental to feeling secure and being able to 'contribute' (Afrim) or even just 'be something' (Ali). A successful grant of leave (whether discretionary or otherwise) allows a migrant to work legally. However, participants described how the possibility of achieving a stable job within a 2.5-year grant was limited, resulting in these years often becoming extensions of the preceding periods of economic inactivity. Romesh describes how quickly he felt 2.5 years could pass without achieving job stability.

... it can be very challenging because the time goes so fast ... by the time you got an employment and settling in the job and then, if your visa is expired, they're unable to keep you ... So essentially you were literally able to work, but the reality of being able to find a job is different ... it takes time to find a good job. It will take at least a year, and you just need to wait and wait to get your interview done ... So by the time you get a job, your visa will come to an end.

Peter describes how much of a 2.5-year grant can be defined by anxiety over legal proceedings, which is particularly preoccupying in the months before the expiration date of a temporary grant.

You can't work while you got your 2.5 years well because you have that anxiety of knowing after that 2.5 years you have to go back again and reapply for the same amount of 2.5, which makes it harder. Of course, even time you go to sleep you think about it. OK, you finish first year, second year now you only ... got six months to go, then you become more worried because you don't know exactly what their decision gonna be.

Peter's later use of the word 'burden' (below) conveys this sense of the weight of

looming applications, that was also shared by Romesh, Idris, and Ali.

I think the only thing that I feel really, really scared of was after I finished the two years getting to that six-month period. Then you have to contact your solicitor. OK, now it's time for us to send an application in. And then you send it in, which means you might not be having the same benefit that you used to have because your limit to your time is already expired. So, you have to wait till the Home Office send you a letter. They could take it to the Council for them to activate your benefits and stuff ... It was quite difficult at that period as well. So, you have to wait till they get back to you sometime. So that kind of increases more, put more burden on you because you have to keep waiting and waiting and waiting. Then you don't have any response. (Peter)

Idris displayed his frustration of his experience with employers being reluctant to employ him due to their uncertainties over discretionary leave: 'then you have to explain to them that I've applied for extension in time. I am eligible for six more months' (Idris). He describes how he was eventually able to find work, but this was largely thanks to being employed by a charity cognisant of the difficulties faced by migrants with short periods of temporary leave.

Much like accessing education, the ability to find a stable job was impacted by practical difficulties experienced during periods of short-term leave, such as accommodation issues. The dual stress of needing to find accommodation and a job reduced some participants' ability to work, despite their entitlement to do so.

Stability in terms of accommodation, in terms of work and being less dependent on others. ... I believe between 2.5 years leave to remain would feel very short and you would still not feel the stability in your life and thinking about the accommodation and the work, you will probably worry more. (Abdullah)

The prospect of achieving a measure of self-actualisation with a five-year grant,

instead of a 2.5-year grant was specifically commented on by certain participants.

If you get refugee status, they give you 5 years. There's so much that you can do. You can go back to school. You can go to college or do university or do any kind of thing. We want to go to work. At least you have that stability, right? I'm gonna be here for five years, and after that, based on how I compose myself in the country, pay all my taxes and all that, and obviously the possibility for me to stay for a longer than five years is certain. But on a 2 1/2 scale, 2 1/2 years, it's not, because you're here for temporary basis. (Peter)

Despite both being ostensibly temporary statuses, Peter only characterises a 2.5-year grant as such. For him, a five-year grant implies a path to long-term leave and allows a person to get on with education and work. Romesh shares the sense that one is only truly able to achieve long-term objectives in a five-year timeframe:

Of course it makes a difference because when I applied for a job, I had to wait, at least a year ... and to get my accommodation as well. So it's almost half of my visa, I completed half of my stay, only got like a few more years to go ... but it took me a while so I don't think I would have achieved these things within 2.5 years of time. (Romesh)

Theme 2. 'The trauma every day you relive' – Sustained instability impeding psychological healing, settling, and community integration

This theme builds on the sense of stasis experienced in periods of immigration insecurity, focusing on the factors impeding participants' ability to heal from past experiences. All participants accessed psychotherapy and had complex psychological needs, suffering certain symptoms chronically. Many displayed symptoms within the interviews consistent with diagnoses of PTSD. They attributed these symptoms to pre-migration trauma rather than

the asylum process itself. Afrim explained, 'The problem ... it's coming from what happened to me from the past. Still, I'm thinking a lot about my mum and my brother.'

While their mental health difficulties were generally found to originate before their time in the UK, many participants described the instability caused by the asylum system as an aggravating factor, but also a cause of stress in its own right, leading to persistent rumination, disturbed sleep, and reduced wellbeing. As Peter explains, 'the trauma every day you relive, is worsened by the experience of being on edge'.

You don't know exactly what the outcome might be ... you're just on the edge thinking, OK, what's gonna happen next? ... And then the mental health, the trauma every day you relive, you can't sleep, you can't eat. You're worrying. You don't have that sort of freedom, even if you're out and about, you always have to look over your shoulder. (Peter)

Peter's words invoke a sense of suffocation from the weight of asylum insecurity and of having insufficient space to heal from past psychological scars following complex experiences of violence in his home country. The prospect of hope was diminished by multiple refusals and appeals, prolonging his uncertainty, 'They almost refused like three times ... the fourth one we appealed, and they refused again' (Peter).

Hailu also discusses how a Home Office decision negatively affected his mental health at the time:

There were two things I was messed up with. One is about the experience that I had at home comes into my mind, the flashbacks. And the other one is the decision was not actually beneficial for my mental health. So I was feeling stressed and anxiety during that time. (Hailu)

The fear of what the future might hold, and its negative effect on mental health, was also observed in Abdullah's account:

I used to worry about the future a lot and it affected my mental health, and I had depression and used to worry a lot and felt quite frightened and had symptoms in my body. (Abdullah)

In addition to causing stress, the looming of leave expiration limited participants' ability to focus on other areas of their lives, such as work, education, and relationships. As Ying highlighted, 'Every time it's time (for renewal), the fear gets worse ... I couldn't sleep ... I think about it more and more.' Much of Ying's account paints a picture of confinement induced by asylum insecurity; when asked how he spent his time he replied, 'Mostly at home, a lot of sleeping time. If there was nothing to do, I would either sleep or cook.' When asked about education, he replied that he had to stop after a month or two 'because of stress' which he attributed to fear of removal: 'After hearing from them that if it got rejected, I might be sent back to my country, then I started to worry (Ying).'

2. 5-year grants giving temporary space to heal

As described in the previous section with respect to the ability to work, a grant of 2.5-years discretionary leave was for some participants a significant positive step forward in their process of mental recovery. They described discretionary leave relieving their stress temporarily and improving mental health in the short term. Afrim, for example, described this feeling of relief: 'When [the Home Office] say yes, I was happy. I was very happy because I'm not gonna go back ... to live like everyone.'

Hailu too was initially relieved at a grant of 2.5-years, discussing how at first this helped his mental health: 'I got a brief relief at that moment because it seems as if something was taken off on my mind, which has been actually stressing and depressing me.' However, he clarified that this relief was short-lived because the grant was only for 2.5 years. Similarly Peter, who unlike Afrim had experienced both

a 2.5-year grant and a grant of ILR, was clear in his determination that 2.5 years was insufficient time to begin 'healing past experiences'.

If they say no, then you have to go back again from square one. You have to restart. When you restart you're just bringing all that old feeling, you feeling helpless. You feel like no one understands ... If you give me 5 years, it's like I'm started healing all my past experiences. But when you take that away from me ... It's kind of like you just open the wound again. (Peter)

Status insecurity generating shame and otherness

Participants felt that socialising and being part of community formed a key part of the process of healing from past scars. Many referenced the social and psychotherapeutic support provided by the Centre: 'They were helping me to integrate with people, to socialise with people' (Abdullah). The ability to socialise was seen as a fundamental pillar of mental healing, with many participants also describing the adverse impact of immigration insecurity on their ability to do so.

I was feeling lonely because I don't have enough money for transportation, to go and join friends. When I was not able to do things that I would like to do, then the stress and anxiety comes. (Hailu)

When trying to fill his time by spending time with other young people from his country, Hailu demonstrates how his asylum status was 'othering'.

I was trying ... to join some friends. But when I joined them, usually I don't tell them my circumstances, I was keeping that inside myself.

He describes his time during which he was granted 2.5-years DL as particularly lonely, due to not being able to open up about his immigration issues.

Yes, I have been struggling because I do not explicitly tell them about my immigration status. So sometimes when I joined them, I laugh. But that laugh is not lasting long.

In Hailu's words we can see a sense of shame about his insecure status, that interestingly was even shared by participants who had been able to access the social environments provided by education, such as Romesh:

Because I couldn't feel like I belonged to this country. Or when people asked me about your status that can be very embarrassing as well. I've been living here for a long time and people will ask me: 'why you have such a short term. You've been here so long?' (Romesh)

Many participants were able to contemporaneously hold a notion that the UK, and not their country of origin, is their home while also feeling a sense of not belonging. While surely part of this feeling of not belonging derives from many of the participants' experiences of overt stigmatisation (that although not largely present in our interviews, can be assumed with relative confidence), part seemed to derive from the perceived difference between themselves and their peers in terms of access to participation in social life.

Theme 3. 'Why would I be lying to you' – disbelief and short periods of leave

The concept of being disbelieved and consequently being considered a 'liar' by the Home Office appeared in many accounts. In asylum proceedings, the credibility of an asylum seeker and their account is questioned by the Home Office and potentially by immigration judges. Peter delineated this in detail:

They have to make a decision based on your story to see whether it's credible or not. It's like me telling you my story of things that I have went through. And then you look in my face and telling me that you're lying, you know, I mean, that kind of hurt. (Peter)

Even if participants did not specifically use the word 'credibility', they conveyed how their sense of whether the Home Office believed them weighed on their conceptions of themselves.

Receiving a temporary grant of leave (as opposed to permanent status) was conceived by participants in contrasting ways: either as an affirmation of the credibility of their story, or as confirmation that they were not fully credible. Afrim's account is illustrative of the former. Having spent six years in the UK without ever having had his credibility affirmed by the Home Office, he described how receiving a positive decision of 2.5-years DL was fundamental to him, as this was the first time authorities had believed his story.

I say 'is it a bad news or good news?'. And [the social worker] says 'The bad news, you will stay just six months in UK [if you don't do anything wrong]. Then after that you will move.' Then the good news. 'They say you're gonna get two-and-a-half years visa and to be free like everyone does.' Because we believe you. (Afrim)

Afrim is quoting the social worker he is speaking to in the penultimate sentence of the above quote. However, the final sentence is his own, and through it we can hear his sense of relief at finally being believed. When later asked how he felt his life would change if he were given indefinite leave, Afrim replied:

What for me is important is they believe what I say. They don't say you are a liar. That's the most important for me, [more] than getting indefinite visa.

For him, being believed was fundamental for his sense of self, opening the door for him to begin healing and living his life as he had imagined it might be. Additionally, he shows conviction in his belief that he will continue to be granted further leave to remain, now having reached this key initial milestone of being believed for a first time.

On the other hand, not all participants viewed being granted 2.5-years discretionary leave as a manifestation of belief. Some conceptualised it as a form of disbelief or, at most, partial belief. Being given a shorter period of leave than other people they knew, meant that they still felt distrusted.

I got a brief relief at that moment because it seems as if something was taken off [of] my mind, which has been actually stressing and depressing me ... Yes, I said briefly, because why that short leave to remain? Because I heard that people are getting five years or something like that. But later, when that was improved to the five years leave to remain, I just felt very happy. (Hailu)

Hailu makes a clear distinction between his response to initial grant of 2.5-years leave and his later five-year grant. This illustrates how the existence of two different grants creates a system of perceived relative injustice:

... because I stayed in this country before that decision for a long time and I was waiting for this decision. And then partly I was feeling happy because it has been recognised even for this 2.5 years, but partially I was not happy, because: why this short? (Hailu)

Other participants viewed a 2.5-year grant more sceptically and were wary of the system's capriciousness. The use of the word 'lie' in Ali's account, shows the extent to which he saw his previous rejection as an expression of the Home Office's contempt.

And they just keep saying lie, lie, lie. You lie. We don't believe you. I mean, why would I be lying? I mean, why? Why would I be lying to you? I don't need to lie to you. I mean, just what? What it is, it's very simple. That's why I'm here. (Ali).

Ali's account also expresses the sense of bemusement several interviewees displayed towards the Home Office's disbelief of their

stories. The seemingly random nature of Home Office decisions seemed to baffle some participants. The idea that their cases could be initially accepted and then rejected or vice versa suggested to some participants that they had not been taken seriously. Peter describes a notion that being given 2.5 years represented less security, not only in that it allowed the person to stay in the country for less time, but also that it meant that the Home Office believed you to a lesser extent:

Five years is certain ... but on a 2.5 scale, 2.5-years, it's not, because you're in here for temporary basis and after that. They can say yes or no.

This was in contrast to participants like Afrim who felt reassured that an initial positive decision was likely to lead to further ones down the line. Nonetheless, these narratives all demonstrate the psychological need for young people's experiences to be believed and validated, in addition to the practical benefits of being given leave to remain.

Discussion

This study explored the way that young asylum seekers experienced their journeys through the asylum system, focusing on their reflections on navigating periods spent with brief grants of DL. Analysis of their narratives revealed that the coupled endeavours of self-actualisation and psychological healing from past trauma were found to be impeded by the roadblocks of short periods of leave and a sense of feeling disbelieved.

A line that runs through this formulation is that 2.5-year grants were discussed by participants as being an insufficient period of time for them to feel that they could move forward, as compared to grants of five years or more. In other words, a 2.5-year grant was experienced as a having considerably less than half the value of a five-year grant. The findings accord with the existing literature that recognises asylum as defined by waiting and inertia, putting

the brakes on self-actualisation, i.e. the ability of young people to realise their projected self-images (Allsopp et al., 2015; Kohli & Kaukko, 2018). Research that has contributed to the formulation of the concept of asylum limbo has been formulated primarily in the context of what we define as absolute immigration insecurity, whereby a person has yet to receive any positive grant of status. Our results agree with those who have suggested that a feeling of limbo also dominates periods of DL, what we define as relative insecurity (Griffiths, 2013). This invokes the notion that brief grants, rather than being time which allows for development of a young person for whom there has been some recognised risk of return, are in fact tacit admissions of an asylum system that seeks to do the minimum possible for their integration.

While some noted improvements in their life after a grant of DL, the prevailing sense was that 2.5 years did not allow for a significant step forward, with this view being expressed most clearly by those looking back from a position of having subsequently been granted more permanent status. Participants described how 2.5 years is experienced as too short a period in which to start work or education, particularly since the last year is dominated by the approach of further asylum proceedings. Given the prolonged time that is required for migrants granted refugee status to achieve stable employment (European Commission and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016), it is unsurprising that a 2.5-year grant is felt to be insufficient.

Certain migration scholars have pointed out that conceptualisations of limbo can oversimplify periods of waiting, and suggest that appreciation of the co-existing temporalities of ‘clock time’, ‘legal time’, and ‘biographical time’ can better aid our understanding of asylum seekers’ experiences (Griffiths, 2024; Stronks, 2022). Certainly, our findings demonstrate the marked mismatch between legal time and clock time, with participants routinely feeling that 30-month grants in practice constitute less clock time due to being

bookended by periods in which their status is perceived as less-than-secure by themselves and others.

With respect to biographical time, Khosravi (2020) points out that analyses that focus solely on educational development and progress in the workplace may fail to capture the personal and psychological development, and often self-actualisation, resultant from acts of caring and solidarity. Such content was scarce in our interviews, other than from references to development of self-care, rather than care-of-others. However, rather than refuting this argument, this result perhaps demonstrates a limitation of our interview schedule inadequately probing such acts of care and solidarity. Additionally, reflection on such acts may have been more prevalent were our participants not exclusively young men without dependents.

Brief grants were seen by participants as not allowing psychological healing to occur. Some of this may be explained through practical realities of DL, in that psychological healing often requires stability in other areas of one’s life. Participants discussed healing from their past trauma, which was made more difficult if their minds were occupied by the immediacy of an impending asylum decision. People with PTSD are found to have a sense of ‘foreshortened future’ and impacts on their future self-view and future goals (Krans et al., 2017). Additionally, asylum proceedings are in themselves a source of significant stress, as found in a previous longitudinal study comparing asylum seekers with other migrants in Sweden (Esaiaasson et al., 2022). Part of the lack of psychological healing may also be understood through feelings of not being accepted. Some participants felt that they struggled to socialise due to embarrassment with respect to their immigration status. DL grants of 2.5 years were consistently considered by participants to convey the state’s perception of their credibility, or lack thereof, with the resultant feeling of not being

believed generating further instability. Lack of belief may thus undermine individuals' sense of ontological security.

Clinical and research implications

The findings from this study illuminate the profound impact of the asylum system on the mental health, developmental trajectories, and future planning of young people. Recognising the cumulative burden of both past trauma and present stressors within the post-migratory context is crucial. Our study underscores the need for professionals not only to address historical trauma but also recognise and engage with the ongoing challenges these young people face as they navigate the complexities of the asylum process. The challenge highlighted by our study is doing so in the context of increased status uncertainty – recognition of this fact is crucial.

Future research could explore the development of psychotherapeutic and educational interventions that are effective and sensitive to the needs of this unique population, given the legal limbo and ontological insecurity described in this study. Interventions must consider the impact of ontological insecurity and developmental stuckness and make developmental adaptations where appropriate. Clinicians should be consistent where they can be seen as a stable figure, promoting safety and reducing uncertainty. Recognising the impact of being in asylum limbo, clinicians are recommended to involve elements of advocacy, social, and community support when treatment planning to reduce feelings of isolation. Fostering a coherent sense of identity and recognising the pervasive impact of social exclusion and societal perceptions is crucial in supporting these young people's psychological resilience and developmental progress. Young people on arrival at UK borders need a careful assessment of their developmental needs and of their best interests to be carried out by trained and experienced social workers and/or clinicians, not Home Office staff.

Policy implications

The journeys through the asylum system for our participants, while striking in their length relative to the participants' young lives, are consistent with other accounts of asylum journeys in the UK, and indeed in Europe. What is notable from the stories is an apparent lack of consistency or clarity as to why certain young people were given short periods of discretionary leave instead of a longer grant. It is also notable that none of our participants' asylum journeys, at least thus far, has followed what is laid out in the 10 Year Pathway plan, in that none have been given ILR after ten years composed of successive 2.5-year grants. While it is possible that this sample of eight young people is not representative of the population of young people seeking asylum who arrived as UASC, it does suggest that the 10 Year Pathway is a concept that exists more in guidelines than in reality.

Grants of short periods of leave reduced participants' ability to imagine a future for themselves in the UK, impacting their ability to lead independent lives. Our results suggest that the ability to be able to work, while legally permitted on DL, is significantly reduced when granted a short period. This is consistent with prior findings that the increased length of asylum wait lowered the probability of being employed (Hainmueller et al., 2016). Our results suggest that the gaining of a brief temporary status, despite being a positive grant of leave, does not always represent a meaningful positive shift in the way young people perceive themselves in the asylum system, and frequently does not result in (either actual or perceived) commensurate personal developmental or psychological healing. We therefore suggest that, if the 10 Year Pathway is still to exist, extending the minimum grant period to at least five years would appear to increase the likelihood that the people who eventually exit the asylum system with permanent status are more psychologically secure and likely to thrive in the country that they see their future in, the UK.

Limitations

This study faces several limitations, primarily related to the unique backgrounds of the FUASC who participated. Due to their past experiences, many of these young people have developed a heightened sense of mistrust towards others, particularly unfamiliar individuals. It is understandable that they may have been hesitant to fully disclose their thoughts and emotions to researchers new to them during the data collection process. This reluctance may have influenced the depth of the information shared, limiting our understanding of their experiences within the asylum system.

PTSD often results in impairments in autobiographical memory (Graham et al., 2014). This can lead to fragmented and inconsistent memories, affecting the recall and coherence of the participants' narratives. Some of the interviews were conducted in English, while others were conducted in the participants' mother tongue with the assistance of interpreters. These factors may have limited the participants' ability to express themselves fully, thus influencing the level of detail provided, and indeed go some way to explaining certain inconsistencies seen between the participants' accounts of their timelines, and the data held by the Centre.

While the population size is equivalent to other studies of this kind, it is entirely composed of male participants. Finally, sampling was purposive, in that participants were identified by the Centre on the basis that the person would be able to partake in an interview. The prerequisites for this were largely based on being mentally and emotionally well enough to partake, and thus the experiences of those less well at the time the interviews were performed were not captured. It is not clear, however, that this represents a relevant, distinct cohort of FUASC, as some of the participants who were indeed included, likely would have been deemed not-well-enough at other points in time. Thus rather than being a distinct population uncaptured, it is

the perspectives of a distinct phase of life (that of transient unwellness) that were not captured.

Conclusion

Young migrants who arrived as UASC, having faced long journeys in their arriving to the UK, frequently go on to have very long journeys through the British asylum system, increasingly defined by short periods of discretionary leave. These grants, particularly those of 2.5 years, are perceived by migrants to limit personal growth and psychological healing, making them less able to thrive both during the grant but also after having received a more permanent status. An asylum system that seeks to allow for the development of young migrants, the majority of whom see their futures in the UK, would gain from granting longer periods of leave consistent with a sense of personal and future security.

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Ethical standards***Declaration of conflicts of interest***

Seb Casalotti has declared no conflicts of interest.

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Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee (University College London – Project ID number: 25939/001) and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Appendix A. Topic guide

The interview schedule included broad initial questions (e.g. first mapping the overall experience) and then prompts to explore in more depth what life was like before, during, and after receiving the limited leave

1. Can you give us a timeline of your time in the UK, and of how your status changed during that time?
2. How do you make sense of the period of time when you are given temporary leave?
3. Tell me how you felt when you received your first grant of leave.
4. What did you do to cope as you were waiting for a decision of indefinite leave?
5. What were the milestones where you felt safe/experienced difficulties in your legal proceedings?
6. Can you tell us about what you were and were not able to do as a result of your immigration status?
7. Tell us about your mental health.
8. Do you have plans/dreams for the future?
9. Have you spoken to other people/do you speak to other people about your immigration status?
10. What else would you like to tell us?