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Opportunities Without Borders: The Impact of Access to Remote Work for Refugees

World Bank Innovation Challenge for Jobs and Migration

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About Na’amal

We facilitate **sustainable livelihoods** for **refugees and under-resourced communities** through market relevant skilling, linkages to work, ecosystem strengthening, and research and advocacy.



Reach and Impact

1,500+

Trained

135

Directly Placed

(since launch of Na’amal Agency)

USD 800

Avg. Earning

(per project)

30+

Thought Leadership

(research, articles, reports, speaking engagements)



Na'amal's Theory of Change

Impact

Refugees and under-resourced communities secure sustainable digital livelihoods through meaningful work

Train

Work Readiness

- Digtial skills training
- Human/soft skills training
- Mentorship (1 on 1 & technical)

Place

Paid Digital Work

- Na’amal Agency: project-based work
- Platform Work: marketplace based gigs
- Direct Placement: formal employment

Strengthen

Knoweldge Transfer

- Research & thought leadership
- Policy & advocacy
- Ecosystem building

Enablers



Funding



Partnerships



Infrastructure



Research & Data

Intervention Overview

Component	Participants	Delivery Mode
Asynchronous Soft Skills Training	All 2,000 participants (Treatment & Control)	Blue Hope (Interactive, AI-powered platform) for Treatment; Qualtrics (Static) for Control
Intensive Freelance workshops	1,400 (Treatment group only)	Live virtual workshops and Pre/Post Work Assignments + Tutor Groups + Optional Office Hours
Structured Mentorship	400 (Subset of Treatment group)	One-on-one mentorship, biweekly for five months

The Promise, and Limits, of Remote Work

- Refugees face structural barriers to local labour markets
- Remote digital work is seen as a scalable alternative
- Participation in remote work (including on digital labour platforms) remains low, fragmented and unsustainable



Research Questions

1. **Employment outcomes:** To what extent can integrating refugees into the global remote workforce improve employment outcomes?

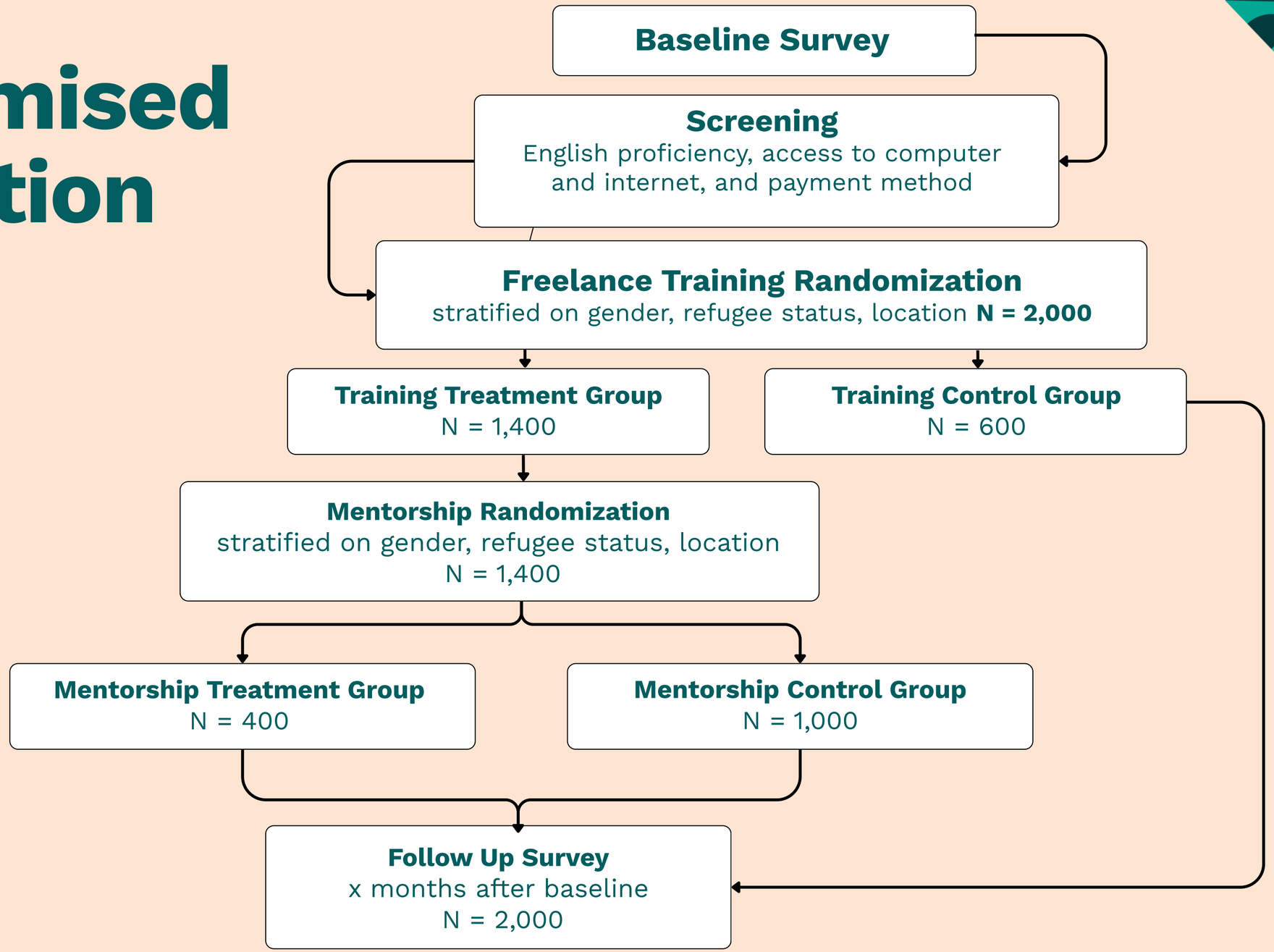
2. **Readiness and suitability:** To what extent do virtual training and mentorship improve participants' knowledge of remote work, readiness for independent freelancing, and the soft skills required to succeed in remote work environments?



RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE

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Randomised Evaluation



Data Sample

N	**2,000** participants
70%	in Kenya; **~90%** East Africa
42%	forcibly displaced
50%	in camps
41%	female participants
26	Mean age
51%	with higher education, but underemployed

Note: Only 16% had worked online, 45% in the month before at baseline

What We Measured: Outcomes and Data

1. Platform engagement	• Awareness • Profiles • Applications
2. Employment outcomes	• Participation • Hours worked • Earnings
3. Behavioural outcomes	• Confidence • Expectations • Persistence

Key takeaway: We tracked the full journey: readiness → work → income

RESULTS

Engagement with Training

51% Attended at least one session

25% Attended 4+ sessions

41% Completed assignments

Refugees were significantly more likely to engage in training than host community members, and participation was highest among refugees living in camps.

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Training improved readiness, but not outcomes

 **Platform readiness**	• Increased awareness of platforms • Increased profile creation • Increased understanding of freelancing
 **Employment outcomes**	• No increase in job applications • No increase in online work • No significant increase in earnings

Key takeaway: Participants became more prepared, but readiness did not translate into income

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Training improved readiness, but not outcomes

Outcome	Treatment	Control
Upwork profile	62%	48%
Applied to work	17%	15%
Employment	55%	56%
Income ($)	157	116

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What changed beyond skills

- **Earnings did not increase as expectated**
- **Confidence in applying did not improve as expected**
- **Decrease in persistent (grit)**

However, there was:

- **Shift toward local labour markets**
  - **Income from in-person work (~$40/month)**
- **Shift toward wage employment**
  - **Increased offline income**

Key takeaway: Training changed decision-making, not just skills

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What prevented market entry



Financial barriers

- Payment systems
- Banking access
- Cost of applying



Infrastructure barriers

- Devices
- Connectivity
- Electricity



Platform barriers

- Competition
- Reputation systems
- Platform rule changes

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Answer to Research Questions: What did we learn?

RQ1

Employment outcomes?

No measurable improvement

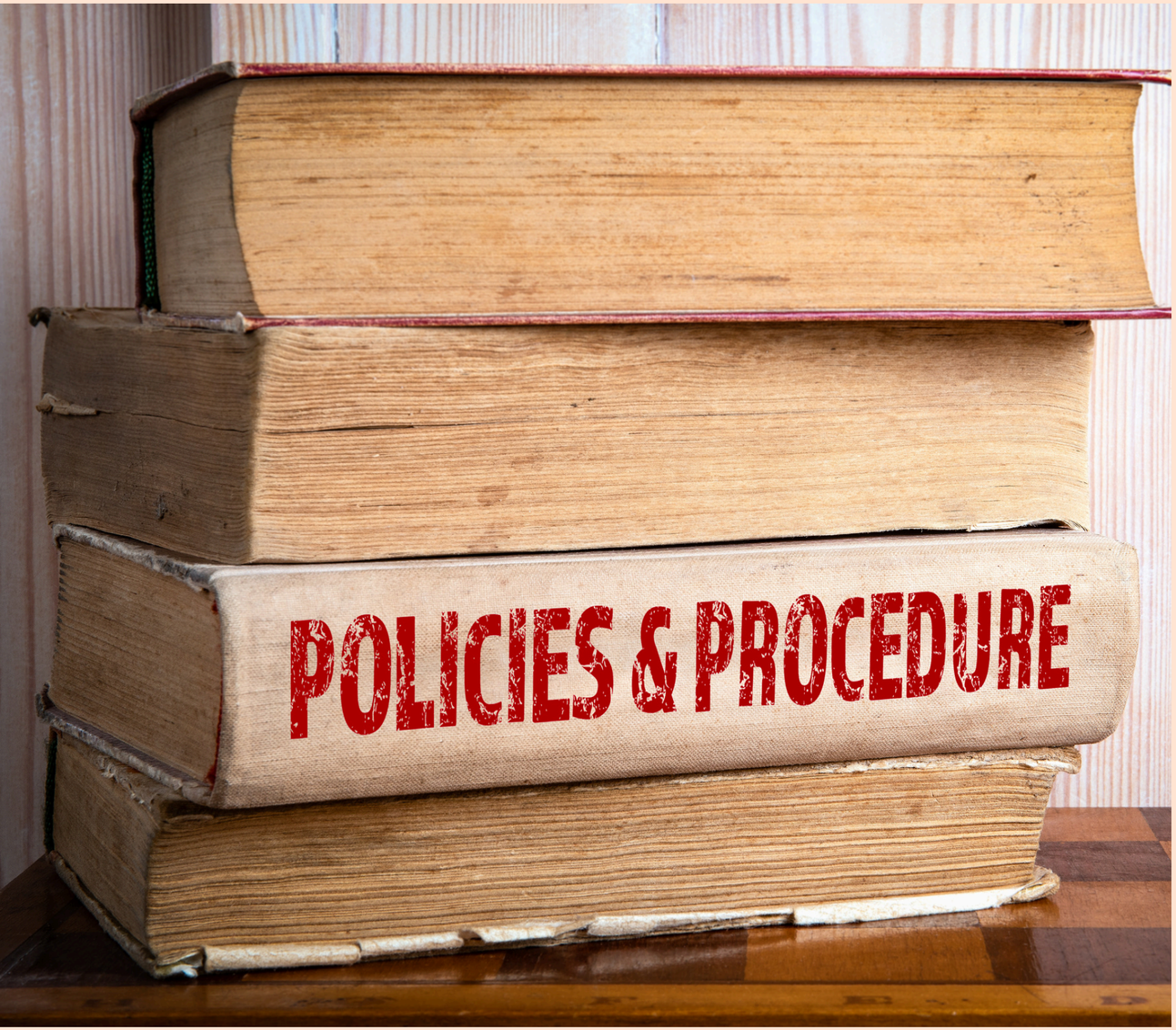
RQ2

Readiness & suitability?

Significant improvement

Final takeaway: Training improves readiness, but does not unlock employment on its own. The main constraint is not skills, it is conversion

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POLICY INSIGHTS

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Reframing the Problem

Digital remote work is not solely a skills problem; employment depends on:



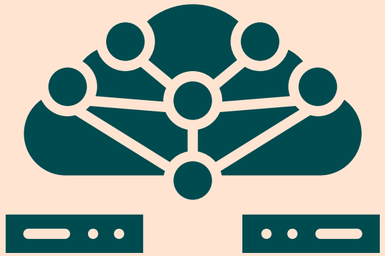
Skills
(technical AND soft skills)



Platforms



Payments



Infrasrtucture Support

Digital work operates as an ecosystem

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The Real Bottleneck and What This Means for Scale

The bottleneck is entry, not skills

Entry is the constraint

- First contract → builds reputation
- Without it → no progression

At scale, this becomes hard, as more support is needed

- Without this support:
  - Lower engagement
  - Greater variation in readiness



Key insight: Scaling access without solving entry reduces impact

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From Training to Systems Change

What is needed to unlock opportunity

Enable first-job pathways in programmes

- Work intermediation
- Employer engagement and partnerships
- Facilitated early work opportunities

Strengthen enabling conditions

- Infrastructure (devices, connectivity)
- Ongoing support
- Work pipelines
- Remove platform barriers to entry



Key insight: Impact depends on systems and intermediation, not standalone training

Final Takeaways

1

Skills alone do not appear to explain the challenges faced by refugees.

2

The missing piece is access to work

The key is intermediation- systems that connect talent to paid opportunities


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