



“I just want to study”: Access to Higher Education for Young Refugees and Asylum Seekers



About Refugee Support Network

We support young people affected by displacement and crisis to access and progress in education.

Over half the world's of out-of-school children live in countries affected by conflict - and for those who flee to the UK, getting a good education is still a battle. Our programmes prioritise helping these young people to achieve their educational potential.

We invest in education because we believe it creates hope for a future, both for the young people we work with in the UK and for those who remain in, or return to, regions of the world affected by displacement and crisis.

For more information about our work visit www.refugeesupportnetwork.org

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In 2010 Refugee Support Network began a pilot programme providing advice, support and individual case work for young people who had the academic potential to access higher education, but who were facing significant barriers due to their immigration status. In 2011 this pilot was extended into a three-year programme, funded by John Lyon's Charity.

This paper is based predominantly on the experiences of the young people we have worked with throughout the pilot and initial stages of the current programme. Some 152 young refugees, asylum seekers and victims of trafficking have so far benefited from this programme. Of these young people 39 have received specialist one-to-one support, and the report is informed by the experiences of this latter group. The findings from our casework are supplemented where appropriate by findings from relevant literature and research.

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List of Acronyms

DeIPHE	Development Partnerships in Higher Education (a UK DFID programme)
DFID	UK Department for International Development
DLR	Discretionary Leave to Remain
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HP	Humanitarian Protection
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ILR	Indefinite Leave to Remain
RSN	Refugee Support Network
UASC	Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child or Children
UKBA	United Kingdom Border Agency
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1. Introduction

In 2010, the UK received 1,717 independent asylum applications from unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)¹, as well as a further 3,167 applications from children as dependents (Home Office 2011). Unaccompanied refugee and asylum seeking children account for around 10% of all children in care in the UK (Brownlees and Finch 2010), with the majority coming from Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea or Somalia (Home Office 2011).

The frustrations which refugee and asylum seeking young people face as they try to create a future for themselves are complex. The barriers they encounter can be financial, practical or legal. Yet despite unfavourable circumstances, many of these young people are highly resilient and continue to hold strong aspirations for the future, particularly in terms of higher education and employment (Hopkins and Hill 2010).



¹The UK Border Agency defines an unaccompanied minor as a child who is applying for asylum in their own right and is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law has responsibility to do so (UKBA, 2011). The terms unaccompanied asylum seeking child and unaccompanied minor are used interchangeably in this report, and it should be assumed that where the term unaccompanied minor is used, an application for asylum has been made.

2. Why education? The value of higher education for refugee and asylum seeking young people

2.1 Educational aspirations

"Since childhood I never had the opportunity to be proud of myself. I never had the chance to see myself in a better and positive environment as an educated person would be. I always wanted to achieve something great and something that will benefit myself and the people around me, something achieved that no one can take it from me.

Education has always been the first and most important aspect of my life since I have had the chance"

Anna, 19, from West Africa

It is well documented that refugee and asylum seeking young people are committed to and prioritise education (Dryden-Peterson 2011, Gladwell 2011a, Save the Children UK 2009, Stevenson and Willot 2007). RSN has found that unaccompanied minors in particular often speak of education as the most positive thing in their lives, and are motivated to progress, primarily because it enables them to focus on the future rather than the past (Refugee Support Network 2010a, 2010b, 2011a). UNICEF research on the aspirations of young refugees and asylum seekers also revealed that their priorities were to be and stay in education, very often with the aim of reaching university (Brownlees and Finch 2010). In the same report, a Kent-based education advisor confirmed that the majority of children receiving support in the county who have reached university are (former) unaccompanied minors. These young people often excel, as they strive to make 'something' of themselves (Kohli 2002).

2.2 A psychosocial perspective

"If I go to college, my mind changes – I am active and I think about good things. If I am just walking in the street and can't finish my education my mind will just stay sad and thinking about all my worries."

Abdul, 18, from Afghanistan

Psychosocial perspectives on well-being of refugee and asylum seeking young people encourage a focus on education: having plans for education which move young people forward is of therapeutic value. Education provides a normalising routine which can help displaced young people to deal with the hardships endured both in their country of origin and en route to the UK. Educational

aspirations also allow young people to make sense of their new lives and help to justify the risk and sacrifice of leaving home. Many unaccompanied minors suffer from guilt at the fact that they now live in safety, whilst their families at home may still be at risk. Inability to contact families often exacerbates this anxiety. In this context, education acts as an investment and a reassurance that they are making good use of their safety and the better situation they now find themselves in (Kholi and Mather 2003). Young asylum seekers can experience periods of 'psychological hypothermia', being unable to look back and fully process their past, whilst not being able to plan for the future due to uncertainty around their immigration status (Papadopoulos 2002). During this difficult period, education brings daily structured activity and purpose to young peoples' lives, enabling them to get through years of uncertainty (Kohli and Mather 2003).

2.3 Education as part of a durable solution

"I want to study at university to become a mid-wife. I want to work in a hospital in England, but also one day I want to go back to my country and be a mid-wife there. Really, when it is safe for me I want to go back for sometime to the refugee camp where I lived for many years, because there they do not have any midwives. I want to help them to have better health there."

Amina, 20, Somalia

Whether unaccompanied or with families, young asylum seekers in the UK face uncertain futures. Some will gain a form of leave to remain in the UK, others will have their asylum claims rejected and 'disappear', whilst others will be returned to their country of origin after turning 18. Many unaccompanied minors who have their asylum claims rejected and who have turned 18 find themselves without suitable support, and the fear of being removed to their country of origin leads some to withdraw from all contact with authorities or support structures, existing informally, simply surviving and attempting to avoid detention and removal.

RSN has found that investing in young asylum seekers' education better equips them for the multiple possible futures they face. If they remain in the UK, the qualifications and skills gained at university will contribute to the UK workforce and economy. If they are returned to their countries of origin, higher education qualifications position them as potentially influential members of conflict-affected societies and poorer communities and contributors to post-conflict reconstruction. In fact, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) is investing considerably in higher education through its Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DePHE) programmes, operating in many of the countries of origin of refugee and asylum seeking young people,² in recognition of the vital role that higher education plays in development and reconstruction (DFID 2006). In this

² According to UKBA, the top five countries of origin of UASC arriving in the UK are Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Eritrea and Vietnam. All of these countries are included in DFID's DePHE Programme, in which it is investing £3 million a year.

context, the exclusion of so many asylum seeking young people from university in the UK, as detailed below, appears inconsistent (Refugee Support Network, forthcoming).



3. Left out: the common barriers

Despite both the desire and motivation of young asylum seekers and refugees to access higher education and the potential personal and societal benefits therein, they face multiple barriers to fulfilling this goal. This section outlines the practical obstacles to accessing and remaining in higher education that young refugees and asylum seekers encounter. Some of these barriers are well documented in research and literature; others have been identified through RSN's work supporting young people to access higher education.

3.1 Tuition fee status

"I arrived in the UK from Somalia when I was 13. I went to school and loved it. I studied really hard and did well in my A-Levels, but I had still not had an answer from the Home Office on my case, so I was classed as an international student. It was so hard to watch all of my friends that I'd studied with going to university and getting jobs, when I couldn't do either. When you look to the future you can't see anything ahead of you, even though you've worked so hard at school...what was it for if I can't go to university or get a job?"

Maryam, 20, from Somalia

Tuition fee status, namely whether a young person is classed as a home or overseas student, is one of the biggest factors influencing access to higher education (Coram Children's Legal Centre 2011). The policies affecting fee status

entitlements change frequently, and confusion over who is entitled to home fees is widespread in colleges and higher education institutions themselves.

Asylum seekers have traditionally been most negatively affected by tuition fee status regulations as they are classed as international students. Given that young asylum seekers do not have the right to work, the cost is more than prohibitive and is often identified as the prime barrier to accessing higher education by young asylum seekers themselves (Stevenson and Willot 2007). However, it is not only asylum seekers who are charged international fees. The changes outlined in the *Education (Student Fees, Awards and Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2011*, about which there was no government consultation or announcement, mean that, as of February 2011 young people with Discretionary Leave to Remain (DLR), who were previously considered home students, are also charged overseas fees. DLR is a temporary status that is normally awarded for three years, or until the recipient turns 17.5 years old, whichever is sooner. It is the most common status awarded to unaccompanied asylum seeking children, accounting for 56% of the initial decisions made on applicants under the age of 17 in 2009 (Refugee Council 2011), and 46% in 2010 (Home Office 2011). This recent change is even now preventing capable young people, who have often already overcome significant educational challenges, from realising their full potential.

Ling is 18 years old and from Vietnam. She was a separated child in the care of children's services and has been in the UK since she was a young teenager. Ling loves school, and has done exceptionally well: despite having English as her second language and facing many personal difficulties, she gained two As and a B in her A-Levels, and has won various awards. She is precisely the type of student universities welcome with open arms. Ling has an unconditional offer to study at university this year but she has Discretionary Leave to Remain and so is not entitled to home fees or student support. This means that Ling will not be able to go to university - a young person with no family in the UK simply cannot afford to pay international fees, or live without the help of student support.

3.2 Rising tuition fees

Young people with Refugee Status, and those with Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) or Humanitarian Protection (HP) status who have been ordinarily resident in the UK for three years are entitled to home tuition fees. However, even for those considered home students, the rise in tuition fees creates concerns. Recent changes in the university fees cap have led to some institutions tripling both their home and international fees. The maximum charge for undergraduate home fees for 2012-2013 now stands at £9,000 per year (DirectGov 2011) whilst international fees may rise to up to £18,000 per year (UKCISA, 2011).

This increase does not just affect those with Refugee Status, ILR and HP status. There are a limited number of opportunities for asylum seekers and those with DLR to attend certain universities at the home fee rate. However, being considered a home student will not enable asylum seekers or those with DLR to take advantage of those university places, due to their ineligibility for student finance.

"I know someone who got a place as a home student at university last year, because she applied to one of the universities that sometimes give asylum seekers home fees, and she is really intelligent so they gave her one of these places. All of our friends and families saved up money to pay the home fees – someone even ran a marathon race to raise money for her! She is doing really well now and I feel happy when I think about her. I used to think that this is what I could dream about happening to me – that if I worked really hard, maybe I would be given a place as a home student too. But now that the fees have gone up even this seems impossible. It's possible sometimes to raise £3,000, but £9,000 every year for three years – there is not even a chance of this."

Khadija, 17, from Somalia

3.3 Delayed eligibility for student support

Young people with Refugee Status, ILR or HP, are eligible for student support. However, those with ILR (but without Refugee Status) and HP must have been 'ordinarily resident'³ in the UK for at least three years prior to being able to access this support. This can be extremely frustrating for young people who are ready to attend university and yet have to wait up to three years before becoming eligible for student finance.

3.4 Immigration controls

In addition to being unable to draw certain specific benefits from educational funding and support directives, young refugees and asylum seekers are also subject to immigration controls. These controls tend to be restrictive in nature and create further barriers to accessing higher education. Young people with pending applications for asylum or extensions of leave, whether as unaccompanied minors or as dependants of another applicant, are often required to send various documents to the Home Office. Documents can be held for months at a time and are not returned upon request, leaving young people without the documentation required of them by higher education institutions or employers precisely at the time they wish to further their studies. Their opportunities to seek work may also be curtailed by these lugubrious procedures (Coram Children's Legal Centre, 2011).

Young people with Refugee Status may also be affected by immigration controls. In August 2005, the decision was taken to award Refugee Status for a period of five years only, after which time the refugee is eligible to apply for ILR, which they are not guaranteed to receive. This change has led to wider status uncertainty amongst refugees and has consequently made Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) less willing to take on young refugees who do not have a full three or four years of refugee status remaining (Stevenson and Willot 2007).

³ The UK Council for International Student Affairs (2011) defines 'ordinarily resident' as follows: "You are 'ordinarily resident' in the relevant area if you have habitually, normally and lawfully resided in that area from choice. Temporary absences from the residence area should be ignored."

Finally, many young people who are subject to immigration controls live with the possibility of their asylum claims being rejected, and their education therefore being disrupted through anxiety, detention or removal from the UK. Some young people respond to these threats by disappearing, choosing to live under the official radar, which can be very detrimental to their life chances.

Farhad is from Afghanistan and was 15 when he arrived in the UK as an unaccompanied minor. He was still waiting for his asylum claim to be resolved when he was offered a place studying International Relations at university. As an asylum seeker, Ali was charged international student fees and was not eligible for student support. However, a charitable trust awarded him a bursary to cover the cost of his fees. Ali loved studying, and became an active member of the student body, setting up a 'Poetry for Peace' society. At the beginning of his second year, Ali received a final negative decision from the Home Office, and knew that he was at high risk of being detained and returned to Afghanistan. Ali's dream was to complete his course, and use his qualifications and experience to contribute one day to building a better future for the next generation of young people in Afghanistan. Gradually, however, the fear of being returned became too much for Ali, and he disappeared. Before he disappeared Ali said, "if I just knew they would let me finish my course, I would feel better, and have some hope that things would eventually be OK. But they won't let me do this, they could return me next week if I don't run away."

3.5 Inadequate, inaccessible and inaccurate advice

In light of the complexities above, it is hardly surprising that young refugees and asylum seekers report struggles in accessing relevant educational advice, and are frequently given inaccurate or confused information when they do (Stevenson and Willot 2007, Refugee Support Network 2010b, 2011). Several young people RSN spoke to did not want to set themselves apart from their classmates at school by taking specialist advice, and others who did were often not given the specialist advice they required. This seems to be particularly common for unaccompanied minors, who have received inadequate or inaccurate information through social workers, peers, schools/colleges and even HEIs themselves (Hopkins and Hill 2010).

This problem has led to young people making ill-informed educational choices, often with adverse effects on their access to higher education (Stevenson and Willot 2007). RSN has worked with a number of young people who were given incorrect information about their entitlements, particularly with regards to student finance. In these situations, the young people enrolled at university, only to find out half way through the academic year that they were unable to obtain a student loan. They are now in debt to the universities and unable to continue studying until the large amount is fully paid off.

Ayesha arrived in the UK when she was only 16 years old. Despite her vulnerability and the uncertainties around her future in the UK, she excelled in her studies at her local Further Education college. She worked very hard, with a dream to study at university and eventually work in finance.

She was delighted to be accepted to study Economics at university and her college adviser assured her that she was eligible for student finance to cover her fees and student accommodation. Ayesha enrolled and began studying, unaware of any problems with student finance.

She was shocked to receive a court summons claiming that she was in debt to the university for both her fees for the year, as well as for student accommodation. Ayesha has now been out of university for a year and is repaying a small amount per month. She will not be able to resume her studies until the full amount has been paid. At her current rate of repayment, this will be in thirty years' time.

3.6 Lower-level English language ability

The admissions process may be further complicated for young refugees and asylum seekers who have a lower level of English language. Many young refugees and asylum seekers have qualifications obtained in their countries of origin that may be accepted for entry into UK universities. However, if their English language skills are lacking, they will need to put their university plans on hold to focus on improving their language skills. RSN has worked with young people in this position who believe that teachers are falsely equating their language ability with their general academic ability, and are therefore not informing them of appropriate progression routes. Others report that some English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, particularly those that provide only a couple of hours of classes per week, are too slow-paced for them to learn at the rate needed to prepare for university (Banks and MacDonald 2003).

Young people with slightly higher levels of English, who wish to use qualifications gained in their country of origin to access university, are generally required by UK universities to achieve a particular score in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test. There are several issues for young people in this position. The IELTS test itself costs a set price of £125 or £130 and the preparation classes can cost anywhere between £305 and £980, depending on how many classes one takes (IELTS 2011). This is a cost that the majority of young people in this situation are simply not able to incur. Many young people spend several years trying to pass this exam, and free preparation classes are not available.

"I don't know what to do now. In Iraq I was doing so well - I had plans and I was top of my class. I was going to start university this year, and I wanted to be a businessman. But also it is chaos in my city in Iraq, especially for people with my beliefs. My father was kidnapped and we had to run away. The most important things I brought with me are my certificates from my school – they are a really good level. The university here says they are OK, but also I need IELTS score of 6.5. I have been in Level 1 English for a year, and I am going crazy. I am trying to pay for IELTS classes in the evenings, but it is very hard. I feel like my future is disappearing from me."

Ishmael, 18, from Iraq



4. Positive steps taken

4.1 Scottish higher education funding

In 2007 the Scottish executive made a move towards greater educational inclusion. The decision to waive tuition fees for young asylum seekers who had been at school in Scotland for at least three years only affected approximately 18 young people that year, but was significant in removing funding barriers for those who had not been granted status (Kelbie 2007). Asylum seeking young people, providing they meet the residence requirement, can be treated as 'home' students in the admissions process and in Scotland this means the full payment of tuition fees by the government funding agency, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland. The small number of students benefiting from this policy is a reminder that other barriers to higher education for asylum seekers remain in Scotland. Nevertheless, as a spokesperson for Universities Scotland commented, the change has meant that "their access to higher education is no longer on a grace and favour basis" (Bule 2007). This is in contrast to government policy in England, Wales and Northern Ireland where asylum seekers and those with DLR can only be considered home students at the discretion of (and cost to) individual HEIs.

4.2 Universities' discretionary admissions policies

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland all asylum seeking young people who have yet to be given a status decision, and those with DLR, are classified as overseas students. HEIs remain free, however, to consider charging students 'home' fees even when they do not fall into the requisite categories (UKCISA 2011). Following Save the Children's Brighter Futures campaign,⁴ which was led by young asylum seekers and refugees, a number of English universities changed their admissions policies or pledged a small number of places for asylum seekers to pay 'home' tuition fees, or to have their fees waived entirely. As the Guardian reported, these universities have made "a bold move", and should be held up as examples of good practice (Hoare 2009). Article 26, a project of the Helena Kennedy Foundation, has continued the work of the Brighter Futures Campaign, working with universities nation-wide and supporting them to waive fees for a limited number of asylum seekers each year.

⁴ The principal campaign of the Manchester Brighter Futures group focused on improving access to further and higher education for young asylum seekers.

5. Recommendations

There are several concrete ways in which the government, universities and support agencies can reduce the barriers currently impeding young asylum seeker and refugee access to higher education.

The UK Government should:

Ensure home fees and student finance are available for young people with Discretionary Leave to Remain. Refugee Support Network, along with other members of the Refugee Children's Consortium (Refugee Children's Consortium 2011), is calling for an immediate reversal of the changes to the Regulations (*Education (Student Fees, Awards and Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2011*), so that young people with DLR can once again access home fees and student finance, at one of the most critical moments in their education progression.

Ensure that no asylum seeking young person wishing to study is excluded by insurmountable financial barriers. Legislation regarding fee status and eligibility for student finance should be amended to ensure that talented young asylum seekers are not prevented from continuing their education.

Ensure that immigration controls do not prevent young people from completing university courses. Young asylum seekers and those with temporary forms of leave to remain who do manage to access higher education, but receive a final negative decision on their claim for asylum part way through the course, should be entitled to complete their course of study in the UK.

Universities should:

Facilitate access to education through granting more fee waivers for asylum seeking young people. A greater number of HEIs should follow the example of the universities cited above by offering fee waivers and bursaries to enable young asylum seekers to realise their potential through education.

Schools, Further Education Colleges and refugee support organisations should:

Ensure accurate advice on Higher Education rights and entitlements is available to young asylum seekers and refugees. It is essential that tailored advice from sources that understand the education system and the complexities of the asylum system is available and accessible. Schools and FE colleges should work closely with specialist refugee support organisations to build capacity amongst student support workers and careers advisors.

Refugee Support Network's Higher Education programme works to help young refugees and asylum seekers progress to university.

We deliver participatory workshops for refugee and asylum seeking students in schools, colleges and other organisations, to enable them to better understand their entitlements regarding HE and help them plan for the next step in their education whether this involves preparation for university or otherwise.

We also offer individual support to young refugees and asylum seekers struggling to access HE. RSN works with students to navigate the complexities of their situation, liaising with universities, teachers, solicitors and social workers to help facilitate access to HE. If a young person is ultimately not able to access HE, RSN will work with them to ensure their potential is developed through alternative means.

We also run training sessions on access to HE for young refugees and asylum seekers for student support workers, careers advisors and other appropriate staff in schools and colleges.

For more information about any aspect of this programme please contact Sarah Lyall at slyall@refugeesupportnetwork.org or visit www.refugeesupportnetwork.org



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