'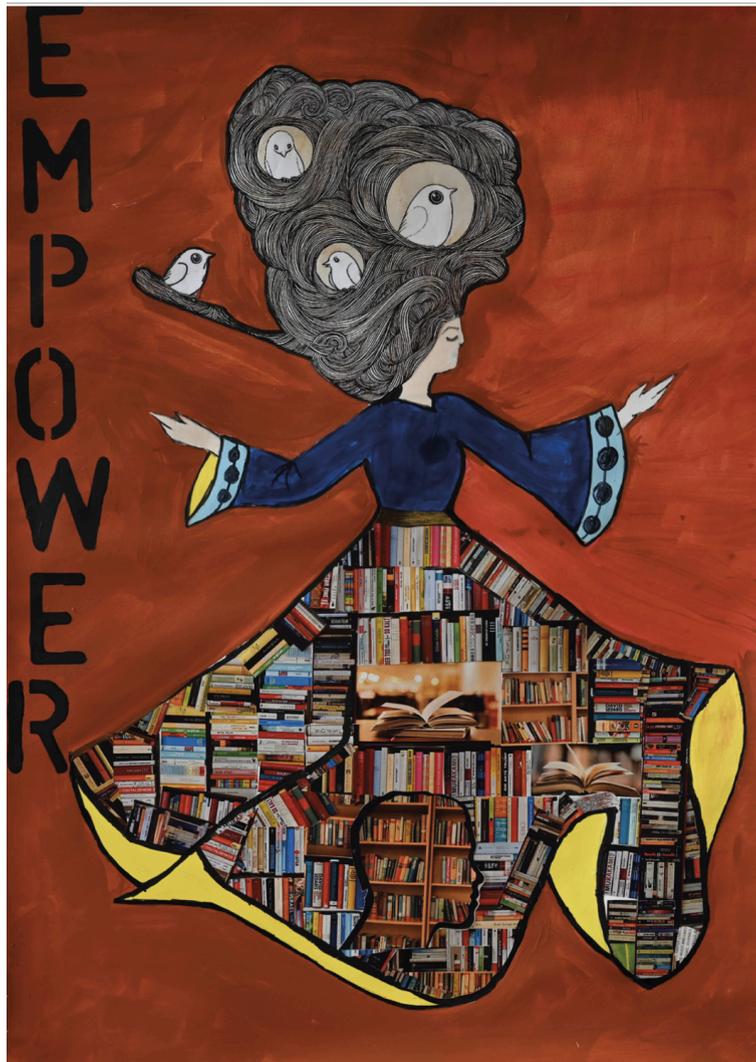It's not just opening the doors': The perspectives of refugees and those working with them in the south-west of the UK on refugees' higher education access

Full Report and Recommendations, February 2025

Bahara Parwani, Empowerment through education (University of East Anglia, 2024)

Mir Abdullah Miri, Holly Rooke and Corinne Squire

Contributing authors: Ruqaiyah Kaderbhai, Rose Kane-Smith, Evie Vaid, Elisha Vereb

University of
BRISTOL

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Acknowledgements

Report Summary

"I couldn't think of any other way of making the life that I have now in the UK than going to university" (Refugee-background participant).

Worldwide, only around 7% of people from refugee backgrounds attend university. Yet refugees gain financially, in career terms, psychologically and socially, from higher education (HE). Universities, and the countries where refugees settle, also benefit. Recognising these important benefits, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has set a target of 15% of refugees attending university by 2030.

Research shows that many constraints - legal, academic, linguistic, financial and psychosocial - limit refugees' HE access. However, other factors such as university scholarships and Widening Participation provision, help from Further Education (FE), local authorities (LAs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and refugees' own families and communities, support refugee HE access.

Research on refugees' HE access is relatively sparse. Often, it does not include people from all the relevant sectors. It may not look at related issues, such as refugees' perceived benefits from HE, and the challenges and possibilities of progression within HE. In the UK, such research has also not specifically addressed the south-west, a region with relatively low refugee numbers and high levels of provision which may offer useful insights for other regions. Nor has much research on refugees' HE access been conducted over the past few years, during which the UK's legal and political 'hostile environment' for all migrants has intensified, and the cost of living crisis has disproportionately impacted the many refugees living on low incomes.

In response, this study asked:
In the south-west of the UK, in the period 2022-2024, from the perspectives of refugees and those working with them in HE, FE, LAs and NGOs:
1. What are the benefits of HE for refugees?
2. What are the obstacles hindering refugees' HE access, and the resources that support such access – personally, socially, economically and institutionally?
3. What are the challenges and resources that impact refugees' HE progression?

4. What do responses to these questions tell us about larger constraints on and possibilities for refugees' HE access?

We consulted with relevant stakeholders and then conducted interviews addressing the above questions with 38 participants, 14 from refugee backgrounds, 13 from HE backgrounds, the rest from FE, NGOs and LAs. We analysed the transcripts according to the themes they displayed. Two-thirds of participants asked for and received report drafts for comment, and we received and integrated comments from six.

Our findings from this south-west based study are consistent with those from similar UK studies, which suggests common cross-national patterns despite variations in resources and refugee numbers. However, our findings also extend those from prior research, and suggest some new considerations around refugees' HE access.

On **UK HE benefits,** participants highlighted - as in earlier research - better job prospects; economic stability; enhanced skills and networks; strengthened social inclusion; improved wellbeing; and a strengthened sense of belonging. In this research they also suggested that HE's rich English-language experience improved refugees' social inclusion, and that UK HE qualifications increased their global mobility - including in the global south - and their ability to support family members, in the UK and elsewhere. In addition, participants framed UK HE's benefits as collective - related to family and community - as much as individual.

Again as in earlier research, participants underscored the major academic, linguistic, legal, economic, psychosocial and institutional **barriers to refugees' HE access,** some highly discriminatory. As well, participants described an increasingly hostile environment for refugees' HE access; increasing financial barriers affecting all refugees, not just asylum seekers; and inadequate HE information for refugees across all sectors. In addition, participants described many **existing and possible supports for refugees' HE access,** rooted in holistic, refugee-centred and socially just approaches across all sectors, including: help with applications, translation, childcare, and mental health; more scholarship support; increased Foundation and Access places; better financial support for all refugees within HE; a fairer, flexible approach to non-UK qualifications and English requirements; free academic English courses and tests; courses to bridge academic gaps and to provide broader academic experience; and free digital and academic skills training.

Participants' accounts of **institutional constraints on and support for refugees' HE access** also recapitulate findings from prior research about refugees, and resonate with studies about other low HE-access groups. However, distinct aspects once more emerged: institutions' incoherent, sometimes rigid and siloed, approaches; their inattention to refugees' specific needs; the role of resource shortages, not just in limiting HE access provision but in actively pushing refugees away from HE; and patterns of discriminatory institutional exclusion. Against these limits, participants described powerful counteracting instances of coordination, refugee-centredness, and openness, within and across institutions and sectors. These enabling factors could work even in the absence of adequate resourcing, though participants also highlighted the need for resource increases. Participants represented these possibilities as contributing to a more just, empowering and transformative approach to refugees' HE access.

On the linked topic of **factors affecting HE progression**, participants once more echoed prior findings, with some extensions and additions. They highlighted obstacles to claiming a refugee identity within HE, such as stigma and racism; refugees' unfamiliarity with UK HE; lack of networks in and outside HE to support progression and, later, employment; HE neglect of refugees' specific material and mental health needs; and, again, poor coordination across refugee-concerned teams and sectors. As more positive factors, participants valued consistent, holistic and community-integrated academic, psychosocial and material support from all sectors, during HE, and also post-HE in relation to employment and further study. Again, participants' breadth of focus suggests they were taking a wider 'social justice' rather than simply 'inclusive' approach to refugees' HE.

Some **limitations of the research** emerged from its structure. For instance, participants' emphases on the limits and possibilities of institutional support structures across sectors, and their awareness of the interlinked issues of HE benefits, access and progression, and of refugees' own individual and collective resource strengths, appeared more strongly than in earlier studies. These emphases may have derived from the study's attention to such issues in its cross-sector sampling, and its questions about interlinked moments within HE journeys, and about structural and refugee-centred factors. Participants' recognition of an increasingly hostile UK refugee environment, and of financial constraints operating in every aspect of their lives - but at the same time, of some highly-developed, and successful support towards HE operating within every sector, seems to express the particular UK economic and HE situation for refugees at the time of the research. The research was also

limited in its representation of different sectors, particularly FE and LAs, and of refugees themselves across the many stages in their journeys towards, through and after HE. As a snapshot of the HE access situation for refugees, it lacks insight into the processes through which that situation changes. Its regional base fails to address issues faced in less-resourced areas, where little research has been done. And despite cross-sectoral consultation and participants, it is, like most such studies, highly determined by the resources and conventions of HE-based research.

Future research with larger numbers of participants; in different regions, particularly those with sparse HE and refugee provision; involving longitudinal and case study work on refugees' difficulties with and progress towards, through and after HE; less university-based; and most importantly, adopting a fully participatory and co-researched approach, could widen our understanding of how to build refugees' HE access.

In conclusion, this study shows the value HE holds for people from refugee backgrounds, for universities, and for the UK; refugees' strong interests in HE; and the extensive academic and other skills and experience which refugees bring to HE. It also points up the limits that the UK's current 'hostile environment' sets on refugees' HE access. The challenges are significant. Comprehensive policy reform is needed to address the wasteful HE limbo into which asylum-seekers and many refugees fall, as well as the sense and the reality, for many refugees, that HE is not for them.

At the same time, the study evidences the possibilities and commitment that refugees interested in HE, as well as those supporting them in different sectors, can work with. The research suggests that through making changes in HE, FE, LA and NGO policy and practice, and mobilising the strengths of refugees and their networks, it is possible to build an expanded, holistic, refugee-centred and transformative approach to refugee HE access.

Summary of Recommendations

Generally, all sectors working to improve refugees' HE access need to:

- Work in a refugee-centred way, with refugees themselves central to creating, implementing, evaluating and deciding about HE access support at every level
- Recognise and mobilise refugees' own resources for HE access: their aspirations, motivations, prior achievements, experience, and networks
- Pay attention to refugees' specific HE access needs arising from their histories and present situations
- Engage with refugees' diversity, intersectionalities, and communities
- Consider HE access holistically, in relation to HE's benefits, refugees' HE progression, refugees' lives before and after HE, and all other aspects of refugees' lives
- Collaborate in providing HE access support in and across organisations and sectors so that organisations and sectors support each other
- Ensure continuity of HE access support within and across organisations and sectors
- Counteract the hostile environment around refugees' HE access through refugee-related practice and policy change
- Connect to broader educational and refugee work for transformation and social justice

Specifically, all sectors working to help refugees access HE need to:

- Provide easy-to-find and understand information on refugees' routes to HE
- Offer free, comprehensive HE access support to potential students across all refugee services, including outreach workshops; academic short courses; pre-sessional courses; mentoring academic English teaching and assessment; academic digital skills teaching, academic skills teaching, bridging subject teaching to meet HE prerequisites, and enriched subject teaching - e.g. creative writing, arts and science - which facilitate HE skills acquisition
- Provide a welcoming environment that includes social support, funded childcare, transport; study materials, digital support - including IT teaching, internet, devices and software; mental health support; and food
- Give appropriate weight to qualifications and English skills gained outside the UK
- Set appropriately tailored English language tests

- Devise alternative assessments of educational, professional and other achievements and experience
- Enable refugees to build up study and qualifications across institutions if they move
- Establish in every organisation a key person and/or structure coordinating refugee HE access work
- Establish, implement, evaluate and ensure accountability for a plan and timeline for HE access work
- Ensure the group's or institution's work on and commitment to refugee HE is publicly visible in - for instance - public meetings, official documents and websites, annual reports and funding applications
- Advocate for more support for refugees within and post-HE: academic, economic, employment-related and psychosocial
- Campaign for more and improved HE access for refugees, and HE and immigration policies to support such access: expanded fee waivers, scholarships, grants and explicitly Shariah-compliant loans; more maintenance grants and loans; and for asylum-seekers, free transport to colleges and libraries if not in walking distance; accommodation stability if in HE; immediate access to education and the right to work.

Alla Piaktova, Education means freedom (University of East Anglia, 2024)

Full Report

"I couldn't think of any other way of making the life that I have now in the UK than going to university" (Participant from refugee background*).*

1. Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there were 43.4 million refugees - defined by the United Nations (UN, 1951) as 'people living outside their countries because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted' - by the end of 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). UNHCR (2019) also estimates that only 7% of these refugees - twice as many men as women - are accessing higher education (HE), compared to non-refugees' access rate of about 37%.

Refugees' HE access is recognised by national and international bodies, policymakers, and professionals and practitioners working with refugees as crucial for refugees' progress and wellbeing, and for the economies and societies of the countries where they settle (e.g. Arar, 2021; Ramsay and Baker, 2019). UNHCR prioritises HE enough to have drawn up a '15 by 30' roadmap, which sets the goal of 15% of refugees accessing HE by 2030 (UNHCR, 2019). And people from forced migration backgrounds are themselves extremely motivated to enter HE, particularly when they settle in a new country (Arar, 2021; Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Ramsay and Baker, 2019).

In this UK-based report, we use the term 'refugee' mostly according to the above UN definition. However, the UK government distinguishes 'refugees' - those whom it recognises as meeting the UK definition - from 'asylum-seekers' - those who have applied for such government recognition. The distinction has implications for HE access, and so at times we will also use these terms. UK refugees and asylum-seekers alike have the right to HE, as guaranteed by the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2010). However this does not make HE easy to access or pursue, particularly for asylum-seekers, who cannot access student finance and who are therefore charged international student fees for HE. Numbers of refugees in UK HE are not fully recorded, but they are thought to be highly under-represented (Lambrechts, 2020; Office for Students, 2020; Stevenson and Baker, 2018). At the same time, refugees' and asylum-seekers' large numbers of applications to

relevant scholarship programmes and their high demand for university preparation courses in the UK, as in other countries, demonstrate their strong HE motivation (e.g. Arar, 2021; Rooke and Squire, 2023; Ruzzetta and Squire, 2024; Stevenson and Willott, 2007).
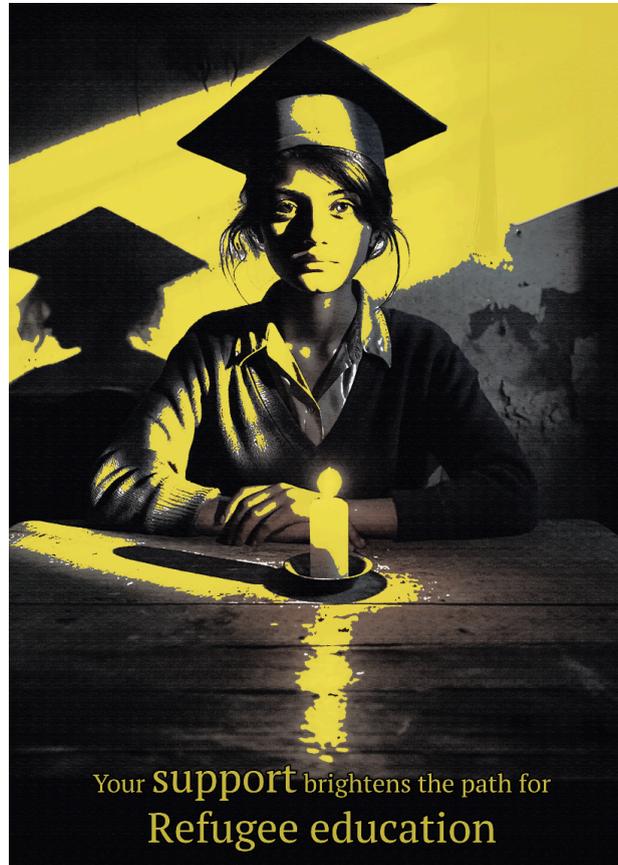
Reza, Your support brightens the path for refugee education (University of East Anglia, 2024)

Refugees' HE access is impacted by many factors: personal and structural constraints and possibilities in their own lives; limitations and capacities of universities' and Further Education (FE) colleges' preparation of refugees for HE; local authorities' (LAs'), charities' and non-governmental organisations' (NGOs') support for refugees' HE progression; national policies on refugees' HE access, and on related aspects of their lives such as education generally, employment, housing, transport and childcare (Arar, 2021; Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Ashlee et al., 2022; Murray and Gray, 2023; Ramsay and Baker, 2019). All these factors work together to constitute an HE environment for refugees that is restrictive in some respects, enabling in others (Miri, 2024; Murray and Grey, 2023).

In addition, while the primary focus in this report, as in UNHCR's roadmap, is on HE access, such access needs to occur alongside good HE progression, and a positive view of HE

generally. The first makes little sense without the other two. Access, progression and a positive assessment of HE's benefits are part of the same HE 'ecosystem'. There may be differences as well as similarities in what promotes or limits each of them, as well as interactions between them.

The HE situation for refugees is also not uniform across the UK. Numbers and resources vary across the country. South-west England and Wales - the areas from which this report's research participants come - have the lowest percentages of non-UK and non-EU-born migrants, including refugees, in their populations: 4% and 2% respectively (Kierans, 2022). As well, some areas - with both low and high numbers of refugees - have more extensive educational, local authority and third sector provision for refugees than others. South-west England and south Wales, for instance, contain large numbers of universities, with well-developed Sanctuary Scholarship schemes (Student Action for Refugees, 2024). Such regional variations may impact refugees' HE engagement.

The UK refugee environment varies over time, too, in ways that affect refugees' HE access. For example, asylum claims rose sharply during the period of our research, with 81,000 claims in 2022 and 67,000 in 2023 - up from around 30,000 annually pre-pandemic (Sturge, 2024). As scholarship numbers did not increase proportionally, this meant many more asylum-seekers were competing for the scholarships they needed to access HE. In addition, the uncertainty and difficulty of asylum-seekers' situation ramped up during the research period. Asylum-seekers housed in the often-constrained and problematic situation of hotels rose from 1,000 to 56,000, with others housed in still more restrictive barracks and barges (Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 2024). In 2022, government criminalised asylum-seekers who did not arrive through approved resettlement or reunion schemes, or who were not already in the country with a valid visa when they sought asylum (Nationality and Borders Act, 2022). In 2023, the Illegal Migration Act required the removal of those arriving irregularly. These changes, only partly reversed by 2024's new government, intensified the UK's 'hostile environment' for refugees and rendered their already-constrained or 'bordered' HE engagement more problematic (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021; Murray and Gray, 2023). At the same time, though, national and locally-based refugee campaign and support NGOs and informal groups have multiplied, particularly since the 2010s, and have strengthened in response to local challenges such as the Bibby Stockholm barge's 18-month housing of refugees on the Isle of Portland (e.g. Dorset Council, 2024; Calo et al., 2022; Gill et al., 2019; Mayblin and James, 2019). Moreover, public attitudes about at

least some refugees and migrants have moved, overall, in a positive direction (British Future, 2024; Richards et al., 2023).

People with recognised refugee status in the UK may also have encountered intensified financial pressures during the time of this study. Economic barriers are known to constrain refugees' HE access (Murray and Gray, 2023). Refugees have lower than average incomes, they experience disproportionate unemployment and employment and business barriers, and HE costs are a major concern for them (Department for Education, 2023; Salmon and Singleton, 2023). Our research started during COVID-19's aftermath and overlapped with the cost of living crisis. Such financial difficulties likely further restricted refugees' HE access.

Other shifts, such as UK government resettlement of Afghans post-August 2021, of 100,000 Hong Kong nationals, and its granting of three-year visas to Ukrainians from 2022, constituted new 'safe and legal' routes (UK Government, 2024) had more positive implications for refugee HE access during the time of this study.

The research on which we report here asked the following questions, in the context of the south-west of the UK, in the period from 2022-2024, and from the perspectives of refugees, as well as those working in HE, FE, LA and NGO sectors:
- What are the benefits of HE for refugees?
- What are the difficulties hindering refugees' HE access - and the resources that support such access - in refugees' own lives, and also in HE, FE, local authorities, and NGOs?
- What are the constraints and possibilities that affect refugees' HE progression, and how might these factors affect HE access?
- What do responses to these questions tell us about larger constraints impacting refugees' HE access, and about wider processes that can support such access?

We asked these questions from different standpoints. All three of us are working or have worked in UK universities in the south-west, and we all still work in the HE sector. Two of us - Mir Abdullahi Miri and Holly Rooke - have experienced UK universities only within the era when fees and maintenance must be paid for by loans and scholarships. This has also been the era of the government-sponsored 'hostile environment' for migrants (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). One of us - Corinne Squire - benefited from free tuition and maintenance grants in the 1970s and 1980s - at a time of widespread, often violent racism and xenophobia,

alongside growing resistance to them (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982). Mir has experience as a refugee, and has been actively supporting and advocating for fellow refugees in their educational transitions across various levels in the UK. Holly has worked with refugees as a housing and homelessness practitioner, and within a refugee-targeted university preparation programme. Corinne has worked with HE 'gateway' or 'bridging' programmes for refugees for the past nine years (Hall et al., 2019; Squire and Zaman, 2020). These varying standpoints helped shape the questions we asked and the research we conducted, as well as the conclusions we draw, and our recommendations here.

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2. Refugees and HE

In this section of the report, we explore in more detail what prior research has discovered about the difficulties and possibilities of HE access for refugees, particularly in the UK. We start by considering why UNHCR may have set such an ambitious HE target, and why refugees' own commitments to accessing HE are so strong.

Refugees' HE access brings many benefits. It provides refugees with higher income, improved career trajectories, stronger social inclusion, positive identities, and enhanced health and wellbeing. For women who are refugees, it correlates with later marriage and pregnancy. For universities, it opens up fresh avenues of knowledge production, and aids in addressing HE's issues of exclusion and disadvantage. However, research highlights that universities often fail to recognise and leverage the diverse cultural wealth refugees bring, such as familial and linguistic capital, which could significantly enhance cross-cultural competencies and campus diversity (Harvey and Mallman, 2019).

For settlement countries, refugees' HE access increases social inclusion and promotes equality (Arar, 2021; Baker et al., 2018; Giles and Miller, 2021; Gruttner et al., 2018; Halkic and Arnold, 2019; Miri, 2024; Morrice et al., 2020; Ramsay and Baker, 2019; Zlatkin-Troitschankskaia et al., 2018; USA for UNHCR, 2022). It also builds productivity and promotes high-skilled, high-waged knowledge economies (Al-Rousan et al., 2018; Baker et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2019).

These common findings are often non-UK-based, and recent economic challenges within the UK may have changed UK refugees' perspectives on HE. Consequently, our research aimed to explore UK contemporary perspectives - of refugees with current, past or planned UK HE experience, and also of those supporting their HE access - on HE's benefits.

What of refugees' HE access? In the UK, refugees have a right to such access, but this does not make it easy. Those whom the government classifies as asylum-seekers, claiming but not yet given UK-recognised 'refugee' status, are in an especially difficult position. UK universities treat them as international students, which means they are asked to pay international fees – usually double those of home students. Although such fees can be waived, this rarely happens, especially given UK universities' current difficult financial situation. Over 80 universities provide scholarships - most termed 'sanctuary' scholarships - which are open to asylum-seekers and often people from other refugee backgrounds, which waive fees, and which usually pay some maintenance costs (Student Action for Refugees, 2024). Universities may also provide help with applying for these scholarships. However, scholarships are few in number in each university, in relation to current numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees. Sanctuary schemes are sometimes poorly integrated into the university; maintenance provision is frequently inadequate (Murray and Grey, 2023).

Moreover, government does not support housing if asylum-seekers need to move to attend university. And unless asylum-seekers meet 'immigration salary list' requirements and have already been waiting more than a year for their claim to be settled, or have a visa allowing work carried over from before they claimed asylum, they cannot work part-time to support themselves while at university. In addition, they cannot access education for six months. Even then, FE college places for English and other study may be full, leaving NGO English classes as the sole available provision.

For those recognised as refugees, the HE access situation looks easier. They can apply for government loans to cover £9250 a year university undergraduate fees or graduate fees starting at about £6000. They may also apply for maintenance loans. Both types of loan must be repaid, with interest, over 30 years post-graduation, when the graduate is earning over a minimum amount.

Rana Haidari, Exploitation, education (University of East Anglia, 2024)

 Once in university, all students from refugee backgrounds can also make use of 'widening participation' provision such as bursaries, targeted at people from - for instance - socioeconomically disadvantaged, racially minoritised and care-experienced backgrounds, and at disabled and mature applicants, all of whom historically have had low HE access. Refugees often also belong to these groups.

Little HE provision outside of sanctuary scholarships is refugee-specific - but research indicates that refugees face many specific difficulties in accessing HE. For example, few refugees are familiar with universities' entrance or other procedures. Many need additional academic English skills in order to enter university; these are expensive to obtain and certificate. Prior academic qualifications may not exactly match UK requirements, or be verifiable, and again, can be expensive to translate and top up (Pastore et al., 2023). Refugees' educational experiences may have been disrupted, meaning high school-level qualifications must be obtained first. Moreover, while applying to HE, refugees must also establish themselves financially and become familiar with the new social and cultural environment of the UK. They may be living with uncertain, changing citizenship status and consequent precarity and shifts in living circumstances; poverty, alongside economic responsibilities in host and home countries; racism, ageism, gender and sexual discrimination; lack of social network support from families and communities; and low

self-belief, isolation, and other difficult mental health issues, arising from a history and a present of harassment, violence and dispossession (Arar, 2021; Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Ashlee et al., 2022; de Lange, 2019; Gruttner et al., 2018; Palanac et al., 2023; Ramsay and Baker, 2019).

Universities themselves may not understand or address all the difficulties refugees face, or the potential they bring. They do not always consider refugees as a group with specific equity issues (Ramsay and Baker, 2019). They can be cautious about admitting them because they fear that if refugees breach their conditions of stay in the UK in relation to education or otherwise, the university will lose government approval to admit the international students on whose fees it depends (Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020). Universities may not reach out to refugees specifically or provide adequate preparation (Strietweiser and Bruck, 2018). HE information 'for' refugees may be insufficient and not tailored to them, and application processes may be difficult, especially for those not born in the UK. Where universities specify, or set their own, English language tests which must be passed at a high level they often do not provide sufficient free training, or funding for test fees. Universities also lack flexibility about non-UK qualifications and how they are evidenced (Ashlee et al., 2022; Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Ramsay and Baker, 2019).

At FE level, colleges do not standardly provide sufficient academic English courses, Level 3 qualifications and careers advice for refugees to enable their HE access. College provision for refugees is often limited to English teaching; even for this, there are discouraging waiting lists and relatively few classes compared to other countries (Ashlee et al., 2022; Schroder et al., 2019). FE colleges may, additionally, be doubtful about asylum-seekers' right to study at HE level or take Access courses (Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020), and hence about their own responsibility to prepare them for such study.

Once in HE, too, refugees experience many constraints (Joyce et al., 2010; Lambrechts, 2020; Esenowo et al., 2019). They are often still negotiating their citizenship status and must at every step prove their right to - for instance - employment, housing, and healthcare. They regularly encounter racism and xenophobia. Generally they have limited financial resources, on which university itself, living costs, and providing support for family in the UK and elsewhere, make large demands (Ryan et al., 2024). Refugees' continuing psychological difficulties can also impact their HE progression (Ashlee et al., 2022; Sheath et al,. 2020; SSAHE, 2020). Universities vary in the amount of support provided even around sanctuary

scholarships; refugee-background students are not standardly identified, supported or even known about by universities (Murray and Grey, 2023). These in-HE constraints also impact how refugees think about accessing HE.

Prior research suggests many factors that support refugees' HE access, though they are unlikely to outweigh the evidenced disadvantaging reported above (e.g, Miri, 2024; Murray and Gray, 2023). Some sanctuary programmes provide effective outreach and help with applications. Universities may provide general refugee application support, refugee-targeted web pages and other information, and may make sustained efforts to be flexible about English and academic requirements. They may also offer foundation programmes; outreach, workshops and summer schools; lower 'contextual' and open admissions; and pre-sessional preparation programmes for students living with present and historical disadvantages, including refugees.

Once within a university, support with fees and maintenance through government loans, but also university grants, bursaries, and other provisions like paid internships, buddying and mentoring, are key for refugees' progress. Again, some of this support is available to 'widening participation' groups generally. Refugee-specific support is also valued, for instance sanctuary programmes with good levels of maintenance and other financing, and extensive academic and psychosocial support throughout the degree programme. Some universities have developed targeted provision for all students from refugee backgrounds. Some also provide support for refugees transitioning into post-HE training and employment - often particularly problematic for them (Yijala and Louma, 2019). However, such support appears to reach refugees at a lower level than other groups.

Generally, helpful HE access and progression support seems to take a welcoming, empathetic and strength-rather than deficit-based approach. It is holistic (Safi, 2022; Squire and Zaman, 2020), providing long-term and flexible academic, practical and socio-cultural support throughout refugees' complex HE journeys (Aldalis, 2024; Ashlee et al., 2022). It is integrated with wider community and NGO provision. It provides support of a personal, 'warm', mentoring kind, especially from peers. And it educates HE educators themselves (Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Baker et al., 2018; Gruttner et al., 2018; Lounasmaa et al., 2022; Ramsay and Baker, 2019).

FE support often seems dependent on individuals within the sector who have a strong interest in refugees' HE access. It can be substantial, especially where there are good links with local universities. Local authority support for resettled refugees' HE aspirations is frequently extensive in initial stages. Local and national NGOs, despite limited resources, make strong efforts to keep informed about university opportunities and build connections with universities (Ashlee et al., 2022). FE, LAs and NGOs all often provide very helpful HE information and referrals.

Most importantly, refugees draw on their own resources for accessing and progressing within HE. Such resources include personal strengths, developed within networks of family, community and larger socio-political support, and those networks themselves (Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Ashlee et al., 2022; Gruttner, 2019; Miri, 2024; Squire and Zaman, 2020).

This brief consideration of prior research raises broader theoretical issues around, firstly, the 'hostile environment', and, secondly, critical and transformative pedagogies.

High-income countries' increasingly severe policing of refugees' entry and rights manifested in the UK in the development, since 2012, of a 'hostile environment' policy. We mentioned earlier the recent legal intensifications of the UK hostile environment. More broadly, the 'hostile environment' has become normalised through technologies of 'everyday bordering' which have multiplied immigration checks, restrictions and sanctions around employment, housing, health, and education in every sector - including HE. Everyday bordering also involves racism and xenophobia which impacts not just refugees but all majority-world migrants and UK-born racialised minorities, including in universities (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018; Dear, 2018; Dona et al., 2025; Lounasmaa, 2020; Lounasmaa et al., 2022; Murray and Gray, 2023; Richardson et al., 2020; Vickers, 2021; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018; Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). Everyday bordering has had discriminatory effects on resources available for refugees and migrants, but also for first, second and third generation British citizens - for instance the Windrush generation and their children (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021) - again, including in universities (SSAHE, 2020; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). The policy works to shift resources away from these groups, often on lower incomes, towards UK-born white populations, often with higher incomes (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Jones et al., 2017; Shahjahan and Edwards, 2022; Vickers, 2021).

In our research, we tried throughout to bear in mind this broad picture of dispossession by the hostile environment, and its interactions with intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnic and racialised group, religion, socioeconomic and educational status, region, sexuality, and age (Arar, 2021; Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Ramsay and Baker 2019; Unangst and Crea, 2020). We also aimed to explore presently developing features of the 'hostile environment' in HE, including its fracturing and contradictions.

Secondly, in thinking about the resources that refugees and their allies bring to refugees' HE access, we considered the foundations and interrelations of those resources, and how they work against and alongside the hostile environment. Despite HE's post-1980s marketised or 'neoliberal' reframing, elements of the UK's post-1945 political commitment to HE's democratisation and expansion have been maintained and developed within universities (Edwards, 2020). This parallel perspective positions education as an interest and a necessity for refugees and others. It operates tangentially to mainstream models of universities as nodes of investment and profit, where students pursue linear paths towards educational 'success' (Baker and Irwin, 2019; Dona et al., 2025). We can see this alternative perspective operating in universities' widening participation, equality and diversity, and inclusion remits, in their sanctuary initiatives (Murray and Gray, 2023), and in their 'outreach' and 'community' programmes, as well as in less formal university-based initiatives and collaborations that focus on educational social justice. Similarly, FE, LA and NGO sectors find ways to support refugees into universities that value HE beyond the immediate economic payoffs foregrounded in much educational policy. And most importantly, many refugees themselves bring with them not only personal, family and community support for HE engagement, but historical and present campaigns in their home countries for rights and justice, including educational rights and equitable resources.

Together, these cross-sector resources constitute loose, sometimes contradictory but often effective formations of humanitarian, rights-based and more critical, social justice-oriented approaches (Hall et al., 2019) that support refugees' university access (Vickers, 2021). Our research therefore aimed to examine the resources deployed across the participant groups to support refugees' HE access, and to sustain and generate varying forms of HE engagement and 'progression'. We also aimed to explore the possibilities for extending and improving those resources.

Zaynab, Breaking barriers - the journey of women's education (University of East Anglia, 2024)

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3. Research Process

The research on which this report draws gained ethical approval from the University of Bristol and was funded by the university's Temple Quarter Engagement Fund. We started the study by consulting with students from refugee backgrounds and with HE, LA, FE and NGO colleagues in the Bristol area about the areas of difficulty and possibility that affect refugees' HE access and that should be addressed, as well as about the research process..

We consulted initially with refugees and refugee-background students, as well as with colleagues in HE and NGOs, about the potential value and nature of this research. We then recruited 38 research participants - mainly from Somerset, especially around Bristol and Bath, with some participants coming from Devon, Gloucester and south Wales. We recruited purposively, with some chain referral, through HE, FE, LA, and refugee networks, in order to understand perspectives across the sectors involved in supporting refugees towards HE. We represented refugee-background students especially strongly, with 14 participants who were, had been, or were planning to or thinking of accessing HE - seven of them women. Of those working with refugees on HE access, we included 13 participants from HE, 6 from FE, 1

from LAs and 4 from NGOs. We aimed for cross-gender and age representation among participants from each sector, particularly within the larger groups. At times, roles overlapped - for instance, NGO and university participants may previously have been refugees; HE participants may also have worked in FE. We report here the primary role from which the participant responded at the time of the study, except when a particular quote requires knowledge of a secondary role in order to be comprehensible. In providing participant quotes, we do not give participant information other than role, as it might be identifying, given the sample has relatively few participants in each role.

Participants first read through the research information and the consent form, and were encouraged to ask questions about them, before signing the consent form. All participants understood and spoke English at levels that easily met the English level of this material, which was also the English level needed to participate fully in the interview - approximately ESOL Level 2. We were prepared to provide additional plain English or Easy Read materials, or translations, but this proved unnecessary.

We conducted semi-structured, mostly online, individual interviews, which lasted a median time of around 45 minutes, at a time of participants' choice. Duration was also a participant choice - prior research information specified 20 minutes minimum. However, few participants engaged at this minimum duration; most took the opportunity to reflect on their knowledge and experience of the topic at length. We asked participants to tell us if they needed to break or stop, and to miss out any questions they did not want to answer. We were also prepared with referrals for any information or advice that participants might request. Refugee-background participants, most of whom were on low incomes, received an honorarium approximately equal to the payment for one hour of research assistance on contemporary University of Bristol pay scales. Other participants, who were interviewed in their employment role, were not renumerated. Approximately half the interviews were co-conducted between two researchers to check on consistency of interviewing.

Interview questions addressed: perceived reasons for refugees accessing HE; factors which hindered or promoted refugee students' university access; institutional factors which constrained or helped refugee students in accessing HE; and factors that affected refugees' progress through university. The order and type of question centred first on refugees' desires and experiences, moving later to issues raised by the institutions with which they interact and then to the broader HE context. Institutional considerations were thought likely

to raise more actionable issues but also to allow for a more analytic and political approach, while the initial questions foregrounded experiential knowledge. The interviews concluded with an open question inviting participants to raise other issues or say more about issues they had already addressed.

The thirty-eight interviewees participated in 33 interviews. Two interviews were in person, and two were group interviews, both for reasons of interviewee convenience. In what follows, we report on themes by describing them and citing the proportion of participants who expressed them. For group interviews, involving seven interviewees, the latter was sometimes not possible, since interviewees did not in all cases answer all the questions.

After cleaning and de-identifying the interview transcripts, we conducted a collaborative thematic analysis of them. Thematic analysis is an approach which looks for patterns of meaning in people's responses (Braun and Clarke, 2021). A theme may involve, for instance, factual representations of a participant's unsuccessful record in making university applications, but also the meanings of exclusion they may ascribe to this record. We report themes arising from the first five questions within the interviews, since these responses encompassed all the themes arising, including those related to the last, open question. While most participant responses to the five questions were specific to the question asked, sometimes the same themes appeared across various parts of the interview. Thus the pattern of themes reported is influenced by but does not exactly mirror the pattern of interview questions and responses. In most cases, themes occurred in interviews across all groups of participants, except where we have noted that they occurred predominantly with specific participant groups. Report drafts were shared with the two-thirds of participants who chose to receive them; we received and integrated feedback from one-sixth.

This research was not fully participatory or co-researched. However, throughout, we paid attention to established and more recent guidelines on and considerations of refugee-centred, refugee-informed and participatory research practice (e.g. Albtran et al., 2022; Hugman et al., 2011; Lounasmaa et al., 2020; Temple and Moran, 2006).

4. Findings

a. The benefits of HE

"People from refugee backgrounds can benefit from higher education like anybody else... everyone benefits from higher education in terms of social development and career-wise" (Refugee-background participant).

Participants' accounts of how people from refugee backgrounds benefit from higher education fell into to three main themes:
1) Career and economic benefits
2) Skill development and networking benefits
3) Social and well-being benefits

i. Career and economic benefits

"I'm sure that when I complete my degree, I can get a better job here" (HE-based participant with refugee background).

Three-quarters of participants identified improved career and income prospects as a major benefit of higher education. This benefit was primarily discussed in terms of: access to a greater range and higher standard of career options; increased choice over future career pathways; access to higher income brackets; and increased long-term employability prospects. These benefits were discussed across the different categories of participants.

Several participants saw university as the gateway to a new or already-begun career path, for example in finance, construction or teaching. Others conceptualised career benefits in more general terms, such as providing "better employment opportunities" (participant from refugee background), "opportunities to move into higher level skilled jobs" (FE-based participant), or being able to access the career that "best suits their needs and best suits their ambitions" (NGO-based participant). Several participants also highlighted that completing university was a way for people to restart the kinds of careers they had prior to being displaced: "It's about getting the type of jobs that they used to have, the quality of life that they used to have" (HE-based participant). One benefit specifically identified by participants from a refugee background was that the status of UK universities would allow

them to gain employment in other countries across the global north and global south if needed or desired. Finally, the potential for greater earnings was discussed in terms of the salary differences between individuals with and without an undergraduate degree, as well as financial security and - in one instance - the ability to support family members with remittances.

ii. Skills and networking benefits

"[T]he skills that they learned being in university, in terms of language skills, writing skills, professionalism, connections, some volunteer jobs, internships, graduate jobs…"
(HE-based participant).

The opportunity to develop skills and create professional and personal networks was also identified as a significant benefit of attending university, discussed in around a third of interviews. This was particularly highlighted by participants from the higher education sector.

Skills development was conceptualised both in terms of "practical skills" such as "navigating UK society… IT… how to articulate themselves better" (HE-based participant), as well as the more fuzzy "life skills" (HE-based participant). The opportunity to develop English language skills was mentioned, with one interviewee stating that "it helps with your language also" (participant from refugee background). Extracurricular activities were mentioned, too, by HE-based participants, for instance in sport or drama. Participants additionally saw university as a time when people could form career-relevant connections and networks, for example with the local community or through volunteering. They could, as well, prepare for the workforce, participants said, through university internship opportunities.

iii. Social and well-being benefits

"[On] a personal level, I think accessing higher education gives me a lot of self-confidence. And a real sense of belonging" (HE-based participant with a refugee background).
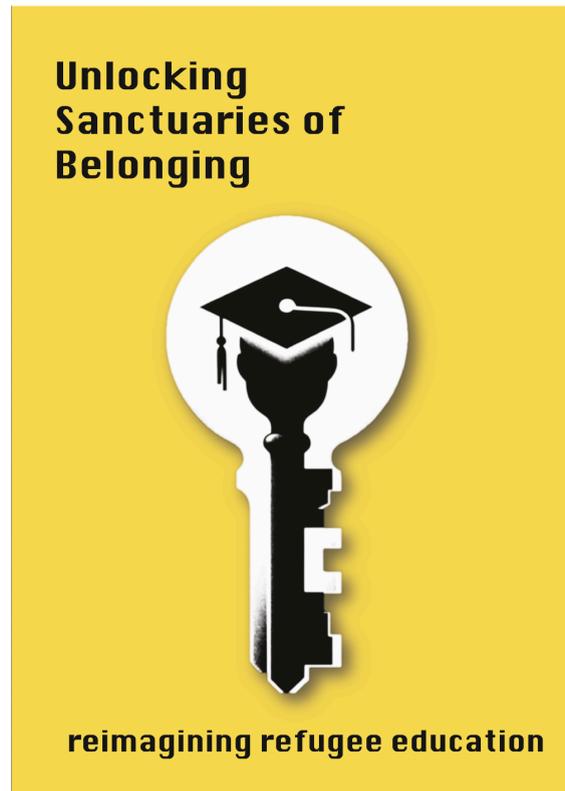
Mir Abdullah Miri, Reimagining refugee education (University of East Anglia, 2024)

Roughly three-quarters of interviewees identified social and well-being benefits as a significant advantage of HE.

The role of higher education in supporting integration was specified by a quarter of interviewees, both in terms of integrating into the specific university community and into wider society. This was also discussed in terms of a feeling of belonging, and having something to contribute to society: "It's about having a sense of their role in the country, this country that they're living in, feeling like they have something to contribute" (NGO-based participant). This feeling of integration, belonging, and purpose was contrasted by two participants with the boredom and isolation that is often seen as characteristic of the asylum process. In addition, university was viewed as a time to make social connections and friends, both with students with similar experiences/backgrounds, and with the student community more broadly.

A personal feeling of achievement and pride, as well as increased confidence was identified, as was the more external sense of a degree providing people with broadened acceptance and value. One participant from a refugee background discussed feeling more accepted in

society when you are educated, and a sense of having earned respect from others. Another interviewee spoke about this in terms of "the sense that you're a human, you know, you are a person, you can be part of the community" (HE-based participant).

b. Barriers to HE for people from refugee backgrounds

This section presents the themes coalescing from participants' accounts of the complex challenges that prevent refugees and asylum seekers from accessing higher education. The themes here tend to be refugee-focussed. In section d, below, we provide an account of more structural themes emerging from accounts of institutional barriers.

i. Asylum-seeker precarity

"Because of their precarious situation, they're just in a limbo" (NGO-based participant).

Half of the participants noted that asylum seekers face particularly significant barriers to UK HE, with their precarious legal status, and potential to be moved, fostering universities' and their own doubts about them entering HE. "There's nothing one can do about the asylum process", as one participant from an HE background said. Financial precarity was also said to limit asylum-seekers' ability to pursue education, particularly in the absence of student loans and shortage of scholarships. Asylum-seekers' social and psychological stresses further highlighted the need for comprehensive support beyond academia, some participants said.

ii. Unresolved immigration status

"People thinking about applying to university are always scared they could be deported any time" (Refugee-background participant).

One-third of participants emphasised the impact of all refugee statuses for forced migrants' HE access. They described the institutional, legal, and social hurdles associated with such statuses, as well as widespread "lack of confidence or lack of knowledge" (NGO-based participant) about rights to HE access among people working with refugees. Besides, the findings point to difficulties in refugees' lives caused by, for example, delays in receiving Biometric Residence Permit cards, and a constant fear of deportation, which create additional barriers to educational advancement.
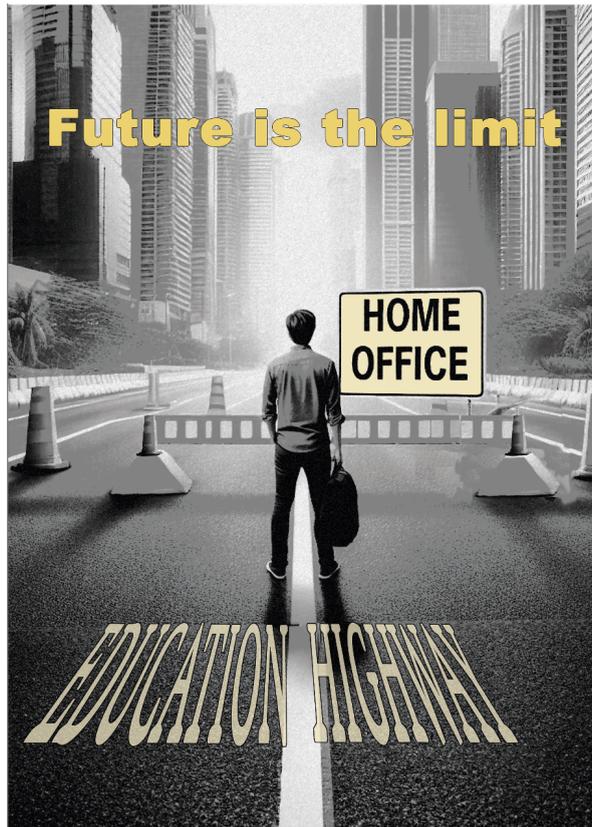
Abdullahi Abdi, Future is the limit (University of East Anglia, 2024)

iii. Difficult-to-meet English language requirements

"The major problem for some students currently is the IELTS requirement. Passing that test is extremely difficult for some refugees in the UK" (Refugee-background participant).

Almost all the participants stated that English language barriers significantly hinder refugees from accessing HE, even when they meet all other requirements. These language barriers include academic language skills; financial challenges of language training and tests, particularly IELTS; lack of training courses; and non-recognition of non-UK English qualifications. While some universities provide tailored English training and tests, their availability and accessibility were said to be limited.

iv. Social exclusion and the hostile environment

"There must be a political will to avoid using refugees as scapegoats for the UK's problems in the media, especially since data clearly shows that the UK receives fewer refugees compared to other countries" (HE-based participant).

Half of the participants suggested that HE barriers include social exclusion and a hostile environment caused by cultural barriers and wider societal issues. Consequences of such exclusion can involve racially motivated assaults on students. Universities themselves contribute to this hostile environment, with racial biases within universities affecting relationships among students, some participants said.

v. Problems with qualification transfer and experience recognition

"I find that their qualifications often aren't recognised here. Even when they reach out to me with their existing qualifications, they're usually highly overqualified. Unfortunately, the only way to align them with our entry requirements is to suggest they do an access course" (HE-based participant).

Many participants reported that translation and recognition of non-UK qualifications and experience present significant obstacles to HE access. The participant quoted above added that subject requirements in UK HE - for instance for particular topics at particular levels, in science subjects - may not match with refugees' subject background. Lack of routes to make up such specific requirements can lead to unnecessary wholesale requalification.

A refugee-background participant pointed out the difficulty of getting their extensive non-UK professional experience to 'count' for Masters access, even though the university cited experience as an important qualifying factor. Another refugee participant pointed out the disparity between the global recognition they anticipated and the rejection they faced in the UK, affecting both educational advancement and self-esteem.

vi. Psychological support needs

"Mental health [difficulty] at many different levels is a huge and growing issue" (HE-based participant).

Almost one-third of participants reported a critical need for psychological support for refugees trying to access HE. For instance, the story of a former child soldier told by one participant underlined the severe psychological impacts of refugees' prior experience, the necessity for refugee-specific mental health services, and the effects of deep-seated trauma

on educational as well as personal development. As well, participants noted the challenges of a new cultural and educational setting and the need for comprehensive psychosocial support.

Majd Adin, At sea (University of East Anglia, 2024)

vii. Unfamiliar education system

 "I knew nothing about applying or preparing my application. If there were more public awareness, I'm sure many people [refugees] would have access to the university" (Refugee-background participant).

Around half the participants emphasised challenges in negotiating the UK's complex and culturally different educational systems. One refugee-background participant mentioned difficulties with an unfamiliar HE application process that set up logistical and psychological barriers, increasing feelings of alienation. One HE-based participant criticised the lack of tailored information and guidance, pointing to the flawed assumption that all newcomers know and understand the system. More fundamentally, several participants from refugee backgrounds reported having no knowledge about application procedures.

viii. Digital resources and skills lack

"Without even a laptop, what do you do? Sometimes, you don't even have a phone to use the internet" (Refugee-background participant).

Participants, including one from a HE background and an NGO participant, mentioned challenges such as lack of digital equipment and unreliable internet access. The transition to online platforms for enrolment poses further obstacles for those lacking stable digital access or the skills to navigate these systems. A few participants reported a more general digital skills gap and/or an in-person preference among refugees seeking HE. As one refugee-background participant put it, "Online (preparation) classes don't work well for me most of the time because I prefer to listen in person and take notes".

ix. Economic limitations

"I didn't take the finance loan because, despite applying three or four times, it was not accepted, and I don't know why" (Refugee-background participant).

Participants highlighted an array of major financial challenges faced by refugees in accessing UK HE. Almost half the participants discussed limited scholarship availability as obstructing that access. They emphasised intense competition - with one HE participant reporting 30 applicants for a single scholarship - and as an NGO participant underscored, the challenge of finding adequately funded scholarships that cover maintenance.

Scholarships were mostly discussed in relation to asylum-seekers with no government financial support. As a refugee-background participant put it, "For asylum seekers, finance is the main barrier. Even if they meet the entry requirements, the financial aspect remains a significant hurdle". But even for those with refugee status, participants pointed out particular difficulties in accessing fee loans. And even when it was accessible, the loan system seemed to many unmanageably complicated and uncertain: "(Refugees') personal and familial situations are usually more complicated than those of domestic students; this makes them reluctant to engage with it (a fee loan)" (HE-based participant). Many participants highlighted wider financial challenges faced by all refugees.

Transportation costs, mentioned by several participants, often exceed any limited financial support available. A refugee-background participant and a higher education participant enumerated a range of financial difficulties, from housing to education funding, impacting refugees' ability to concentrate on studies. An NGO participant discussed refugees' severe financial constraints in affording basic needs like clothing and toiletries. Several participants mentioned childcare and broader familial financial responsibilities. The challenges of navigating financial support systems, such as Universal Credit, were also noted by an LA participant as complicating the balance between work and study.

c. Possibilities for enhancing refugees' HE access

This section presents participants' insights into strategies - those of refugees, their networks, educators, including in HE, and FE and LAs - to improve refugees' HE access. Again, the themes reported here are content-based, arising from participants' general accounts of factors supporting refugee HE access. More structural themes emerging from considerations of institutional factors are reported in section e.

i. Extended teaching support

"There is no formula saying that, 'Oh, we need six months for this or one year for that'. I think these programmes need to be there so that people can come, do whatever they need, and then leave whenever they feel confident to move on to the next step" (NGO-based participant).

Extended teaching support and information emerged as key facilitators for refugee HE access. Participants advocated for proactive engagement and adaptability. A refugee-background participant, also involved with teaching refugees, emphasised the need fully to provide for refugees' requirements, and for teachers to exceed conventional support expectations: "I really appealed to (funders) that, you know, I need this programme for my learners."

Regular team meetings were suggested by a HE and FE-based participant so that teachers can clarify doubts. The importance of integrating professionals' understandings across professional groups was noted by another HE-based participant. An NGO-based participant recommended multilingual guides and accessible support points for navigating educational

systems effectively. A HE participant with a refugee background stressed the long-term significance of sustained educational relationships in refugees' educational journeys.

ii. Friend and family support

"When you undertake study in higher education, a support network can be a very, very important factor in your success" (Refugee-background participant).

A refugee-background participant shared the significant role of financial assistance from relatives: "I took the money from my cousin... He's in a good financial position." Support extends beyond the financial. A participant from a refugee background mentioned her family's role in her educational aspirations. One participant from HE noted the encouragement some refugees had received from artist friends. More broadly, a refugee-background participant emphasised the power of word-of-mouth in the refugee community, with shared experiences impacting educational decisions. An HE-based participant, too, noted that they had observed the long-term planning and community support involved in refugees accessing higher education.

iii. Refugees' engagement

"These students show they are committed and take the programme very seriously, always attending class every week, [they are] not the kind who disappear or don't turn up" (Refugee-background participant).

Three-fifths of participants emphasised refugees' high commitment to accessing HE. An NGO and a HE-based participant described refugees' great desire to seize educational opportunities through hard work and proactive steps, such as seeking out exams to take and participating in social as well as institutional learning environments. Another HE-based participant saw refugees' approach as notably strategic, with a clear plan for the academic journey, from foundation courses to desired degrees discussed and supported, as we saw above, within families and communities. According to an HE participant, this dedication to HE, with its aspirations for societal integration and life improvement, shows a resilient stance against challenges. A refugee-background participant emphasised however that the success of such personal motivation and commitment to overcoming obstacles still also

requires sustained support from HE, FE and NGOs: "It's not just opening the doors, but saying, 'We are going to open that and we are going to help you to navigate this journey'".
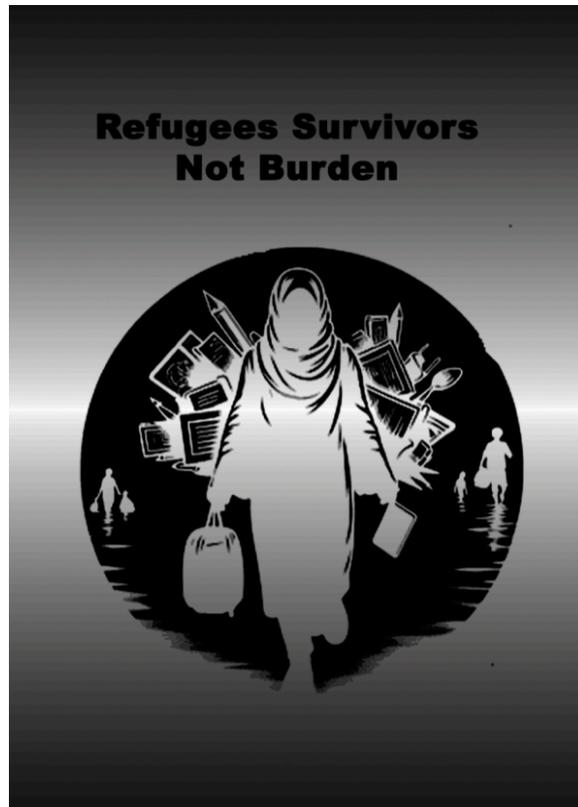
Ahmed, Refugees, survivors not burden (University of East Anglia, 2024)

iv. Language skills

"When you learn languages, it's like having a key to integrate with the society and people here." (Refugee-background participant).

Participants argued that language skills are crucial in facilitating refugees' access to higher education. Several, particularly those within HE, highlighted that institutions offering free IELTS or other pre-sessional English courses and/or exams were particularly helpful. A participant with FE and HE experience praised innovative online learning tools like 'News In Levels' for their effectiveness. A refugee-background participant emphasised charitable organisations providing academic English classes as a critical resource supporting students' aspirations to study at the university level. Finally, an HE participant highlighted the potential of multilingual skills among refugees, suggesting that emphasising these existing skills could enhance refugees' educational and social integration.

v. Foundation and access courses

"In terms of readiness or preparation, the foundation course has been the backbone—to set me up, to get me ready to be a university student. Otherwise, I wouldn't be coping in the first year" (Refugee-background participant).

Participants reported foundation and access courses as important for facilitating refugees' entry into higher education and equipping them with the required academic skills and English proficiency. HE-based participants noted that these courses are critical for helping refugees' academic integration. These courses smooth their transition, addressing the academic and social hurdles they will encounter in HE and fostering their later HE success.

vi. NGO support

"I think programmes like [NGO name] are better than university-run projects because they're specific and cost-effective for refugee learners" (Refugee-background participant).

The findings reveal the important role of NGOs in guiding refugees through university applications. Their detailed advice can lead to eventual acceptance after initial rejections, observed by a refugee-background participant, who also endorsed NGOs' long-term, "continuous support". An NGO participant noted how NGO mentorship schemes providing personalised support increased refugees' confidence and knowledge about HE applications. According to another NGO participant, NGOs' provision of educational opportunities and community connections which support refugees' integration into broader society, is also critical for refugees' success in higher education.

vii. Academic support

"I think there is a gap between where they [refugees] are and entry requirements for universities. And the best support is just to help them to bridge that gap basically" (Refugee-background participant).

Almost two-fifths of participants reported academic support initiatives were key to helping refugees bridge what they saw as the requirements gap to HE. For example, one HE

participant highlighted assistance with articulating qualifications and aspirations on personal statements. An NGO-based participant emphasised training volunteers to give better support, and holistically combining academic with creative and counselling programmes. One HE-based participant mentioned innovative approaches, such as using digital platforms for summarising readings to enhance language skills. Another, more conventionally, stressed tailored academic advice that facilitated entry into specific programmes. A third emphasised academic skills (e.g. essay writing) training, prior to HE access. Several refugee participants criticised the lack of differentiated criteria for refugees in the admissions process. Participants also highlighted the need for refugee-dedicated HE websites offering detailed information, and services that directed refugees to these resources. A refugee-background participant connected refugee-engaged teachers (see ci) with such support.

d. Institutional difficulties

"It's very hard to really pin down why people in universities appear to put up barriers to our students progressing" (FE-based participant).

In this section, we focus on themes of institutional barriers to refugee HE access in participants' accounts. These themes sometimes echo Section b themes, but take a more structural perspective.

The themes were:
- Institutional incoherence
- Lack of refugee-specific institutional practice
- Institutional resource shortages
- Institutional exclusions

i. Institutional incoherence

"Refugee students don't fit a UK traditional definition of widening access, they don't really meet an international definition as well, that's why I think it's definitely a bit of a gap" (HE-based participant).

Around half the participants mentioned institutional incoherence as impeding refugees' HE access. Universities' information and communication were described as complicated and

unclear, with feedback on enquiries often absent or cursory. HE-related provision in FE was similarly difficult and confusing - for instance Access courses requiring prior GCSEs, and Functional Skills courses as GCSE English alternatives - Participants described low integration between 'siloed' HE, FE and NGO sectors. Many said no sector provided clear refugee HE pathway guidance. Refugee-background participants said NGOs and local councils rarely mentioned HE. NGO-based participants themselves said they needed more university input.

Participants also frequently mentioned institutional inconsistencies and omissions. FE did not teach study skills alongside ESOL; FE 'careers' advice directed ESOL students only towards employment. Within HE, participants identified disjunctions between Widening Participation, international student, and admissions teams, as described by the HE-based participant quoted above. Universities were said to be largely unconcerned with the details of how other universities deal with refugees, with information not shared. And across FE and HE, decisions about refugees' HE access often seemed to devolve to particular experts by experience.

A key inconsistency, as reported in Section bv. above, was qualification equivalence. Participants said they were unclear whether FE and HE course prerequisites were shared nationally and what admissions latitude there was. Tools to determine qualifications' equivalence were expensive and sometimes seemed inadequate. FE's specifications of English requirements for HE frequently seemed inconsistent, and provision sparse, generating unnecessary years of study: "Seven years on just English courses", a refugee-background participant reported (see biii).

ii. Lack of refugee-specific institutional practice

"How do we ensure that all our services that students might come into contact with are able to deal with the diversity of students and diversity of issues that they might be presented with?" (HE-based participant).

Two-thirds of participants mentioned that UK HE did not consider refugees' specific educational situations. They noted that refugees may previously have used in-person and print rather than digital resources for HE information and applications, may be unfamiliar with UK personal statements, may have pursued educational pathways not aligned with those in the UK, and are heterogeneous in their economic, immigration and educational

situations. In the UK, too, refugees will have had varying educational experiences depending on finances, immigration status, and time in the UK, amongst other factors.

A concrete expression of inattention to refugees' specific situations lay in HE requirements for qualifications' documentation. As one refugee-background participant put it, "When you are running away from persecution, there is no way you are going to be carrying documentation…. In most cases, these things are not considered".

Many participants also remarked on HE administrators erroneously classing refugees with international passports as international students, leading to significant confusion around fees and funding. And participants thought that HE outreach rarely specifically addressed refugees, let alone the intersectional diversity among them.

Participants also noted that FE may not consider refugees' specific educational histories. One refugee-background participant reported that FE careers services did not explain to their child that they needed maths to study physics, thinking the child would know this.

iii. Institutional resource shortages

"The UK has gone through 20 years of defunding for all kinds of community-based initiatives for social welfare, for anything really that can make people's lives easier and more liveable" (HE-based participant).

One-third of participants described institutional resource difficulties that hindered refugees' HE inclusion. NGO-based participants said addressing increased destitution meant they lacked time and funding to explore HE pathways with refugees. FE-based participants foregrounded ESOL waiting lists, for which colleges' overspend allowances were insufficient, and limited academic English and IELTS teaching. FE-based participants characterised FE's insufficient HE advice and pathways as resource-determined; one said, "HE is not what our funding is based on. It is getting people into work basically".

FE-based participants also described how the financial liability - since funding depends on course completion - of working with refugees who the Home Office frequently moves, works against recognising refugees' achievements, and frustrates their own desire to promote refugees' development towards HEs. FE- and HE-based participants described resource

deficits as inhibiting their statutory integration work even at the level of identifying 'refugees' who might not so define themselves. Yet not doing so meant not being able to evidence the resources needed.

Participants described a lack of resources within HE, too, to address refugees' academic English training and testing, and qualification equivalence. They noted resource restrictions on sanctuary scholarships - which are a "drop in the ocean" (HE-based participant) - and on support beyond fee waivers. And they noted how competing criteria around need, merit and prior record, assailed scholarship allocations.

Participants also emphasised UK HE's broader resource demands on refugees: high fees compared to most other countries; loan funding, entailing long-term debt with variable and sometimes religiously problematic interest; and high study and living costs, set against refugees' often limited earning potential, lack of UK support networks, and family financial commitments in the UK and home countries.

iv. Institutional exclusion

"And then the length of time it takes to be able to access the opportunities in the college. Like you said, you have to be on the waiting list for a long, long time" (Refugee-background participants, group interview).

UK HE exclusion starts, as the participants above indicate, with restricted HE opportunities. Participants described FE's 'jobs' focus as exclusionary. Around one-third also suggested that HE's lack of openness to refugees amounts to exclusion. Such exclusions often seemed their own rationale, with multiple, apparently illogical, unexplained entry requirements, and application refusals not or cursorily justified. Participants thought unexplained refusals could have long-lasting effects, discouraging applicants – and those who know them - from trying in future. Refugee-background participants saw non-response as itself an exclusionary strategy. One described how, "When I told [my daughter] I sent an email [about the participant being refused admission] to the university and they don't reply, she told me, 'Mama, they don't reply'. They don't reply even for her".

Several participants also described institutional racism driving exclusion. Qualifications of majority-world students, they said, were downgraded, irrespective of specific national

education systems, institutions, subjects, and individual achievement. An HE-based participant described structural bias operating even within HE inclusion programmes: "[university] people are suspicious of who these refugee students are".

Angel N, Mir Abdullah Miri, Olga, Sayed Sajjad, Sam Pordale, Yulia,
Floating university (University of East Anglia, 2024)

e. Institutional possibilities

"When I came here [NGO], it was really like a home for me, and a big school. There are groups of people, they are helping you: 'What do you want to be?' or, 'What's your goal?' or, 'What's your dream?' That's very nice" (Refugee-background participant).

This section addresses themes of institutional possibilities for refugee HE access, sometimes echoing Section c themes but taking a more structural perspective, and mirroring Section d:

- Institutional coherence

- Refugee-centredness
- Institutional resource requirements
- Institutional openness

i. Institutional coherence

Two-thirds of participants emphasized that institutional coherence could support refugees' HE access. Participants wanted universities to communicate better with refugees, provide more sanctuary scholarship events, events for refugees generally, finance workshops and Open Days, and inform them about HE generally, not just their own programmes. An HE-based participant said universities should be more "visible in the community" – visiting schools, local councils, NGOs, libraries, faith groups and refugee hotels. Such visits could inform those organisations' staff as well as refugees, amplifying information spread. Colleges and universities should also, participants said, convey HE information to all refugees, not just Access course students. Better communication between teams with responsibilities to refugee students – HE's Admissions and Widening Participation, FE's Careers and ESOL – could help.

Participants wanted holistic, integrated services, as demonstrated in provision for Ukrainian refugees. University refugee teams should, they said, advise refugees throughout the application process; learn from Widening Participation and inclusion processes; work across universities; and work more with colleges and local councils. They should expand refugees' access to, for instance, their libraries and sports facilities. Colleges and universities could offer more joint programmes and NGOs could collaborate more with universities on HE access: "If the information could be part of the NGO welcoming package, I think that would be helpful" (Refugee-background participant).

ii. Refugee-centredness

"We have the careers element, we have a well-being element, but we also have [a programme] that's about being part of the learning community but also understanding more about the wider community" (FE-based participant).

Two-thirds of participants suggested more refugee-centred strategies could promote HE access. Across HE and FE, proposals included websites in appropriate languages; interpreters

and people from refugee backgrounds at Open Days; refugee-specific websites; childcare and child-friendliness at events promoting access; refugee-accessible internet platforms; refugee-knowledgeable careers teams; and refugees representing refugees in all decision-making. Participants wanted refugee-centred, "wraparound" - as one HE-based participant put it - learning communities, encompassing wellbeing; approaches that are aware of trauma and other forms of distress, and that are generally emotionally sensitive; practical advice; and links with refugee alumnae/I, other students from marginalised and international backgrounds and local communities. An FE-based participant who promoted student-community links said, "It has been really nice for refugee students to feel part of something but also to be able to engage with the community".

Many participants emphasized the "massive value" for displaced people, as an HE-based participant put it, of ongoing support, especially from people with similar backgrounds, and involving paid workers as well as volunteers: "Mentoring and tutoring can be really helpful. People really can treat those as a lifeline" (HE-based participant).

Proposals also drew on services developed for other marginalised groups, for instance RARPA, the Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement scheme which registers progress and attainment outside formal qualifications, and virtual schools, helpful for students on the move; vulnerable and mature student support; and part-time and Access programmes. In FE, individual learning plans – crucibles for progression which recognize students' specific educational and employment experiences; are holistic; allow for follow-up especially if students become disengaged; and mean "not being passed around to different points", as an HE-based participant put it - were valued. Such plans help people balance aspirations with the realities of language level, and with the time and expense involved in obtaining HE prerequisites and qualifications.

Participants suggested refugee-centred HE approaches should include better awareness of other countries' different educational and grading systems; opportunities to make up UK prerequisites; refugee-specific preparation and refugee-aware Foundation programmes; refugee-specific communications – including about pathways to HE - from WP and other teams; and short courses in refugee-friendly spaces like NGOs, libraries, hotels, mosques and churches.

Addressing the current 'access' block around English prerequisites, interviewees also proposed using cheaper and less culture-specific tests, and providing more free training and university and programme-specific tests.

iii. Institutional resource requirements

"If there are 10 things to achieve and they [refugee students] achieve six with us, we have got 60% of the funding and the new college should get 40% of the funding because they are going be the final 40%" (FE-based participant).

A quarter of participants suggested that refugees' HE access required increased resources, independently of enhancing institutional coherence and refugees-centredness (such increases were implied in other interviews too). Participants said for instance that college funding should take account of refugees' mobility, which currently generates losses. Other resource requirements mentioned were funded HE outreach and preparation programmes; increased government loans and scholarships, particularly sanctuary scholarships; expanded FE budgets based on demonstrated need; refugee-dedicated well-being support; and more general support from sanctuary universities, including greater financial and housing aid.

Participants also suggested support was needed for more NGO, FE and HE programmes providing HE information and preparing refugees for HE; for digital learning to help dispersed or travel-restricted refugees and upskill those who have learned in other ways; and to direct FE, LA and government policy and practice towards refugee HE, not just employment.

iv. Institutional openness

"When [refugees] are doing ESOL, are you giving them options? Are you telling them it's possible? Are you going out of the way to give them the university experience?" (Refugee-background participant).

Around two-thirds of participants suggested more radical openings-up of HE. For example, participants said programmes should be flexible if English competence was demonstrated outside of recognised tests. They proposed learning from other countries' dedication to overcoming refugees' language barriers, citing Germany as an example: "For the first six

months when they are still asylum seekers, the government is trying their best to provide German language services to push those who are willing to study"(Refugee-background participant).
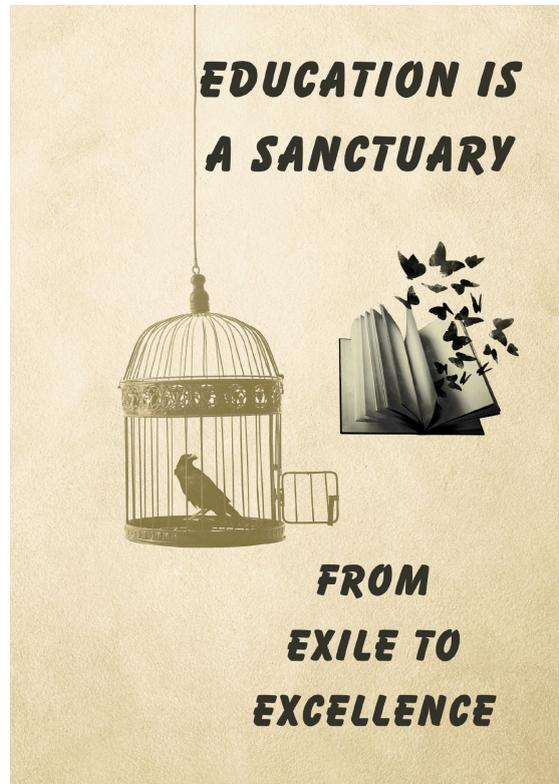
Nicosall, Education is a sanctuary (University of East Anglia, 2024)

Participants proposed an HE strategy of refugee allyship which would allow "reasonable adjustments" as one HE-based participant put it - as happened for Ukrainians and as happens for other groups statutorily protected. Suggested adjustments included: being flexible about entry requirements, as happens with contextual offers; coming off what an HE-based participant called the "gold standard" of GCSEs and A levels; finding new ways to validate non-UK qualifications; negotiating refugees' entry criteria with programme leaders; setting programme-based English tests; interviewing, rather than simply refusing applications; taking into account study and employment experience; expanding degree apprenticeships; and removing unmeetable, sometimes endangering, reference requirements. Refugee HE allyship means universities making "brave" decisions and working together to avoid feeling "exposed", as FE- and HE-based participants, respectively, put it. Interviewees emphasised the importance of always keeping HE in sight in FE and NGOs, and the imperative to extend 'university of sanctuary' programmes by working more with

community organisations. At the same time, participants emphasised, it is crucial to value all achievements, rather than prioritising university: *"Could we just focus on progression generally, not just this kind of success?"* (FE-based participant).

f. Progress in HE: insufficiencies and support

Refugees' university experience involves not just gaining access, but having positive academic and psychosocial experiences. As well, those experiences affect if and how others in refugee students' networks approach HE. Accounts of this issue generated three themes:

1. Universities' refugee-specific progress insufficiencies and support
2. Universities' general progress insufficiencies and support for refugees
3. Non-university HE progress insufficiencies and support for refugees

i. Universities' refugee-specific progress insufficiencies and support

"A student could be given ongoing support, making sure that we check on them, to find out their progress, how they're doing" (HE-based participant).

As with refugees pursuing HE access, current refugee students may, participants said, not declare their status – wanting just to be students, or because of stigma and racism. They may not know about services; asking for help can feel like "annoying the lecturer or… those students around me" (Refugee- background participant). Yet many refugee-background students are on a "steep learning curve" (HE-based participant) about, simultaneously, universities, English, the UK, and the aftermaths of forced displacement.

Over three-quarters of participants said refugee-background students required specific, ongoing support - especially dedicated staff tutors. A contact point, "the master of knowing…what resources are available" (refugee-background participant) is useful for students - and staff. Peer mentoring, STAR, student unions and other societies, and well-informed lecturers, administrators and students can all help. Participants particularly valued help from, and community among, other refugee-background students.

Support must, participants said, address academic issues: different teaching styles; online learning; new assignment types. Administrative help, from enabling part-time or foundation study if appropriate, to facilitating library registration, is important. So is holistic attention to,

for example, housing - given refugees' lack of networks and frequent homelessness experiences; transport; and child-friendliness. "Bringing employers into the learning community" and promoting volunteer and placement opportunities builds refugee-background students' connections and "helps them understand how the UK employment sector works" (HE and NGO-based participants). These initiatives are particularly important for sanctuary scholars who may need to access Immigration Salary List occupations, post-HE, if their status is not resolved. Students may need mental health support - often not accessed before, sometimes specialized: "There is also this psychological (pain) we have been subjected to by our situation" (Refugee-background participant). Sanctuary scholars need extra housing help when leaving university and all refugee-background students need to retain resources such as library and IT access post-HE. Participants also emphasised how refugees view university as an opportunity to make social connections and friends, but need opportunities to network with students from similar backgrounds as well as with the student community more broadly.

Participants recognized university funding constraints. Some mentioned how volunteer tutoring, by increasing students' employment value, and refugee progression initiatives which fulfilled WP requirements, benefitted non-refugee students, and universities themselves. But many thought universities must commit financially to "tak[ing] the pressure off' refugee-background students" (HE-based participant). Sanctuary scholars needed adequate living allowances and sometimes, legal costs. Refugee students, generally on low incomes, needed bursaries, additional loans, and help with housing, transport and food: "People cannot afford to buy food sometimes, and maybe… you can get a soup or something before you go to your exam" (Refugee-background participant).

ii. Universities' non-refugee-specific progress insufficiencies and support

"If you've had some difficult experiences… It makes you much more resilient to some of the challenges that you might face when you're studying on your course" (HE-based participant).

Practically, refugee-background students may utilise mature-student support, for example for childcare; international-student support, for instance around English, different educational backgrounds and children's schools enrolment; and WP support such as financial and retention help.
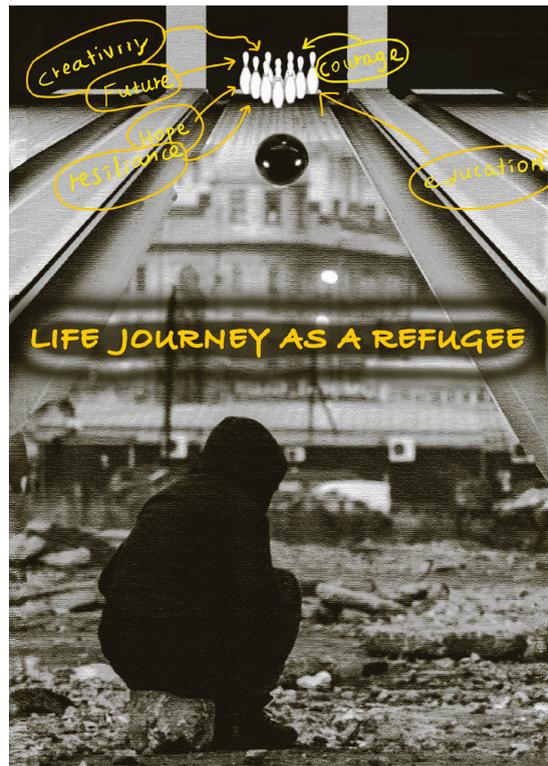
Benyam, Life journey as a refugee (University of East Anglia, 2024)

Around half the participants pointed out that refugee-background, international, mature and generally Widening Participation students also gain support from common experiences and resources. A significant "demographic shock" accompanies university for all WP students, so "it's important not just to separate the groups… to bring everyone together" (HE-based participant).

Younger students' "drinking culture" (HE-based participant) excludes some refugee-background students. Students who are "really at a young age" generally "do not understand you very well". This refugee-background participant, though, found international students supportive during their degree programme: "There's one student from [non-UK country], he's really close to my thinking, sometimes we will do work together" (Refugee-background participant).

iii. Non-university HE progress insufficiencies and support

"[F]amily, refugee people like us… maybe the charity people encouraging us… if we are approaching exams or something like that… people can encourage us" (Refugee-background participant).

One-third of participants described employers, family and community encouraging refugee-background students' progress. Community support networks offered a strong argument for refugee-background students "stay(ing) within a familiar community where possible" (NGO-based participant). Universities themselves could foster non-local refugee students' connections to local community support. And employers' flexibility could be key, as a refugee-background participant currently studying at university identified: "My manager is a very, very good person, and so he's helping me a lot as well. My work engagements, luckily it's flexible" (Refugee-background participant).

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5. Discussion

Annie Karuimbo, Untitled (University of East Anglia, 2024)

Our findings align closely with issues highlighted in prior research literature on refugee HE access in the UK and elsewhere, such as Ashlee and colleagues' (2022) Coventry-based

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research, Safi's (2022) and Lounasmaa and colleagues' (2022) London-based work, and Arar's (2021) cross-national review. This alignment suggests the robustness of such findings across local and national differences, and the findings' consequent value for researchers and practitioners across the UK. At the same time, this study's address to HE access across participants from different sectors, its emphasis on refugees' perspectives, its concern with HE benefits and progression as well as access, its interest in refugee alongside institutional difficulties and possibilities for HE access, its enabling of often lengthy and reflective interviews, and its occurrence at a time of increased refugee precarity and policy hostility, alongside strengthened third sector support – all these seem to have generated some distinct insights. In what follows, we concentrate on these distinct findings, before discussing the research's limits, and possible future research directions.

a. Benefits of HE

Findings on perceived HE benefits for refugees included, as in earlier research, career and economic gains, enhanced skills and networks, strengthened social inclusion and improved refugee wellbeing, (e.g. Arar, 2021; Baker et al., 2018; Giles and Miller, 2021; Gruttner et al., 2018; Halkic and Arnold, 2019; Miri, 2024; Morrice et al., 2020; Ramsay and Baker, 2019; Zlatkin-Troitschankskaia et al., 2018).

Additional findings included an emphasis among refugee-background participants on the value of UK HE experiences and qualifications for possible onward mobility. This emphasis indexed refugees' actual and potential transnational networks - not just in high-income countries but more widely, for instance within sub-Saharan Africa or Arabic-speaking regions. As with some international students, it seems participants understood UK HE as a key to the world.

Findings also contained a stress, from participants in all groups, on HE's economic value for supporting family and community in the UK and in home or other countries. Internal and international financial remittances rarely feature in studies of refugees' HE gains. However, they appear, again, in studies of international students' and migrants' HE engagement (Singh and Sidhu, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023), and as a resilient aspect of migrants' lives generally (Lindley et al., 2024).

Refugee participants also noted HE's role in making them feel fully at home by enhancing English language familiarity – a benefit often overshadowed in refugee HE research by the importance of academic English skills. Once again, this emphasis on inclusion through English relates to studies of international students (Dovchin, 2020) as well as to research on earlier stages of refugees' education (Amina et al., 2023), and with refugees generally (Morrice et al, 2021).

In addition, participants from refugee, NGO and FE backgrounds all described not only HE's often-noted generation of connections to groups with different kinds and levels of social, economic and cultural resources, but HE experience as producing shared identifications across families and communities, across generations, and integration between communities, NGOs, LAs, and HE itself.

These findings suggest resource gains from HE, from local language belonging to community and generational resource-building, that extend gains noted before and that further stress the importance of considering HE access in the context of perceived HE outcomes.

b. Barriers to and possibilities for HE access

Again as with prior research, our findings underscore the significant academic, linguistic, legal, economic, psychosocial and institutional barriers and possibilities refugees face in accessing HE (e.g. Arar, 2021; Ramsay and Baker, 2019). The findings elaborate on these challenges and possibilities, and identify some others.

Research frequently emphasises asylum-seekers' severe legal and economic challenges in accessing HE. However, speaking during a period of increased political and policy hostility towards all refugees and migrants, participants noted the *de facto* HE exclusion of UK government-recognised refugees as well as asylum-seekers, and the need for targeted interventions to support these different groups in their educational journeys (Arar, 2021; Ramsay and Baker, 2019).

Participants' accounts of significant financial obstacles to HE access echoed prior research findings, but also create a Catch-22 picture of the financial benefits of attending HE, mentioned earlier, ruled out by HE's own upfront costs. These costs encompass high tuition fees, additional study and living expenses, and un-navigable financial aid systems – as,

indeed, for other low HE-access groups In response, participants emphasised, as in other work, the effectiveness of scholarships and other broader financial support for facilitating access, the need for more of the most effective schemes and for more help in applying for them. In addition, participants pointed to refugees' struggle to balance academic demands with familial internal and international remittance responsibilities, often not taken into account in literature on HE access (Yijala and Louma, 2019). Given this refugee-specific landscape of financial constraint, the findings suggest that explicit and comprehensive refugee-directed HE financial support systems are needed to promote access, rather than such support appearing *ad hoc* to manage progression.

Refugee HE research often generates a long list of inflexible and discriminatory English, qualifications and documentation requirements for refugees' HE access (Arar, 2021; Morrice et al., 2021). In this research, participants' understandings of such 'everyday bordering' micro-technologies viewed them as a 'hostile environment' strategy which needed to be addressed as a whole, not piecemeal. However, participants' accounts of language bordering's variability and sector-specificity also indicates that such technologies' filtering of 'good' (broadly, IELTS- and A level-compliant) from 'bad' refugees in relation to HE access, needs continued and targeted attention.

As in some other research, participants called for shifts in approaches to refugee HE access towards clear information and support (UNHCR, 2019; Kaukko et al., 2024); comprehensive qualification recognition; more availability of Access and Foundation courses transitioning between education systems; free tailored academic English support, such as pre-sessional classes; wide availability of academic English environments across different sectors and modalities; and the valuing and mobilisation of existing language skills (Câmara, 2024; Morrice et al., 2021). Again, however, participants framed these shifts within a broad transformation strategy involving long-term, holistic understandings of refugees' HE capabilities and access (Baker and Irwin, 2019; Palanac et al., 2023).

As exemplars, participants identified the continuous, flexible HE access support provided by some educational NGOs, which adapt to the individual needs of refugees, working long-term to facilitate their integration into HE and beyond, and collaborating with other organisations (Aldalis, 2024; Carvalho and Haybano, 2023).

Again as in some prior research, participants described current societal undervaluations of refugees, along with the additional challenges faced by women and LGBTQ+ refugees, as significant obstacles to HE access.

The findings also emphasise specific provision for refugees' long-term and particular psychological needs as integral to HE access, clearly marking out such provision from the often over-generalised, short-term mental health support operating within universities. And findings point to digital insecurity often ruling out refugees' HE access, rather than, as in dominant educational discourses of digitality as inherently democratic, just limiting it.

c. Institutional constraints and affordances

Our findings around institutional limits to and possibilities for refugee HE access again often recapitulate those in prior research (e.g. Ashlee et al. 2022; Lounasmaa et al., 2022). Some distinct framings, however, also appear, perhaps linked to the study's specific attention to institutional issues through its cross-sector sampling, its questions about interlinked moments within HE journeys, and structural as well as refugee-centred factors.

Enabled by this research framing, participants' emphases on the limits and possibilities of institutional support structures across sectors, and their awareness of the interlinked issues of HE benefits, access and progression and of refugees' own individual and collective resource strengths, were foregrounded perhaps more than in earlier research.

Participants linked the often-noted incoherence of approaches to refugee HE access, to institutions' internal markets, their contradictory educational and financial remits, and their financial restrictions. But, at the same time, they pointed to many examples of and possibilities for improving HE coherence around refugee HE access – for instance by much wider and better communication within and between HE, FE, LAs and particularly, NGOs - which could be achieved at least partly independent of budgets.

The refugee-centred orientation of the Findings in Section b was taken further in participant analyses of institutions' failures and successes. Here, participants foregrounded the difficulty and value both of 'identifying' refugees and of taking full account of their heterogeneity in HE contexts. In so doing, participants open up a broader picture of what 'refugee-centredness' in refugees' HE access might look like, for example through the

comprehensive involvement of refugees at every point and in every sector, with 'nothing about us, without us'.

Participant accounts of structural blocks to refugees' HE access pointed less to specific financial barriers, as, in Section b, than to the current implicit policy constitution of refugees as a low-waged workforce; to a decade-long defunding of FE as well as HE, of refugee services, and of social protection generally; and to many asylum-seekers' contemporary criminalisation, as exacerbating refugees' present HE exclusions. Against this newly 'expulsive environment' (Herd, 2023) for refugees' HE access, they posit a radical openness, taking further the holistic approach mentioned in the prior section inside HE and other institutions, to suggest a non-linear and integrated understanding of what 'good education' might be (Morrice et al., 2020; Raki, 2024; Baker and Irwin, 2019). They posit 'reasonable adjustments' for refugees' histories and circumstances; adopting alternative ways to assess qualifications; specifically including refugees within Widening Participation; taking into account refugees' unique educational histories (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021); and decentring from one participant's ironic description of 'gold standard' A level and IELTS requirements.

d. Restrictions and possibilities in refugees' HE progression

Once more, participants' accounts of the limits and affordances for progression within HE often parallelled existing findings - for instance suggesting provisions that the Office for Students (2020) has recommended for refugee-background students. Our findings also added or reframed fractors, which have relevance for HE access as well as progression. Participants, especially from refugee backgrounds, stress the need for consistent, holistic, dedicated and warm – though not necessarily one-to-one - support throughout HE as well as before, including more extensive financial support; collaboration with community networks, and including outreach of a kind universities rarely provide. Participants emphasise their specific psychological 'pain' in a way not easily assimilated to the more general trauma-informed perspective often deployed in HE (Oddy et al., 2022), that has implications for HE access work. And they point to the mismatch between digital and other skills required and normalised within HE and unavailable to many refugees.

In highlighting what refugees do and do not share with other low HE-access groups within HE, this section of the study generated not an exceptionalist approach but a recognition, again, both of intersectionalities, and of refugees' particularity. And while all such groups'

access and progression are linked, the interaction between these two processes may be particularly strong for refugees with only very recent UK HE histories to draw on.

Non-HE factors that participants foregrounded were integrated community support, as emphasised by Ashlee and colleagues (2022) - although employment support was less stressed in this research. Nevertheless the importance of both of these factors working continuously through HE access, progression and after, of cross-sector integration, and of them having a backward effect from refugees within university for refugees thinking about university, comes out of this study. And they decentred and deprioritised hegemonic expectations about HE learning – mentioned in some prior research (Morrice et al., 2020) in a way that recalled contemporary decolonial framings of critical university pedagogy (Mbembe, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

e. *Challenges of the research process and future research*

Despite this south-west-based research's consistency with similar research in other UK regions, suggesting some common patterns, the research has limited relevance for regions with sparse HE and other refugee provision. Such regions, increasingly used by government and LAs to host refugees, would merit specific study.

Although our study benefited from working across sectors, larger participant groups from each sector - particularly FE and LAs, where participation was limited by workload - would have been helpful. So would sampling that represented more fully the intersectional positionings of refugee participants. In future work, it might also be useful to talk with participants who are local and national policymakers, politicians, and national NGO workers, who are also part of the assemblages around refugee HE access.

Some issues arose with the research process. Its structure - starting from a focus on refugees themselves to foreground knowledge gained from experience and professional practice, moving towards an institutional focus - generated largely different responses from participants across the interview questions, and valuably foregrounded refugees' own perspectives. Trying an alternative ordering of questions could however have been useful.

Since participants volunteering for interviews are contributing considerable time and other resource to research, they often have strong interests in the topic. While we reached out to

include refugee participants with little HE engagement, research could in future usefully include similarly disengaged participants from other sectors who may be key constrainers or enablers of refugees' HE access. The time constraints of some participants indicated brief questionnaires might work well, while also allowing less socially desirable, because anonymised, responses. At the same time, the complexities of refugees', workers' and volunteers' experiences remained under-addressed in this study's cross-sectional interview model. Longitudinal work with participants and case studies of their professional and personal progressions and transitions, and of particular institutions or organisations, perhaps using different media, might, as other work demonstrates (Africa et al., 2017; University of East Anglia, 2024) provide valuable insight into engagements with refugee HE access. Such work might, moreover, involve more specialised forms of analysis than our usefully open but rather general approach.

This project pre-consulted with stakeholders, provided research-assistant rates of participant recompense, benefited greatly from participant feedback and will have participants involved in disseminating and discussing results. However, more fully co-researched work with adequate funding for refugee, FE, NGO and LA involvement, throughout study design and execution, would be an important shift, in future work, away from the academia-dominated body of research to which this project contributes, again, as already demonstrated by other initiatives (Africa et al., 2017; University of East Anglia, 2024).

Participants' recognition of an 'expulsive' refugee environment and of financial constraints operating in every aspect of their lives, but at the same time of some highly-developed, and successful support towards HE operating within every sector, helpfully express the particular UK refugee, asylum-seeker, economic and HE situation during 2022-2024, characterised by the 'hostile environment' but also by doubt about and contest over the resultant policy orientations. Shifts in refugee and HE policy and practice already indicate the importance of continuing research in this area.

In conducting the study, we were aware of the intersectional positions from which refugees approach HE (Unangst and Crea, 2020), but we could have explored them more thoroughly and explicitly. Researchers and participants often mentioned issues of financial resources but rarely directly addressed issues of class and educational background (e.g. Lambrechts, 2020). We often spoke about racism and xenophobia, but we did not always raise this concern, despite its clear contemporary salience for refugee-background as well as

international and majority-world students (e.g. SSAHE, 2020). Refugees identifying as LGBTQ+ encounter discrimination in relation to their asylum claims, within the UK, and in refugee and LGBTQ+ communities (e.g. Vamvaka-Tatski, 2023), which may constrain their HE access and support for it. People from refugee backgrounds across the large range of 'mature student' age criteria frequently meet with specific barriers in relation to their qualifications' date, the relevance of their experience, however extensive, and dominant discourses of age and HE access (e.g. Morrice, 2021). We did not ask questions about religious beliefs, but participants occasionally referenced them in relation to loan structure and, more broadly, the moral value of education and equitable access to it. Perhaps most saliently, while participants frequently raised the topics of childcare and time and economic constraints, we did not consistently address the related issue of gender across the interviews (Ugurel Kamisli, 2021). Future research in this area could fruitfully commit to explicit consideration of these and other intersectionalities in refugees' HE experiences.

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6. Conclusion

This study shows both the value that HE holds for people from refugee backgrounds, for universities, and for the UK, but also the limits that the UK currently sets on refugees' HE access.

The challenges are significant. Comprehensive policy reform is needed to undo asylum-seekers' classification as international students; their ineligibility for fee loans; their year-long ineligibility for paid work which would support their study; their six-month ineligibility for study outside of NGOs and the paucity of study opportunities thereafter; their inability to shift their Home Office-provided accommodation to take up university places; and their lack of a study-related right to stay in such accommodation, should the Home Office ask to move them. These factors require them to delay restarting studies and struggle to find appropriate and open courses. They render them dependent for HE access on small numbers of scholarships, so that they are often warehoused educationally, eroding motivation and skills essential for their own and societal development.

Refugees, although in a less legally and economically precarious situation, also turn out to be significantly economically excluded from HE, with consequent long-term distancing from

possibilities of return and of skills and career upgrading. In relation to both HE access and progression, the study indicates that HE policy could usefully address refugees', like other historically low HE-access groups', economic and at times religiously-based resistance to the UK student loan and interest structure, and the lack of maintenance funding available for refugees specifically.

The study demonstrates significant other constraints for refugees as well as asylum-seekers on HE access. Both groups lack integrated, well-resourced, holistic, continuous and refugee-centred academic, economic and psychosocial support for HE access, across all sectors, and addressing all socio-demographic groups.

At the same time, the study indicates the possibilities and commitments that refugees interested in HE access, as well as those supporting them across all sectors, can work with now, within communities, and in HE, FE, LA and NGO policy and practice, to build an expanded, refugee-centred and transformative approach to refugee HE access. Many of these possibilities are resource-dependent; many, also, are not.
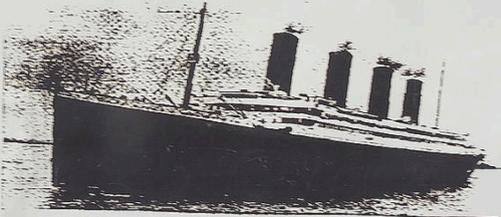
Across the findings, this research contributes to a shift in conceptualising the 'hostile environment' around refugee HE access. It suggests the importance of the intersectional HE dispossessions with which refugees and asylum-seekers live, HE access programmes' limited recognition of those intersectionalities, and also the particular situations of refugees and asylum seekers in relation to HE access. It understands the current hostile environment as increasingly intense and 'expulsive' (Herd, 2023), but also as complex - both multiple and contested - in ways that can allow all sectors to work collaboratively to open up spaces for refugees' HE access. It re-theorises refugees' HE access resources as encompassing a HE collectivity that takes in refugee communities and informal networks, as well as groups and institutions across the HE, FE, LA and NGO sectors. Many of these resources have strengthened over the past 15 years.

Recognising all these resources means that we can take account of the histories, presents and possible futures of refugees' HE access - its immediate and later consequences - and that we can define HE access not just numerically or in terms of individual outcomes, but in relation to social justice and equity (Harvey and Mallman, 2019). The research thus suggests that working the contradictions within the expulsive HE environment for refugees, while also

pursuing social justice in education, offers limited but important contemporary possibilities for expanding and transforming refugees' HE access.

Full Recommendations

Angel, Mindtank (University of East Anglia, 2024)

These recommendations for supporting refugees' access to HE, for all groups and institutions (refugee communities and networks, HE and FE, LAs and NGOs), are drawn directly from the findings of our research. However they also echo, at many points, other research findings, policy recommendations, and best practice guidelines, and are therefore part of a much broader body of work advocating a similar approach.

1. Generally, groups and institutions across all sectors should:

a. Adopt the principle: 'Nothing about us, without us'. Apply refugee-centred guidelines to ensure that refugees themselves, from diverse backgrounds, are central to creating, implementing, evaluating and deciding about HE access support at every level.

b. Recognise and mobilise refugees' own resources for HE access – their aspirations, motivations, prior achievements, experience, and networks.

c. Pay attention to refugees' specific HE access needs arising from their histories and present situations, as well as recognising commonalities between refugees' situations and the situations of people from other low HE access groups.

d. Engage with refugees' communities, diversity and intersectionalities, bearing in mind gender, sexuality, class and educational backgrounds, age, religion, dis/abilities, health and illness, and national backgrounds, as well as varied histories of oppression and harassment, varied journeys to the UK, and different experiences within the UK.

e. Consider HE access holistically, in relation to HE's benefits, refugees' HE progression, refugees' lives before and after HE, and all other aspects of refugees' lives.

f. Collaborate in planning, providing and delivering HE access support within and across organisations and sectors, so that those organisations and sectors support each other. Always work with organisations and networks of refugees.

g. Ensure continuity and sustainability of HE access support, within and across organisations and sectors.

h. Think broadly about policy and practice challenges to refugees' HE access in the context of the 'hostile environment', rather than only addressing the challenges one by one; also pay attention to the particular character of each challenge.

i. Consider refugees' HE access as part of a long-term process that includes refugees' perceptions of HE benefits; their issues with HE progression; their lives before and after accessing HE; and all other areas of their' lives; and that is not always linear, temporally predictable, or academically driven. This means addressing issues that affect HE access - such as knowledge of HE, and academic English levels - but also issues that affect HE progression - like academic skills training, employment experience and network-building - and paying attention to other significant areas of refugees' lives such as financial and care responsibilities, and mental health.

j. Understand refugees' decision-making on HE access as a refugee community issue, collective rather than only individual.

k. Connect refugee HE access work to other educational and refugee work aimed at equity and social justice.

l. Within HE, alongside other groups and institutions, and with politicians and policy-makers locally and nationally, advocate for expanding, improving and transforming refugees' HE access.

2. Specifically, groups and institutions across all sectors should:

a. Provide easy-to-find and follow information on routes to HE in the UK, which includes all the many possible pathways, and which pays attention to the resources that groups and organisations in all sectors offer.

b. Offer free, comprehensive HE access support to potential students across all refugee services, including outreach workshops; academic short courses; pre-sessional courses; mentoring academic English teaching and assessment; academic digital skills teaching, academic skills teaching, bridging subject teaching to meet HE prerequisites, and enriched subject teaching - e.g. creative writing, arts, and science - which facilitate HE skills acquisition.

c. Provide a friendly, welcoming environment that includes social support, and funded childcare, transport; study materials, digital support - including IT teaching, internet, devices and software; mental health support; and food.

d. Give appropriate weight to qualifications and English skills gained outside the UK.

e. Set appropriately tailored free language and subject tests, rather than assuming UK-based qualifications and general UK academic English language tests are the 'gold standard'.

f. Devise alternative assessments of educational, professional and other achievements and experience instead of insisting on references and certificates which are unobtainable and/or dangerous for people from refugee backgrounds to request.

g. Enable refugees to build up study and qualifications across institutions if they move.

h. Ensure there is in every group and institution a key person and/or structure coordinating work on refugees' HE access. Ensure those enquiring about admissions or services, students/service users, and staff, all know who this person or structure is.

i. In every group and institution, establish regular meetings/meeting items planning and evaluating HE access work. Coordinate input to these meetings across groups' or institutions' internal teams.

j. Establish, implement, evaluate and ensure accountability for a plan and timeline for HE access work.

k. Ensure the group's or institution's work on and commitment to refugee HE is publically visible in, for instance, public meetings, official documents and websites, annual reports and funding applications.

l. Advocate for more support for refugees within and post-HE - academic, economic, employment-related and psychosocial.

m. Campaign for more and improved HE access for refugees, and HE and immigration policies to support such access: expanded fee waivers, scholarships, grants and explicitly Shariah-compliant loans; more maintenance grants and loans; and for asylum-seekers: free transport to colleges and libraries if not in walking distance; accommodation stability if in HE; immediate access to education and the right to work.

3. People from refugee backgrounds can:

a. Use, and help others to use, support for HE access from all groups and institutions providing it – for instance, academic English courses offered within HE, FE and by NGOs; university open days; information sessions provided in FE and NGOs.

b. Seek out and build refugee-background community networks concerned with HE access, involving people from refugee backgrounds who have HE experience and interests, within and outside the UK.

c. Seek out and build networks with people from refugee backgrounds currently studying at or working in UK HE.

d. Build refugee-centred support networks within HE, in and across universities and in FE, LAs and NGOS..

e. Advocate for more support for refugees' HE access from FE institutions, LAs and NGOs.

f. Support refugee-background students' HE progression as well as access.

g. Foreground a holistic approach to HE access, treating HE as part of people's lives, rather than focusing on HE on its own and as linear academic progress.

h. Include HE access in campaigns for equitable and just provision for refugees.

4. People working in HE can:

a. Prioritise identifying and supporting applicants and potential applicants from refugee backgrounds.

b. Provide more funded HE preparation and HE for people from refugee backgrounds: accessible and refugee-specific academic English courses; courses on how to access

HE and courses on academic study skills; more Foundation places and programmes; more scholarships, bursaries and other financial support; more one-to-one short- and long-term mentoring; and courses that bridge specific specific gaps in refugees' academic preparation.

c. Respond promptly and fully to refugee-background students' queries and applications, rather than allowing non-response to be a response strategy.

d. Expand academic, financial and psychosocial support for refugee-background students so that their progression encourages others from refugee background to access HE. For instance, inductions should include guidance on the UK HE system (e.g. assignments, academic writing style, and university life); careers services should help refugee-background students to draw on their previous experiences when seeking employment; and Widening Participation and International teams should help refugee-background students develop networks and a sense of community, through social events and links with local NGOs.

e. Cooperate within each institution to support refugees' access, avoiding siloes, setting up cross-team working groups including for instance refugee-background students and alumnae/i, Admissions, WP, department or school-based EDI teams, Sanctuary groups, and International teams.

f. Provide a named person/group to coordinate refugee HE access support across the institution and with other institutions.

g. Work collectively across universities rather than in competition, with meetings, actions and forward planning across regions and nationally.

h. Establish cross-university collaborations that allow continuity of HE for refugee-background students, especially asylum seekers, if they are moved by the Home Office (e.g. in relation to scholarships, bursaries, programme acceptances) since uncertainty about such moves stops many refugees accessing HE.

i. Work extensively and responsively with FE, LAs, NGOs and community groups (e.g. faith groups) on refugees' HE access, for exampleby providing HE outreach, information, and courses, credited and uncredited, in community settings; and supporting what these sectors are doing themselves to build refugees' HE access.

5. People working in FE can:

a. Find out about and support refugee-background students' potential HE interests and past HE experience, alongside their employment possibilities, from the time of their

initial FE inquiries onward, and standardly report on interested students' progress towards HE access as well as their other areas of progress.

b. Be aware of students' possible refugee backgrounds even when they do not declare them.

c. Take full account of refugees' prior educational, English language, professional and other experience, so that refugee-background FE students with HE interests do not have to take redundant courses over many years.

d. Ensure collaborative working across teams e.g. language-centred teams (ESOL, Functional Skills, GCSE English), and career- and academic-centred teams (ESOL, GCSE, Access, Careers), so that they can help refugee-background students build their HE-directed qualifications more quickly, working in 'skills' and 'academic' areas simultaneously.

e. Across all teams, provide training for, orientation towards, and resources for supporting refugees' HE access – for example, by developing refugee-targeted HE advice from Careers teams; making academic English courses available for suitable refugee students; making subject-based courses available for suitable ESOL students.

f. Designate an individual or group with specific responsibility for addressing refugees' HE access issues.

g. Provide partial credits which can be summed or other certification for students who are moved by the Home Office in the middle of courses.

h. Develop mentoring or buddying systems for refugee-background students with HE interests, drawing on the resources of other refugee-background students and alumnae/i as well as other FE students more generally.

i. Work with local HE and NGO colleagues, and with refugee organisations and networks, to develop and integrate FE's HE access provision, and to ensure that refugee-background students with HE interests draw on all available local provision.

j. Pursue resources for more HE-oriented work with refugees in FE.

6. People working in LAs can:

a. Enquire about all refugee-background clients' HE interests and experience, incorporate these into future plans from first consultations onward and report on HE access alongside other areas of client progress.

b. Ensure all-staff training on supporting refugees' access to HE, including input from local HE and FE colleagues, refugee NGOs, and refugees themselves.

c. Provide a HE contact person or group to address queries, provide referrals and coordinate the LA's approach.

d. Work across LAs and with local HE, FE,NGOs and refugee networks to support HE preparation for refugee-background clients.

e. Integrate HE access issues into policy for all refugee work and make HE access work visible on websites, in reports and on funding applications.

7. People working in NGOs can:

a. Assess clients' or service users' HE plans routinely when they register with the NGO and record progress on those plans during their connection with the NGO.

b. Work closely with local FE and, especially, HE institutions, as well as with refugee networks and organisations, to provide refugee-specific HE preparation, and to link to other providers.

c. Provide academic English tuition and information on how to access UK HE.

d. Ensure the NGO provides training in HE access for all staff members and an HE link-person or group to address service user queries, provide referrals, and develop links to HE, FE and other NGO HE preparation programmes.

e. Include HE access work in NGO reports, future plans, and funding applications.

8. HE policymakers can:

a. Pay attention to the low levels of maintenance funding available for low-income refugee students by providing more loans and grants for these students.

b. Address refugees' resistance to the UK student loan and interest structure by providing more fee grant aid and an alternative loan structure that is clearly Shariah-compliant.

9. Immigration policymakers can:

a. Remove asylum-seekers' work and study disqualifications, now lasting a year and six months respectively, to allow them to study and seek employment immediately, thus reducing maintenance costs incurred and enabling the development of nationally valuable skills.

b. Allow asylum-seekers to shift their Home Office-provided accommodation to take up university places.

c. Provide asylum-seekers with free transport to colleges and libraries when those are not within walking distance.

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