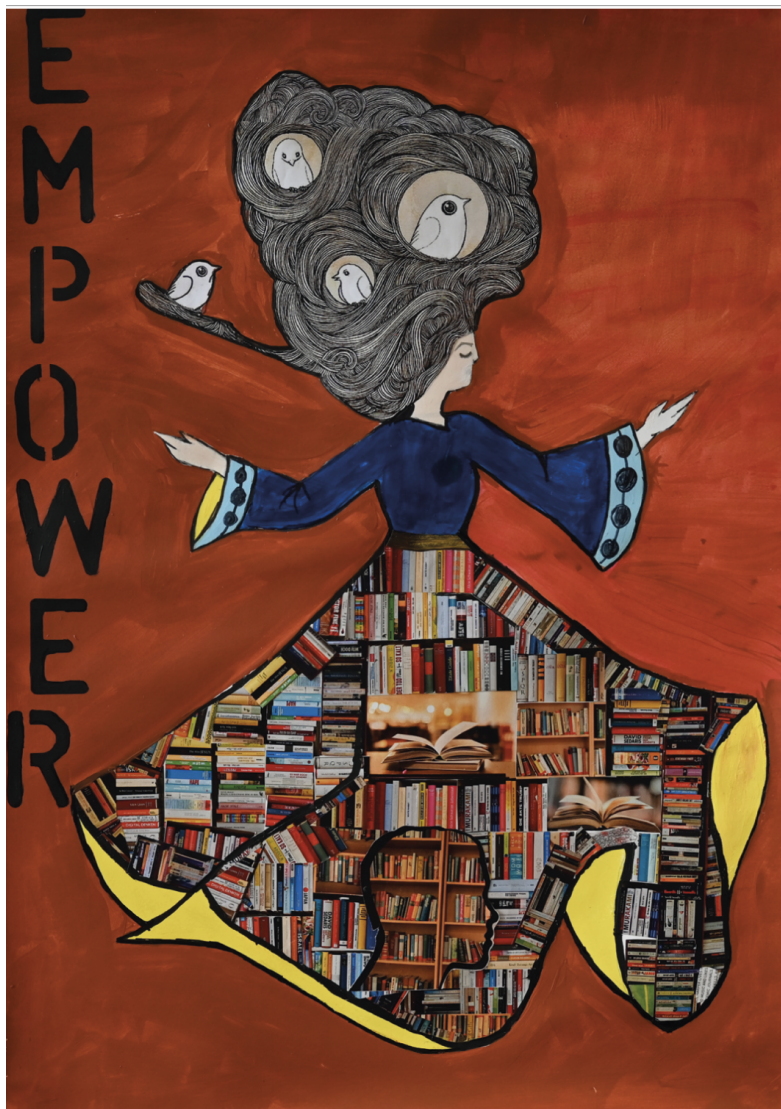


‘It’s not just opening the doors’: The perspectives of refugees and those working with them in the south-west of the UK on refugees’ higher education access

Report Summary, February 2025



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

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“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.



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

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.



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

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, experiences, 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 when conventional achievement records are not available.
- 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 academic, economic, employment-related and psychosocial support for refugees within and post-HE
- 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)

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