

**FOR EVERY
CHILD**

unicef 
UNITED KINGDOM

**EDUCATION TRANSITIONS FOR
REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING
YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE UK**

**EXPLORING THE JOURNEY TO
FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS	3
<hr/>	
1. INTRODUCTION	4
2. METHODOLOGY	7
3. RESEARCH FINDINGS	8
■ Overarching factors affecting progression	8
■ Transitions to further education	10
■ Transitions to higher education	12
4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	15
<hr/>	
ANNEX 1: Sample breakdown	17
ANNEX 2: List of participating organisations	17

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This report was written for Unicef UK by Amy Ashlee and Catherine Gladwell from Refugee Support Network (RSN).

With thanks to the young people and expert interviewees who generously gave their time to participate in this research and share their views and experiences; Rebecca Torrance (RSN) who carried out focus groups and key informant interviews, and assisted with data coding; Christopher Smart who organised and carried out focus groups and interviews; Bryony Norman (RSN) for her technical support and expertise; Anja Nielsen, Liam Sollis and Sarah Hamilton (Unicef UK) for their technical input and oversight; Anjali Saran (Newman Catholic College), Lydia Mitton (RSN) and Rosy Cockburn (RSN) who organised focus groups with young refugees and asylum-seekers; and STAR for enabling researchers to invite young people not supported by RSN to participate in this research.

ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

ARE	Appeal Rights Exhausted
ESFA	Education Skills and Funding Agency
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
ILR	Indefinite Leave to Remain
LLR	Limited Leave to Remain
NASS	National Asylum Support Service
SFE	Student Finance England
UASC	Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Services
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Abbreviations and acronyms specific to this report

Abbreviations and acronyms are used in the findings section of this report when quotations are included.

FG	Focus group
Int	Interview
KI	Key informant
S/C	School or college
Uni	University
VS	Voluntary sector
YP	Young person

1 INTRODUCTION



© Unicef/Herwig

Background

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enshrines the right to education for all children. This right is not suspended when children are forced to flee their home countries. Amidst the uncertainty and adversity of forced displacement, education is a source of hope, a space of safety and a gateway to opportunities for the future.¹ Yet across the globe, forced displacement disrupts the right to education, with only three per cent of refugees estimated to reach university.²

While recent research outlines the many educational challenges facing refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK,³ research specifically examining progression to further education (FE) and higher education (HE) is scarce. Unicef UK commissioned this 2020 study to:

- Address the gap in relevant research
- Build on existing evidence
- Examine the factors that hinder and support refugee and asylum-seeking young people's education progression in the UK.

AIMS OF THE REPORT

1 Identify the barriers for refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people in the UK transitioning to FE or HE.

2 Identify the supporting factors for refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people in the UK transitioning to FE or HE.

3 Offer recommendations for government, education institutions, and voluntary and private sectors to smooth the transition process.

1 UNHCR (2019) Stepping Up: Refugee education in crisis (UNHCR); UNESCO (2019) Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Building bridges not walls (UNESCO).

2 UNHCR (2019) Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2018 (UNHCR).

3 For the purposes of this report, the phrase 'refugee and asylum-seeking young people' covers all young people seeking safety and protection in the UK. The term 'young people' covers children and young adults between the ages of 15 and 25, in line with RSN's approach to supporting young people (see www.refugeesupportnetwork.org/pages/2-our-services).

Data sources

The research draws on the experiences of more than 500 young people and practitioners in the UK through three new data sources:

1. Interviews and focus groups with refugee and asylum-seeking young people
2. Interviews with expert practitioners
3. Anonymised data from RSN's education programmes.

The technical report that follows this research report also includes a detailed literature review.

Scope of the research

In exploring education transitions to FE and HE, this research study examines access and progression issues up to university entrance; it does not include experiences at or upon leaving university. For the purposes of this study:

- FE describes “any study which is not HE, and which is being pursued by students who are usually 16 or older”.⁴
- HE describes “describes post-18 learning that takes place at universities”.^{5,6}

Education policy landscape

Under UK law, refugee and asylum-seeking pupils of compulsory school age have the same entitlement to full-time education as other UK pupils, and schools should not ask directly about a child's immigration status.⁷ From age 16, though, complex criteria and rules affect their continued access to education.

Rights and entitlements to FE

Immigration status and age both affect eligibility to access state funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) for FE study.⁸

In order to access funding for FE study, a student “must have the legal right to be resident in the United Kingdom at the start of their programme”.⁹ Additionally, institutions are directed to ensure that “there is a reasonable likelihood that the student will be able to complete their study programme before seeking funding for the student”.¹⁰

Many students – including those with refugee status, humanitarian protection, asylum-seekers and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) – are eligible to access state funding. And, despite misconceptions, those eligible for funding do not have to have been ordinarily resident in the preceding three years.¹¹ However, having time-limited immigration status can still be problematic. Some institutions may restrict access to students who are awaiting a decision on an asylum claim from the Home Office or who have limited leave to remain (LLR) that is due to expire before the course finishes.¹²

Age is a significant determining factor in refugee and asylum-seeking young people's access to FE. The ESFA is responsible for funding tuition fees for all students in full or part-time education between the ages of 16 and 18 and students must be under the age of 19 at the start of the teaching year in order to access this funding at any time in that year.¹³ For those who are over 19, the funding available is “more restrictive and [...] focused on making students ready for either advanced learning and HE, or work”.^{14,15}

4 Coram Children's Legal Centre (2019) Migrant Children's Project Fact Sheet: Further education in England (Coram Children's Legal Centre), 1. www.childrenslegalcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Further-education-August-2019.final_.pdf (Accessed 22 April 2020).

5 Coram Children's Legal Centre (2019) Migrant Children's Project Fact Sheet: Higher education in England (Coram Children's Legal Centre), 1. www.childrenslegalcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Higher-Education-May2017.final_.pdf (Accessed 22 April 2020).

6 HE can also include post-18 learning in ‘other colleges and institutions that award academic degrees, professional qualifications and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) modules’, but all data examined for this study applies to university-based HE.

7 Coram Children's Legal Centre (2017) Migrant Children's Project Fact Sheet: Access to compulsory education for migrant children (Coram Children's Legal Centre).

8 Coram Children's Legal Centre (2019) Migrant Children's Project Fact Sheet: Further education in England (Coram Children's Legal Centre).

9 Education, Skills and Funding Agency (ESFA) (2020) Funding Guidance for Young People 2019 - 2020 (Department for Education), 14, assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/861585/16_to_19_funding_guidance_Regulations_2019_to_2020_1-1.pdf (Accessed 22 April 2020).

10 *ibid.*

11 Coram Children's Legal Centre (2019) Migrant Children's Project Fact Sheet: Further education in England (Coram Children's Legal Centre).

12 *ibid.*

13 *ibid.*

14 *ibid.*, 5.

15 Please see the forthcoming technical report for a more detailed examination of 19-plus eligibility.

Rights and entitlements to HE

Asylum-seekers and those with LLR will, in most cases, be classed as overseas students and required to pay overseas fees. These young people are also ineligible for government-provided student loans from Student Finance England (SFE).¹⁶

Young people with refugee status are eligible for home fees and student finance as long as they can prove they are ordinarily resident in the UK on the first day of their course and have not ceased to be ordinarily resident since being recognised as a refugee.¹⁷ Those with humanitarian protection and indefinite leave to remain (ILR) can also be eligible for home fees and student finance but, in addition to the conditions for refugee status, they must prove that they have been ordinarily resident in the UK for three years prior to the start of their course.¹⁸

'No study' conditions

In 2018, legal changes to immigration bail, specifically the introduction of the 'no study' condition,¹⁹ led to some restrictions on access to education for refugees and asylum-seekers.²⁰ For children, guidance clarifies that they must be allowed to study up to and including the age of 18.²¹ However, young people over the age of 18 can be affected; a 'no study' condition can affect former UASC who are Appeal Rights Exhausted (ARE), and undocumented young people.²²

There have been recent legal challenges to the 'no study' condition. The Home Office has agreed to review its immigration bail guidance and has clarified that there is no requirement to impose a study restriction on all individuals who are ARE.²³



AGE IS A SIGNIFICANT DETERMINING FACTOR IN REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACCESS TO FURTHER EDUCATION.

16 Coram Children's Legal Centre (2019) Migrant Children's Project Fact Sheet: Higher education in England (Coram Children's Legal Centre).

17 *ibid.*

18 *ibid.*

19 In 2018, the UK government made changes to immigration law. The changes mean that young people may not be allowed to study while in the UK without leave to remain or enter. For more on this, see Coram Children's Legal Centre (2018) No study conditions and immigration bail (Coram Children's Legal Centre). www.childrenslegalcentre.com/resources/no-study-immigration-bail (Accessed 22 April 2020).

20 Coram Children's Legal Centre (2019) Migrant Children's Project Fact Sheet: Further education in England (Coram Children's Legal Centre).

21 Home Office (2020) Immigration Bail: Version 5.0 (Home Office), 13.

22 *ibid.*, 13–15.

23 Duncan Lewis Solicitors (2019) Home Office concedes unlawful imposition of study restriction as a bail condition on individuals who are 'appeals rights exhausted' (online) (Duncan Lewis Solicitors). [www.duncanlewis.co.uk/news/Home_Office_concedes_unlawful_imposition_of_study_restriction_as_a_bail_condition_on_individuals_who_are_%E2%80%98appeals_rights_exhausted%E2%80%99_\(20_November_2019\).html](http://www.duncanlewis.co.uk/news/Home_Office_concedes_unlawful_imposition_of_study_restriction_as_a_bail_condition_on_individuals_who_are_%E2%80%98appeals_rights_exhausted%E2%80%99_(20_November_2019).html) (Accessed 22 April 2020).

2 METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a mixed-methods (primarily qualitative) approach, and incorporates the experiences of 500 refugee and asylum-seeking young people and practitioners (see Annex 1).²⁴

Focus groups and interviews

Twenty-two young people between the ages of 17 and 25 were directly consulted through four participatory focus groups and six phone interviews. The young people consulted for this research, whether directly through focus groups and interviews, or indirectly through case work notes analysis, live in England. The majority are based in London, with others in Birmingham and Manchester.

Semi-structured key informant interviews with 16 expert practitioners across the FE and HE sector in England were also conducted. These interviews included voluntary sector representatives (frontline workers and policy experts) and staff at schools, colleges and universities (see Annex 2).

Analysis of RSN casework data

Data from RSN education programmes, which support refugee and asylum-seeking young people to progress to FE and HE, between August 2018 and February 2020 was analysed. The casework notes of 135 young people who received face to face support

from RSN were examined – 49 under the 'Access to HE' programme, and 86 under the 'Access to FE' programme. In addition, 343 enquiries made to RSN's 'Access to HE' helpline were examined.

Analysis and ethics

The data was analysed using an iterative coding process and all research was carried out in line with Unicef UK and RSN's safeguarding policies for working with children and vulnerable young adults, as well as RSN's Research Ethics Framework,²⁵ which was designed to address the ethical considerations posed by research with refugee and asylum-seeking young people.

Potential limitations to the research

Potential limitations to this study include a possible London-centric bias, the missing views of young people who have been unable to access voluntary sector support, and the potential for certain themes to be more visible than others due to the nature of RSN's programmes. Given where the young people consulted for the research live, the report is primarily focused on experiences of, and recommendations for, FE and HE in England.

²⁴ Though the sample size is recorded at 516 (see Annex 1), a conservative figure of 500 is used to account for the small portion of young people who are double counted across the data.

²⁵ Available at: hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/rsn/attachment/file/12/Research_Ethics_Framework__1_.pdf

3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

RESEARCH FINDINGS ARE GROUPED AND PRESENTED UNDER THREE SECTIONS:

1 Overarching factors affecting progression to both FE and HE

2 Transitions to FE

3 Transitions to HE

1 Overarching factors affecting progression to both FE and HE

This section presents the key factors that support and hinder the education progression of refugee and asylum-seeking young people at both levels.

WHAT HINDERS?

The three most significant overarching barriers were:

- A) Lack of support and encouragement**
- B) Poor mental health and emotional wellbeing**
- C) Poverty and disadvantage.**

A) Lack of support and encouragement

A lack of support and encouragement was the most prevalent overarching barrier, identified by approximately one third of the total sample, and was particularly linked to a lack of support in education settings. In the context of a reported generalised lack of support (from families and professionals), young people described having their needs as a refugee or asylum-seeker overlooked or undetected, the latter preventing schools from providing them with accurate information and advice.

This lack of support and encouragement was reported, in many cases, to exacerbate a “significant problem with self-belief” (KI, VS).²⁶ Just over two thirds of key informants emphasised this challenge, describing how refugee and asylum-seeking young people “put up barriers in their own mind [about their abilities]”

26 Abbreviations are used in the findings section of this report when quotations are used. Please see [page 3](#) for abbreviations.

(KI, S/C), or do not see FE or HE “as an option for themselves” (KI, VS). This lack of self-belief was reiterated by young people, with one stating, “I know a few students who don’t even do UCAS because they think there is no point, no hope” (YP, FG).

B) Poor mental health and emotional wellbeing

Poor mental health and emotional wellbeing was reported as a critical barrier to education progression in over three quarters of ‘Access to FE’ casework notes, and by close to a fifth of the total sample.

Key informants and young people told how mental health conditions disrupt education journeys by limiting ability to engage with education, and negatively affecting grades. The process of applying to college or university itself was also reported to produce a sense of pressure that “can be extremely triggering” (KI, VS). Mental health conditions were also said to lead to behavioural issues with potential harmful consequences: over a fifth of the young people RSN worked with under the ‘Access to FE’ programme were, at some stage, at risk of suspension or exclusion as a result of mental health-related behavioural issues.

C) Poverty and disadvantage

Poverty significantly hindered education progression for over a third of the young people directly consulted, and was reported or experienced as a barrier by just over a tenth of the total sample. One young person described how poverty “closed off” (YP, Int) opportunities. Three quarters of key informants reported economic insecurity as a key barrier to progression – highlighting the “relentless precarity” (KI, Uni/VS) many young refugees and asylum-seekers live in.

The most prevalent specific poverty-linked challenge, faced by close to one third of young people supported through the ‘Access to FE’ programme, was inability to pay for transport costs. One key informant emphasised that “even if [young people]

are ready and willing to go to college, literally a £1.50 bus fare is what stops them” (KI, VS).

Other challenges included being unable to pay for educational resources and equipment, the pressure to prioritise formal or informal work, and, for those eligible for Universal Credit, the impossibility of both claiming this support and studying full time.

WHAT SUPPORTS?

The three most significant overarching supportive factors, affecting progression to both FE and HE, were:

- A) Persistent support through challenging times**
- B) Personal resilience**
- C) Welcoming and encouraging educational environments.**

A) Persistent support through challenging times

Receiving ongoing support over an extended period of time, preferably from the same person – whether a social worker, foster parent or representative of the voluntary sector – emerged as the most significant factor supporting education progression. Correlation between ongoing consistent support and positive outcomes in casework notes was very high, and was referenced by half of the young people directly consulted, who explained the positive impact of having someone who “was there with [them] throughout [their] entire journey” (YP, FG), particularly “when going through tough times” (YP, Int).

An analysis of RSN casework notes revealed how support through challenging circumstances, such as destitution and serious mental health conditions, is critical in enabling young people to engage, or re-engage, with their education. One key informant confirmed: “It’s not enough to walk a young person to the door to enrolment – you need to address what else is going on in their lives” (KI, VS).

B) Personal resilience

High levels of personal resilience – where it was possible to cultivate this – positively influenced education progression. Over a third of young people directly consulted described how, when attempting to progress to both FE and HE, they remained determined even when discouraged by others.

“Even if [young people] are ready and willing to go to college, literally a £1.50 bus fare is what stops them.”

One young person explained that “everyone said it was impossible until you got your status, but I asked universities anyway” (YP, Int). Another young person stated, “I said to myself, ‘I’m gonna keep doing this’. I didn’t lose hope” (YP, Int). Casework notes also demonstrated a correlation between higher levels of personal resilience and positive progression outcomes, and one key informant had experienced that refugee and asylum-seeking students place high value on education and thus “grasp” opportunities even in the face of setbacks (KI, S/C).

C) Welcoming and encouraging education environments

The importance of welcoming and inclusive education settings was identified as a key factor supporting progression by just under a third of key informants. They referenced:

- The significance of schools and colleges having dedicated focal points for refugee and asylum-seeking pupils
- Staff who have received training in working with young refugees and asylum-seekers
- Peer support and extra-curricular initiatives.



2 Transitions to further education

This section presents findings on the factors that hinder and support transition to FE in particular.

WHAT HINDERS?

The most significant factors constraining transition to FE were:

- A) The intersection of immigration status and age**
- B) Insufficient information, advice and guidance (IAG)**
- C) Limited education opportunities at FE level**
- D) Immigration procedures**
- E) Institutional reluctance.**

A) The intersection of immigration status and age

The most prevalent factor hindering transitions to FE was immigration status – exacerbated by age. This was described by just under half of key informants, and emerged in more than half of the casework notes examined. Key informants described how young people aged over 18 often find themselves ineligible for state funding for their chosen course, as a result of a combination of their immigration status or length of residency and age.

One young person described being asked to drop out of college, explaining: “My teacher said I’m not allowed to do business [studies] because I am over 18” (YP, FG). For those who are eligible for state funding, inability to evidence eligibility has hindered progression. Just over a quarter of young people supported by RSN’s ‘Access to FE’ programme struggled to provide the required documents at the point of enrolment, “never hav[ing] had them or [having] fled without them” (KI, VS).

B) Insufficient information, advice and guidance (IAG)

Insufficient or inaccurate information, advice and guidance (IAG) was the next most prominent hindering factor. Half of key informants described how young people are often given wrong information about their eligibility to study at FE level, including from teachers, social workers and other

professionals supporting them. This was repeatedly attributed to a widespread “lack of knowledge [...] about [refugee and asylum-seeking] people’s rights for FE” (KI, VS) within the education and refugee support sectors. This was further evidenced by the volume of enquiries (circa one in ten) to the RSN ‘Access to HE’ helpline that in fact pertained not to HE, but to FE. Accuracy of information and guidance relates not only to eligibility, but also to course selection. Young refugees and asylum-seekers were reported to be held back from accessing appropriate courses due to widespread misconceptions about “vocational routes and BTEC not being [a] viable [pathway] for university” (KI, VS).

EDUCATION PROGRESSION FOR YOUNG REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS: FACTSHEETS FOR PRACTITIONERS

A set of factsheets for schools, further and higher education institutions will be published as a follow-up resource to this research report. These factsheets will outline the entitlements of young refugees and asylum-seekers to education at each level, and identify key practical actions education practitioners can take to facilitate progression.

C) Limited education options at FE level

Over half of the young people directly consulted for this research described being faced with limited education options at FE level because of their age, language abilities, previous grades, and/or lack of recognised qualifications. For example, one young person had studied for a year at university in their home country. However, in the months following their arrival to the UK, they were only able to access a basic English course. They alluded to a sense of hopelessness, stating, “I didn’t know why or where I was going” (YP, FG).

Young people also emphasised the insufficient pace of learning or study hours on ESOL courses. One young person said, “Some people go to college [to study English] twice a week for three hours. In my humble opinion, that’s not enough at all [...] it is something you need to do every day” (YP, Int).

D) Immigration procedures

The practical impact of being in the immigration system emerged as negatively affecting a young person’s ability to access and remain in FE, and had affected almost a fifth of young people directly consulted. Geographical moves between NASS dispersal locations or local authorities proved particularly problematic. Young people described the significant disruption this caused to their education, from having to drop out halfway through a course, to having to travel between two cities each weekend in order to continue their education.

Regular appointments at the Home Office or with solicitors or social workers created smaller but frequent disruptions to education, resulting in elevated absence rates which can be detrimental when applying to progress to – or within – an FE institution.

E) Institutional reluctance

Though not frequently cited by young people, nearly a third of key informants reported experiencing a degree of institutional reluctance to admit refugee and asylum-seeking pupils at the FE level. Access and funding guidance is interpreted in a variety of ways, and “colleges’ discretion”, combined with (at times misplaced) fear of violating Tier 4 obligations²⁷ was said to influence outcomes for individuals (KI, VS).

Key informants reported heightened caution leading to restricting access for young people with statuses perceived to be insecure, enrolment staff requesting more documentation than needed, and a growing reluctance to accept alternative letters (i.e. from a solicitor) as proof of status. This caution with regard to young refugees and asylum-seekers was also reported to be exacerbated by frequent changes to ESFA guidance and rules, which “make it tough for colleges to keep up” (KI, VS).

“Some people go to college [to study English] twice a week for three hours. In my humble opinion, that’s not enough at all [...] it is something you need to do every day.”

27 In 2012, London Metropolitan University had its ‘highly trusted’ Tier 4 sponsor status revoked, following a Home Office assessment that found 26 students studying ‘without leave to remain in the UK’. Their status has since been reinstated, and clarification provided that (in the absence of a ‘no-study condition’) asylum-seekers may study. Nonetheless, the case received significant publicity, and practitioners report that a climate of uncertainty and fear around Tier 4 compliance remains. For more information see [London Met’s website](#).

WHAT SUPPORTS?

The three most prevalent factors that support refugee and asylum-seeking young people's transition into FE were:

- A) Targeted support with college application and enrolment processes**
- B) Inclusive sixth forms and colleges**
- C) Longer term education planning and advice.**

Factors less frequently mentioned but of note included:

- The embedding of English language support into existing FE courses
- Accessing alternative forms of funding from charitable trusts.

A) Targeted support with college application and enrolment processes

The most commonly reported factor supporting refugee and asylum-seeking young people's transition into FE was having targeted support with college application and enrolment processes. Nearly a fifth of the young people directly consulted for this research, and approximately two thirds of FE casework notes identified this support – from teachers or support workers – as critical. Accompaniment of young people to college enrolment processes was found to be particularly helpful, providing “someone with the confidence and the language” to challenge initial staff decisions (KI, VS).

B) Inclusive sixth forms and colleges

Refugee and asylum-seeking young people's access to FE is positively affected by inclusive practice from colleges and sixth forms at the point of enrolment. Basic friendliness at first contact, the availability of bursaries for refugee and asylum-seeking students, and the presence of trained members of staff who understand relevant rights and eligibility were all reported to ease transitions to FE.

C) Longer term education planning and advice

Longer term guidance on possible routes into and through FE, tailored to the immigration status, age, educational history and strengths of a young person was found to be beneficial for approximately two thirds of the young person sample. This support

was typically provided by the voluntary sector or by schools and colleges. It was reported to be particularly effective when starting early – at secondary level or when engaging in entry level courses.

3 Transitions to higher education

This section presents findings on the factors that hinder and support the transition into HE.

WHAT HINDERS?

The two most significant factors that hinder transitions to HE were:

- A) Insufficient information, advice and guidance**
 - B) The implications of immigration status.**
- Other prominent factors included:
- C) Challenging entry requirements**
 - D) Accumulative pressure of application processes**
 - E) Institutional reluctance from universities.**

A) Insufficient information, advice and guidance

The most significant factor that emerged from research findings, reported or experienced by over two thirds of the total sample, was a lack of accurate information about refugee and asylum-seeking young people's rights and entitlements to HE.

Key informants often equated this challenge to those with refugee status in particular. Without the hard barrier of ineligibility for financial support experienced by asylum-seekers, transition to HE for those with refugee status was markedly hampered by receipt of inaccurate or insufficient IAG.

One young person said, “My whole journey was about finding the information that wasn't given to me and then [...] making my own way into university” (YP, Int). School and college-based key informants recognised this challenge, describing the complexity and frequent modification of entitlement policy as a “minefield” they struggled at times to navigate (KI, S/C).

“My whole journey was about finding the information that wasn’t given to me and then [...] making my own way into university.”

B) The implications of immigration status

Immigration status, primarily when linked to ineligibility for home fees and student finance, was reported as a key challenge by over two fifths of the total sample, including all key informants. And, for those with affected status it was without exception the primary barrier they encountered. Young asylum-seekers and those with DLR or UASC leave reported deferring places in the hope that a different status would be obtained. Those with status requiring them to meet ordinary residence requirements were also forced to defer entry to HE. Errors determining fee status were also reported, with several cases of young people who were in fact home students and eligible for student finance being classed as international students and rejected for student finance emerging.

Immigration status-related ‘no study’ conditions were also cited as a barrier by over a third of key informants. Although these conditions are often lifted for individuals, the time lost and the “chaos and confusion” (KI, Uni/VS) caused within universities has proved challenging. One young person told of getting a scholarship, and then receiving a ‘no study’ condition. This was ultimately lifted, but “it took so long that I couldn’t take up the scholarship. All the deadlines had closed by the time it got lifted” (YP, Int).

C) Challenging entry requirements

Over half of young people directly consulted referred to entry requirements as hindering their access to HE. For young people forced to flee their country of origin shortly before they were due to start university, evidencing prior learning is a key challenge.

Young people described challenges retrieving certification and obtaining references from teachers in home countries. They also reported institutions not recognising the certificates they did have as equivalents. “We have done it,” said one young person, “but we can’t prove it” (YP, FG).

For those arriving in the UK during the final two years of secondary school,²⁸ reaching the requisite standard with just a few years in the British education system can prove difficult. In particular, many pupils often lack GCSEs, or may have studied vocational courses not accepted by some universities. Others may excel in the subject of their choice, but fail to reach the academic English language level required. Finally, those who did have an appropriate level of English at the point of application, still identified the finances and study time necessary to pass an IELTS exam as a barrier to progression.

D) University application processes

Half of the key informants and close to a quarter of young people directly consulted identified challenges related to university applications. The complexity of the UCAS application process was particularly emphasised. One young person described it as “so complicated. It might not be, for those who are used to these applications all the time, but, with the language barrier, it is a really big application” (YP, Int). The cumulative pressure of completing multiple scholarship applications alongside UCAS can also be detrimental to a young person’s wellbeing and confidence, “especially when they start to get back outcomes that aren’t successful” (KI, VS).

E) Institutional reluctance from universities

Finally, distinct from fee status classification, a reluctance from some universities to even admit refugee and asylum-seeking students emerged as a hindering factor. Though not frequently mentioned by young people, this issue was raised by over two thirds of key informants. “Fear of the Home Office” (KI, Uni/VS), particularly in relation to Tier 4 obligations, was said to contribute to a “culture of [...] being over-cautious” (KI, VS). This was particularly equated to those without status or whose leave would expire during the course of study. Limited understanding of eligibility and other issues affecting these prospective students was also reported to have led to young people feeling “unwelcome” (KI, VS) when making enquiries or liaising with admissions teams.

28 In 2015, 88% of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in the UK were aged 14–17. See Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2018. Refugee and unaccompanied asylum seeking young people: guidance for paediatricians. www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/generated-pdf/document/Refugee-and-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-and-young-people---guidance-for-paediatricians.pdf.

WHAT SUPPORTS?

Significant work to improve access to HE for seekers of sanctuary in the UK has been undertaken in recent years. In this research, the most significant supportive factors identified were:

A) Long-term education planning, guidance and support

B) Participation in pre-university opportunities

C) Scholarships

D) Clear information and flexibility from universities.

Factors less frequently mentioned but of note include:

- Having role models from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds
- Funding to support application-related costs
- FE courses which specifically promoted HE aspirations.

A) Long-term education planning, guidance and support

Long-term education advice, guidance and support for young refugees and asylum-seekers with aspirations to study at university was the most frequently identified supportive factor. This helped over nine tenths of the young people directly consulted and who received support under the 'Access to HE' programme. This included workshops and advice sessions, help preparing for interviews or drafting personal statements, as well as support navigating the UCAS application process.

B) Participation in pre-university opportunities

The opportunity to participate in pre-university opportunities, including summer schools, foundational years or open days, helped the transition to HE for just under a third of the young people who received support under the 'Access to HE' programme. The funded opportunity to study at a university and adjust to the UK's HE academic culture was reported by young people consulted to be particularly helpful, as was the opportunity, when provided, to meet current students from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds on open days. "That gives you hope" (YP, FG) and leaves "[you] inspired by the testimony of others" (YP, FG).



C) Scholarships

Just over one fifth of young people directly consulted and two fifths of key informants described scholarships – whether university based or provided by an independent trust – as significant in supporting refugee and asylum-seeking young people's access to HE. Young people who had received scholarships stated that going to university would not have been possible without this support.

That scholarships are transformative for those who receive them is clear. Nonetheless, the limited availability of such scholarships means many young people remain unable to access this potential solution. Young people cited numerous challenges to gaining scholarships, including: restrictive eligibility criteria; schemes which only partially cover university costs; and scholarship application dates that are not accessible to those applying to university through clearing.

D) Clear information and flexibility from universities

Successful transition to HE was often linked to universities' commitment and flexibility when engaging with prospective refugee and asylum-seeking students. Approximately one fifth of young people directly consulted for this research recalled examples of such flexibility, including universities using their discretion to charge asylum-seekers home fees and offering fee-waivers; recognising asylum-seekers' prior learning in their country of origin; and being flexible in accepting IELTS scores which were below the expected score.

Provision of clear information about support available for refugee and asylum-seeking students on university websites or through designated focal points within admissions teams was also reported to ease access.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

This report finds that refugee and asylum-seeking young people are confronted by a multitude of barriers to realising their right to education. These barriers intersect, accumulate and become increasingly restrictive and complex as refugee and asylum-seeking young people attempt to reach further and higher education levels.

Young refugees and asylum-seekers are required to navigate the complexities of progressing in their education against an undercurrent of adversity and restrictive eligibility. Often these young people must do this without sufficient support, encouragement, information or advice from those around them. The challenges young refugees and asylum-seekers face on their journeys to progress through education can exacerbate underlying mental health conditions resulting from a young person's forced displacement. Such challenges can also cause young people to doubt their education rights and entitlements, as well as diminish their self-worth.

For young refugees and asylum-seekers, access to higher levels of education "comes at the end of cumulative education disadvantages which

prevent many from qualifying".²⁹ As refugee and asylum-seeking young people journey towards HE, the options available to them narrow. This research suggests that pressure accumulates when young people attempt to transition into HE. The importance of education to refugee and asylum-seeking young people and the pressure of successfully accessing university can be triggering and, if unsuccessful, particularly devastating.

Despite the multitude of hindering factors reported and experienced by refugee and asylum-seeking young people and practitioners, research findings demonstrate that progression is achievable. Holistic and specialist support from individuals – including social workers, case workers, teachers and representatives from the voluntary sector – is crucial, as are the decisions taken and approaches adopted by FE and HE institutions. The journey to further and higher education is possible for young refugees, if all actors come together to smooth the transitions process.

29 UNESCO (2019) Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Building bridges not walls (UNESCO), 15.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure refugee and asylum-seeking young people are able to progress to further education and higher education:

The Department for Education should:

- Work to extend access to home fees and student loans to asylum-seekers and those with DLR or UASC leave (including with applications for extensions pending).

The Home Office should:

- Provide clear guidance for FE and HE institutions about Tier 4 regulations and study for seekers of sanctuary
- Remove the three-year residency rule for holders of humanitarian protection and other forms of time-limited status
- Consider the impact on education progression and continuity when selecting location of asylum accommodation for a young person.

Higher education institutions should:

- Significantly expand the number of sanctuary scholarships and fee-waivers offered to young refugees and asylum-seekers
- Appoint dedicated focal points within admissions, student support or widening participation teams to support access for young refugees and asylum-seekers
- Invest in regular training for admissions and widening participation teams on rights and entitlements of refugee and asylum-seeking students
- Ensure all relevant staff have access to the factsheets produced as a follow-up to this report
- Provide clear information, publicly available, about admissions and support for prospective refugee and asylum-seeking students
- Explore creative alternatives to evidence of prior learning, where a prospective student is unable to provide documentation from their home country.

Further education institutions should:

- Invest in regular training for admissions, student support and progression workers on educational rights and entitlements of refugee and asylum-seeking students
- Ensure admissions staff are regularly updated on ESFA guidance

- Ensure all relevant staff have access to the factsheets produced as a follow-up to this report
- Exercise appropriate discretion and flexibility when considering a prospective refugee or asylum-seeking student for a course or for funding
- Provide clear information, publicly available, about admissions and support for prospective refugee and asylum-seeking students
- Provide appropriate pastoral and mental health support to enable young people to access, remain in and progress through FE.

Schools should:

- Invest in early educational planning for refugee and asylum-seeking students
- Support refugee and asylum-seeking students with applications and enrolment for FE or sixth form
- Provide appropriate pastoral and mental health support to enable young people to remain in and progress from secondary school to FE or sixth form.

The voluntary sector should:

- Continue provision of critical education and holistic support work
- Create a platform for young refugees who have accessed higher levels of education to encourage, guide and inspire others
- Equip the education sector with specialist training and guidance
- Foster collaboration and coordination between HE and FE institutions, independent scholarship providers and the charity sector.

The private sector should:

- Consider the provision of financial support, increasing the amount of scholarships and bursary schemes available to young refugees and asylum-seekers.

ANNEX 1: Sample breakdown

CATEGORY	METHOD	YOUNG PEOPLE	PRACTITIONERS	TOTAL SAMPLE
Primary data	Young person interview	6	–	6
	Young person focus group	16	–	16
	Key informant interviews	–	16	16
RSN's programme data	'Access to FE' casework notes	86	–	86
	'Access to HE' casework notes	49	–	49
	Enquiries to RSN's helpline	227 ³⁰	116	343
TOTAL		384	132	516

ANNEX 2: List of participating organisations

Expert practitioners from the following organisations participated in a key informant interview:

- Article 26 (now Universities of Sanctuary)
- Birkbeck, University of London
- City of Sanctuary
- Coram Children's Legal Centre
- Helen Bamber Foundation
- Kingston University
- Newman Catholic College
- Refugee Support Network (RSN)
- Sir George Monoux College
- Student Action for Refugees (STAR)
- UKCISA
- Universities of Sanctuary
- University of East London
- We Belong
- Winchester University

30 Includes enquiries made by young people or a representative (including parents, siblings, mentors or friends) on behalf of a young person.

**UNICEF WORKS TO BUILD
A BETTER WORLD FOR EVERY CHILD,
EVERYWHERE, EVERY DAY.**

**FOR EVERY
CHILD**

unicef 
UNITED KINGDOM

**Unicef UK, 1 Westfield Avenue,
Stratford, London, E20 1HZ**

Registered charity
England & Wales (1072612)
Scotland (SC043677)