

STAR News

THE QUARTERLY UPDATE FROM STUDENT ACTION FOR REFUGEES

Issue 32 Winter 2006



CULTURE, COMPASSION & COMING TOGETHER IN SUPPORT OF REFUGEES STAR National Conference 2006

In a world premiere, Liverpool Guild of Students this year played host to STAR (Student Action for Refugees) National Conference on 28th and 29th October. There was plenty of star quality with amazing live performances from Zeela, a Sheffield based all-women Liberian choir, Bravo- Bravo and Actors for Refugees. The conference brought together political speakers, personal testimonies and poetry with keynote speakers that included Amna Dumpor, a Bosnian Poet and member of Exiled Writers Ink; Alphonsos from Voice of Asylum Seekers and Louise Ellman, Member of Parliament for Liverpool Riverside and part of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees.

The conference kicked off in style with Zeela and on Saturday afternoon Question Time – STAR style – came to Liverpool with contributions from Tim Finch, Director of Communications at the Refugee Council; Sue Darling, Anti-Slavery International; Catherine Drew, IPPR; Neil Amas, ICAR and Voice of Asylum Seekers. The conference brought together students and young people from across the country and the STAR network with opportunities to attend workshops on issues as diverse as Detention, Access to Higher Education, Refugee Children and the Impact of Torture. But STAR conference is definitely not all talk and no action. Sunday Action Sessions sent delegates away impassioned with ideas on 'Getting through to their MP', 'Working with the Media', 'Setting up and maintaining a successful volunteering project' and 'Making the most of your STAR group' amongst others.

On Saturday night delegates got the red carpet treatment as they were wowed by an amazing performance from Bravo-Bravo, an acclaimed world music duo which



STAR Conference Question Time

brings together the steel pan and kora. Sunday definitely wasn't a day of rest as democracy was in action with the STAR AGM (see pages 3 and 4) and live drama in the form of the 'Asylum Monologues' by Actors for Refugees. But the real stars of the weekend were the students and young people whose passion and commitment was obvious and infectious. As one delegate put it, "The best thing about conference has been meeting other STARs and sharing ideas, just having the opportunity to be around so many awesome people and inspiring speakers." Roll on the sequel in 2007!

Action Day 2007 – Supporting Refugees Everywhere

It's coming up to that time of year again when STAR members across the country take action to raise awareness on refugee issues. Get this year's Action Day in your diaries – **7th March 2007**. Action Day provides an excellent opportunity for the entire network to join together to make a difference, with everyone doing activities in their local area. Check out the STAR website for more information www.star-network.org.uk

Coming up in this edition of **STAR News**... the lowdown on STAR conference, Interview in an Instant with Louise Ellman MP, Trustee Talk with Jonathan Price, news from STAR groups and much more.

Taking ACTION!

Asylum Seekers and HE

UK University students pay home fees (£1000 - £3000ish) if they come from an EU country or have lived in the UK full time for 3+ years. International fees (£8000-£40,000) are paid by anyone else wishing to attend university in the UK.

Asylum seekers are an exception. Even when they've gone through the 7+ years of school and achieved great grades and made friends, most funding councils choose not to contribute for them and most universities choose to charge them international fees. On £40/week, banned from working and student support, this is virtually impossible. However, it's worth pointing out that the fees charged are at the discretion of the individual universities.

London Met charges asylum seekers home fees as a point of principle, no matter what. Strathclyde Uni – my Glasgow Universities' younger, more progressive rival – has had a bursary scheme paying fees (including book costs) for one asylum seeker per year to study if they can prove they're good enough. It's been so successful that this year they've put it up to two per year, so impressed are they with the quality of students they're getting.

The issue in the University sector seems to be one of balancing the books versus the quality and integrity of education. Some universities, including most in Glasgow (go us!) are lobbying fees councils to treat asylum seekers fairly so the dilemma need never arise. But it's not always true that a university choosing to charge home fees or less should cost extra money.

How you can help

A number of people are already acting on this issue. As well as refugees and refugee support there are schools and teachers, annoyed that their hard work is being wasted.

Some things to consider surrounding campaigning for asylum seekers and HE:

Make sure it's absolutely impossible for people to misinterpret your motives. Other students will often either a) think you're trying to get asylum seekers kicked out of university or b) think you want to give asylum seekers a better deal than everyone else.

You are working with the university, not against them. When dealing your university directly, remember: you're helping them to safeguard their reputation as an institution that doesn't discriminate, or bar access to the poor while also helping them to access great quality students.

Alan, Glasgow STAR

Southampton STAR live like destitute asylum seekers

Members of Southampton STAR spent a night outside the Cube on Friday 17th November in order to illustrate what many failed asylum seeker are forced to do -sleep on the streets. They successfully managed to raise £300 during the night, the successful culmination of a week of raising awareness for the cause of destitute asylum seekers in the UK.

Southampton STAR President Chris recorded in his diary: "Whilst sleeping rough I felt like a living ghost- ignored and without a voice. All I could do was watch from ground level at everyone walking above me who seemed so superior" Whilst another participant complained: "Someone urinated in a bin I was lying next to – great!"

For 5 days and 5 nights several members of the group lived without access to any money. They were unable to buy food, or pay for transport; mobile phones were discarded along with other luxury items. Homes were left and replaced with friends' floors. They were living out of a bag packed only with clothing necessities.

Jemima felt that, "The week made me appreciate all the support that I had around me, and heightened my awareness that destitute asylum seekers do not have this." The members of STAR experienced many trials through the week. One member, Becky, observed: "I was flying in the concourse and someone threw food at me because I was playing the part of a destitute asylum seeker. It makes me realise what they have to go through every day."

The total money raised throughout the week was £564. In addition the group held a stall where they got 150 students to sign a petition which they will send to local MP's in Southampton to initiate a change to the law, allowing more support to these people in this already distressing environment.

Chris & Kat, Southampton STAR

ESOL Funding cuts hits asylum seekers

In October the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) announced changes in its funding and priorities for 2007/08. As part of these changes there will be no LSC funding for supported asylum seekers aged 19+ to study Further Education courses. Supported asylum seekers aged 16-18 will still be eligible.

In addition, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) is no longer free, except to the unemployed and those learners in receipt of benefits – including those with refugee status, humanitarian protection and discretionary leave. This means that for the current year – 2006/2007 – funding remains unchanged and supported asylum seekers remain eligible for LSC funding up to level 3. But, and it's a big but, from 2007/2008 colleges will classify all asylum seekers as international students – although colleges do have the discretion to charge asylum seekers as home students or waive fees. These changes have come as part of a Government review and is driven by ambitions for the New Asylum Model.

What you can do

STAR members and other supporters are urged to write to their MP, as individuals or as part of a group to express concern. You can double check who your MP is by going to <http://www.upmystreet.com/commons/>. To assist with this the three key points around ESOL are:

- Maintaining a policy of dispersal without supporting people to learn English is irresponsible and will have detrimental effects on social inclusion, community cohesion, personal health and well being.
- Preventing access to mainstream ESOL provision for asylum seekers will inevitably restrict people's ability to integrate successfully as refugees.
- Government, local authorities and agencies (both mainstream and others) will end up spending far more on interpreting and other services.

If you want any further information on this or any other campaigns then contact James Fisher, Campaigns Co-ordinator on campaigns@star-network.org.uk

News in brief... all the latest on asylum and refugee issues

November's Queen Speech at the State Opening of Parliament laid out the planned legislative programme for the coming year. Amongst the bills announced was The Border and Immigration Bill, This new bill will largely concentrate on immigration rather than asylum centring around proposals to reform the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, increasing border controls and giving new powers to Customs officials. However, the bill also proposes streamlining the appeals system to speed up deportations and will create a new category for people who are claiming asylum but have committed serious crimes.



NATIONAL STAR CONFERENCE LANDS IN LIVERPOOL!

This year's annual STAR conference took place on the 28-29 of October at the Liverpool Guild of Students. The central theme was Asylum: A Global Issue in Your Back Yard and over the course of two days STARs from across the country participated in workshops and talks that addressed many issues, including those surrounding detention, legal aid and the New Asylum Model. In addition, a number of key decisions were made about how STAR will operate over the next year. Read on to find out more!

Democracy in action!

STAR youth members get a voice at the STAR AGM

STAR youth members have this year been able to fully participate in STAR. The Annual General Meeting took place on Sunday 29th October 2006 at the Liverpool Guild of Students. The AGM is the place and the time for STAR members to have the opportunity to change the way that STAR operates. However, up until this year it has only been the Chairs (or a designated representative if the Chair cannot attend) of STAR student groups who have had the right to vote at the AGM. This has, unfortunately meant that youth members have not been able to participate fully.

Traditionally, STAR has been an organisation of student led activism but over recent years the youth network has expanded and become more active within the organisation. With this in mind, a proposal was put forward at this year's AGM to enable youth members better representation and to have a democratic say in the direction of STAR.

The proposal presented was that pre-AGM meetings will be held for non-university members. At these meetings, members will discuss the AGM agenda and elect members who will represent their opinions and vote on their behalf at the AGM. One representative will be elected for each 10 youth members and regional meetings will be organised as appropriate. The number was decided upon to reflect equivalent levels of involvement and influence from the student network, based on there being an average of 10 members per university group; and a youth member's level of involvement being equivalent to that of a student committee member.



The STAR AGM 2006 gets into full flow

The proposal was passed with unanimous support by all those with voting rights at the AGM. In the words of one delegate, "One of the best things about this year's STAR conference was youth members being given the vote. It's great to see that there is fair and equal representation between student and youth members."

Hosting conference a privilege & a pleasure

Helping to host the National STAR conference at our uni here in Liverpool was a very exciting experience to say the least! Over the course of three days on the last weekend of October 2006, we blitzed our students' union in posters, ensured everyone arrived ok, bought 25 pizzas on the opening night for a ravenous group of STARs, sorted out various meals throughout the weekend and ensured everyone knew where they were going and what they were doing.



Liverpool STAR looking out for where STAR Conference 2007 will take place...

Yvette Stephens, current Liverpool STAR president said: "Hosting the STAR conference in Liverpool was a great privilege for both the Liverpool STAR group and our guild. It was a great way to cement the team together and provides a focal point for new members as soon as they join after Freshers."

Talking about the local links we have here in Liverpool, she went on to say: "We are lucky to have great resources within the local refugee community in Merseyside and are eternally thankful to the likes of Sola Arts and Asylum Link Merseyside for all their support. It was also great to meet our local MP Louise Ellman who spoke on behalf of her constituency."

The feedback given to our group has been very positive, and although a lot of organisation is involved, the sense of achievement after hosting your very own conference at your union is unbeatable.

Bethan Jenkins joined our STAR group this year. She had a lot to say on her experience of the conference. "As a new member of STAR, the workshops, talks and question sessions were a brilliant insight into a wide range of asylum issues that I hadn't previously considered. Hosting the conference at our uni was great fun, a really good way to get to know the members of my STAR group and to meet groups from other areas and share ideas."

I would wholly recommend getting your STAR group involved in the conference for next year- it appears that the position of 'host uni' will be open once again, and we hope that some of you will take the challenge- its fantastic fun!

We would just like to say thank you to all who helped, including the national STAR team and the absolutely wonderful staff at our Guild of Students.

Patrick, STAR Liverpool Secretary

Conference caught on camera



Bosnian poet and member of Exiled Writers Ink, Amna Dumpor addresses the conference through the medium of poetry.



Zeela choir wow delegates at the conference with their soul inspiring music.

Photo: James Uiley

Photo: James Uiley



Actors for Refugees move and inspire STAR members with their 'Asylum Monologues'



Delegates deep in discussion about working with the media and getting through to your MP in one of the many workshops

Interview in an **INSTANT**

Louise Ellman



Louise Ellman is the Labour Member of Parliament for Liverpool Riverside and spoke on the Saturday of the STAR Conference. Louise has been an MP since 1997 and is a member of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees. She is also a Council Member of the Holocaust Education Trust.

Firstly, what were your impressions of the STAR national conference?

I thought that the STAR conference was very well organised and informative.

For many of the young people and students involved with STAR it is campaigning on refugee issues that first gets them into 'politics'. Do you recall what got you involved with politics?

I have been interested in politics since childhood – I remember feeling angry about inequalities – and racism as I grew older. I wanted to do something to bring change, though never knew exactly what that “something” was. I became a Lancashire County Councillor in 1970 and Leader of the Council from 1981-1997. I then was elected as MP for Liverpool Riverside.

STAR members have sometimes faced difficulty in getting MPs to make a stand on asylum and refugee issues. Why do you think this is?

These issues are very unpopular with the public, who often feel threatened.

If you could single-handedly implement one change to asylum policy in the UK, what would it be?

I'd restore the right to work [for asylum seekers].

Finally, what top tip would you give to STAR members keen to engage with their MP and get them involved with the work that they are doing locally?

Approach MPs on the basis of exchanging information on issues.

Thank you Louise!

In the next edition, STAR interviews Christine Bacon from Actors for Refugees (who performed at STAR conference 2006.) Actors for Refugees was formed in Melbourne, Australia, in September 2001. Send your questions for Christine to communications@star-network.org.uk

The STAR Annual General Meeting (AGM) explained!

STAR's Memorandum of Association (also called the constitution) requires that STAR hold an AGM every year. It is also a legal requirement to have this meeting each year.

All members of STAR, funders, supporters and others with an interest in the organisation are invited to the meeting. At the AGM, the Trustees of the charity (or Management Committee as we call them) present the activities of the organisation over the last year. It is a chance to meet, put questions to and elect the Management Committee members who are responsible for the management of STAR as a charity.

Every vote counts! Every Management Committee member, and every STAR group has one vote at the AGM. STAR youth members also have a vote at the AGM, with pre-meetings held to elect representatives (see separate article for more details).

What do Management Committee members do? Management Committee members are responsible for the effective and efficient management of STAR as a national registered charity. They are the trustees of STAR as a charity and company and are legally responsible for STAR's actions and funds. Responsibilities include setting the aims and objectives of the charity and translating these into a business plan, maintaining an oversight of STAR's funds and appointing and managed STAR's Chief Executive.

NATIONAL OFFICE NEWS

STAR national office doubles!

The New Year heralds exciting times for STAR national office, as three new members of staff start work at STAR. The new people joining the team are: Sarah Williams, Youth Outreach Officer, Russell Brooks, Volunteer Support Officer and Emer O'Sullivan, Development Officer. Sarah will work with STAR youth members to develop and expand opportunities for young people to be involved in STAR. Russell will offer support to members setting up and running volunteering projects as well as developing an internship scheme in the National Office. Emer will be supporting the development of the network by fundraising for resources and building support for STAR from individual donors through our 'Friends of STAR' scheme. All the new staff are keen to meet you and will be out on the road visiting groups throughout the Spring term.

Goodbye Hannah!

After a year working for STAR national office, Hannah Blythyn, STAR Communications & Events Officer is leaving STAR for pastures new. Hannah said of her time working with STAR, "I feel privileged to have worked for an organisation with so many committed and enthusiastic members and supporters. I have learnt a lot over the last year and will forever remain a supporter and friend of STAR."

Boost for Campaigning

The STAR national office has recently welcomed James Fisher to the team as an intern for this academic year. James will be STAR's Campaign Co-ordinator researching, planning and implementing STAR's campaign agenda and activity over the coming year. James was Co-Chair of the STAR group at Warwick University last year.

STAR is looking to launch a brand new campaign for the next academic year and is currently looking at the issues that we should be tackling. In the meantime, the national office is keen to support groups in any way in many of the excellent local campaigns that they run. If you want to contact the national office about any campaign work you are doing or have a great idea for something that you think STAR should campaign on nationally then contact campaigns@star-network.org.uk.

Thanks to Sile!

Sile Reynolds has been working on wrapping up and producing an evaluation document of STAR's last campaign – Age Matters! Sile has put a great deal of work into a comprehensive and useful paper which has been invaluable to STAR and will assist James' work over the coming months. Big thanks go out to Sile for all her time and effort that has gone into some amazing work.

STAR is looking for a Treasurer

Not quite national office news, but news about STAR nationally nonetheless. The STAR Management Committee (see the AGM article for more about what the Management Committee do) are looking to recruit a Treasurer. The Treasurer would maintain an overview of STAR's affairs, ensuring its financial viability in the short and long term and work with the Chief Executive, staff team and service providers to ensure that proper financial records and procedures are maintained.

Amongst other things, the Treasurer would be expected to present the financial reports to the Management Committee and membership at quarterly meetings and the AGM (quarterly reports are prepared by STAR's accountants); to ensure timely preparation and submission of accounts, annual returns and other required information to funders, external organisations and regulatory bodies (Charity Commission and Companies House) in order to fully comply with all relevant legislation and regulations; to ensure yearly external audit of accounts is undertaken and any recommendations implemented; and to present the accounts and a summary of STAR's financial affairs to the AGM in a coherent and easy to understand manner. The Treasurer would be part of the Management committee and would therefore need to commit four Saturdays and one full weekend a year for meetings and the STAR national conference.

If you, or anyone you know is interested then please contact STAR on info@star-network.org.uk or 0207 840 4400 for more information.

STAR reaches out internationally: Bulgarian Exchange

On Sunday 22nd October STAR volunteer John McGeachy met Valeria, Olia, Nezi and Vladi as they arrived in the UK for a week long study visit, organised by STAR. All four are students from Bulgaria and volunteer at the Refugee Legal Clinic in Sofia. The aim of the visit was to exchange ideas and experience and learn more about the situation with regards to refugees in the UK and organisations such as STAR which work in support of refugees.

The visit involved a packed schedule with a broad cross section of visits – to Save the Children, the Refugee Council, Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) and the Gatwick Detainees Support Group. Neil Gerrard MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees, also hosted Valeria, Olia, Nezi and Vladi on a visit to the Houses of Parliament, taking them on a tour and advising them on the position with regards to immigration and asylum in his constituency and in the UK as a whole.

On the Friday they traveled up to Liverpool to participate in the STAR National Conference, hosting a workshop about the Refugee Legal Clinic in Bulgaria. Saturday night saw STAR delegates learn some traditional Bulgarian dance moves!

Olia summed up the exchange, "During these ten days I felt privileged to meet extraordinary people sharing the same ideas and fighting for the same cause as our Clinic. Their example will become a long-lasting source of inspiration and tenacity for me. The scope and importance of the refugee rights protection work



Olia, Nezi, Vladi & Valeria with members of Liverpool STAR

in the UK amazed me. So did the central place the issue occupies in the public attention of the country. "

Nezi added, "As a whole my visit to the UK is an experience I will never forget. It was really enriching and gave me a lot of new ideas. But what I consider most valuable from it is that it broadened my horizon – now after I met all those wonderful people I believe I can really make a difference and that nothing is impossible if you really want it!"

News in brief... continued!

At the end of October the Conservative Party published a policy document on immigration. The paper doesn't deal with asylum at all and they have stressed that they want to keep asylum separate from immigration. The paper also rules out an amnesty because they believe it acts as a pull factor encouraging new illegal entrants.

On 18th October an Independent Asylum Commission was launched. The Commission is completely independent and is set to conduct a nationwide review of the UK asylum process over eighteen months. It will then publish a report suggesting credible reforms to the system in time to influence the manifestos for the next general election. The Commission will operate via three methods: public hearings around the country; a general call for written evidence; and original research.

This edition of the STAR newsletter was edited by STAR Liverpool Secretary Patrick Scott-Graham. Special thanks go to Chris, Jonathan, Alan, Louise Ellman MP, Kat and Natasha for their contributions.

Would you like to write for or edit STAR's newsletter? Tell the network about your STAR experiences, what motivates you to be involved with STAR or share examples of things you have done that have worked well. It's simple and you can get help from the team. Contact Katherine or Natasha to have a chat about it. The next newsletter will be coming out after the Action Day and the deadline is 13th March. Email: communications@star-network.org.uk or call 0207 840 4443.

TRUSTEE TALK

Jonathan Price answers all!

Each newsletter we'll be bringing you a one to one with a member of the STAR management committee who serve as trustees of the charity. This time around it is Jonathan Price, former STAR student member, and current university researcher.

What got you involved with STAR?

My involvement with STAR began while I was at university. I became highly concerned when I learnt about the issues facing refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and abroad. My studies in social anthropology and the politicised environment at university opened my eyes to the injustices that were taking place not only in far away countries but in our own country. Becoming involved in STAR was a tangible way to influence the situation through voluntary work and campaigning. My current work as a researcher at the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) involves carrying out research on the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK with the aim of informing debates and influencing policy in this area.

Tell us a bit about your role on the Management Committee.

I am one of the newest members of the Management Committee. It is an advisory role as I give guidance to

the National Office on a wide range of matters, including the development of STAR's new website. I bring the experience of my own work in the refugee sector to advise STAR on how to best run the organisation. It is, of course, a two-way learning experience, and I can apply what I learn from STAR to my own work.

When was your first contact with STAR?

My involvement with STAR began during my second year of study at SOAS. I coordinated a volunteering project at Hackney Community College helping students who were struggling with the ESOL syllabus.

Where do you see STAR in 5 years time?

I see STAR expanding, with an active group in every university and college in the UK. To cope with expansion, I see a central office being established in the north to divide responsibilities and to enable STAR coordinators to visit regional groups more regularly.



If you were Prime Minister for the day what one thing would you do to support refugees and asylum seekers?

There is more than one thing that I would do to support refugees and asylum seekers if I were Prime Minister for the day! Where do you start? Perhaps a good starting point would be to acknowledge publicly, in no uncertain terms, why it is that people seek asylum in the UK. There is a culture of suspicion around the issue of asylum, which has been institutionalised. The acknowledgment of people's protection needs from the highest political position, independent of discussions about national security and immigration restriction, would be highly welcome.

CAMPUS COLLECTIVE... A ROUND UP OF STAR GROUP NEWS

Birmingham STAR met with the Children's Society to discuss restarting 'SPLAT', a supported play scheme for refugee children in the city. STAR has received funding from their Union towards this project. The group also participated in a STAR training session on working with refugee children, facilitated by their Regional Rep, Anna Beardsley

Bradford STAR are holding a cake sale (popular as always!) to raise funds for future planned activities

Bristol and Oxford STAR are planning a visit to attend a Close Campsfield demo outside Campsfield House Immigration Reception Centre

Cambridge STAR are working with the Harambee Centre in Cambridge to organise a workshop for school children about refugee issues

Cardiff STAR are working with their university volunteering bureau to set up a lunch club where asylum seekers, in particular failed asylum seekers who may be destitute, can come and get a meal, hang out and receive support.

De Montfort STAR have made contact with a national volunteering charity ToCh to volunteer at a local drop in centre and food distribution project in Leicester.

Edinburgh and Glasgow STAR facilitated 5 workshops at a Glasgow High School as part of their Programme for Global Citizenship Day. The workshops were delivered to 130 students in total and they overwhelmingly rated STAR workshops the best of the whole day. Well done Edinburgh and Glasgow STAR!

Essex STAR are preparing for 'Refugee Day' on campus, at the beginning of December. In collaboration with other societies, the group will be hosting a talk by Natasha from STAR, showing documentaries and running an awareness raising stall.

UCL STAR, a new edition to the STAR network, are working with the Refugee Advice and Support Centre in London to start up a mentoring scheme for refugees and asylum seekers.

Warwick STAR recently held another successful speed dating night and raised approx £200 for local refugee projects. No info as yet as to how many happy couples are together as a result!

Dates for your Diaries...

STAR Events

7th March – Action Day 2007: Supporting Refugees Everywhere

If your STAR group has an event coming up you want others to know about then contact national office at communications@star-network.org.uk

External Events

1st December – World AIDS Day

2nd December – International Day for the Abolition of Slavery

5th December – International Volunteer Day

27th January – Holocaust Memorial Day

26th February – 11th March – Fair Trade Fortnight

8th March – International Women's Day

9th – 11th March – National Student Volunteering Conference, The Aldelphi Hotel, Liverpool www.studentvol.org.uk

21st March – International Day for the Elimination for Racial Discrimination



STAR (Student Action for Refugees)

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