

VICE CHANCELLOR'S GUIDE

A Guide to the inclusion of asylum seekers in Higher Education



'We want the doors
of universities to
be open to us'

1. What is the problem?

Asylum seekers have come to the UK and made claims for protection under the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Asylum is a human right we all enjoy and the UK has a long tradition of providing safety for those facing persecution. However, while in the asylum process people face many barriers accessing higher education in the UK. This is of particular significance as asylum seekers generally come from countries where education is valued. Higher education is no exception and the main barrier that many asylum seekers wish to overcome is the tuition fees that they are charged.

Unlike their UK peers, asylum seekers are not eligible for Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding as home students. As a result, they are usually considered as international students for fee purposes and are charged substantially higher rates. In addition asylum seekers are denied access to student support and the majority are not allowed to work. This effectively prevents them from accessing higher education. We feel that this is in direct contradiction of the UK Government's ratification of the United Nations Convention against Discrimination in Education which states their commitment to "make higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of individual capacity".¹

The exclusion of asylum seekers from higher education funding is in sharp contrast to other parts of the education sector. Asylum seekers up to the age of sixteen are required to attend school and are eligible for Learning and Skills Council funding up to the age of nineteen. Adult asylum seekers can also study in further education as home students and become eligible for Learning and Skills Council funding after six months.

The current funding of higher education means that asylum seekers who gain UK qualifications up to Level 3 are unable to progress to Level 4 and above without the support of individual universities. For some, this has meant spending time without being able to study, waiting for the Home Office to resolve their claim for asylum. Although the Home Office is making faster decisions on asylum claims, there are still many people who face a wait of several years for their cases to be determined². This leaves them in limbo and unable to continue with their lives. If granted leave to remain at the end of this process, people face the prospect of having to try and integrate into society after many years during which they were effectively excluded.

It is vital that asylum seekers are able progress their learning while they wait for their claims to be concluded. Studying and gaining qualifications in higher education will help them rebuild their lives and fulfil their potential.

2. Who is affected by it?

- Asylum seekers who are still waiting for an initial decision or who are in the process of appealing a decision on their claim for asylum
- Asylum seekers who have been refused asylum but who cannot return or be returned safely
- Dependants of asylum seekers in either of these positions.

3. What is the solution?

The Scottish Government decided in 2007 to fund certain categories of asylum seekers from September 2008³. The policy change was targeted at young people who had claimed asylum before 1 December 2003. As of March 2009, 20 asylum seekers had benefited from the policy. In England, the Access to Higher Education Working Group was formed in 2008 to work towards a similar change to HEFCE funding⁴.

In the UK, some individual universities have used their discretion to admit individual asylum seekers as home students on a case by case basis. The Brighter Futures group in Manchester has had success in persuading the following universities to go further than this and to make a positive commitment to offer home fees to a particular number of asylum seeking students each year.

- November 2007 - Vice Chancellor of Manchester University announced to the student union that undergraduates who are asylum seekers would be treated as home students from September 2008 onwards.
- February 2008 - Liverpool Hope University will remit international tuition fees for 8 undergraduate students at any one time
- September 2008 - Liverpool University has agreed that a maximum of 5 asylum seekers at a time can study at the home fees rate.
- May 2009 - 5 places as home students for undergraduates who are asylum seekers at Manchester Metropolitan University.
- July 2009 - Edgehill University decided to support two students seeking asylum on the basis of them paying home fees.

In addition, informal fundraising activity resulted in Save the Children supporting three students to commence their chosen degree programmes in Autumn 08/09 as home students for fee purposes. Plans are in place to develop a longer term fundraising strategy.

We would like more universities to follow the lead of those cited above and either accept asylum seekers as home students for fees purposes or remit tuition fees in full.

4. Why should universities support this initiative?

- Higher education institutions look for students that are the best academically and committed to their studies. Asylum seekers who meet the academic entry requirements not only demonstrate an intellectual ability but also the personal determination to succeed in difficult circumstances.
- Asylum seeking students who want to access higher education are characteristically highly motivated. The case studies (page 5) clearly demonstrate that it is possible to study successfully with the bare minimum of financial support.
- Asylum seekers are not asking for academic concessions; they simply want to be afforded opportunities to continue their learning.
- In supporting this initiative, higher education institutions will demonstrate that they are embracing widening participation and actively promoting diversity and equal opportunities.
- Allowing people to participate in higher education is good for local communities. The government agrees, noting that there is "a strong positive correlation between the cohesiveness of local communities and participation in higher education"⁵.
- Giving asylum seekers access to HE will have a long-term return for the local, regional and national economies through strengthening the skills and earning potential of those granted leave to remain in the UK⁶.
- There are universities that accept asylum seekers as home students but on a case by case basis - we would argue that one guaranteed place as a minimum would be preferable. A definite commitment is required.

Case Studies

The Save the Children Perspective

"Since Brighter Futures began this initiative, four members of the group have embarked on an undergraduate degree programme with the support of Save the Children. One young man received a first class honours degree in Business and Investment Banking. In October 2009, the other three students commenced the second year of their degrees; they all achieved 2:1 average in their end of year exams. On an even more positive note, three out of the four students have now had a positive decision on their asylum claim and have the right to remain in the UK. These four young people demonstrate why it is so important to invest money in these young people's education. We believe these costs are negligible in light of the financial and social cost brought about by the denial of education".

The University Perspective

"**The University of Manchester** is committed to pursuing exemplary fair access and admissions processes to identify and attract the very best students regardless of background. The University also recognises that fair and meritocratic admissions policies need to be underpinned by generous, merit-based and needs-focused bursary and scholarship programmes. It is within this context that Manchester provides scholarships to asylum seekers accepted onto undergraduate programmes that allow these students to pay home rather than overseas fees. Our policy fits well with the broad range of equity and merit scholarships and bursaries available to students from the UK and overseas. The decision to accept undergraduate asylum seekers on home fees is based on the University's commitment to support the best students in gaining access to higher education regardless of background. The number of asylum seekers currently studying here is small. Clearly, if the numbers were to increase significantly, the University would need to re-assess the situation within the context of our broader scholarship programmes."

"**Liverpool Hope University** became involved in this initiative because, as the only ecumenical university in Europe, supporting marginalised and disadvantaged groups is at the heart of our Mission. We have a long association of working with asylum seekers on Merseyside stretching back over 7 years and this is a natural extension and formalisation of the existing practice and commitment.

The initiative is supported by the Vice Chancellor and the Rectorate Team. The financial impact, even for a relatively small University, is minimal when weighed against the Mission-fit of the activity. We have committed the University to support 8 students seeking sanctuary at any one time.

These students involved in the scheme so far, have fitted in quietly and modestly and make few demands on the University. Their presence contributes to the feel good factor within

the University. The academic community is aware that it is doing something concrete to support a marginalised and disadvantaged group. There have been no negative impacts. The students, understandably, wish to remain anonymous and so this has reduced any PR benefit or attempts to recruit other asylum seekers.

The Student Perspective

Mohammed: "Being involved with the Brighter Futures group I learnt that some universities allowed asylum seekers to pay home student fees; I accepted a BA Accounting and Finance offer from one of these universities. I knew the university would be a very difficult experience given my immigration and financial status.

I had to acquire the £3000 tuition fees for first year to be able to enrol for the course. Rebecca from Brighter Futures tried tirelessly to help me with this but the funders did not have much trust on my ability. My father also advertised for some grant on an Asian newspaper; that was more successful and generated a substantial amount of money towards the tuition fees. The rest of the money was generated through loans from friends and family. A director of a Leading Islamic charity also read my plea on the newspaper and offered to provide me with free accommodation in London. Also an ex-colleague of mine provided me with £10 every week. This £10 was like a lifeline for me.

All these little contributions made a huge difference in my life. I did not believe in God and it created problems with the person who accommodated me; I agreed to leave. Without his generosity the first month would have been much harder. The new accommodation was overcrowded, dirty and cold but it provided me with a roof over my head.

I contacted my university advice centre few times asking for help but there was not anything they could have done for me. I tried for some other private grants again all of these efforts were not successful I did a lot of extra-curricular activities and volunteering; being busy helped me keep my mind off all the negative things. On January 2008, I received Indefinite Leave to Remain which meant I was finally allowed to work to support myself. I resumed my third year and started working legally; moved to a better accommodation and was finally able to apply for financial services jobs/internships.

Upon graduating (with a first) I started applying for jobs within the financial services in the City. Investment Banking is the hardest industry to get into alongside other financial services industry; however, for the first time in my life I was able to make an independent choice. After careful consideration I have accepted the offer from a bank starting September 2010; solely because of how much money they were offering.

I am not bitter about not being able to enjoy my childhood, teenage years or university years. I have not done a lot of things which my fellow peers have done but now I have endless opportunities. Being in the asylum process in the UK for six years made me a more

driven, determined, stronger and ruthless person. Some people have criticised me for becoming greedy but let me assure you that when you have lived in absolute poverty and deprivation for most of your life; it is important to experience the rich side of life too. I will always remember where I come from; all the help I received from others; integrity and ethical decision making will always be a part of my professional life.

Mariam: "I looked forward to my first lecture and when that day came I went there with a positive attitude. However, from the very first lecture when I saw the reading list I started to realise that things are not going to be easy; I didn't have any budget to spend on books and I had to borrow them from the library (as long as they were available and some were not). The next barrier was social life! I felt like an outsider since I couldn't go shopping for books or groceries with other students. I couldn't afford to join them for lunch or their evening social activities. All these barriers affected me emotionally, especially when I remembered that in my home country I never thought that there would be a day when I was short of money. I came from a background where I attended private school, in comparison to now, when I am too embarrassed to even acknowledge that I live in a very low economic state.

I have now passed my first year successfully and I will start my second year. I know that despite all the hard times I have been through, the fact that I was fortunate enough to have this opportunity to study is one of main reasons why I stayed strong through the asylum process and grew as a person. I was always so hungry to learn and be able to share my knowledge with the rest of the world to make it a better place. I know that if my university education had been delayed by even one year, I would have been emotionally destroyed and would have lost track of my future goals and plans. As I believe that education is the key to success and I hope that one day I will be able to use what I have learnt to help those less fortunate than me."

Solomon: I felt the same way as any other student going to university. I was excited because attending university is the way forward, to improve my lifestyle, gain knowledge and to be able to contribute to UK society. I was also anxious about what to expect there; both the challenge of studying new subjects and how to make new friends in a new environment. In truth I'm not settled yet, because I am not able to satisfy all my needs as a student e.g. have cup of coffee / sandwich in my break time, due to the lack of finance. However, being a student has made a great difference to my life; my mind is always occupied by my course work and how to improve my knowledge, rather than being dragged down by other thoughts e.g. my ongoing asylum claim. If I hadn't had this chance I believe that I could be on the streets, doing drugs and other bad things and my health deteriorating. This opportunity is a dream come true and I'm looking forward to giving back what I have received.

Further Information

If you would like to find out more about this initiative, please contact:

James Fisher @ STAR (Student Action for Refugees)
Oxford House
Derbyshire Street
London E2 6HG

Tel: 0207 729 8880 ext. 205
Email: students@star-network.org.uk
www.star-network.org.uk

Rebecca Murray
Save the Children
195 Fog Lane
Manchester
M20 6FG

Tel: 0161 249 5134

Email: r.murray@savethechildren.org.uk
www.abrighterfuture.org.uk



1 United Nations Convention Against Discrimination in Education, Article 4: adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO on 14th December 1960. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/education.htm>, last searched 3 September 2009

2 The estimates of numbers of asylum seekers waiting for their cases to be concluded were initially given at 450,000 and July 2011 set for fully resolving these cases. Current figures are that around 200,000 cases remain, although the actual number is likely to be less (around 100,000). Grants of leave to remain to date have been approximately 30%.

3 The eligibility criteria are: individuals must be 18 or under at the time of the asylum application, which must have been prior to 1 December 2003, and that they must have been resident in Scotland for three years

4 The groups includes the Refugee Council, Save the Children, Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), Westminster Abbey, National Union of Students, the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU), The Children's Society, Student Action for Refugees (STAR) and a number of universities.

5 Home Office. 2001. Community Cohesion, A report of the independent review team chaired by Ted Cante cited in DFES. 2003. The future of Higher Education <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/pdfs/DfES-HigherEducation.pdf>, last searched 3 September 2009. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) research also found that refugees with UK qualifications had a higher earning potential. See Bloch, A (2002) Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training (DWP)

6 The need for graduates in the UK is highlighted by the OECD 2007 report 'Education at a glance' at <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Education/documents/2007/09/17/oecdreport.pdf>, last searched 3 September 2009. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) research also found that refugees with UK qualifications had a higher earning potential. See Bloch, A (2002) Refugees' opportunities and barriers in employment and training (DWP)

