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Improving Access to Higher Education for Asylum Seekers: A Partnership Approach

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Abstract: This paper considers two, linked examples of innovative practice in widening participation activity designed to work with adult asylum seeker and refugee communities. Specific examples of interventions that have been undertaken at Cardiff University are described, namely ‘*Live Local; Learn Local*’, a suite of courses delivered in communities around South East Wales, and the ‘*Aspire Summer School*’, offering a combination of courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) alongside academic short courses. The authors suggest these programmes are innovative as: (1) they provided free and meaningful English language courses; (2) they provided flexible routes to undergraduate and postgraduate study; (3) the programmes seek to remove structural barriers to education through a contextualised approach; and (4) the specificity of the Welsh context and partial devolution of Wales played a role in creating these opportunities. These interventions are presented in terms of their positive aspects and also where further development is required. The paper concludes with suggestions as to how higher education institutions can improve the provision offered to support asylum seekers and refugees.

Keywords: higher education; asylum seekers; refugees; widening participation; widening access; ESOL; civic mission

Introduction

Two, linked examples of innovative practice in widening participation activity designed to work with adult asylum seeker and refugee communities are considered. After presenting background information on the barriers that these communities can face in accessing higher education (HE), specific examples of interventions that have been undertaken at Cardiff University are described, namely ‘*Live Local; Learn Local*’, a suite of courses delivered in

communities around South East Wales, and the ‘*Aspire Summer School*’, offering a combination of courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) alongside academic short courses. These programmes are innovative as: (1) they provided free and meaningful English language courses; (2) they provided flexible routes to undergraduate and postgraduate study; (3) the programmes seek to remove structural barriers to education through a contextualised approach; and (4) the specificity of the Welsh context and partial devolution of Wales played a role in creating these opportunities. These interventions are presented in terms of their positive aspects and also the areas where further development is required. Finally, the authors suggest areas of improvement that higher education institutions (HEIs) can aim towards.

Context

In the UK, the term ‘refugee’ is broken down into a number of different asylum statuses. The term ‘asylum seeker’ refers to someone who has submitted an application for protection based on the Refugee Convention of 1951.¹ If a person has ‘refugee status’, they are usually granted leave to remain for five years, after which they can apply for indefinite leave to remain (Refugee Council, 2013). Wales is only partially devolved and policies for immigration and asylum remain within the control of the UK Government via the Home Office. Détourbe and Goastellec (2018) helpfully provide a summary (see Table 1) of the different categorisations of asylum status and link this to corresponding rights for residence, welfare benefits, right to work and higher education.

Table 1. Administrative refugee status and corresponding welfare and student rights in England

Asylum Status	Assigned Residence	Welfare Benefits	Right to Work	Student Status	Right to Study	Admissions	Fees	Mainstream Student Support
Asylum seeker	Yes (initial accommodation)	Yes (UK Border Agency)	No	International student		HEI level decision No government control on student numbers	International fees	No HEI funds only
Refugee	Yes (dispersal accommodation) Eligible to social housing	Yes Mainstream welfare benefits +Integration loan +Housing benefit		Domestic/Home student	Yes	HEI level decision Government control on student numbers	Home fees International fees (home fees only after 3 years' residence)	Yes (immediately eligible) + HEFCE funding Yes (only after 3 years' residence) + HEFCE funding
Discretionary Leave to Remain	No Not eligible to permanent social housing	Yes Mainstream welfare benefits (Not integration loan or housing benefits)	Yes	International student		HEI level decision No government control on student numbers	International fees (home fees at HEI discretion or after 3 years' residence)	No HEI funds only

(Détourbe and Goastellec, 2018: 9)

Immigration policy is not devolved and policies on asylum seeker and refugee status are set by the UK Home Office. As only individuals with refugee status have recourse to public funds (and therefore access to tuition fee loans), asylum seekers, particularly those deemed economic asylum seekers, can wait a considerable amount of time before they are able to access Level 4 provisionⁱⁱ. As Table 1 shows, asylum seekers have international student fee status, which puts higher education out of their reach with it being three times the cost of home fees. The regulations mean that Level 3 provision in community outreach, as outlined in this paper and detailed in our two case studies, is even more important for those asylum seekers waiting for refugee status. It is their only chance to engage with higher education while they wait for refugee status, which can often take up to ten years.

Even once they have attained refugee status, only one per cent of refugees enter higher education compared to 34 per cent of the general population (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2016: 4). It must be noted that this is based on worldwide figures, and that the proportion of refugees and asylum seekers entering HE in Wales and the UK is likely higher due to the range of HEIs, scholarship and bursary opportunities, and other factors.ⁱⁱⁱ Barriers to access include poverty (Akinwotu, 2017; Hoare, 2009; Penrose, 2002), higher unemployment rates than the general population (Barrett, 2010; Bloch, 2002), experiences of instability related to the right to remain in the UK (Stevenson and Willott, 2007), English language barriers and the requirement to pass expensive language proficiency tests (Willott and Stevenson, 2013) and a lack of documentation, for example, to prove prior attainment or experience (Gateley, 2015). Existing research emphasises that the barriers faced by these groups are deeply rooted structural problems, as noted by Dougherty and Callender (2017), who suggest that the likelihood of refugees and asylum seekers accessing higher education is ‘the product not so much of lesser desire or ability but of societal and institutional obstacles and exclusions that negatively shape disadvantaged students’ aspirations, knowledge and academic preparation’ (Dougherty and Callender, 2017: 43). Increasingly, research in this area emphasises that education has an *intrinsic* value for many asylum seekers and refugees and that these groups value education itself (Gateley, 2015).

The HEIs in the UK may opt for a number of different programmes to address these issues and, indeed, many are obliged to provide some kind of intervention that improves access to HE for marginalised groups as part of their Fee and Access Plans^{iv} (or national equivalents). In Wales, for example, those seeking asylum are classed as ‘hard-to-reach learners’ or ‘under-

represented groups’, and should be provided with equality of opportunity to access HE (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales [HEFCW], 2017: 28).

Assistance for asylum seekers and refugees at Cardiff University

Cardiff University offers a number of pre- and post-entry interventions designed to support the educational opportunities of refugees and asylum seekers. Here, we will be focusing in particular on two key pre-entry interventions that provide examples of innovative practice within HEIs’ engagement with asylum seeker communities.

Live Local; Learn Local

The *Live Local; Learn Local* (LLLL) programme delivers Level 3 accredited courses in communities around South East Wales. Level 3 is pre-university and requires around 360 hours of guided teaching for the full award; the ‘Live Local’ programme offers ‘bitesize’ modules^v that comprise 18 hours of guided teaching, equivalent to 10 credits at Cardiff University. The modules are targeted at adults (aged 21 years or older), but theoretically anyone over the age of 16 could take part. Staff work specifically with the Welsh Refugee Council (WRC) to recruit students from the asylum seeker and refugee communities. The most popular module with the refugee and asylum-seeking communities is Public Services Interpreting, which allows these groups to use their multilingual skills to work alongside public services such as policy and healthcare professionals. Another popular module is an enterprise start-up module, where undergraduate students from the Cardiff University Business School and members of the local refugee/asylum seeker communities worked together across the semester.^{vi} In the academic year 2016–17, the group went on to take part in a national competition, the Enactus World Cup^{vii} – further details of which are given in the case studies section.

From our internal Student Information Management monitoring and tracking system, we know that a number of students have successfully gained places on undergraduate and postgraduate courses since taking part in *Live Local; Learn Local*, but English language barriers continue to be a major concern of the learners. To address these language barriers that refugee and asylum-seeking learners face in accessing HE, the Aspire Summer School was established by Cardiff University to provide intensive English language programmes to aid social integration as well as progression to education and employment opportunities.

Aspire Summer School

In August 2017 Cardiff University, in collaboration with the WRC, hosted the first Aspire Summer School: a free programme for Asylum Seekers in the local area to re-engage with education. The programme comprised English language classes, Level 3 accredited courses (LLLL) and information sessions to support further educational opportunities. Across six weeks, students took part in courses such as Public Service Interpreting and Business Management, as well as receiving information on university applications and financial support.^{viii} Believed to be the first summer school of its kind in the UK, the programme engaged with 50 students and offered the opportunity to engage with higher education in the UK. The programme is unique due to the dual offer of meaningful English language provision alongside bitesize academic modules, intended to provide an opportunity for progression to higher education and to help remove some of the barriers outlined earlier.

Post-application support

The outreach provision highlighted above is complemented by specific support mechanisms for asylum seekers and refugees post-application and throughout their studies. Post-entry support exists in the form of two annual bursaries to support asylum seekers (this is not available to refugees as their refugee status means they are classed as a ‘home’ student for fee purposes).^{ix} This is offered in the form of a fee waiver, plus £4,000 towards living costs. Yet access to this support by students on the scheme can be problematic; although all are asylum seekers, some have sometimes varying restrictions that impact how we award them the £4,000. This is highlighted in some examples provided by a member of staff at Cardiff University:

- Student 1 came to the UK on a Tier 4^x and then due to the political situation in their country applied for asylum while studying. As a result of their previous Tier 4 status, the student is allowed to work and there is no issue with them receiving the £4,000 directly.
- Student 2 was concerned that the UK Home Office would stop their section 94 support (the housing and weekly money that the Government pays asylum seekers) if the money was paid directly into their account. This would make it impossible to support the family financially and study. Instead, the university pays money directly to the childcare provider, which allows the student to be able to attend the university to study.

Several other tailored support mechanisms are in place, and to date have included: arranging enhanced support through hastened referral to counselling; liaising with personal tutors and acting as an advocate; providing support and evidence for extenuating circumstances applications; linking students up with others on the scheme to act as mentors; providing advice on securing child care.

Case studies

The following case studies^{xi} are offered to illustrate further some of the barriers that have been overcome through partnership working and collaboration. This has only been made possible by having dedicated staff who can take down structural and institutional barriers.

Aisha

Aisha and family fled due to violence in her home country in 2015. They had been subjected to assault and violence, particularly due to gender. Aisha is well educated, and before migrating had a successful career in management. Having a good standard of English, Aisha expressed an interest in translation work, and through the WRC was encouraged to join an LLLL course in Introduction to Public Service Interpreting. At the end of the course she expressed an interest to study further and wanted to pursue a Pathways degree in translation.^{xiii} As an asylum seeker, Aisha has no access to funds and lives on Home Office support, which is minimal, and so was not in a position to fund a course herself. With support from Cardiff University, a fee waiver was agreed and she was able to enrol onto the course.

As an important aside to this, asylum seekers are often dispersed to other cities and have no control over where they are being placed. Aisha was dispersed to Portsmouth during the Pathways Programme. As these opportunities are so limited, Aisha continued to attend the course at Cardiff University, travelling from Portsmouth regularly to continue her studies. This was only made possible by the WRC providing funding for her transport.

Sayid

Sayid is a refugee who fled to the UK from the Syrian war, alone at first, followed later by his young family. He took part in the LLLL enterprise module and attended the Enactus national competition in London. He already had a diploma from his home country and wanted to further his education at Master's level, but did not have the required English Language qualifications. To enable him to meet the requirements, an academic member of staff

involved in the coordination of the LLLL programme submitted a request on his behalf to the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Cardiff University to fund an English foundation course that would allow him to continue his studies. The request was approved: with further support, Sayid progressed to undertake an MSc in Strategic Marketing and Entrepreneurship and has since passed his course with Distinction. The extract below is from an interview with Sayid, and highlights the impact these opportunities have had for him:

Sayid: ... it [the experience of being on the course] was brilliant, excellent to work with inspiring young students. They were very, very kind with us and they were listening to me when I was talking. My English wasn't very good comparing with them. When I was for example suggesting an idea or something they were listening to me as a student and when they speak they speak really nice and appreciate us, I think they respect us and that's really amazing (...) [the course] was a really very enjoyable experience with Enactus and they even give us the chance to go to London to the national competition and I did go. It was very much impactful on me, and some moments I cried because when I saw the Enactus, their major goal, it was to focus on how to help people who need it, not to give them money, no, to help them to do their own project (...)

Researcher: (...) So they help them to find a way to solve their own problem and then they can do that in the future?

Sayid: Yes, they teach them how to work, how to survive, and how to make a sustainable business for themselves because when you feel sad about something you think oh he is very poor you give him some money but then the money is finished and he will need more and keep him waiting in a position to need more money and that is what is amazing about Enactus and we had the chance to work together and that was really inspiring for me, to go further to do more.

These are just a few examples of how Cardiff University, through providing an integrated package of support and dedicated staff, attempts to promote innovative practice to increase opportunities to education for refugees and asylum seekers. The university's location in the capital of Wales offers an invaluable opportunity to work closely with the WRC, providing examples of good practice that could be extended across other Welsh universities. Cardiff is also a designated City of Sanctuary,^{xiii} with representatives from HEIs and not-for-profit organisations also working with colleagues nationwide on a project to make Wales a Nation of Sanctuary.^{xiv} Even though further progress towards this goal is still awaited, this nationwide consultation is an example of how partial devolution may enable Welsh HEIs to work with asylum seeker and refugee communities in a different way to their English counterparts.

Although barriers are still in place for asylum seekers and refugees attempting to access HE in Wales and the UK more broadly (see next section), we believe that these initial examples of innovative practice place Cardiff University in a strong position to lead by example in terms of addressing the statistically low numbers of refugees and asylum seekers accessing HE in the UK.

Implications for policy and practice

Despite these examples showing progress in the commitment towards access to HE for marginalised groups, there are still numerous areas for improvement. For example, although 50 students attended the Aspire Summer School and dozens have completed Level 3 courses through the University's department for Continuing and Professional Education (CPE), the scholarship and bursary opportunities for those who go on to be accepted onto a degree at Cardiff University are minimal. With two scholarships per year, available to asylum seekers but not refugees, the cost of HE remains a huge barrier to these communities. Community learning provision provides a means for HE to engage with refugees and asylum seekers as individuals and groups. However, progression opportunities into HE are hindered as asylum seekers have no recourse to public funds. Given that refugees can wait for up to ten years to achieve 'home' status within the UK, this places asylum seekers at a clear disadvantage in sourcing funding for HE courses. It is issues such as this that mean students who have attended a programme like the Aspire Summer School then have limited routes into continued education.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that many of those seeking asylum as a result of fleeing conflict already have high-level skills and are professionals in their home country. We would suggest that although programmes such as *Live Local; Learn Local* and Aspire help to develop opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees, the lack of funding for language skills development beyond the level provided through Aspire reduces the potential impact of such programmes. These students need access to higher level and official language learning (such as the intensive courses provided by the university's International Foundation Programme which gives proficiency equivalent to International English Language Testing System [IELTS] level 7 – Master's level entry), but such courses can be prohibitively costly.

Research by Gateley (2015) suggests that services offering tailored information, advice and support for refugees and asylum seekers are pivotal for removing structural barriers. The support at Cardiff University does this,

to some extent, and in the face of the decline in state-funded programmes for supporting refugees and asylum seekers, perhaps the call on universities to fulfil a civic duty and engage more with local communities outside of traditional education and research is an opportunity for further support and engagement from the HE sector.

Next steps

We have described the programmes that Cardiff University has implemented to improve access to HE for asylum seekers and refugees. We have also highlighted how the programmes show innovation and areas which could be further developed and improved to provide better support. What we have attempted to do is create a system that is customised and contextualised to ‘unlock future potential rather than to reward past success’, as Hillman (2017: 9) suggests should be the case.

For access programmes for refugee and asylum seeker communities to have greater impact, they need to be tied into broader English language provision, as well as financial support programmes, requiring greater collaboration across university departments. This is important for a number of reasons, not least that the longer that refugees have gaps in their education, the more likely they are to be marginalised in their new culture (Sheikh and Anderson, 2018: 30).

ⁱ Refugee is a general term used to describe all people who, ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...’ [Article 1A] (UNHCR, 1951).

ⁱⁱ In the UK there are 9 levels of education, from entry Level through to Level 8. Level 4 generally equates to the first year of an undergraduate degree, considered a Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE). It also includes Higher National Certificates. A full list of qualification levels is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels>

ⁱⁱⁱ Although limited statistics are available (and such information can be unclear on matters such as refugee status), Crawley and Crimes found in their 2009 survey of Wales’ refugee population that over 25 per cent of respondents held an undergraduate degree before entering the UK and 8.1 per cent obtained an undergraduate degree after their arrival in Wales. Data on similar statistics for asylum seekers is not currently available.

^{iv} All institutions in Wales that provide full-time higher education courses must submit a Fee and Access Plan to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The plan sets out the strategy for the university with regards to equality and diversity and the promotion of higher education. A satisfactory Fee and Access Plan allows the institution to

charge up to the maximum tuition fee for a full-time undergraduate degree. For the academic year 2018/19, the maximum annual tuition fee in Wales is £9,000

^v A wide variety of modules are available including Child's Play, Child's Psychology, Community Journalism, Practical Permaculture, Hidden Histories and Starting up a Business.

^{vi} For more information on the project, see <https://www.responsible-innovation.net/case-studies/realising-your-potential-in-business-responsible-innovation-initiative-with-refugee-students>

^{vii} More details can be found at <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/727229-collaborating-to-create-a-brighter-future>

^{viii} More detail can be found at <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/884789-ground-breaking-summer-school-helps-refugees-to-access-higher-education>

^{ix} For more information, see <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/funding/support-for-asylum-seekers>

^x To Study at a UK university as an international student, you must hold a valid visa which entitles you to study. Most international students will need to apply for a Tier 4 (General) student visa. Tier 4 visas only apply to full-time degree courses, and eligibility is calculated on a points-based system.

^{xi} Case studies have been provided with permission from the students. Details such as names and location have been changed in order to anonymise the data as much as possible.

^{xii} The Level 3 provision can lead onto the Level 4 Pathways to a Degree programme, which offers flexible routes to studying for a full degree. For further information see: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/part-time-courses-for-adults/pathways-to-a-degree>

^{xiii} For more information on the City of Sanctuary project, see <https://cityofsanctuary.org/>

^{xiv} The 'Nation of Sanctuary' project was supported by the Welsh Government's Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee: <https://cityofsanctuary.org/2017/04/18/wales-nation-of-sanctuary/>

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