

Cylchlythyr

Circular

Widening Access to Refugees and Asylum Seekers

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Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in
Wales
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This circular provides information on widening access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers, including some of the barriers faced in accessing higher-level study and examples of effective practice in providing refugee and asylum seeker support.

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Introduction

1. This circular provides information on widening access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers, including some of the barriers faced in accessing higher-level study and examples of effective practice in providing refugee and asylum seeker support.

Definitions

2. The Welsh Assembly Government's *Refugee Inclusion Strategy*¹ (June 2008) defines an asylum seeker as a person who is fleeing persecution in his/her homeland, has arrived in another country, made themselves known to the authorities and who has exercised the legal right to apply for asylum.
3. Under the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees, a refugee is a person who:

 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, 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...' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951).
4. The UK Government recognises an asylum seeker as a refugee when s/he satisfies the above definition.

Background

5. The Welsh Refugee Council website² states that:
'there are around 3,000 people seeking asylum in Wales - that's less than 0.5% of the total population- and around 10,000 refugees. There are almost 600 asylum seeking families in Wales (with over 400 headed by a female), plus over 100 unaccompanied asylum seeking children who have arrived without parents or guardians.'
6. It lists the top five countries of origin for asylum seekers as: Somalia; Iraq; Turkey; Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
7. When settling in Wales, the website states that *'most asylum seekers and refugees live in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Wrexham. These four cities are the designated dispersal areas in Wales'*.

¹ The Welsh Assembly Government's *Refugee Inclusion Strategy* can be accessed by following this URL <http://wales.gov.uk/dsilq/publications/communityregendevlop/refugeeinclusionstrategy/strategye.doc?lang=en>

² <http://www.welshrefugeecouncil.org/documents/usefulinfo/Asylum%20Seekers%20and%20Refugees%20in%20Wales.pdf>

Policy Context

8. Considering the needs of groups under-represented in higher education is fundamental to contributing to social justice: a cornerstone of the *For Our Future* Assembly Government strategy for higher education (November 2009).³
9. In June 2008, The Welsh Assembly Government published a *Refugee Inclusion Strategy*. The strategy outlines the strategic objectives of the Welsh Assembly Government in relation to refugee inclusion and sets out how it will work with service providers to realise its vision of refugee inclusion in Wales. A three-year Implementation Action Plan accompanies the strategy and it includes recommendations for higher education.
10. The strategy recognises that there are a number of barriers to refugee inclusion. In general, barriers to inclusion include a lack of information about rights and responsibilities and misunderstandings between receiving communities and refugee/asylum seeking communities.
11. The strategy addresses the barriers to inclusion and the implementation plan sets out the actions required to overcome these barriers. For higher education the following aims and objectives are of particular relevance:

The Welsh Assembly Government will work with voluntary sector refugee agencies, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, further and higher education institutions and Careers Wales to:

- *Ensure higher and further education institutions are fully aware of refugee and asylum seeker entitlements as well as best practice on overcoming barriers to access.*
- *Provide accessible information, advice and guidance as well as direct financial and other support to increase access to further and higher education by refugees and asylum seekers.'*

Educational Attainment

12. *The Refugee Inclusion Strategy* cites research by Kirk (2004) which found that there were marked differences between refugees to the UK in levels of language skills, qualifications and experiences of employment. In some nationalities the skills and employment profiles were different between men and women.
13. There has been limited research into the levels of skills and qualifications held by asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. The Welsh Refugee Council

³ <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/091125hedocen.pdf>

refugee skills audit of 360 refugees (2007)⁴ and the Assembly Government *Refugee Inclusion Strategy* found that:

- 60% of refugees living in Wales have a further or higher education qualification; with
- 27% having a university degree;
- when arriving in the UK 76.4% had a secondary school certification of education; and
- a further 43.9 % had a diploma.

14. These findings are broadly consistent with other UK surveys.
15. Statistics for the number of refugees and asylum seekers enrolled on further and higher education courses in Wales are not available, but it appears that numbers are low. To improve data collection to inform policy development, information on the skills and qualifications of refugees across the UK is currently being collected as part of a Home Office survey to evaluate the pilot phase of SUNRISE (Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services) and also in research into the Gateway Protection Programme (the UK's refugee resettlement programme).

Barriers for refugees and asylum seekers in accessing higher education

16. The Assembly Government's *Refugee and Inclusion Strategy* notes that the main barrier to higher and further education for refugees and asylum seekers is financial:

'The main barrier is the ability to pay for or to access financial support to fund courses. Refugees and asylum seekers have access to further and higher education as long as they meet the entrance requirements for the course, can pay the fees and support themselves financially. Asylum seekers are not eligible for Student Support, Access Funds or Hardship Loans and have to pay overseas student fees (with some exceptions). This causes severe difficulties in participating in further and higher education and is particularly problematic for high achieving young people.'
(p.46)

17. Other barriers include lack of accessible information and advice on the appropriate education and training available, as well as practical barriers associated with poverty such as an inability to access transport, childcare or attend courses at prescribed times.
18. We recognise that a number of these barriers act as deterrents to other under-represented groups in higher education and, therefore, all institutions are likely to be aware of, and will be addressing, these issues as part of their general commitment to widening access, including admissions processes.

⁴ www.welshrefugeecouncil.org

19. However, an additional barrier faced by refugees and asylum seekers relates to social and cultural adaptation to UK life, over and above adaptation into UK further and higher education systems and processes.
20. Some of the key barriers to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers are outlined below, together with some suggested measures to overcome them.

Financial Issues

21. The financial entitlements of asylum seekers and refugees accessing higher education are summarised as follows:
 - Asylum seekers would normally be charged overseas student fees and, as noted above, they are not entitled to student financial support in the form of student loans but they may be eligible for support from universities' own funds;
 - Those with refugee status, humanitarian protection, discretionary and indefinite leave to remain are classed as home students and should pay home students fees. They are all also eligible for student financial support: those who have refugee status would be immediately eligible, however, those with humanitarian protection and discretionary and indefinite leave to remain would become eligible after being ordinarily resident in the UK for three years before the start of the academic year.
22. Higher education institutions play an important role in providing pre-entry advice, including financial advice to students. The Association of Student Services Managers in Higher Education (AMOSSHE) recognise that the financial and cultural advice needs of refugees and asylum seekers are likely to be similar to those of international students. However, where institutional data records systems identify refugees as 'home' students (indicating their fee rates) they may not be easily identified by HEI support services as likely to require either financial or cultural support. Institutions may wish to consider how to ensure refugees and asylum seekers are made aware of the range of support, including financial support available to them. A useful tool for those supporting refugee and asylum seeker children is: *Seeking Support: a guide to the rights and entitlements of separated refugee and asylum seeking children*⁵ produced by the independent charity The Children's Legal Centre. Institutions might identify within this publication issues or effective practice which is applicable to refugee and asylum seeker undergraduates.

Lack of Knowledge and Information

23. The second barrier to higher education is a lack of knowledge or information about both day-to-day life in the UK and, in particular, accessing further (FE)

⁵ <http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/>

or higher education (HE). The lack of refugee- and asylum seeker-specific information available on accessing FE and HE, including sources of funding, along with a general uncertainty about living and operating in the UK can make it difficult for refugees and asylum seekers to consider and successfully access higher level study.

24. Targeted advice and guidance for refugees and asylum seekers within their own communities would contribute to increasing their understanding of higher education. Through assessing the needs of the community, including language needs, relevant outreach activities such as taster courses, mentoring and advice and guidance sessions could be provided covering topics such as careers advice, FE and HE entry processes, course choices, flexible learning opportunities and university life. Higher education widening access outreach and Reaching Wider Partnership initiatives are well-placed to provide innovative activities which are responsive to such need.
25. Widening access/lifelong learning departments and Reaching Wider Partnerships, working collaboratively with other education providers, community groups and agencies have proven expertise in developing short, taster programmes with progression pathways to and through higher education. All examples of effective practice listed at the end of this circular include links with voluntary sector organisations representing the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. These voluntary sector organisations are well-placed to identify latent demand for pre-HE or HE-level learning and to liaise with the sector to ensure 'joined up' approaches, to avoid duplication of provision, identify gaps in learning opportunities, to signpost learners and to liaise with community groups and/or community leaders.
26. In addition to the lack of knowledge refugees and asylum seekers themselves have about higher education, some higher education staff/departments could benefit from continuous professional development/staff training to raise their awareness of refugees' and asylum seekers' experiences and educational needs.
27. Ensuring that the student voice strengthens higher education is a priority of *For Our Future*. An example of engaging the voices of students from diverse backgrounds is the work undertaken by researchers at Swansea University's Centre for Migration Policy and Research. The Centre hosted a series of one-day seminars aimed to increase understanding of migrants' experiences. The events aimed to ensure that the evidence base for institutional policy making on asylum and migration included the voices and experiences of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.⁶

⁶Further information can be accessed from <http://www.swansea.ac.uk/cmpr/Events/Seminars/>

Recognition and Accreditation of Overseas Qualifications

28. In considering the diversity of refugees' and asylum seekers' backgrounds we recognise that many refugees and asylum seekers are highly qualified and skilled in their own country. However, obtaining recognition and accreditation of overseas qualifications and experience can be a significant barrier to higher education as not all qualifications from non- EU countries are recognised by UK universities. Furthermore, providing evidence of educational achievements may not be possible for some refugees and asylum seekers, given the nature of their departure from their own country.
29. At a UK level, the National Recognition Information Centre offers advice on how overseas qualifications relate to UK qualifications.⁷
30. Two options open to institutions in recognising the learning of refugees and asylum seekers are:
 - accreditation of prior learning (APL) which involves accrediting formal learning that is supported by evidence; and
 - accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) which involves accrediting informal learning and learning that is not supported by formal certificates or other documents.
31. The APEL process has been recommended as a tool for personal development by The Refugees and Asylum Seekers Unit (RAGU) of London Metropolitan University <http://www.heran.org.uk/HE-projects/3-APEL.pdf>
32. As the higher education sector considers the extent to which student contextual data should be taken into account to ensure fair access, we will be discussing with the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) programme the issues this raises for ensuring that appropriate and transparent admissions policies and practices are developed for all, including refugees and asylum seekers.
33. In respect of fair admissions, it is also worth noting that, in October 2008, the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) working with SPA, concluded that not taking account of '*native foreign language qualifications*' when assessing applications to certain courses or programmes may be considered to be unlawful discrimination, on the grounds of race, against those regarded as possessing the native language qualifications.⁸

⁷ www.naric.org.uk

⁸ Further information can be found at the SPA website <http://www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/native-language-quals.html>

Language Barriers

34. Providing adult refugees and asylum seekers with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and supporting young refugees and asylum seeking school pupils with specialist support in English as an Additional Language (EAL) is important in promoting community cohesion. *Getting On Together - a Community Cohesion Strategy for Wales*⁹ notes that:

'The ability for everyone to communicate using a shared language is very important in helping to promote shared understanding and respect within local communities.'

35. Higher education widening access and Reaching Wider Partnership provision could provide progression pathways to higher education from adult ESOL language courses.
36. Language support for those wishing to access further or higher education needs to be available locally and to be progressive. It is also often more attractive to learners if it is curriculum-related.

Some Examples of Effective Practice

37. The *Refugee and Inclusion* strategy makes reference to the REAL project which was completed in 2007. The University of Glamorgan-led project aimed to increase refugees' and asylum seekers' participation in further and higher education and to support re-training and re-accreditation of refugee health professionals. It also noted that one college in Cardiff provided subsidised courses for asylum seekers and refugees.
38. The Reaching Wider initiative delivers innovative learning opportunities to raise the educational aspirations and skills of significantly under-represented groups in higher education across Wales. Within the individual projects of the Reaching Wider Partnerships refugees have successfully participated in the Wales Summer University at Lampeter and the All-Wales Widening Access Wales (WAW) programme for people from black and ethnic minority communities led by the South West Wales Reaching Wider Partnership.
39. The South West Wales Reaching Wider Partnership, collaborating with University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC), Communities First areas and Cathays High School, is working with pupils from an ethnic minority background to develop interactive media to inform parents/family members about their children's education and how to understand the education system. The media is designed to help parents/ family members feel better

⁹ The full report can be found at <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dsjlg/publications/commsafety/091130ccstraten.pdf>

equipped to support their children and to engage with their learning more effectively, thus raising attainment levels in schools.

40. University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC) has established a range of provision for refugees and asylum seekers which provide progression pathways into further learning. The arts project and exhibition (*Women: Creation*) has enabled women to progress to the *Preparing to Teach Adults* and *Preparing for IELTS* (English language test) courses. Achievement of the IELTS qualification, alongside their existing qualifications, often obtained in their own countries, enables refugees and asylum seekers to enter higher education. A Research Skills programme, in collaboration with the Welsh Refugee Council (WRC) has enabled WRC volunteers to undertake community research. *Hospitality* and *Healthy Eating for the Family* courses have included information, advice and guidance on opportunities for further study leading onto higher education courses. Complementary therapy courses promote routes into Foundation Level O and BSc Complementary Therapies. An *Intercultural Learning and Preparation for Study at HE Level* course explores with Somali students potential barriers to learning and developing and awareness of academic and cultural issues to enable successful completion of higher education studies.
41. The Open University in Wales is scoping learners' needs and outreach opportunities, working collaboratively with a range of refugee and asylum seeker organisations across Wales. The Open University in Wales's aim is to develop progression routes to employment and higher level learning.
42. The Higher Education Academy evidence net is a UK web-based resource of learning and teaching-related research and data. It currently lists six research papers that include references to refugees and three to asylum seekers.¹⁰

Further information

43. For further information, contact Jane Johns (tel 029 2068 2219; email jane.johns@hefcw.ac.uk).

¹⁰ <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/evidencenet>