Globalisation, Societies and Education

ISSN: 1476-7724 (Print) 1476-7732 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cgse20

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To cite this article: Rachel Caterer, M. Pereira, D. Aditya & P. C. J. Otermans (26 Jun 2025): A qualitative exploration of the barriers asylum-seeking students face when accessing higher education in the UK, Globalisation, Societies and Education, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2025.2518159

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2518159

Published online: 26 Jun 2025.

GLOBALISATION, SOCIETIES AND EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2518159

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A qualitative exploration of the barriers asylum-seeking students face when accessing higher education in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Since 2015, there has been a sharp upward trajectory in the number of applications for refugee status. This raises many questions for how education will assist refugee inclusion. However, accessing education after the age of 18 has been under-researched. This project looks to add to the body of knowledge as to why those from an asylum-seeker background are underrepresented in Higher Education (HE). Three key themes emerged through focus groups and semi-structured interviews of this group's experience of attempting to access HE. Firstly, a lack of knowledge as to their rights to HE; secondly, poor and inaccurate information being circulated by gatekeepers to HE; thirdly, the timings of offers of places being uncoordinated with access to scholarships. In conclusion, this study uncovered several barriers for refugees accessing HE in the UK, some of which are systemic. It is suggested that further research is conducted from the perspective of university admissions and widening participation departments. It is recommended that there is an official, reputable source of information for those from asylum-seeking backgrounds wishing to apply for HE.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 September 2024
Accepted 2 June 2025

KEYWORDS
Asylum-seeker; refugee; higher education; UK

Introduction

This research contributes to a body of evidence identifying barriers faced by refugee background applicants to HE to inform policies that could remove them and assist with access to HE. This research is necessary as the Department for Education (2018) has stated that it wishes to know why there are differences in participation rates in HE, with particular focus on obstructions to access for disadvantaged students. This research looks at those from an asylum-seeking background, a disadvantaged group in society. This research takes place against a backdrop of increasingly hostile UK government policies towards refugees and asylum-seekers. Recent legislation, such as the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, has made it significantly more difficult for asylum-seekers to enter the country and claim refuge. These laws have been criticised by human rights organisations for potentially violating international refugee law.

In response to the growing global concern for expanding access to HE for refugees, this research is situated within the context of international efforts such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 15by30 agenda, which aims to ensure that 15% of young refugees are enrolled in HE by 2030 (UNHCR 2025). This paper adopts the UNHCR definitions of

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asylum-seeker and refugee (UNHCR 2005). An asylum-seeker is defined as 'an individual who is seeking international protection' (UNHCR 2005, 441), whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed. A refugee is, 'A person who meets the eligibility criteria under the applicable refugee definition, as provided for by international or regional instruments, under UNHCR's mandate, and/or in national legislation' (UNHCR 2005, 441). It should be noted that 'Not every asylum-seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee was initially an asylum-seeker' (UNHCR 2005, 441).

Researchers have repeatedly called for an increased focus on 18+ education (Dryden-Peterson and Reddick 2017; Gateley 2015; Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018; Sheikh, Koc, and Anderson 2019). Most of the current research is school-based and ends when compulsory education finishes. This has led to a lack of understanding of how asylum-seekers and refugees navigate education post-compulsory schooling. Considering the growing numbers of refugees resettled in response to the Syrian, Afghan and more recently Ukrainian crisis, researchers believe there is an increasing urgency to address this gap in knowledge. With resettlement, one of the four durable solutions, the global North needs to prepare sustainable pathways to HE that are accessible to resettled refugees. Furthermore, inflammatory rhetoric from politicians has contributed to a rise in anti-refugee sentiment, culminating in violent protests against refugee accommodation in 2024 (Maddox and Middleton 2024). This political climate has significant implications for asylum-seekers' access to higher education and their overall integration into UK society. The government's 'hostile environment' policy, initially introduced in 2012 but intensified in recent years, has created additional barriers for asylum-seekers in various aspects of life, including education.

One of the co-authors was drawn to this area of study due to their involvement with the asylum-seeking community housed in hotels around Heathrow. As a teacher of the English language, they set up and ran classes in the area. During this time, they became acutely aware that whilst there was strong interest in HE, there was a lack of awareness that HE was a right. This research took place at a point in time where the political and public rhetoric was hostile, an atmosphere that has subsequently intensified to the point of direct attacks on immigrant hotels (Maddox and Middleton 2024), asylum-seekers are keen to remain 'invisible' rather than investigate their right to lifelong education (Pugh 2021; United Nations 2015). Hence, the researchers' desire to conduct the research around barriers to HE as it remains a pathway to integration and social mobility (Maddox and Middleton 2024).

Participants during this research project were asked to talk about their experience of accessing HE to establish the reasons why they are underrepresented. Currently, the UNHCR estimates that only 3% of the world's refugees have access to HE (UNHCR 2019). This research looks to assist with meeting their target of increasing refugees in post-secondary education globally by 15% by 2030, known as 15by30 campaign (UNHCR 2019). Research has discovered a strong positive correlation between higher levels of education and improved socio-economic outcomes for asylum-seekers not just on a personal level but also to their communities (Clark and Lenette 2020; Hugo 2014; Lenette 2016). Further research that looks at identifying barriers to HE will work towards dismantling impediments thereby leading to improved outcomes.

The current research is being undertaken at a time of increasing numbers of people coming under the mandate of the UNHCR, currently 32.5 million refugees and 5.9 asylum-seekers as of mid-2022 (UNHCR 2022a). This trend indicates that those seeking asylum and being granted refugee status will continue to increase. Currently, the UK homes 231,597 refugees and 127,421 asylum-seekers (UNHCR 2022a). It is therefore imperative that the UK Government has a robust strategy for meeting their obligation to provide an education under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) (UN 2015), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26 (United Nations 1948). The UNCRC defines anyone of the age of 18 as a child which includes those in the UK applying to HE, the focus of this project. In addition, UN SDG 4 (2015) goes further and looks to promote lifelong learning for all whether they are situated in

the global North or South. The SDGs have ensured that there is global responsibility for delivering on these goals, the UK as a signatory, is accountable for the success of these objectives. The recent events, such as the Rwanda deportation scheme and the use of controversial accommodation like the Bibby Stockholm barge, have further exacerbated the challenges faced by asylum-seekers. These policies have not only made it more difficult for asylum-seekers to access education but have also contributed to a climate of fear and uncertainty within these communities. It is within this context that this research sits, looking to unearth why it is that asylum-seekers are underrepresented in HE. Many asylum-seekers look to settle within the developed world to obtain an education. Research indicates that their success is dependent on the attitude and policies, supported or otherwise by political rhetoric and the public narrative of their country of resettlement and their educational institutions (Dryden-Peterson 2017; Dunwoodie et al. 2020; Ramsay and Baker 2019).

Literature review

Alberts and Atherton (2015), in their report into barriers for unaccompanied asylum-seekers, found that legislative barriers around a student's status prevented access to HE. A finding that was later replicated in the findings of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) in 2017. These barriers can prevent access to student finance or access to scholarships due to their status. Immigration status was found by Gladwell (2020) to be the most frequent reason given (by unaccompanied asylum-seeking Afghan children) as a barrier to accessing HE in their research using Local Authority data, focus groups and interviews. The complexity of rights linked to status has been found to result in poor or misinformation by HE given to refugees (Alberts and Atherton 2015). The current research looks to establish where incidents of misrepresentation of refugees' rights in accessing HE are occurring and give recommendations for how this can be eradicated.

Research has shown that gender plays a part in refugees transitioning to HE (APPG 2017; Cheung and Phillimore 2017). It has been found that within families, females are more likely to have childcare responsibilities, to lack family support for their education, and to be limited in access to financial assistance. This adversely impacts on their ability to engage in English as a second or other language (ESOL) and other educational classes. Without the level of English required by HE institutions, they are less likely than men to be able to continue in education post-compulsory schooling. However, when this is a cultural normal, it is difficult to reverse this gender norm. Research has shown that gender plays a part in refugees transitioning to HE (APPG 2017; Cheung and Phillimore 2017). It has been found that within families, females are more likely to have childcare responsibilities, to lack family support for their education, and be limited in access to financial assistance. This adversely impacts on their ability to engage in English as a second or other language (ESOL) and other educational classes. Without the level of English required by HE institutions, they are less likely than men to be able to continue in education post-compulsory schooling. However, when this is a cultural normal, it is difficult to reverse this gender norm.

Another area concerning barriers to education is providing ESOL training. Research showed that the provision of ESOL was found to be either non-existent or access was poor, no matter the age of the refugee on arrival within the UK (Alberts and Atherton 2015; APPG 2017; Morrice et al. 2020). Either in school or in adult learning, refugees were hindered from entering HE and had complications with their social integration into their host nation due to a lack of language proficiency (APPG 2017). Despite these findings, budgets for ESOL have reduced significantly from £200 million in 2009 to a little over £100 million in 2021 (Seyoum 2021). A three-year longitudinal study by Morrice et al. (2020) discovered that with no national strategy for refugee ESOL provision, it fell to Local Authorities as to whether language support was provided. Morrice et al. (2020) showed that higher levels of English have a direct impact on the wellbeing of this vulnerable, marginalised group. In addition, Gladwell's (2020) research has shown that improved language skills positively impact socio-economic outcomes. A higher language proficiency increases the range of

jobs a refugee can apply for. When provision of ESOL is sporadic and lacks a national strategy, asylum-seekers look to prioritise finding work where a low proficiency of English is required rather than invest in improved long-term outcomes.

An All Party Parliamentary Group (2017) review of refugees' experience of being hosted by the UK identified that UK legislation around refugee applications for financial aid to study in UK institutions of HE is often problematic. This problem stems from identifying some refugees as 'home' and others as 'international' students. Student finance is only available to 'home' students. Therefore, legislation has a negative impact on students classed as 'international'. Research by Alberts and Atherton (2015) stressed the need for fee waivers and bursaries. Their mixed methods research gave immigration status and the cost of HE as the number one barrier to HE. Their participants included 6 HE Students, 23 local authorities, 14 HE Institutions and 2 third sector organisations, all working with unaccompanied asylum-seekers. A limitation of Alberts and Atherton's (2015) research was that there was not a 'systematic review of the activities of local authorities' (p. 14). This weakness has been subsequently addressed by Gladwell's (2020) research, which used quantitative data collection methods with local authorities. Gladwell's (2020) findings supported those of Alberts and Atherton (2015). In addition, they used focus groups and in-depth interviews with Afghan care-leavers; both methodologies found that immigration status was the most frequently reported barrier to accessing funding for HE. It should be noted that a substantial number of the local authorities were unwilling or unable to provide the data requested, weakening the robustness of this research.

McKenzie et al.'s (2019) research into improving access to HE for asylum-seekers found that the provision of scholarships was a key enabler. However, the low number available meant that the cost to study, for many, was prohibitive as asylum-seekers are unable to access student finance. They call for closer collaboration between university departments such as Admissions and Scholarships, the timing of their offerings in terms of language classes and financial support acknowledging that they make a difference to the success of asylum-seekers' ability to access HE. The longer asylum-seekers wait to enrol in HE, the more likely they are to become marginalised in their host country (Sheikh and Anderson 2018). Therefore, the better communication between university departments and improved alignment of their cut off dates, the higher the likelihood an application to HE is to succeed. A limitation of McKenzie et al. (2019) research was that it was carried out at a Welsh university, and they acknowledged the fact that partial devolution impacted their findings owing to the specificity of the Welsh context.

A study by Tomren and Opaas (2024) explored the impact of trauma and mental health issues on asylum-seekers' educational aspirations and achievements. They found that many asylum-seekers struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression, which can significantly hinder their ability to engage with education. This highlights the need for comprehensive support services that address both mental health and educational needs. Moreover, the research by Almohamed and Vyas (2019) has examined the role of social networks and community support in facilitating access to higher education for asylum-seekers. They found that those with stronger social connections and access to community organisations were more likely to successfully navigate the complex application processes and overcome bureaucratic hurdles. The work of Merisalo and Jauhiainen (2020) has also shed light on the digital divide faced by many asylum-seekers, which has become increasingly relevant in the context of remote learning and online education. Their research suggests that limited access to technology and digital skills training can create additional barriers to higher education for this population.

The current study

The purpose of this study is to establish the issues asylum-seekers and refugees face when accessing Higher Education (HE) in the UK. The aim of the current research study is: What are the barriers to HE faced by those from an asylum-seeking background?

Methodology

Research design

This piece of research aims to add to a paucity of data around post-compulsory education for asylum-seekers (Arar 2021; Lambrechts 2020; Sheikh, Koc, and Anderson 2019). It seeks to understand, from the lived experience of asylum-seekers, the challenges they face when accessing HE, and how those that have achieved places at university have done so. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and focus groups allowed for themes to be identified to ensure the work reflected the unique journeys individuals have had whilst bringing together common themes.

Participants

Participants were identified by the gatekeepers who controlled access to asylum-seekers and refugees who had an interest in HE. The gatekeepers were a university widening access officer and contacts within two charities working with the refugee community in the London area. They facilitated the introduction of the researcher to the research participants. A total of 14 participants took part in this qualitative study (see Table 1) for their characteristics. They were either asylum-seekers or from an asylum-seeker background now with refugee status. All were resident in the UK living in the London area.

Ethics

Guidelines issued by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018) were followed to ensure that no harm, through participation in this research, was caused to participants. This was particularly important because the participants were from a disadvantaged and marginalised group. Through the use of a Participant Information Sheet, all participants were advised on matters of confidentiality; that participation was voluntary and could be ended by them at any point in time during the research; security of data and its destruction; that their comments and views would be reported anonymously and who they should contact should they have any questions before, during and after their participation in the research (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). The issue of confidentiality when conducting research through focus groups was explained to participants and whilst anonymity was guaranteed by the researcher, confidentiality could not be promised on behalf of all participants (Smithson 2008). Therefore, at the start of the focus group activity, a statement regarding confidentiality and respect for one another's disclosures was made to reduce the inherent risk when using this method of research. At the end of the focus group and interviews,

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Participant number	Gender	Age	Country of origin
1	Male	20	Afghanistan
2	Male	37	Iran
3	Male	36	Iran
4	Male	29	Iraq
5	Male	47	Nicaragua
6	Male	19	Palestine
7	Male	22	South Sudan
8	Male	22	Sudan
9	Male	33	Sudan
10	Male	27	Sudan
11	Female	21	Pakistan
12	Female	18	Afghanistan
13	Female	46	Palestine
14	Female	42	Nicaragua

a debrief document was made available to all participants, giving contact details should they wish to ask questions or withdraw from the research within a stated timeline.

Data collection method

This research was carried out using a mixed methods approach of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, both qualitative methodologies based within an interpretivist paradigm (Kuhn 1962). These enabled an in-depth study, through the eyes of the participants, of barriers to accessing Higher Education. It is their views and perceptions that were of paramount importance.

In-person focus groups, popularly used within the social sciences since the 1990s and increasingly used in educational research, were used for data collection (Smithson 2008: Wilkinson 1998). Guided by Morgan & Krueger's argument that —five to seven participants are appropriate for focus groups (Morgan and Krueger 1998). The first focus group had four participants and the second had six participants.

In total, six semi-structured interviews were conducted and were a mixture of telephone, online and in-person interviews. Semi-structured interviews encouraged the participants to be more open about their experience and gave a richness and depth to the research. It is acknowledged that when interviewing vulnerable participants, it is important to pay attention to the way a participant responds as well as what is being said (Silverman 2011). The researcher sought to counter unconscious bias interpretation by taking a reflexive approach which was achieved using a reflective diary (Adeagbo, 2021; Holstien, Gubrium, and Jabar 1997; Li 2018). While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of asylum-seekers in London, it is important to note that the experiences of participants in this urban setting may not be representative of asylum-seekers in other parts of the UK. Future research could explore regional variations in access to higher education for this population.

Interview schedule

The overarching research question was 'What are the barriers to accessing HE experienced by students from a refugee background?' This led to the following topics of discussion:

(1) Accessing information on how to access HE
(2) Application process to HE
(3) Outcome of application

Success was defined as being offered a conditional or unconditional place, regardless of whether the participant could take up the offer. It is acknowledged that post-offer, there are additional barriers to enrolling. However, this falls outside the scope of this research (Table 2).

Some examples of the questions that were asked are listed below:

- What was the hardest part of applying to university?

Table 2. Timings and duration of the focus groups and interviews.

Method	Participants	Date	Minutes
Focus group 1 (FG1)	P1 to P4	31/08/2022	00:20:19
Focus group 2 (FG2)	P9 to P14	22/09/2022	00:19:23
Semi-structured interview (SSI)	P5	19/09/2022	00:15:13
Semi-structured interview (SSI)	P6	19/09/2022	00:16:51
Semi-structured interview (SSI)	P7	21/09/2022	00:12:27
Semi-structured interview (SSI)	P8	22/09/2022	00:07:48
Semi-structured interview (SSI)	P12	29/09/2022	00:17:49
Semi-structured interview (SSI)	P14	29/09/2022	00:27:48

- What were the positive encounters you had during the process?
- How do you feel the process of gaining access to HE for refugees can be improved?
- What support have you had around accessing HE?
- What could the Universities and/or Government do to support and improve the experience of applying to university?.

Data analysis method

The data from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded by a single researcher, ensuring the reliability of content analysis (Silverman 2006). A thematic analysis in keeping with the reflexive nature of this research was used to identify themes from the data, resulting in three themes (Clarke and Braun 2013; Neuendorf 2019).

Analysis of findings and discussion

Three key themes were identified from the focus groups (FG) and semi-structured interviews (SSI). These were a lack of knowledge; misleading and inaccurate information and the timing of offers and scholarships. Figure 1 shows the build-up of the themes identified.

Lack of knowledge

Lack of knowledge in this research is defined as a lack of knowledge of the rights of asylum-seekers around HE. It should be noted that there are no restrictions on applying to HE institutions for asylum-seekers wishing to study in the UK beyond the admissions criteria which do not include a student's status (Refugee Council 2017; STAR; UCAS). However, their status at the point of entry to university will affect access to funding and accommodation, both of which can be insurmountable barriers to asylum-seekers taking up their offer of a place but fall outside the scope of this research. This lack of knowledge resulted in many of the participants in this study, including those with a degree and Master's level education, not applying to university. They believed that asylum-seekers were not allowed to do so. Research carried out elsewhere supports the finding that this community has inadequate knowledge around their rights to HE and the educational systems within their host countries (Hirano 2014: Morrice et al. 2020: Stevenson and Willott 2007).

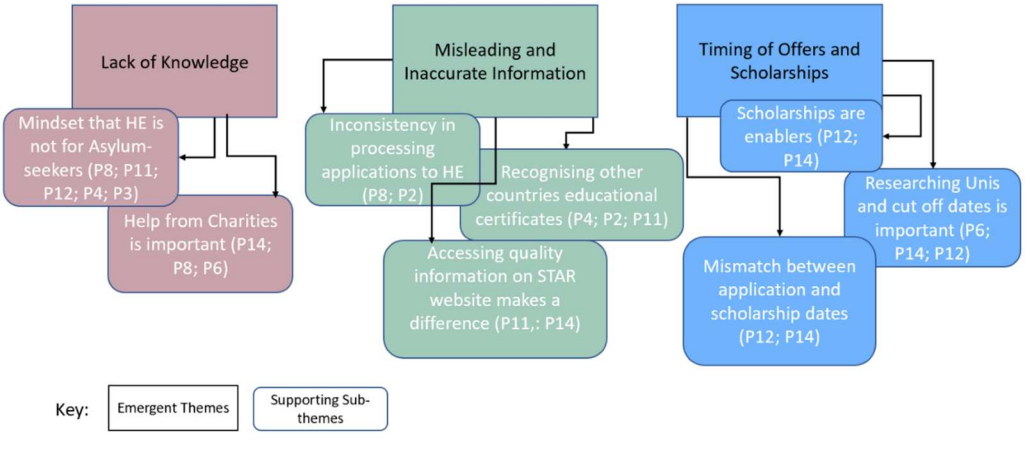

Figure 1. Thematic map of emergent themes.

Farad (P8), a 37-year-old male Iranian, with a degree in agricultural genetic engineering explained that he ' … would like to go again here to university.' (P8, SSI, l.17). When asked what was stopping him, he replied, 'I think you cannot go because it is the law.' (P8, SSI, l.5). This misbelief was reiterated elsewhere.

Diaco (P11), a 29-year-old male Iraqi said that University education was not for 'people like us … . I think there are more opportunities for refugees but not asylum-seekers' (P11, FG2, l.10)

Amani (P12), a 33-year-old male from Sudan, currently holding offers from 3 Universities and applying for a scholarship, 'People do not know that as an asylum-seeker you can get access to university' (P12, FG2, l.71). Most participants in this research were housed in hotels around Heathrow. This added to their misconception of their rights as they were not in permanent housing.

Abdul (P2), 22-years-old (age given by the Home Office as he was unaware of his age), male from South Sudan who wishes to pursue a career in medicine shared, ' … for us who are staying in the hotel … … we cannot enrol because you are staying in a hotel and maybe they will move them' (P2, FG1, l.128).

Aziz (P14), a Sudanese male, with a degree in Computer Science from Sudan, and currently holding an offer to study at university with a scholarship:

> … most of the asylum-seekers and refugees, they don't have access, or they have a lack of awareness about study and the opportunities here in the UK. So I live in a hotel where we have 200 people, most of them they have degrees, but they don't know about the scholarships here. They don't know about the process to get into university … (P14, SSI, l.144-147)

There was scant knowledge amongst participants that they had a right to HE:

> … [there is] no kind of orientation from the Home Office to the asylum-seeker. They just like give them accommodation and that is it. For many they don't even know that there is a college, … . and that they should go and register. (P12, FG2, l.65-67)

This lack of awareness of asylum-seeker's rights is an issue because if students delay applying to HE until their status is confirmed, they can be in the UK without studying or the ability to work for years. This period of uncertainty is an ideal time to undertake HE as study is permitted. Amani (P12) highlighted this as an issue amongst his community. Without securing a place at University, Amani (P12) stressed that asylum-seekers are more likely to prioritise earning money as soon as they are granted refugee status and thoughts of HE recede. Not only does this affect their long-term socio-economic wellbeing (Lenette 2016; Sheikh, Koc, and Anderson 2019), but in addition, they miss opportunities for acculturation (Berry 1997).

Amani (P12) was keen to impress upon the interviewer that he was doing all he could to advise others of their rights and to highlight disinformation amongst this group. He explained:

> I already … … . tell those in the hotels that they have the right to study. But you know the mindset of those people they think that because we are asylum-seekers we are not allowed to do anything, but I say you can, and I have already progressed. Some people are just waiting for the college. But I have a friend, she's a lady, and she has a Baccalaureate, and I tell her you don't need to go to college you can improve your English and apply for a Master's and you have a chance to go for this scholarship but she said 'I don't think we're allowed' but I said I already did! (P12, SSI, l.50-55)

The need to learn the host country culture was stressed by Farad (P8), 'Asylum-seekers need to learn about culture. Because that's very important because some asylum-seekers have a different culture' (P8, FG2, l.54-55). This includes the way in which the education system is structured and the expectations of Admissions teams. It is by gaining social capital that asylum-seekers can negotiate the complexities of the rights of asylum-seekers to HE. Research shows that time spent in education can increase the social and cultural capital of asylum-seekers, resulting in better outcomes (Clark and Lenette 2020; Gladwell 2020). These can take the form of improved employment opportunities, increased social networks and better chances of accessing lifelong learning.

Amani (P12) made the connection to improved outcomes for the host nation as well as asylum-seekers. When asked what he thought the Government could do to improve access to HE he replied:

> I think they should encourage people because if they are going to be here and accepted in the UK it is better to have well educated in the future because most asylum-seekers as you know are young people so it would be good for them in the future rather than just leaving them at the hotel. (P12, SSI, l.67-69)

When asked if he wanted to add anything at the close of the semi-structured interview Amani (P12) said:

> I hope your study is going to reflect the reality and that the people who make the decisions and implement it in the future know that there are many young people willing to study, willing to do their best because nobody left their country and came here for nothing. Everyone wants to achieve something so in the UK there is a resource, these are good people, and they have the willingness to do it, I know these girls and guys in the future could be something. (P12, SSI, l.74-78). ct.

Misleading and inaccurate information

The theme misleading and inaccurate information is defined as guidance given to participants that was later found to be factually incorrect or led them to make mistakes when trying to access HE. Gaining social capital is a complex issue for those seeking a place in HE as demonstrated by the second theme identified from this study. Aspiring HE students are routinely misinformed or miscommunicated to or not communicated with at all about what education is available to them and how to access it. This resulted in asylum-seekers being misdirected to inappropriate pathways, increasing the time they would take to reach their desired educational outcomes. Ali (P3), 'I'm really confused. If you get your A levels, you can go to Uni right but what's this ACCESS to HE for cos they say that's the shortest route to Uni?' (P3, FG1, l.112-113).

Abdul (P2), 'so I went to enrol but they said for those in the hotel we can't enrol' (P2, FG1, l.129).

Farad (P8), 'I went there, and they supposed to let me know about my time when I can go to the college, but they don't answer me.' (P8, SSI, l.35-36).

Diaco (P11), 'I went to … … college, they said I had been here a long time so maybe I will be moved in the future so … .' (P11, FG2, l.12-13).

The college refused to enrol Diaco (P11). He had been in the UK for over 6 months. He had the right to be enrolled in a college of further education, his pathway to university. Diaco's (P11) experiences with the education system in the UK has left him feeling ostracised and hopes of achieving the best socio-economic outcome for him are fading. Diaco's (P11) perception is that education in the UK is not for asylum-seekers: 'They [admissions personnel] don't like people like us. People don't have the right documents. There're so many people with Master's Degrees but they can't study. It happened to me' (P11, FG2, l.10-11). He feels that many of the asylum-seekers being held in the hotels around Heathrow are having similar experiences, 'Maybe 50% of the people want to go to University … someone who speaks English well or has a Master's degree' (P11, FG2, l.2627).

Abdul (P2) recounted this recent experience of barriers when attempting to access a pathway to HE:

> So what I found at the moment is that I, uh, I went to the college and they asked, like, do I have qualifications … . they told me I have to bring my qualifications … . I print them out and I took them to college. … . I showed them the certificate and it's like I haven't bought them nothing they don't know what is there. I feel … very sad because they told me to bring the certificate and when I did bring the certificate they couldn't do it [enrol him]. (P2, FG1, l.15-24)

He then discovered he would need to do an entrance test. He wasn't told in what subjects these tests would be. He believed they would be English and Maths. When he arrived, he was given tests in all three sciences. He was upset because had he known this, he would have spent time revising. Another miscommunication came when he sat the Maths paper:

> They just told me to bring a calculator for the calculations. I've been doing maths but not using a calculator. When I went there, I took the calculator with me they say, 'no calculator is for A level you're not ready for A level.' I never wanted to use the calculator! (P2, FG1, l.54-56)

Similarly, Hirano's (2014) study showed that a lack of quality information around the application process and the 'misrecognition of cultural capital' hindered HE applicants. In a bid to acquire cultural and social capital all the participants spoke of engaging with asylum-seekers and refugees charity organisations that are active within the asylum-seekers geographic area. These connections had increased their knowledge of their rights and how to make applications for university.

Kadeeja (P6), a 46-year-old University educated female from Palestine and Aisha (P5), an 18-year-old female, originally from Afghanistan, resettled in Ukraine and now seeking refuge from the war, both referenced how invaluable the contact they had with the charity Action West London (AWL) had been. Aisha (P5) recalls the help that she received through the local charity:

> When we moved to London I found out about Chris, so they helped me a lot they talk to me a lot. Then we found about that then they registered me to Uxbridge College, and then I had exams, and then they are guidance team also. Talk to me to help me to choose something. Then, as I like it, so I said I'll start it, and then I see it's lovely. … They help me a lot. They help me and my siblings to start. (P5, SSI, l.48-59)

Both Kadeeja (P6) and Aisha (P5) had accessed English Language lessons through AWL, and Aisha is now on course to apply to university.

Aziz (P14) and Amani (P12) both referenced the organisation Student Action for Refugees (STAR) set up by students in the UK to help asylum-seekers and refuges access higher education. Amani (P12): ' … . he told me there is a scholarship called sanctuary and there's a website, STAR refugee, and he sent me the link and I went there and there was a whole list with the start times and the deadlines' (P12, SSI, l. 27-29).

Several of the refugees thought that the solution to the impediment of misleading and inaccurate information was for those working with and supporting asylum-seekers to run information sessions. The suggestion was made that this could be held at the hotels at which they are being housed. It was apparent how strongly, those that had found a pathway to university, felt about others having the same opportunities.

Aziz (P14) said:

> My recommendation is for people and organisations who work with refugees and asylum-seekers to give them the keys and just to show them the way and after that they got through everything. But you know like. Yes, my asylum-seeker friends they are brilliant and resilient people. They are brilliant and talented … give them the framework in which they can get to university. (P14, SSI, l.148-155)

When asked where it was that they had obtained accurate information about applying to university they advised it was from family and friends or with assistance from the refugee-specific charities they were in contact with. Amani (P12) said:

> For me, honestly, I got the information from one of my friends who told me about the kind of scholarship that as an asylum-seeker you should apply for it. Then after that I sent like a normal e-mail to the Home Office and they replied to me, yes, you have the right to study. And I went online, and I did apply for many universities. And I got acceptance letters' (P12, FG2, l.79-82)

Once they were aware of their right to HE and found the application process online those asylum-seekers who believed that they could study in the UK have all been successful in securing places at UK universities. However, there remain many asylum-seekers, including those from this study who continue to be unsure of their rights.

Timing of offers and scholarships

This theme is about the mismatch that the participants found between the deadlines for acceptance of offers and the deadline for applying for a bursary. University will open their application process to students at approximately the same time of year and set deadlines by which an application must be made. If a student, then wishes to apply for a scholarship, this would normally not be possible until they have received and offer from the University.

It was found that there was a discrepancy between the timing of offers of places being made and the processing, after a protracted application process, of scholarships for asylum-seekers. Two of the participants had been offered places at UK Universities only to discover that the deadline for the scholarship for asylum-seekers had closed meaning that they would need to defer for a year or attempt to locate suitable courses at alternative Universities that still had applications for scholarships open. Research shows that any delay in enrolling in HE can have adverse effects on an asylum-seekers ability to become acclimatised to their host nation and local community (Sheikh and Anderson 2018). Conversely, they are more likely become marginalised members of society.

Amani (P12) explains that:

> … the hardest thing for me was the long waiting time for my application, checking my qualifications and checking with the home office, to ask if this person is allowed to study. I know some unis know you have the right to study as an asylum-seeker. At Swansea they sent me an email and said they could not enrol in September because they were still waiting for the Home Office. (P12, SSI, l.36-40)

Amani (P12) has accepted the place offered but has deferred to next year so that he has an opportunity to apply for a scholarship. Aziz (P14) had a similar issue. When asked what the hardest part of the application process to HE had been he said:

> One of the hard things is the issue, is the dates of the scholarship, for example, the scholarship deadline it was at the last of July and the results came in in August. So, you have short time about to going on to enrol in university. If you have conditional offer and if they need from you English proof. So, if the university here, they make their deadlines and the result of scholarship earlier they give you chance to prepare for your or IELTS or to do any English exam for them. So, the issue is a short time between the result of scholarship and enrolment for university. (P14, SSI, l.88-94)

Aziz (P14) had the same impediment with timings:

> If you are not successfully in …. [Universities English Language exam] … they have English courses. But unfortunately, the English courses is before the result of their scholarship. And you cannot enrol or attend English courses without scholarship. You can't do that. So English courses was in July, and they are having English courses in May and June. But unfortunately, the result of the scholarship came in the middle of August. (P14, SSI, l.99-103)

Without a degree of flexibility on the timings for applications to language classes and for scholarships, there will continue to be a mismatch in the timing of offers and subsequent access to enabling factors, such as funding. These findings support those of McKenzie et al. (2019) research into improving access to HE for asylum-seekers which recommended closer collaboration between a university admissions, English language and scholarships departments to ensure deadlines are in line with one another.

The themes that emerged from our data can be understood through the lens of social exclusion theory (Boardman, Killaspy, and Mezey 2022) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013). Participants' experiences of misinformation and lack of coordination between university departments reflect broader systemic barriers that contribute to the marginalisation of asylum-seekers in UK society. For instance, the theme of 'lack of knowledge about rights to HE' can be interpreted as a form of institutional exclusion, where information asymmetry serves to maintain existing power structures. The 'poor and inaccurate information circulated by gatekeepers' theme highlights how even well-intentioned actors can perpetuate systems of exclusion through misinformation. The 'uncoordinated timing of offers and scholarships' theme demonstrates the complex interplay between different institutional processes and how they can create additional barriers for asylum-seekers. This can be understood through the concept of 'institutional racism' (Macpherson 1999), where seemingly neutral policies and procedures can have disproportionately negative effects on marginalised groups. Furthermore, our analysis revealed how these barriers intersect with other aspects of participants' identities, such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. For example, female participants often faced compounded challenges due to childcare responsibilities and cultural expectations, aligning with intersectional feminist theories. These extended

sections provide a more comprehensive and critical engagement with the political context, existing literature, and theoretical frameworks, addressing the reviewers' concerns about the depth and breadth of the analysis.

Recommendations

Whilst previous research has reported that legislative barriers are preventing access to HE, this piece of research found that it was the lack of knowledge of the participants' rights to HE that was the most prevalent barrier (Alberts and Atherton 2015; Gladwell 2020). It quickly became apparent that the misrepresentation of their own rights amongst the asylum-seeking community was an impediment to their accessing University education. Therefore, it could be a perception rather than a reality that research has found legislation the most frequent reason given as a barrier to HE.

The recommendation in this area is that asylum-seekers are advised of their rights to HE in line with the emerging recognition of lifelong learning (UN SDG; Jarvis 2004). In Morrice's (2021) paper, she emphasises that lifelong learning for asylum-seekers and refugees has a role in enhancing the quality of their lives, self-reliance and increasing their level of participation in the community. This in turn enables them to bridge the gaps in their education and fulfil their future aspirations. This recommendation looks to address this gap.

The second area of importance in preventing asylum-seekers from taking part in HE was the perceived complexity of rights linked to status and the reality of progressing their enrolment. Knowledge of rights was found to result in poor quality or inaccurate information being given to refugees relating to HE (Alberts and Atherton 2015). Incidents of misrepresentation of refugees' rights to accessing HE were found during this research. It was apparent that using the social networks that participants formed was currently the most effective way of passing correct information amongst the community. However, even then there is reluctance to believe one another. Research by Stevenson and Willott (2007) found that many asylum-seekers view HE as a route out of poverty and discrimination and are highly aspirational and motivated. Comments from interviewees support their findings that given a framework resilient, self-motivated asylum-seekers will find their way to HE.

The recommendation around the area of miscommunication is to have an official, reputable source of information for those wishing to apply for HE. Gateley (2015) supports this recommendation; in his research, he found that offering specific, individual advice and support to those from an asylum-seeking background was 'pivotal for removing structural barriers' (Gateley 2015, p. 230). As mentioned by all those who had successfully found a place at University, the STAR network is already providing such information, but not enough asylum-seekers know about this.

The last barrier those interviewed faced was around timings of the application and enrolment process linked to scholarships, language classes and delays in obtaining information. It is the suggestion of this research that further investigation with those responsible for the application process that asylum-seekers follow is carried out with a particular focus on collaboration. Follow-up research with admissions and widening access departments within universities is recommended to understand their experience when receiving and processing applications from asylum-seekers.

Conclusion

This research has looked to understand the lived experience of asylum-seekers when applying for HE. This paper adds to the limited body of evidence as to what happens to asylum-seekers aged 18+ on their educational journey post-secondary level education. This was identified in the review of literature as an under-researched area. If the UK's commitment to the UNHCR 15by30, UN SDG 4 and the UNCRC are to be met, there is a need to ensure a positive, factual, discourse around the contribution that achieving HE has on asylum-seeker integration in a nation of resettlement as part of the agreed durable solutions to an increasing refugee population no longer contained in the

global South. At a moment in time when Europe sees the largest movement of diaspora since the second world war as highlighted by Fillipo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, speaking about the current war in Ukraine, 'The speed of the displacement … … is unprecedented in Europe in recent memory' (UNHCR 2022a, p. 1) research into how we lower the barriers to HE must continue apace.

While our findings suggest several potential avenues for improving asylum-seekers' access to higher education, it is crucial to acknowledge the constraints imposed by the current political environment. Any policy recommendations must be considered within the context of a government that has actively sought to restrict the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees. Future research could explore how universities and civil society organisations can work within these constraints to support asylum-seekers' educational aspirations.

Acknowledgements

Thanks, and appreciation is extended for the support received, during this research project to Refugees in Effective and Active Partnership, Action West London, the Widening Access Officer at Brunel and Compass Collective. We would like to acknowledge the contribution made by the participants of this research who were prepared to share their experiences and beliefs around accessing higher education in the UK.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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