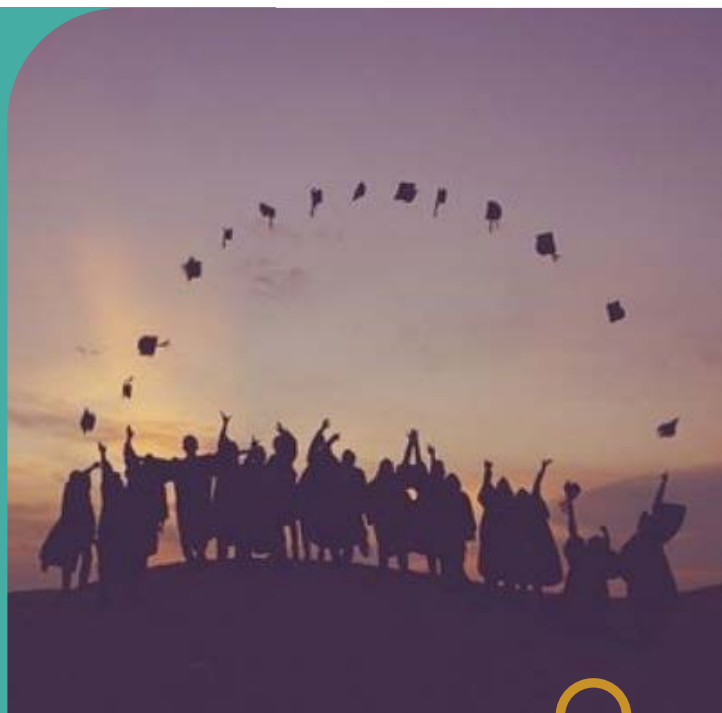


Refugee Background Students: Moving Through School to HE

Understanding the challenges through action research

This project focusing on refugee background students (RBS), refugee families and foster carers of RBS aimed to highlight the experiences of RBS and their families, identifying new ideas and approaches for supporting progression to higher education. It also sought to produce an online resource that supports teachers and staff in schools and colleges to better understand this group's perceptions and needs. Finally, the project aimed to work with peer researchers to provide role models to RBS in schools. The report has been disseminated and is used in the Office for Students' report on BAME students and higher education, and in a University of Sussex report.



METHODOLOGY

Researchers interviewed 18 RBS currently in education to understand their experiences of secondary education, aspirations for the future, and associated difficulties and challenges. They also spoke to two refugee parents and two refugee foster carers to identify their needs in relation to supporting their children as they move through the education system. Two peer researchers were recruited by the project to provide positive role models to RBS in schools.

The advisory group met three times throughout the project's lifetime. It played a vital role in project strategy, raising awareness of the work within relevant networks, and ensuring that the online resource was developed in an accessible way that met the needs of staff in educational institutions.

IMPACT

Before the project began, there were no platforms specifically related to RBS and education that enabled sharing between schools, colleges and universities. The knowledge exchange and mutual learning was a first. Through networks developed by the advisory group, one refugee parent was linked with admissions at a local university and their child was admitted to a degree programme without having to resit the expensive International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam. Another refugee parent was supported to deal with an issue of racism at their child's school. The Hummingbird Project gained insight into some of the frustrations that young unaccompanied asylum-seekers can face in English as a Second Language (ESOL) provision, and the importance of outreach work with the local ESOL provider to bring refugee and non-refugee young people together.

PROJECT SUMMARY



Context

To reach university education level, a young refugee has to overcome significant barriers and only one in 100 makes it. By comparison, 34% of young people of university age around the world are in tertiary education. Despite their potential, young refugees are greatly disadvantaged in accessing university education as well as technical and vocational training. (source: UNHCR UK)

Duration

February to September 2018

Partners

The Hummingbird Project; Sanctuary on Sea; an advisory group of partners from schools, colleges, universities, Brighton and Hove Council, Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC), the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) and representatives of the refugee community.

Funding source

NCOP – now Uni Connect (Innovation Fund)

Furthermore, the representatives of the refugee community on the advisory group have gained valuable insights into the education system which hopefully will filter back to the broader communities, building understanding and capacity.

The two peer researchers involved in the project have received research training and experience which will boost their CVs and subsequent employment prospects. However, while peer researchers were invaluable to the project, difficulties in recruiting them meant they were not really 'typical' of the young people interviewed, and the young participants may not have easily related to them as role models, meaning that their impact in that regard may not have been as significant as planned.

The young refugee participants have had the opportunity to tell their story and to have their experiences valued.

The universities that participated in the project are now aware of the gaps in providing support to RBS, and that their widening participation activities should perhaps focus on homework and 'catch-up' work rather than aspiration-raising for this group. Hopefully, they are also now aware of the gap between school/college and university.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- There are considerable variations in the experiences and needs of RBS students. Key factors are age on arrival in the UK; previous education (including interruptions to education in their country of origin, in camps and during flight); family background; legal status in the UK; and whether they are in care or with their families in the UK.
- Students received very different support and advice during their education. In general, there is no unified or coherent approach in and between schools and colleges. The variety of support provided suggests there are no clear or shared guidelines regarding the provision of education to refugee students.
- Students are generally not informed about their entitlements to support. In a number of cases, requests for support were rejected in the first instance but were later agreed if the student persisted.
- Refugee students have high aspirations and are generally very keen to study and progress in their career paths. However, the majority struggled to find the right academic path and/or support to achieve these aspirations.
- Family and carers can play a key role in the education of refugee students. Strong links between schools and families/carers supported students to navigate the education system and were important to students' successful transitions.
- Refugee parents often have limited understanding of the education system and, where this was the case, refugee students relied on others, including older siblings who had already been through the system, teachers and friends, for advice and support.
- Refugee students in foster care have generally more networks of support made available by local councils and social services compared to those who have travelled with their families or who have joined family members in the UK.
- Mental health issues, particularly related to asylum claims or trauma, have a significant and ongoing impact on the lives and education of refugee students.
- Engagement with education (for example, attendance, punctuality and behaviour) of refugee students can be affected by stress, anxiety, nightmares and other conditions related to being a refugee. It can also be affected by caring responsibilities – parents, siblings or extended family members.



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- Lack of English is often perceived as a lack of aspiration and limits the educational opportunities made available to refugee students.

The project wrote a series of recommendations to share with education providers:

Schools and colleges

For RBS

- Support for refugee background students should be more unified across schools and colleges, and clearer guidelines for academic and vocational pathways should be designed for them.
- The diversity of RBS and the need for tailored pathways should be recognised.
- Schools and colleges should build bridging programmes to enable RBS to catch up with academic content, rather than just focusing on English language courses.
- ESOL teaching should be integrated with academic skills courses to give students a chance to progress in education. Where possible, college students could be taught maths alongside non-ESOL speakers to break down silos.
- Improved communication is needed between language schools and secondary schools and colleges (for example, pre-teaching keywords from curricula, especially science and maths).
- Flexibility is needed in the number of GCSE subjects that students are expected to take to allow opportunity for independent study in the timetable for students who would benefit.
- Extra time and use of an appropriate dictionary (not just bilingual) during tests and exams should be provided to RBS by default.
- Support with homework should be provided to RBS.
- One-to-one support for refugee students should be provided to explain how the education system, A-levels and GCSEs work. This support should be extended to parents of RBS.
- RBS and their parents should be better informed by schools and colleges about their entitlements in the education system.
- Schools should provide a peer mentoring system so that RBS can make friends more quickly, which is beneficial for their language, confidence and social aspects of learning.
- Strategies to promote informal learning and socialising, which bring together refugee and non-refugee students, should be considered.
- Support for schools is needed to develop an awareness of and celebrate the diversity that RBS bring to classrooms, for example, country of origin, first languages etc.
- Training and support for school and college staff on how being a refugee can impact on learning (for example, ongoing mental health issues, caring responsibilities) is needed.

For families and carers

- Schools should provide accessible information on the education system, including the examinations at each key stage, and the vocational and academic pathways through the system.
- Induction programmes for parents should be set up to introduce them to school portals, websites and other resources.
- Schools should provide information about the subjects being studied so that parents can help their children at home.



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Schools and colleges should consider ways of engaging refugee families in the life of the school.



- Schools and colleges should send information to parents via email as well as letters, as emails are easily translatable online.
- Schools and colleges should consider ways of engaging refugee families in the life of the school.

For universities

- Universities should simplify information about financial support available to refugee background students, and consider outreach activities with RBS in schools and colleges to demystify university applications and finances.
- Universities should consider outreach activities that support RBS to 'catch-up' with academic content, and address gaps in their education, for example, via support for homework clubs and bridging programmes.
- Universities should consider refugee students' backgrounds flexible entry requirements, such as alternatives to GCSE English.
- Universities should provide free IELTS courses and testing for RBS when they don't have standard entry requirements.
- Admission officers should be more aware of the non-traditional pathways of RBS and consider alternative means of assessing competences where there are gaps in an applicant's profile.
- Universities should work towards a kitemark for refugees, similar to care leavers.



TALKING POINTS

- Difficulties in getting some communities to engage owing to concerns about state surveillance – a lack of understanding of the separation of academia and government?
- Young people's reluctance to self-identify in front of their peers.

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