

Improving Education for Refugee Background Students: **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

University of Sussex, The Hummingbird Project and Sanctuary on Sea
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The Partners

The Hummingbird Project

A charity founded in 2015 providing four core services to address the needs of young refugees living in and around Brighton: (i) the Homework Club, addressing the additional education support needed for young refugees; (ii) the Global Social Club, a social group helping young people make friends and learn about different cultures; (iii) the Young Leaders Club, training in leadership, public speaking, communication, management and advocacy; and (iv) one-to-one trauma support and casework.

Brighton & Hove Sanctuary on Sea

Sanctuary on Sea is a non-profit organisation run entirely by volunteers. It is part of a national network of *Cities of Sanctuary* which exists to make cities more safe, welcoming and hospitable for refugees and those seeking sanctuary.

Acronyms Used

EMAS:	Ethnic Minority Achievement Service
ESOL:	English for Speakers of Other Languages
BTTC:	Brighton Table Tennis Club
HE:	Higher Education
RBS:	Refugee Background Student
SLN:COP:	Sussex Learning Network: Collaborative Outreach Programme
UASC:	Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child/Children

A Note on Terminology

An asylum seeker is someone who has fled their country and applied for international protection (asylum) in another country. The Government decides if their claim meets the definition of a refugee.

A refugee is someone who, according to the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees definition, has fled their country due to ‘a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion’.

An unaccompanied asylum seeker is a person who, at the time of making their asylum application, is under 18 years of age or who, in the absence of documentary evidence, appears to be under that age and who is applying for asylum in their own right and is without an adult family member or guardian to turn to in this country.

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Summary of Research Findings

- There are considerable variations regarding the experiences and the needs of refugee background students (RBS). Key factors determining their experiences are: age on arrival in the UK, previous education (including interruptions to education in their country of origin and in refugee camps, and interruptions due to traveling to the UK), family background, legal status, and whether they are in the UK with their families or are in foster care.
- Refugee students have high aspirations and are generally very keen to study and progress in their career paths. However, some RBS have struggled to find the right academic path and/or the right support to achieve these aspirations.
- Low English language abilities limit the educational opportunities made available to RBS. Low English language is often perceived as lack of aspiration.
- Refugee students receive different support and advice during their education in the UK. In general, refugee students receive extra support in schools or colleges. However, the variety and amount of support provided to RBS seem to suggest that there are no clear and shared guidelines regarding these students.
- Students are generally not informed about their entitlements to extra support.
- RBS face a variety of barriers that affect their progression in education. These include: limited English language and print literacy skills, cultural barriers, informational barriers related to how the education system works, and inflexibility of the education system.
- Refugee students often experience serious difficulties in socialising with peers because of language and cultural barriers. A number of refugee students have also been victims of bullying and/or racist abuse in schools or colleges.
- External support from organisations not in the formal education system has proven to be essential for some RBS, as it helped them progress faster with language skills and with socialising.
- Mental health issues, particularly related to asylum claims or to trauma, have a significant and ongoing impact on the lives and education of refugee students. Engagement with education (e.g. attendance, punctuality, 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 for parents, siblings or extended family members.
- Family and carers can play a key role in the education of refugee students. However, refugee parents often have limited understanding of the education system in the UK, and, when this was the case, refugee students rely on others for advice and support, including older siblings who have already been through the system, teachers and friends.
- Refugee students in foster care generally have more networks of support made available by local councils and social services, compared to refugee students who have travelled with their families, or who have joined family members in the UK.

Introduction

This research aimed to understand the experiences of refugee background students (RBS) in secondary schools and colleges in order to support their progression to Higher Education. The research focused on the refugee students' experiences of arriving in, and moving through, the education system. Additionally, the research looked at the aspirations of young refugees, how these are being met and their perceptions of the difficulties and challenges they face in moving through the education system.

The project worked in partnership with The Hummingbird Project, a charity supporting young refugees and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Brighton, and Sanctuary on Sea, part of the national network, City of Sanctuary, whose objective is to make cities more welcoming for refugees and migrants. The project also worked in collaboration with an Advisory Group of partners from schools, colleges, the University of Brighton and the University of Sussex, Brighton and Hove City Council and representatives of refugee communities (See Annex 1). The group met three times over the course of the project. Alongside general oversight of the research, the group contributed their invaluable professional and practice-based perspectives, these have helped to shape the findings presented here.

Two peer researchers with refugee backgrounds were recruited to help with data collection. They were trained in a two-day workshop on research methods at the University of Sussex led by the principal investigator. Peer researchers also contributed to the Advisory Group with their own experiences of education in the UK.

The Context

[E]ducation is a fundamental human right and an enabling right (UNESCO 2016: 8)

As the quote above suggests, access to education is not only a basic right for refugees, but it is a means through which other rights are realised. It enables children, young people and their families to access better health, better employment, to establish friendships, better understand the culture, their rights and their responsibilities. Access and progression in education is key if refugees are to participate fully and thrive in society. However, as this study indicates, there are significant challenges facing young refugees in the UK as they move through the education system.

In order to understand the experiences and aspirations of young refugees in the UK, it is necessary to take a step back and to consider the global context of refugee education. Recent figures from UNHCR (2018) estimate that just 61% of refugee children globally attend primary school, the figures for secondary school become poorer with only 23% of refugee adolescents in school. With such a narrowing of the educational pipeline it is not surprising that only 1% of refugee youth globally access Higher Education (HE). In the light of such stark global figures, it is very likely that children and young people will have experienced an interrupted and fragmented education prior to coming to the UK.

Some of them might have missed crucial years of their education through being in a camp or a city where they did not have access to education, or it was not safe to go to school. Some might have been in transit for months or even years. On arrival in the UK, they are often excited to be starting school and have high expectations about their futures.

In 2017, there were 2,206 asylum applications by unaccompanied children in the UK (Home Office, 2018). This is a decline of 27% on the previous year, and a particularly large decrease in the number of applications from Afghanistan. The top seven countries of origin for unaccompanied children are: Sudan, Eritrea, Vietnam, Iraq, Albania, Iran and Afghanistan. In addition, 769 children were transferred to the UK from Calais in 2017 (Refugee Council 2018). The numbers of children who enter as part of a family are more difficult to estimate. The Refugee Council estimate that 5,655 under 18-year olds applied for asylum in the UK as part of a family unit. In addition, children and young people enter the UK through resettlement programmes¹. In 2015, the UK Government announced it would resettle 20,000 refugees affected by the Syrian conflict by 2020. A smaller programme resettles around 750 refugees a year from all over the world.

It is estimated that around 200 asylum seekers live in the Brighton and Hove area (Brighton and Hove City Council 2018). Up to August 2017, ten Syrian households were resettled (31 individuals) and the Council aims to resettle 20 households in total. In 2006, the Council received a group of 79 refugees from East Africa under the Gateway Protection Programme. In August 2017, there were 40 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living in Brighton and Hove. The majority of these young people are male and aged 15 and over (Brighton and Hove City Council 2018).

¹ The UK Government operates two main resettlement programmes: The Gateway Protection Programme and the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Unlike the asylum route, people receive their refugee status prior to arrival in the UK; they arrive in the UK with rights similar to those of British citizens.

Research Methodology

Interviews took place between April and June 2018. A total of 18 young people (11 male, seven female) were interviewed. Of these young people, 12 were from Syria, five from Afghanistan and one from Palestine. We aimed to recruit a broad range of ages and experiences, from those who were just starting their secondary education, through to students who had successfully accessed and participated in university. The youngest student interviewed was 12 and the oldest 20 years old: six young people were 18 years old; nine were between 12 and 17; three were 20. All the young participants had been in the UK between two and four years. They had attended a variety of schools and colleges in the city. Three students had already completed their first year at university, two at universities outside of the Brighton and Hove area.

In addition to interviews with young refugees, we interviewed refugee parents and foster carers. We used a purposeful sample, selecting two experienced foster carers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and two refugee parents. The parents each had five children in the education system and they have been in the UK for different lengths of time. One arrived in the UK in 2006 having spent many years in a refugee camp in Kenya after fleeing from Ethiopia, and the other arrived in 2016 from a city in Syria.

Interview questions were agreed in advance by the research team (principal investigator, research assistant and two peer researchers) during the training workshop in March. The two peer researchers contributed with their own experience to the development of the topics for interviews. Sulaiman, as a young man who arrived aged seventeen, had successfully navigated the system to secure a place at the University of Oxford; and Maha, a mother of five, had recently completed a Master's degree and was supporting her children through their education. The team agreed on conducting semi-structured interviews, following the set of questions agreed in advance. All interviews were conducted in English, audio recorded and transcribed.

All research participants were provided with a participant information sheet and signed a consent form before interview. Parents or carers were asked to sign consent forms for participants under the age of 16. All the names of participants have been changed to preserve their anonymity, the names of schools and colleges have been omitted and any identifying information removed.

RBS Experiences in Secondary School and College: Research Findings

I Refugee background students' aspirations

All RBS interviewed had high aspirations for the future and were aiming to work in a variety of professions including: lawyer, doctor, engineer, business person, psychologist, interior designer, charity worker and pharmacist.

An interior designer, because I quite like drawing, and I took product design because I like designing stuff. A business woman, or something like that, like in the business industry. So, like working at a bank, or working as a secretary or something. I feel like that would be fun. And I also like talking, so a secretary or at the office or something.
(Karin, 14, Syria, in the UK with family)

A doctor, because, doctor is good for everyone, because you can have... When you doctor you can help people. (James, 18, Afghanistan, unaccompanied child)

Who I want to be in the future? The best, most famous, royal neuro-surgeon.
(Mark, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

Some of the students asked their school or college for advice regarding possible future steps. One student received support from his college and the Career Service:

Very helpful, they have something called the Career Service in the library. So I used to go to them any time I want asking them questions about UCAS, how to apply to university, asking them about how to write an essay or academic skills. (Richard, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

Students without confirmed refugee status in the UK plan and dream about going to university and settling in the UK, despite their insecure status. Without refugee status, they are eligible to pay overseas student fees for Higher Education and are not able to access student loans. This creates insurmountable barriers for those still going through the asylum process.

Despite the high aspirations described by refugee students, low English language skills are often perceived as lack of aspiration and limit the educational opportunities made available to them. Students attending English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes received little or no support to identify future career pathways, and they were not aware of how they could find information about university or vocational education. For example, James would like to become a doctor, but he was not given advice on this pathway. Instead he was told to study business:

Int: Now, the question now is, do you know how to become a doctor?

J: Yeah, uh, because you should be, uh, study hard?

Int: But what I meant is, do you know, what the steps that you have to take to become a doctor?

J: Because I don't have any step, [...] Just I go to college and sit in the classroom, teacher class finish. Nobody I have asking to... [...] Nobody, no, nobody asking me, no, what you going to do, no, because, uh, when I go to college first I telling, uh, teacher I don't like doing business because I tell you, I'll never be liking business. [Teachers say] the business class, this is good for you, I say okay. (James, 18, Afghanistan, unaccompanied child)

It is undeniable that some of these young people's aspirations might be very hard to achieve, if not impossible, given the gaps in their education and the difficulties they are encountering in learning the English language. However, schools and colleges could still provide advice on related career paths, for example in James' case, he could be shown how to become a health care assistant or other pathways related to medicine.

II Support provided to RBS in schools or colleges

Refugee young children and people are a diverse group with different capacities, needs and opportunities, and care needs to be taken not to make broad generalisations or to treat them as a homogeneous group. Some of the participants in this study had already started university before having to flee, others were preparing to go to university. Some, particularly those who had travelled alone to the UK, had very little or no education prior to arrival. Their status in the UK also varied. Some had their refugee status confirmed, others had applied for asylum and were still waiting to hear whether refugee status was to be granted or not.

The majority of refugee students said that they receive extra support from their schools or colleges. For example, one student reported that she received a lot of support from her primary school. She had a support teacher who didn't speak Arabic, but she wrote and read for her in English. She received translated work in Arabic and twice a week, she also had a support teacher who spoke Arabic who would translate French and science for her. In another case, a refugee student asked for extra support in English and maths and the college hired an external support teacher to help him once a week with the two subjects. The refugee students who received the extra support said that they felt motivated to study and they made good improvements.

[Receiving support] makes you feel like they do care about feeling like you're comfortable in the school. (Noor, 15, Syria, in the UK with family)

A number of students reported that they need help with academic content rather than with translation. This was sometimes due to gaps in their educational background, to the different cultural references compared to their own countries, or to different approaches to education (see 3. Language and cultural barriers). Students were sometimes frustrated that their support teacher was only able to translate the work and did not help with the content:

[The teacher] came to help, but when I need help for science or math, she says, I don't do math or science, I'm just here to translate for you. I found it difficult and I told the teacher, at probably the middle or end of the year, I don't want her anymore, I'm good by myself. (Majd, 17, Syria, in the UK with family)

A small number of refugee students said that they receive little to no extra support from their school or college. One student with very limited English proficiency said he receives one hour of extra support a week, which mainly consists of help with spelling or homework. Another student, Akhtar, said that he does not receive any support from his college, and that he often does not understand the tasks he needs to complete.

AK: *I don't know how to solve, so I just carry on with my own mind. So they're not helping me do like this to...*

Int: *So when you go in the lesson, the teacher gives you a sheet of paper...*

AK: *Yes.*

Int: *With the maths problems and questions.*

AK: *Questions, yes.*

Int: *And then you work on it on your own?*

AK: *Yes.*

Int: *And do you understand the English on the maths paper?*

AK: *No.*

Int: *Is that difficult?*

AK: *Yes, very difficult, because I don't understand about the question, yes.*

Both students regularly attend the Homework Club run by The Hummingbird Project and the Table Tennis Club (see next section), where they receive support with their homework.

III Informal support provided by local organisations

A number of refugee students regularly attend the Global Social Club, the Young Leaders Club, the Homework Club (run by The Hummingbird Project) and the Brighton Table Tennis Club (BTTC). One student said that his English improved because he attends the Global Social Club and the Young Leaders Club. Before attending these clubs, he was very shy and not confident.

My English is better because, the reason is I communicate with people. I come to Global Social Club or to Young Leader Club, which has made a huge difference in my English... And my confidence, especially.

(Ahmed, 18, Afghanistan, Unaccompanied child joining family members in UK)

Some of the RBS also received support with homework through these organisations. The Hummingbird Project has a dedicated service for academic support to RBS with their homework. In these sessions, volunteers provide support mainly with English and maths homework. At BTTC, support with homework is provided informally if and when requested by the young people.

I come for homework and social club. Every Monday, today is homework day in here, and, uh, Wednesday I having, uh, support worker and another lady from table tennis... And Friday I have maths helping teacher, uh, a woman in, uh, Table Tennis.

(James, 18, Afghanistan, unaccompanied child)

Several foster carers mentioned that young people in their care attended BTTC or other social clubs for young people. These informal spaces are very important for building confidence, language skills and social skills (Doidge, Sandri 2018). Mixing and making friends with native speakers was beneficial for their English language, but such clubs also provided opportunities for meeting other refugee young people (see 4. Social and emotional dimensions of education). One foster carer commented on how important this is for their well-being as such spaces provide opportunities to share aspects of their lives that they cannot share with other friends.

He's just been hanging round with English speaking people. Yes, and he's met loads of friends. And now he has met, you know, that special friend. A young person from Chad, actually. They speak Arabic together. [...] a lot of the kids go to [Brighton] Table Tennis Club.
(Dawn, foster carer)

IV Home environment

Family and carers can play a key role in supporting the education of refugee students. However, if their language skills are limited and/or they have no experience of the English system, they often struggle to support their children. For example, in the case of Mark, his parents are highly educated and were supporting him in Syria. However, because of the language barrier, and because they are not familiar with the education system in the UK, they found it hard to support him and his siblings.

They did all of their best, yes, but they're not English speakers. So, my father is a consultant electrical engineer and my mum is a 'maxfax', maxillofacial surgeon. So, in Arabic they were able to support me a lot, but in English they weren't really able to support me, but they've done all of their best to support me. [...] it's still very, very hard for them. They're still learning English. They wanted like to change their qualifications to an English one, and it's, yes, they're working on it. (Mark, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

As the quote illustrates, parents can also be struggling to re-qualify and re-establish careers in the UK.

One of the parents interviewed spoke of how schools could do more to include parents in their children's education:

Sometimes I think it would be also a good chance to consider their parents, with the subject, to prepare either meetings or short courses, to give them a hand with a few, information, extra ones about the subjects they are taking at schools to give them some more information to support their children when they get back home. [One of his teacher] used to give me a piece of paper or a few sheets of paper to show me what subject they are going to have in the future, and that will make it much easier for me to know what he's going to have, and at the same time to rehearse with him at home, to ask him a few questions about it to find out if he's doing well or not. (Anas, Syrian, father)

The Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) provide a home-school liaison service to support the engagement of families with schools, but it has to be purchased by individual schools and, with one notable exception, secondary schools tend not to buy-in to this service.

In the absence of parental support refugee students seem to heavily rely on the support of older siblings and friends for their education, including help with homework, as well as emotional support:

My older sister for example likes maths, the other one likes science, my younger brother, one of them likes art, one of them likes [unclear] so I get support from all of them with different subjects. [...] If I feel like I need support I could talk to them, tell them can you help me with this subject? [...] From time to time they always ask me if need any help with any homework and when it comes to my exams they'd offer to help me with things, even if I don't go to them, they'd come to me first. (Noor, 15, Syria, in the UK with family)

There are some advantages for refugee students in foster care as they generally have more networks of support made available by Local Authority and Social Services, compared to refugee students who travelled with their families, or who have joined family members in the UK. Refugee student in care receive financial support and a Personal Education Plan (PEP). The PEP is a statutory part of the care planning process and is a termly meeting between carers, social worker and school.

The big plus for them being fostered is they get opportunity to use and learn language far more than if they were in an independent accommodation ... And benefit hugely from having a carer, one to one to look after them before they find their feet. But, language is a huge part of my role, helping, supporting them with their language because that is the key skill they're going to need for their future. (Helen, foster carer)

As care leavers, these young refugees have access to full time education up to the age of 25 years. If they apply to university, support is available with finance, settling in and accommodation. Such support is not available to other refugee background students, such as refugees who travelled to the UK with their families or who have joined family members.

V Poverty

Financial difficulties are a common challenge for refugee students and a number of participants mentioned not having access to laptops which would support them with homework. Financial difficulties were particularly acute for those who travelled to the UK on their own to join family members. These students do not receive financial help as they are not in care, and they are not entitled to receive bursaries as they are considered cared for by their family members. However, these families often struggle to support the young person, and they can end up living in inadequate and over-crowded conditions with little or no financial support for study. For example, Akhtar said that he lives in a two-bedroom flat with seven relatives; he sleeps in the kitchen and has no space to do his homework.

I have two brother and one sister and my brother-in-law and nephews and my... my sister's children ... I don't have my own room because we are seven people, seven people and two bedrooms. ... there is no extra support. No laptop, no my room, so I'm sleeping in front of kitchen. It's really difficult. (Akhtar, 18, Afghanistan, travelled on his own to join family)

Barriers to Progress in Education

1 Arriving in the UK with low English language skills

On arrival to the UK, refugee children aged 16 and under should be placed in mainstream schooling as soon as possible. Normally an assessment of their language skills is made, together with a judgement as to whether they have sufficient language skills to access the school curriculum, or whether they should be referred to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision. If young refugees arrive in the country after Easter, they may have to wait until the next academic year to start school. A recent study found that children entering school at secondary level waited for more than three months for a place (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018). If they arrive aged 16 (Year 11) it is difficult for them to start school as the focus is on revision for GCSE exams. The Gladwell and Chetwynd study found that schools are reluctant to admit children in Years 10 and 11 as they fear that admitting children at this stage would negatively affect their results and impact the school league tables. In these situations, the young people are usually referred to the post-16 college sector, usually to ESOL provision.

Access to some ESOL courses was also delayed as some courses operate on fixed, but regular entry points. Students arriving mid-year faced delays. This research found that ESOL students are usually very keen to learn and want more ESOL than they are offered. Generally, refugee students felt that ESOL courses were not preparing them for future studies as they focused only on English language skills and were not linked to academic or vocational subject matter. For example, James described how he would like to learn more ICT skills as he never used a computer before coming to the UK, but he says there is no one at his college to teach him:

Is not good when I'm not learning at computer, no. No having computer course. [...] I like to do because I never use before in computer, no. (James, 18, Afghanistan, Unaccompanied child)

Students were keen to start catching up with the academic content they had missed and gain the qualifications that would enable them to progress. The time spend on ESOL courses is generally perceived as too long and it does not allow for fast progress:

I would not say I wasted my time, I made some good friends, but I would say it wasn't very helpful as doing GCSE and Access course. Because when I did my Entry Two and Entry Three and then Level One, I think it took me lots of years, unnecessary years I think, to prepare to go to do GCSE. (Richard, 20, Syria, in the UK with his family)

Other students said that they were not learning enough as there are only international students in the ESOL classroom, and they do not have opportunities to practice their English with native speakers. Those students that managed to progress from ESOL to college said that they learnt more English in college, as they were able to make friends with native speakers (see p19 Case Study – Richard).

Some of the students reported that there are mixed abilities in the same ESOL class, and this makes it very difficult for students to learn. One student said:

In our class, they have ESOL where Entry 3 students, Level 1 students, Level 2 students and one teacher is teaching to all. If she is teaching for Level 1 and Level 2, how can Entry 3 students catch her lecture? The teacher prepare for Entry 3 students, the Level 1 students are just playing game in phone because they say that what the teacher is doing I know about this. (Ahmed, 18, Afghanistan, Unaccompanied child joining family members in UK)

Some of the students asked teachers to be moved to higher classes but were told there was no space in those classes. This further exacerbated feelings of being 'stuck' in ESOL classes and of not progressing.

2 Print literacy

Some of the refugee students, particularly the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, had either never attended education before, or had received very limited education, for example in a religious school. They therefore arrived with little or no print literacy skills which presented a significant barrier to their learning overall:

I didn't go in Afghanistan school. I just go to like, Mosque, where my religion is, school no. The age of like ah... Five to eight, around.[...] after I worked with my father. Tailoring, tailor master, making dress. [School in the UK] is very hard for me, you know... Starting it by A,B,C is very hard. (James, 18, Afghanistan, unaccompanied child)

Without the independent learning skills and literacy in their home language, learning English and progressing in education was very slow. While there is some literacy support for students in schools, there appears to be little to no specialist support for illiterate adolescents.

When you haven't learnt how to learn from a previous education, they don't have the skills to learn. So, things like revising and looking over your work and using bits of the language to help you with other bits of the language and using that resourcefulness that you have, they don't have that. If you had a provision that had specialist teachers who were trained in working with illiterate adolescents that would be wonderful, wouldn't it? (Helen, foster carer)

3 Language and cultural barriers affecting progress

In general, RBS struggle during exams as they have difficulties with understanding and responding to questions due to language barriers. For example, maths and science curricula require the production of complex language, and understanding terminology was an obstacle:

The math in English and the math in Arabic are the same, numbers and stuff, but only the difficulty was the... What is it called? The terminology, that's the one. The mathematical terminology of the things, it was hard. (Majd, 17, Syria, in the UK with family)

The hardest subject is science. Yes, when I have this... I must try write with science word, like 'solvent', and those words, and it's very hard to learn these words. (Aisha, 13, Syria, in the UK with family)

Language barriers heavily affect grades of refugee background students. For example, one student said that back in Syria he was the top student in his class, but in the UK his marks went down because of language difficulties.

I really enjoyed reading books for the English language GCSE. I find them really hard, and it really made my grades go down instead of up, the English language, because I spend a lot of time doing English language instead of my actual A-Levels. (Mark, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

Language barriers are also affecting the refugee students' choices of GCSEs or A-Levels. For example, one refugee student wanted to take A-Level Biology but was advised against because, according to the teacher, the language in that A-Level was too complex.

Refugee students also encounter obstacles because of the different cultural references in the curricula compared to their own countries. One student gave the example of history being taught from a European perspective, in contrast to the curriculum in Syrian schools:

In our countries they look from our point of view, our beliefs, it's like they're supporting Arabic culture or Islamic beliefs or Quran. Where in England here, they support the European belief or the English belief, which is normal of course. (Daniel, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

Daniel also drew attention to the different cultural expectations about education, such as critical thinking and essay writing:

About the skills like writing essays, presentations, writing argumentative essay or persuasive essay. All these things, for example, we don't learn it in Syria. [...] everything is like revising and memorising stuff and then go to the exam and just write down what you remember.

RBS have suggested that extra time and the use of dictionaries during tests and exams would be very helpful to overcome these obstacles. A few students have been allowed extra time during tests, and they said this is really helpful.

4 Informational barriers related to the education system

The majority of refugee students reported that when they started going to school, they did not know how the education system worked in the UK. They said that the different qualifications, and how the results achieved might influence their future choices were not explained to them.

Doing A levels, and I didn't have anyone to tell me how it's going to be. So I think I just figured it out when I started college because no one told me anything and I didn't know what to expect. [...] I didn't really receive any support. I was just expected to start like anybody else, just like any, like, British person that was here since they were young. [...] I could have received support for how the exam was, because obviously exams in Syria are different than exams here. I didn't receive any support, like, oh, this is how the exams are going to be, this is how you need to answer them. [...] I think if they, like, brought someone, or a teacher, to talk to me and tell me, or if they've given me, like, resources or support, yes. I think if they did help me with that that would have really helped with me with the exams. [...] I believe I could have achieved a lot higher grades. (Muna, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

It was often assumed by teaching staff that refugee students had progressed through the education system, and at some earlier point information and knowledge had been conveyed to them. For example, one student who was taking GCSE English in order to progress to university was placed in a class with students who were re-sitting the exam. He was the only student in his class who had never taken the exam before, but his teacher appeared unaware and did not explain how these exams work.

The people I was with, they were resitting the GCSE and I was doing it for the first time. [The teacher] was assuming that everyone knows the content, and she's just going fast over them. So I wasn't able to keep up with the students. She didn't pay a lot of attention. (Mark, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

Mark did manage to successfully pass the exam and progress to university. Similarly, another student explained how he struggled with assignments because, unlike the peers in his class, he had never been taught how to write essays or do presentations.

When I did my GCSE, they don't teach you how to write essays or assignments or doing presentations or anything. So when I went to the Access course, I remember when I did my first essay, I did it in a different form than any normal students in my class. They knew how to do it because they learn how to do essays and assignments or presentations. So at the first two months it was very, very hard, that makes you feel that you don't know anything about the subjects. It makes you like in doubt of your skills if you can pass it and honestly the first two months or three months, I said maybe I might fail this year and then I was very, very worried. (Richard, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

Some of the information gaps could easily be addressed, such as taking time to ensure that students are aware of text books and resources which support homework and revision for exams. Majd who had joined a GCSE class mid-year found out about the existence of an important revision book only after failing his exam:

It was after the exams, I think, in year 12. My teacher told me, this is the book, and I think I took it home with me. He said, it's okay, you can take it home and revise from it. I said, okay, thank you; now you're telling me. (Majd, 17, Syria, in the UK with family)

5 Inflexibility of the system to meet needs

Throughout the research, it emerged that refugee students' requests for extra support or for changes in their education progression are usually rejected in the first instance, but agreed if students insist (see below, Case Study – George). For example, if refugee students ask to be moved from ESOL courses to a mainstream school or college, or move up levels, these requests are usually rejected at first with little explanation. However, students reported that when they insist, schools usually agree to the request. This might reflect an inflexibility in the education system which is based on linear and predictable pathways and achievement within particular timescales. Refugee students are very much 'outside of the norm' in terms of their varied backgrounds, different learning capacities and needs.

Case Study: George

Aged 18, Afghanistan, unaccompanied child

George arrived in the UK when he was 16. He started attending ESOL classes at a local college and was very happy to go to college after three years of interrupted education.

When I went to [college] after three years if somebody let you go to study freely, it's like Christmas day. So I love the place and I found more friends there. I love my college.

However, he also felt that his level of English was higher than the class he was assigned to. After two months, he started asking his teachers if he could move to a higher class, but they would not allow him to because they said his level of English was not good enough. He felt he was wasting his time because he really wanted to progress in his education and eventually go to university.

I passed all Entry and then I was like, can I have all the Level 1 also? The teacher said, no, you can sit in Entry class and we'll promote you in one year. [...] At the end of two months I started arguing with my teachers, no, my English is good and I'm doing better so I want to sit for Level 1 exam rather than sit in Entry and do Level 1 next year. Some of the students they can easily pass Level 1 and

*Level 2 in the first year but the teachers say no, one year in Level 1, another year Level 2.
But it's a waste of time for us.*

As he insisted that he wanted to be moved, he managed to get transferred to another college. In the new college, they assessed his English and sent him to functional English classes for two months.

*When I went there they said, your English is quite good, we don't care about the paperwork.
So, they straight away put me on functional and preparation class for maths and English GCSEs.
And then also I applied for Level 2 Business which was a whole new subject for me
and the teachers started helping me.*

After two months, George was able to move to GCSEs because he demonstrated his ability to study in English. He said that he felt he was given a chance to prove himself. He also chose Business GCSE and at the end of the year he received a merit for his course work.

Support did not always appear to be consistent. In some cases, those with most acute needs, i.e. recently arrived with low English language, or those without established literacy, receive some support, but once a certain threshold is reached, the support ends. Where this threshold is varied considerably from student to student and across schools and colleges. Some of the students said they would have greatly benefitted from extra support for a longer.

Time extensions in exams are available when specific criteria are met, but the guidelines are not always clear to students, and consequently it was felt to be at the teacher's discretion and not always fair. One student received a time extension for his exams but was told that as he'd been in the country for more than two years, this extension must stop. He felt that he still needed this extra time as he struggles with writing in English. In addition, some of the refugee students are not aware of these entitlements for support, hence they do not access the support they need.

In one case, a refugee student was told to do seven GCSEs even though the minimum required is five. He found this to be too much work. He would have rather had more time for independent study to consolidate the subjects, as he was already finding it hard to adjust to the new education system in the UK:

They told me to choose between geography and history. I chose history, but they gave me both subjects even though I only wanted history. And they made me do triple science. [...] You only need five subjects to pass for GCSEs. I think I got eight or seven. If I only had what I needed, it could have been better. They didn't tell me, they just chose for me. I think probably because so I won't have free time probably, I'll just stay at school and do stuff instead of wasting my time, or maybe I don't know, but maybe to fill the timetable. [...] It was hard still because I still couldn't speak English that well, and there were so many exams, about 23 exams or 21 exams, and they were in a time where I was fasting as well. [...] I pretty much got D for all of them. [...] I had to retake them last year. I passed all of them except English. (Majid, 17, Syria, in the UK with family)

With a more flexible system, Majid might have passed sufficient GCSEs to progress without the need to retake exams.

RBS develop their linguistic and academic skills and capacities at very different rates, and they were often frustrated at what they perceived as the slowness and inflexibility of the system. All the different experiences and needs suggest that support to RBS should be more tailored depending on the student's individual needs. RBS have very different backgrounds, some of them have never been to formal education, others attended international private schools, and the support provided to them should be fitting with their needs.

6 Social and emotional dimensions of education

The majority of refugee students stated that, at first, they found it very difficult to socialise with English students because of the language and cultural barriers. Some of the students struggled with isolation and anxiety because they couldn't make friends at first. Aisha, a young Syrian, explained how she felt other students didn't like her:

I didn't like primary school, because I did not have friend, they work with me with different way, and look at me in a different way. But I feel they don't like me. Only one girl, she was sitting with me at the breaks, speak with me. She speaks English. She doesn't speak Arabic. But she is very different from me as well. But I like her. (Aisha, 13, Syria, in the UK with family)

Reflecting back, Mona describes how her first friends were other migrants:

I found it hard to make friends with, like, with people because I've never, like, I've always interacted with people from, like, the same country, same religion, same language. So when I first came, the first people I became friends with were people that were like me, people that have come from different countries and their language... their first language is not English. (Muna, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

The challenge of trying to 'fit in' and not be seen as different is clear in Jay's narrative. The struggle to learn a new language, perform academically and 'be like everybody else' was experienced as humiliating and prevented him from seeking support from his teachers:

I was a bit embarrassed most of the time. Yeah, I felt like they would make fun of me if I didn't know how to spell a certain word. [I]t affects your learning because if you're sitting in a class and you're embarrassed to... to say... something you might not understand... If you don't raise your hand up and say I don't understand then the teacher's not going to know that you don't understand, he's going to think that you know everything. ... And the fact that I didn't want to go out and look like I wanted to go and get help because I wanted to be like everybody else was... it was a bit hard to try and learn like that... there was no point in me listening because I didn't understand anything they were saying. And the fact that I was embarrassed to... to put my hand up and ask... I mean, it's kind of my fault a little bit.

Learning to integrate and to adapt to a new culture was also difficult:

When you first get here you're new to everything it's like a whole new world. You don't know anything else apart from what you knew... what you knew back there. ...And when I first came here I was, like, why is it like that. And it was so different, like, the... the... the culture and everything was different. It was quite hard to just transition ... if I wore the Muslim thing if I wore the Muslim hat or thingy some might look at me different. (Jay, aged 18, Palestine, in the UK with family)

Jay stopped attending and eventually dropped out of school completely. He said that what would have helped him is having what he referred to as a 'little class' where students can go and ask for support and advice. He would have also liked the school to organise a mentoring scheme to make friends. A number of refugee students suggested that it would be really helpful if schools had mentoring schemes to help new students socialise and feel more welcome when they arrive in the new school. In Noor's words:

I think sometimes someone can move to a school and people already have friendship groups and that would make the person feel unwanted there and they wouldn't be very comfortable there. So, I think it would be good if schools would let them meet people, rather than just letting them go and meet people when other people already made their friends.
(Noor, 15, Syria, in the UK with family)

In only a handful of cases, refugee students reported that other students were friendly and helpful. Making friends and having the support of peers is a key factor in academic progression and success (see below, Case Study - Richard).

Sometimes I had to do sign language and pointing to let my friends know what I want and what I say. (Majd, 17, Syria, in the UK with family)

Majd describes how he and other students would try and use body language to communicate or use their phones to translate.

Case Study: Richard

Aged 20, Syria, in the UK with family

Richard left Syria with his family when he was 16. He attended ESOL courses for one year and a half, then went on to do his GCSEs and an Access to Higher Education course.

He has finished his first year at university. He recalls that he found ESOL very difficult particularly because he was put in a class where most of the students were over 30 and from abroad. He mostly spoke Arabic with them and felt that his English did not improve.

Most of the students are, for example, speaking the same language, so they speak Arabic. Most of the students I remember were Arabic or Iranian or Turkish, they have similar language, so we used to speak Arabic sometimes more than English.

He said that he started to learn English when he moved to another college to study GCSEs. The majority of the students were native speakers and he started to make friends and understand the culture more.

When I did my GCSEs this is the first time I met friends from English backgrounds and I started to go out with them. So this gave me more about the English culture, it makes me feel that I'm happy in this country more. And then it makes me understand how to talk, like how English people or people from England they think, they speak, what they like, what they hate. So it makes you feel like one of them in the country rather than sitting in ESOL meeting old people from, let's say from my background. [In ESOL classes] you're just living in England, but you don't know nothing about England.

Particularly during his Access course, peer support and learning from others was an important contributory factor to his progression.

I learned more English language, more vocabulary and grammar by sitting next to people, writing essays and making mistakes and someone telling me this is wrong. I think all my skills now and what led me to go to university is because writing essays, making mistakes, learning from other people's experience.

Although very grateful for the support of his peers, Richard felt that they might have been motivated by 'pity' because of his status as a refugee and because he did not speak English very well.

Either they are helping me because I came from Syria and because it's war, or they're helping me because my English is not very good, so I always get confused.[...] So everyone when they were talking to me, they knew I'm from Syria so it's normal questions, asking me, what's the problem, what's happening there. You probably came from war background, very dangerous background, like I mean in our city, dangerous area. So this is enough reason, I think, and especially because I was young, this is enough reason to say they feel more sympathetic about me. [...]

Some people they might get upset because other people looking at Syrian people, people coming from different areas in a sympathetic way, I would say. But I don't see it this way, I see it as very humanitarian and very nice and it's really good, this is what people should do.

7 Racism and bullying

Students also talked about being bullied or racially abused by other students at school. Racism was directly connected with being foreign. If incidents were reported, schools and teachers intervened promptly. Below, Karin explains what happened to her at school:

At the start of Year 7 there was a couple of people who were kind of racist. So they would tell me, go back to your country, or, I know English better than you, you don't need to be here ... the teachers would give them isolations or warn them, and if it happened again with any other kid, they would tell their parents and phone home. The school did support me and didn't let it go ... It wasn't just Christian people, it was different races, different religions, so the school was really understanding, I think. This person was quite racist to me, and really mean, and then they gave him isolation and phoned home. So he never did it again, and now me and him are okay, like, we talk, we say hi and stuff. And I think the school did okay. He got what he deserved.
(Karin, 14, Syria, in the UK with family)

Some students had experienced racism from teachers. Jay reported that some teachers were:

...not being nice ... being a bit cross towards me, a bit racist. You understand when someone is, when someone don't like you and someone don't want to teach you and someone don't want to help you. He's not being racist, he don't want to show up, but you know he's being racist towards you.

He went on to explain how

... it really lower your confidence when someone is not being nice to you, like you think, what have I done? Why is he not being nice to me? And, [...] it makes you worry as well, like, why I'm not getting treated the same way as others. (Jay, 18, Palestine, in the UK with family)

As the quote above indicates, young people might be aware that they are facing racism and discrimination in the classroom, but it takes a form which is not always easy for them to identify and challenge. In general, refugee students tend not to say that they are refugees because they fear being bullied.

A number of participants referred to activities and events at school, such as school projects collecting items to send to refugees, or positive representations of refugees. These activities made them feel valued for being different, and they had helped them to develop a sense of well-being at school. One young girl spoke of her pride at being asked to speak Arabic at a school assembly as part of a language awareness event.

8 Mental health and education

Mental health issues, particularly related to asylum claims or to trauma, have a significant and ongoing impact on the lives and education of refugee students. Asylum application processes and rejections are the most common challenges that affect refugee students who arrive in the UK via the asylum route. The long waits, and stories of friends and family members receiving rejections, gravely affect the mental health of the students and their education. One student said he did not feel well enough to sit maths GCSE because his asylum application had been rejected. He said he received support from the school at this difficult time, such as help with assignments and writing letters to the Home Office in support of his application. He will re-sit this GCSE in the autumn:

I had some problems going on in this year, that's why I couldn't have gone and sat a GCSE in May. I'm planning to sit in November and teachers are all, okay [...] I had my asylum interview and then I waited eight months. After eight months they suddenly informed me that I got refused. [...] Usually when they [the teachers] knew that, they start giving me letters to send to the Home Office. The lessons were really tough so they helped me a lot with going through my assignments and each time when I go to the class they're asking me how I feel today.
(George, 18, Afghanistan, unaccompanied child joining family members)

Engagement with education (e.g. attendance, punctuality, behaviour) of refugee students can be affected by stress, anxiety and other conditions related to being a refugee. One of the foster carers interviewed, who had looked after four young men, described how the waiting period caused depression, anxieties and nightmares. During these times the young people find it difficult to motivate themselves to go to school or college, often spending long periods alone in their bedrooms.

9 Caring responsibilities

Some of the refugee students are also young carers for another family member. For example, Jay, who dropped out of school, lived with his mother who has had chronic health issues for the last 10 years, and a father who recently developed serious mental health problems. He has two younger siblings who he is also trying to care for. His group of friends was his main source of emotional and practical support, and the family did not seem to be accessing support from elsewhere.

Akhtar, who joined his brother's family in the UK, described how he was expected to take and collect his nephews and nieces from primary school. Unable to afford the bus fare to college he had to walk, which made him late. He was worried about his punctuality but when he explained his situation to his tutor, he was told that it was his brother's responsibility to look after the children and not his. Akhtar was entirely dependent on his brother's family and in a vulnerable position; unable to contribute financially to the family, he had little choice but to contribute in ways in which he was asked, such as caring for his nephews and nieces.

10 Barriers to admission to university

Among the students interviewed who already attend university courses, there is a sense that universities are not particularly attentive to their refugee background, particularly in the admission phase. Universities did not recognise the overseas qualifications that students arrived with. For example, one student had already started university in Syria but when he arrived in the UK, his qualifications were not accepted, and universities insisted that he had to pass English and maths GCSEs. He also had to take AS and A-Levels in the UK.

Many participants who were either at university or aspiring to attend university were not following the traditional A level route and were often taking an alternative pathway, such as Access to Higher Education course.

Whichever route students were following, GCSE English was assumed to be a requirement for access to HE. Obtaining this qualification poses significant challenges to refugees as it requires engagement with a range of literary texts from different genres, types and historical periods, as well as effective use of English language. An alternative qualification for refugees to be able to prove their language proficiency was often the International English Language Testing Scheme (IELTS). However, the cost of courses and exam fees was prohibitively expensive. One parent interviewed reported they had paid £1,000 in fees for their child to prepare and sit the IELTS exam. The University of Sussex provides scholarships for Syrian refugees to prepare for the IELTS examination, but no project participant had accessed these scholarships.

Students interviewed have had mixed experiences regarding the support they received from colleges when applying to university. One student said she didn't receive support from her college when she was applying for university, it took her a long time to understand how to apply, and she approached one teacher asking for help, particularly regarding student finance.

It took me a long time to apply to university because, I mean, I didn't know how to deal with it. But I just, I mean, at the end I figured it out. They just let you do it on your own. But if, like, when I did need help, I did ask for it. (Muna, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

Conversely, another student said that in his experience, three different teachers helped him write personal statements, trained him for interviews and had classes in preparation to his BioMedical Admissions Test (BMAT) (entry requirement for medicine).

And for applying to universities, the teacher help. Not one, like three teachers help me write my personal statements, they corrected it, they re-read it, they re-proofed it, yes. And for interview training I received like four or five interview trainings. For the BMAT we had weekly classes. The BMAT is one of the test we have to do before applying to do medicine. (Mark, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

A notable gap in knowledge was around funding for higher education. The system of university finances, and the availability of loans for students with refugee status, was little understood. Richard said that he was surprised to receive a £3,000 grant before he started his first year at university, he was not aware he was eligible to receive this money.

They send me a letter after two days saying that because we checked you like your form or like your application and you are entitled for £3,000 scholarship that you don't need to pay back. And this was, I think, very good. I was surprised because I didn't ask them for anything and they gave me £3,000 for nothing. (Richard, 20, Syria, in the UK with family)

Unaccompanied children seem to have less access to information regarding higher education and funding. This could be because their English language and print literacy skills were generally low, and therefore it was assumed that Higher Education was not an option for them. Also, without confirmed refugee status they are viewed as overseas students and are not eligible for financial support and lower home student fee status. Akhtar, who had arrived in the UK on his own and was now staying with family members, explained how he wanted to become a software engineer, but that his status and lack of funding for higher education was a barrier:

Ak: *My friend told me that if you don't have a full permanent or refugee status, they will not admit in university... the thing is that, how you will pay for university? So, how can I pay? I don't have a job, nothing, so how can I pay?*

Int: *So, did the college give you any advice about going to university?*

Ak: *No.*

Int: *None at all?*

Ak: *No.*

Akhtar was still waiting for confirmation of his refugee status, but that does not stop him and others waiting in the asylum system from dreaming and planning their futures in the UK.

Recommendations for Improving Practice

Based on the findings in this report the following recommendations should be considered to improve refugee background students' ability to progress through and thrive in the education system.

Schools and colleges

1. Support to refugee background students should be more unified and consistent across schools and colleges and clearer guidelines for academic paths should be designed for refugee students.
2. Diversity of refugee background students and the need for tailored pathways should be recognised.
3. Schools and colleges should build bridging programmes which enable refugee background students to catch up with academic content, rather than just focusing on English language courses.
4. ESOL courses should integrate academic and vocational skills courses to give students a chance to progress in education.
5. Where possible college students on ESOL courses could be taught maths and other subjects alongside non-ESOL speakers to breakdown silos and encourage mixing between students.
6. Improved communication between ESOL provision and secondary school (e.g. pre-teaching of key words from curricula, especially science and maths).
7. Flexibility in the numbers of GCSE subjects students are expected to take to allow opportunity for independent study in the timetable for students who would benefit.
8. Extra time and use of appropriate dictionary (not just bilingual) during tests and exams provided to refugee background students by default.
9. Schools and colleges should provide more support with homework to refugee background students, and work more closely with organisations providing support (such as IntoUniversity, Hummingbird and BTTC).
10. One-to-one support to refugee students to explain how the education system works, including A-Levels, GCSEs and the different pathways to level 4 qualifications. This support should be extended to refugee parents.
11. Refugee background students and their parents should be more informed by schools and colleges about their entitlements in the education system.
12. Schools to provide a peer mentoring system so that refugee background students can make friends quicker, which is beneficial for their language, confidence and social aspects of learning. See, for example, the [Young Interpreter Scheme](#) developed by Hampshire County Council.
13. Strategies to promote informal learning and socialising which bring together refugee and non-refugee students.
14. Support for schools to develop awareness of, and to celebrate the diversity of refugee background students in classrooms. For example, recognising countries of origin and different languages.

15. 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.

Support for families and carers

1. Schools to provide accessible information on the education system, including the examinations at each Key Stage, and the vocational and academic pathways through the system.
2. Induction programmes for parents to introduce them to school portals, websites and other resources so that they can support their children at home.
3. Schools to provide information about the subjects being studied, so that they can help their children at home.
4. Schools and colleges should send out emails as well as letters, as emails are easily translatable online.
5. Schools and colleges to consider ways of engaging refugee families in the life of the school.

Universities

1. Admissions offices to recognise the non-standard backgrounds of refugee students and consider flexible entry requirements. For example, consider alternatives to GCSE English, alternative means of assessing competences where there are gaps in an applicant's profile, and recognise qualifications from overseas.
2. Universities to simplify information about financial support available to refugee background students and consider outreach activities with RBS in schools and colleges to de-mystify university applications and finances.
3. Universities to consider outreach activities which support RBS to 'catch-up' with academic content and address gaps in their education. For example, support for homework clubs and bridging programmes.
4. Universities to provide free IELTS courses and testing for refugee background students where they do not have standard entry requirements.
5. Universities to work towards a kitemark for refugees, similar to those for care leavers

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