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“Education is key to life”: the importance of education from the perspective of displaced learners

OLive course students, IT trainer and director

Students on the University of East London’s OLive course – a preparatory course for university access specifically tailored to refugees and asylum seekers in the UK – share experiences of accessing education as displaced learners.

Education is a basic human right for all and should be accessible regardless of the fact that we have been displaced. As forced migrant students, we face several barriers to entry into higher education in the UK, which include:

Immigration status: While most asylum seekers have the right to study in the UK as long as their case is active, this right is not widely known and many universities and educational institutions are still reluctant to accept us. Often, when we call and inquire about our right to study, the people we speak to in these institutions do not know that we have the right to study and they turn us away.

Access to finance: Asylum seekers and those who have temporary leave to remain are not eligible to apply for government-provided student loans, nor other types of related student finance including hardship funds, bursaries and travel funds. For those with refugee status, access to student finance is limited and depends on their length of time in the UK, age and level of study. Student finance is only available where students wish to study at a higher level than they have done previously but because we face problems in getting our previous qualifications recognised we may need to repeat studies at a similar level.

Recognition of previous qualifications: Many of us do not have access to our transcripts and for those of us who have copies, the cost of having them translated and validated is prohibitive. Universities should be more proactive in recognising and accrediting refugee and asylum-seeker students’ prior learning.

English language requirements: To accept a place in a university we are required to provide evidence of our English language competence. Places on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) courses are limited and asylum seekers do not automatically qualify for free provision. Many universities are inflexible with what they accept as proof of competence, requiring IELTS exams even when other documentation can prove similar attainment. Sitting an IELTS exam is costly and the waiting time for a speaking test can be several weeks. Arranging and paying for an IELTS test is often impossible within the timeframe available after having secured both a place to study and a scholarship or student finance.

Trauma and ongoing struggles to live a dignified life: Experiences of trauma – escaping war, conflict and violence, and then being put in the asylum process – cause post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and other mental health difficulties. This reduces our ability to engage in application processes and our studies. We need additional support and information in order to navigate these processes without them causing us further anxiety and exclusion.

Academic skills and culture: Even though many of us have been to university before, the expectations of UK universities are different and the culture is unfamiliar. Not being able to express our thoughts in perfect academic English can mean people underestimate our intelligence and skills. We have all had our educational path interrupted by conflict, war, violence and displacement. There are gaps in our education which are

difficult to bridge, and for which we need additional support, but these gaps are not an indication of lack of ability or drive.

Lack of support and exclusion: We often struggle to access mental health services, childcare support and information about our rights. We are being moved into housing in areas where there are no educational opportunities, and we do not have adequate funds to travel to available courses. Those of us whose asylum claims are unsuccessful end up losing our housing and benefits altogether. It is virtually impossible to study and make progress in the face of such pressures.

Lack of access to information: Although some opportunities are available (including generous scholarships for asylum seekers), information about services, funding opportunities, policies and practices regarding higher education is difficult to access. Some of us have been offered places in universities and invited to come and enrol, only to be told on arrival that we cannot start as our status does not permit access to student finance.

Changing policies: Ever-changing policies make it even harder to know our rights regarding education and mean that many educational institutions are reluctant to support us. In 2017 some of us were banned from studying by a randomly applied immigration bail condition.¹ Although the decisions were later overturned, this took several months, further increasing the gap since we last studied and further damaging our confidence.

Initiatives and recommendations

Since April 2017 the University of East London has been offering an Erasmus+ funded ten-week weekend course for refugees and asylum seekers who wish to prepare for university studies. In addition to the core teaching team, the course is run by enthusiastic volunteers, who are students and staff in UEL, colleagues in other institutions and community actors. This Open Learning Initiative (OLive) course

offers English language tuition, academic skills and writing, academic lectures, IT literacy, creative writing, photography and other workshops and classes. It also offers students advice in planning their pathways through education: choosing universities and programmes, finding scholarships and getting through the application processes. An important aspect of this course is the physical access to higher education institutions and networking opportunities it provides.

The course – the first one of this kind in the UK – has the potential to support new arrivals in their first steps towards achieving independence by providing them with the necessary skills to eventually make meaningful progress in their personal and educational development. It also provides a space for social gathering and peer support for forced migrants, who often feel isolated. The main limitations of the programme are lack of funds for travel, lack of access to childcare and limited opportunities after the course finishes. As opportunities like this are very limited in all of the UK, some students travel long distances to attend, coming from as far as Birmingham, Swansea and Manchester.

We welcome the scholarship schemes that many universities have established but there needs to be better coordination and availability of information regarding these opportunities, not least inside the institutions which offer them. More scholarship opportunities are also needed, countrywide, in a broader variety of courses and universities, and these should be supported by the State as well as by individual universities.

Scholarships alone, however, do not solve all the issues. We would like to encourage other universities, especially those outside London, to develop access, pre-sessional and foundation programmes with fee waivers and additional funds for travel and study materials for forced migrants. Community-based education programmes outside formal educational institutions are also important as they can help enhance the skills we require for studying and working in the UK, and can also help us form supportive communities, reducing the sense of exclusion.

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Although Student Action for Refugees and Article 26² have made great efforts to make information available regarding rights and opportunities, this should also be more readily available through the State-provided support structure for those in the asylum process. We would welcome an open and accessible platform that provides information in several languages about the education system, application processes, students' rights and available support. We would also like to see the setting up of educational consultation centres where we could find support and access all this information.

Some of the barriers we have faced, especially financial ones, are particular to the UK but most apply in all host-country contexts. A wider perspective and a large-scale evaluation of the challenges faced by forced migrants, involving all stakeholders, is needed. This would help the UK and other host countries to develop better strategies and policies to improve displaced people's access

to education at all levels. We believe education is key to life. It benefits each of us individually but it also has a positive impact on those around us. Through higher education we can obtain knowledge, skills and qualifications that can give us better jobs and better lives.

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1. See article by Baron in this issue.
2. See Article 26 <http://article26.hkf.org.uk> and Student Action for Refugees www.star-network.org.uk
3. Susan Razawy, Elizabeth, Senait, Jamaalatu, Nisaar Ahmeed, Fernando Chathveragh, Majid Adin, Rajmonda Kurti, Mohamed Alie Jalloh, Elizabeth K Johnson, Fatema, Elijah, B U, Ghirmay, Talatu Stella Bernard, Hatixhe Madana, Cleofe Pingol, Saud Aman, Adnan Baessa, Mahmoud Sarsak, Younes Soaryeni, Muhammad Babar and Yusuf Ferah Iman.