

'It's not just opening the doors': Challenges and possibilities for refugees' access to higher education

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Worldwide, around 7% of people from refugee backgrounds attend university. Yet refugees gain substantially from their participation in higher education, as do universities and the countries in which refugees settle. Recognising these benefits, UNHCR has set a target of 15% of refugees attending university by 2030.

About the research

Prior research shows that many constraints - legal, academic, linguistic, financial and psychosocial - limit refugees' access to HE. However, support from university scholarships, Widening Participation provision, and help from Further Education, local authorities, NGOs, and refugees' own families and communities, can enhance refugees' HE access.

After stakeholder consultation, interviews were conducted with 38 participants based in Somerset, Devon and South Wales and involved with refugees' HE access: 14 from refugee backgrounds, 13 from universities, the rest from further education colleges, NGOs and local authorities.

Questions addressed HE's benefits for refugees; obstacles and resources impacting refugees' HE access - personal, social, economic and institutional; and challenges and possibilities for refugees' HE progression.



Majid Adin, *At sea*

Recommendations for policymakers

1. Immigration policies such as work and study limitations on asylum-seekers prevent access to HE. Removing or reducing these would allow for further access, save costs and enhance skills.
2. The Home Office needs to allow greater geographic flexibility when providing accommodation to allow asylum-seekers to attend university.
3. Economic constraints currently prevent many refugees from accessing HE. Government and universities should provide greater assistance with maintenance loans, grants and bursaries.
4. Universities, FE colleges, local authorities, NGOs, and refugee groups need to provide easily accessible, simple guidance that takes into account differences in language and qualifications. They should provide free English, academic bridging and IT courses and digital access, to enable refugees' progression.
5. Collaboration within and across sectors is needed to ensure welcoming, refugee-centered, holistic and consistent support for HE access.
6. Data on refugees' applications, admissions, and outcomes should be published to ensure accountability and measure progress.
7. All those working to improve refugees' HE access can enhance that work by linking it to broader campaigns for socially just education and refugees' rights.

Key findings

1. On **HE benefits**, research participants mentioned better job prospects; economic stability; increased skills and networks; heightened social inclusion; improved wellbeing; a strengthened sense of belonging; rich English-language experience; more global mobility; greater ability to support family members and enhanced possibilities for family and community.

2. On **barriers to refugees' HE access**, participants identified legal, economic, psychosocial, academic and linguistic challenges; an increasingly hostile policy environment for refugees which impacts their HE access; and intensifying financial challenges.

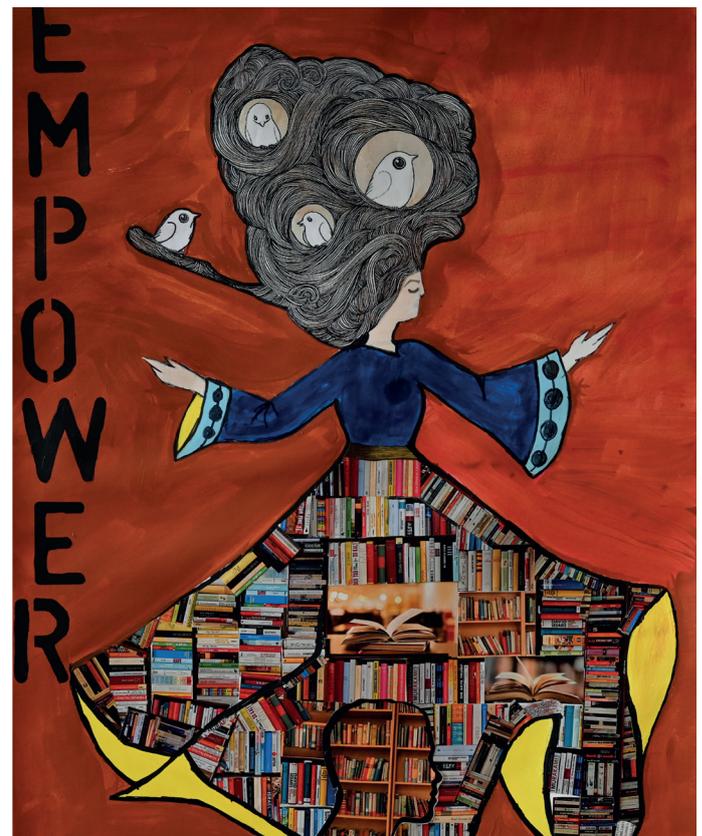
3. Participants also described **existing and possible support for refugees' HE access**: more information; help with applications, translation, childcare, and mental health; more scholarship support; increased Foundation and Access places; better financial support within HE; a fairer, flexible approach to non-UK qualifications and English requirements; free academic English courses and tests; courses to bridge academic gaps and to provide broader academic experience; and free digital and academic skills training.

4. Participants identified a number of **institutional constraints on HE access** including rigid, siloed approaches; inattention to refugees' specific needs; resource shortages; fragmented provision; and discrimination.

5. Participants envisaged **institutional support** as refugee-centred, open and coordinated, across institutions and sectors. They noted the expansion of such work, operating against the hostile environment, and saw it contributing to a just, empowering and

transformative approach to refugees' HE access.

6. **Participants suggested HE progression was hindered** by stigma and racism; refugees' unfamiliarity with UK HE; and lack of support for refugees' specific needs. **Participants valued** consistent, holistic and community-integrated academic, psychosocial and material support from all sectors, both during and post-HE, especially for employment.



Bahara Parwani, Empowerment through education

Further information

Project summary - <https://migration.bristol.ac.uk/refugees-access-to-higher-education/>

Read the full report here - <https://migration.bristol.ac.uk/files/2025/02/Refugee-HE-Access-Full-Report-and-Recommendations-Feb-6-2025.pdf>

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