



Refugee Education UK

# Make or break:

**Reflections on further education enrolment for  
refugee and asylum-seeking learners**

March 2025

## Summary

This briefing presents practitioner-based insights from REUK's experience of supporting young people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds to enrol in further education in September and October 2024. It highlights some of the barriers and challenges facing young sanctuary seekers in enrolling in further education institutions, and identifies examples of good practice. It presents [top tips for colleges](#) to help make enrolment a smoother, more inclusive and accessible experience for young refugee students.

## About Refugee Education UK

Refugee Education UK (REUK) is a UK charity working towards a world where all young refugees can access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future. Our direct programme work supports children and young people to get into school, from primary to university, and to thrive academically and in their wellbeing. Alongside our direct work, REUK provides training, resources and bespoke support to education institutions across the country and carries out research to build evidence on issues related to refugee education. Find out more about us at [www.reuk.org](http://www.reuk.org).

## Acknowledgments

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FE	Further Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UASC	Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

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# Introduction

For many learners aged 16 and over from a forced migration background, further education (FE) is the main entry point to the UK education system ([Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018](#)). Colleges across the UK play a crucial role in giving young people an opportunity to engage in education and access wider support networks, thereby giving them the tools to build more hopeful futures.

Based on the findings of research conducted by Refugee Education UK (REUK) and UNICEF UK in 2018 ([Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018](#)), the Access to Further Education programme at REUK was established in 2020. Since then, REUK has experienced an increase in queries to our education advice line regarding access to FE and issues with enrolling at college. Each year we support young refugees and asylum seekers to enrol at college through pre-enrolment advice and support, as well as telephone and face-to-face support during enrolment.

Getting into FE is a pivotal moment in a student's journey, and has the potential to enable them to progress towards their educational goals. Conversely, inability to enrol in FE can lock young people out of the education system entirely. Ensuring enrolment is inclusive and accessible is therefore crucial. In Autumn 2024, REUK supported over 130 young refugees and asylum seekers across England through the enrolment process to access suitable FE courses. This briefing seeks to provide an evidence-based snapshot of challenges experienced by practitioners and young people during enrolment, as well as to share learning and highlight good practice.

## Context

Under UK law, all children of compulsory school age (5-16) have the same entitlements to full-time education, regardless of immigration status. From the age of 16, complex criteria and rules affect continued access to education ([Ashlee & Gladwell, 2020](#)).

In England, young people aged 16-18 are expected to be in some form of education or training, including full-time education, an apprenticeship or traineeship, or working or volunteering for 20 hours or more per week while in part-time education or training ([GOV.UK, n.d.](#)). Local education authorities are responsible for ensuring the availability of suitable, free education or training for young people in this age group, including a place in full-time education, work-based learning or part-time training alongside part-time work ([Anq, 2024](#)).

For those aged 19 and over, the availability of funding for FE is more complex and restrictive ([Ashlee, 2024](#)). Government funding is available for some FE courses, depending on age and immigration status ([Ashlee & Gladwell, 2020](#)).

Very little research exists on access to and experiences of FE for young people from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in the UK. Past research by REUK ([Ashlee, 2024](#); [Ashlee & Gladwell, 2020](#)) has found that the older young people are when they arrive in the UK, the more challenging it is to access a course that allows them to progress in their choice of career paths. Newly arriving refugee and asylum-seeking students above the age of 16 tend to be placed in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or functional skills courses, with few clear pathways to progress beyond this. A lack of college



spaces, uncertainty around young people's accommodation because of dispersal policies and complex admissions and enrolments processes mean many refugee and asylum-seeking students struggle to access meaningful FE placements ([Ashlee, 2024](#)).

## Methodology and limitations

This briefing is based on REUK's experience of supporting young people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds to enrol or re-enrol in colleges in London, Oxford and the West Midlands in September and October 2024. During this period, REUK staff provided a mixture of face-to-face support, telephone advice and pre-enrolment advice and planning to 134 young people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds. The majority of these young people were already known to REUK, including through our access and mentoring programmes, while others were referred to REUK for enrolment support by other organisations.

Young people were seeking to enrol at more than 40 different college campuses and sixth forms, on a wide range of courses and at a variety of levels, including ESOL provision, Access to Higher Education (HE) courses, GCSEs (primarily English and Maths), BTEC diplomas, A Levels and others. Enrolment support was primarily provided in three locations in which REUK has an existing staff presence: London, the West Midlands, and Oxford (see Table 1).

This briefing is based on REUK staff reflections and observations on the enrolment process. It draws on three key informant interviews with staff members who were extensively involved in supporting enrolments, and on monitoring data, including an online form completed by staff for each young person they supported to enrol or re-enrol in college. This is complemented by evidence from existing literature.

**Table 1. Number of young people supported with enrolment, by region**

Region	Number
West Midlands	41
London	74
Oxford	12
Other	7
Total	134

The briefing is intended as a reflective, practitioner-led piece, and as a basis for further research, discussion and advocacy. It draws on the observations and experiences of REUK staff, rather than on data collection with young people or college staff. It focuses on access to and enrolment in FE, rather than on the experiences of young people after they have enrolled. It can be read in conjunction with REUK's recently published report ([Ashlee, 2024](#)), which examined the experiences of displaced young people aged 13-19 who arrive in the UK late in the education system, and which drew on the experiences of more than 400 individuals, including charity, education and local government stakeholders.

## Definitions

The briefing uses the phrases 'young people from refugee backgrounds', 'refugee and asylum-seeking learners' and 'young person' to encompass young people with a broad range of statuses who have been forcibly displaced from their homes and are seeking sanctuary in the UK. It does not only refer to those with refugee status, but rather includes individuals seeking asylum whose status is unresolved or who are in appeals processes, and those with statuses including refugee status, humanitarian protection, unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) leave and discretionary leave to remain.

In the UK, FE refers to study after secondary education that is not part of higher education (such as a university degree) ([GOV.UK, n.d](#)). It is mostly undertaken by those who are above compulsory education age (16 and above), though some courses are accessible to 14 and 15 year olds.



## Learnings and reflections

This section summarises observations related to the enrolment process. The first section highlights examples of good practice in making enrolment inclusive and accessible for young people from a forced migration background. The second section identifies challenges and barriers.

### Practices that support inclusive and accessible enrolment

#### The role of support workers

Having the support of a social worker, charity support worker, foster parent or a designated staff member at the college goes a long way in enabling students to understand the educational pathways available to them and navigate the application process. The 134 forms filled for this project all demonstrated the impact of having this additional support in a young person's enrolment journey. One key informant recounted their experience where a young person would have been denied a place at the college if not for their intervention:

*“One challenge that I can remember that I experienced was a young person in a family reunion visa that was going through applying for a visa extension, so there is a rule there that's called Section 3C that applies, but the college was like, you do not have an active visa, there's nothing that shows you're here legally. So we had to go in and tell them, hey, actually this young person is covered by 3C, here is evidence of their application to the Home Office... so we had to go and explain things like that”* (key informant).

Studies show the importance of a trauma-informed approach when engaging with students who have experienced forced displacement ([Jack, Chase & Warwick, 2019](#)). This is true even during the enrolment process. Practitioners reported instances of TVs in the waiting room flashing news of wars and graphic images that create a hostile environment and could trigger a young person who has fled their country because of war. Further, the entire enrolment process can feel overwhelming for a young person and the prospect of having to take assessments can add to their overwhelm, leading them to not perform to the best of their abilities. Having someone accompany them to encourage them and help them focus on the task at hand, while advocating on their behalf with the enrolment staff, gives them confidence to proceed. As one practitioner reflected:

*“That intervention from us, that moment was very key. Changed the whole scenario and helped the young person take the assessment, prove himself. Yeah. I mean, if, like, you know, suppose we were not there with the young person and the young person would have been under stress already because colleges denied him, he would come, you know, he would face that, another big barrier, the strict teacher. Yeah. And they would definitely, like, you know, be turned away. Yeah. Because they couldn't express themselves. It would be a big challenge”* (key informant).



## Case Study

One young person attempted to enrol onto an Access to HE Diploma at his local college, but was told that he did not meet the eligibility criteria as he had not been living in the UK for three years. He reached out to REUK via our advice line and was connected with a caseworker. On checking the rules, the caseworker confirmed that the young person should have been eligible for funding for this course based on his age, immigration status and previous level of study. The caseworker wrote an email confirming their understanding of the funding entitlements for the young person to take to the college enrolment team. On doing this, he was still turned away and told he was ineligible because of the three year rule.

After being rejected twice, the young person was ready to give up and remain out of education. This time, the caseworker accompanied the young person to the college to explain that we believed the young person had been incorrectly fee assessed. The matter was resolved quickly, and the young person was able to successfully enrol on the fully funded course that he was entitled to.

## Online assessments

Practitioners shared that some colleges had initiated online assessments this year which helped them support more young people in enrolment. One practitioner said:

*“all the ESOL, like, assessments, maths assessments, that's all done online now. So, like, results can be, like, given back to students quite quickly, which meant that we, like, our time with, well, my time with the students, like, I think that's an overall shorter time...which I think helped”* (key informant).

While this is a welcome practice, practitioners noted that it might be helpful to have online and written assessments made available as options to young people, to avoid digital exclusion.

## Supportive staff

Practitioners and young people reported on the positive impact of supportive staff at colleges. Even if the outcome of their application was unsuccessful, being heard and spoken to with respect and kindness had a positive impact on the young person.

*“They listened to us, they gave us time. I spoke to multiple staff that are very understanding, that explained their position, that tried so hard with senior management, for this young person to be given a second chance. We were not successful, but their attention and support...was really, really positive”* (key informant).

This is supported by our 2020 research, which identified inclusive colleges - including friendliness of staff, availability of bursaries and presence of trained staff who understand relevant rights and entitlements - as a key factor enabling young people to transition into FE ([Ashlee & Gladwell, 2020](#)).

## Clear signposting on campus

Signposting during enrolment helps guide students through what can be a complex and overwhelming process for them. Practitioners reported that even simple signs on paper go a long way in reducing young people's anxiety on the day.

*"I have noticed in some courses, they have lots of good signposts printed on the papers. Okay, this way you're going to student finance team, this way ID card printout team, this way you're going to speak to the science teacher..."* (key informant).

Young people also appreciated having someone from the college guide them through enrolment day by letting them know what to expect from the beginning. Practitioners noted some colleges had a staff member to greet young people as they entered the college and give them an overview of what the day would hold.

## Pre-enrolment preparation

Practitioners highlighted as good practice, colleges that began preparing for enrolment towards the end of the previous academic year. This included instances of teachers talking through progression options with students at the end of their courses and having certificates and documents prepared well in advance of enrolment.

*"Because near the end of the academic year, the colleges have started doing the, some of the official procedures or, like, formalities for the enrolment to the next level or next course, just by the end of, near the end of the academic year. So, a big portion of the enrolment was carried out that time, last academic year"* (key informant).

This helped practitioners provide more hands-on support to newly arriving refugee students or others who needed more tailored support.

## Barriers to inclusive and accessible enrolment

### Complexity of requirements and processes

An overarching theme that was repeatedly highlighted is how complicated the FE system is to navigate for practitioners and students alike. Newly arriving refugee learners find themselves navigating multiple complex systems, including the FE system ([Hill, 2023](#)), which can leave them feeling overwhelmed and confused about their educational options. Practitioners reflected that the complexity of the system means refugee learners often don't know what the eligibility criteria are for different courses and where they can find information about their financial entitlements. Colleges may not always have clear information specific to refugee and asylum-seeking learners, which can lead to disappointment when a young person tries to enrol onto a course they may not be eligible for.

Speaking about the complexity of the FE system, and the challenges refugee and asylum-seeking learners encounter because of it, one practitioner said:



*“they're not designed with refugees and asylum seekers in mind. They are in these documents as an exception, so colleges won't be focusing on that really, because this will be a very small cohort of their students, so it's not surprising they don't give that much attention”* (key informant).

Further, colleges interpret requirements differently leading to some colleges having unnecessarily burdensome documentation requirements for refugee and asylum-seeking students. One practitioner commented:

*“I'm not sure why they make it stricter sometimes, for example, they might be like, oh we need to see your Application Registration Card (ARC), we need to see your Section 95, we need to see your Asylum Support Enablement (ASPEN) card. All of that is unnecessary, they only need to know if the person is in the country, has claimed asylum, and it has been six months since he claimed asylum. And that's it. But they ask for what we think are unnecessary documents”* (key informant).

The enrolment process itself can feel quite intimidating and overwhelming for refugee and asylum-seeking students. Practitioners reported young people being asked to retake assessments because they hold qualifications from a different UK college, or being offered a place on a lower level course than the young person has applied for despite them having the necessary qualifications. This has a negative impact on their emotional wellbeing, and practitioners reported that young people often lose motivation to study when they are faced with rigid and overly complex systems.

The complexity in processes can extend to enrolment day itself and young people can find navigating the college campus quite difficult.

*“Sometimes it's a bit challenging for young people to find the exact place where they have to go for the enrolment. Because sometimes it was confusing for me. I have to go, for example, to the second floor for getting the enrolment card. And I had to go, for example, to the next room or, like, third floor for doing the assessment on the computer. Yeah. And once you're done with that, you have to come back to the first floor to finalise the last bit of the enrolment”* (key informant).

## Inflexibility on academic entry requirements

Practitioners recognised and supported the need for academic entry requirements to ensure learners have the skills and knowledge to successfully cope with the demands of their chosen course. However, they reflected that the interpretation and inflexibility of entry requirements can add unnecessary barriers for learners, especially as this often varies across colleges.

For example, for a refugee or asylum-seeking learner with high levels of English and a high school qualification applying for an Access to HE Diploma, the entry requirements could vary from:

- GCSE English *and* Maths
- Either GCSE English *or* Maths (with the opportunity to study the other alongside the Access course)
- Level 2 English and Maths (which includes Functional Skills) *or*

- Demonstrating English and Maths skills at Level 2 (without stipulating qualification)

Practitioners recommended that colleges retain flexibility within their entry requirements, whilst ensuring learners are able to cope with the demands of the course with a clear route to progression on its completion. In the instance of Level 3 courses with progression to university, it is helpful to note that many universities accept different qualifications to prove English language competency (such as IELTS or an internal English language test). Colleges should adopt a similar approach to entry requirements to enable access and facilitate progression for young refugee learners.

### Case study

A young person was offered a place at university for a bachelor's degree (with a foundation year) and met the English language requirements for the course with an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) certification. However, he was unable to take up his place on the degree due to lack of funding. With REUK's support he applied for an Access to HE Diploma at a local college with the hope of applying to university the following year.

The young person was initially refused entry onto the Access course by the college tutor as he didn't have a GCSE English certification. When an REUK staff member advocated for the young person to be given a place, it was explained that the young person would not receive university offers without a GCSE certification, despite the college website requirements stating a GCSE "or equivalent" certification. The college was made aware that the young person had already received an offer from a university, and he was then enrolled onto the Access course.

### Inconsistent communication

Research has shown that a lack of timely, transparent and consistent communication is a significant barrier in refugee learners' access to education ([Kalocsányiová et al., 2023](#)). Reflecting on their experience with college staff during enrolment, practitioners spoke about the complex rules being interpreted differently, not only across colleges but also between different staff members within the same college, leading to further confusion. One practitioner reflected that:

*"It really seems like the young person's progression at times is dependent on the individual that we've come to for the assessment"* (key informant).

Even in instances where the young person had the assistance of a support worker during enrolment, the experience could still be confusing because of different information coming from different members of staff. For example, one practitioner stated that:

*"the chances for advocacy, our advocacy is limited to what they tell us, and different teachers will tell us different things, depending on their interactions, their perceptions of that young person, which make it even more difficult, because"*

*there's no sense of uniformity when it comes to the treatment of, and assessment of [by] different teachers" (key informant).*

## Incorrect interpretation of funding rules

The incorrect interpretation of FE requirements can lead to arbitrary treatment of young people during enrolment and could lead to potential learners being out of education or enrolled on an inappropriate course. Practitioners reported that this can be exacerbated by staff being unaware of the rules, and that without someone to advocate on their behalf young people could miss out on opportunities to get into FE. Past research by REUK similarly found that refugee and asylum-seeking learners are often given inaccurate information about their eligibility to study in FE courses, ultimately holding them back from appropriate courses ([Ashlee & Gladwell, 2020](#)).

*"[Name redacted] was originally told she is not eligible for funding. She arrived on family reunion visa - her father has refugee status. We had to advocate on her behalf by emailing the university outlining the entitlements for family reunion. [name redacted] then enrolled successfully" (online form response).*

Practitioners suggested that to help navigate the complex funding rules, FE college staff should be trained to identify a range of immigration statuses and assess learners' eligibility on that basis.

### Case Study

One young person tried to enrol independently at his local college but was told he was not eligible for financial support and would have to pay the full fee for the course. On his friend's recommendation, he reached out to REUK for support with his case. The REUK caseworker realised that he was, in fact, eligible for funding under the funding rules and accompanied him to the college for enrolment. The young person was once again denied financial support and was told that the computer database was flagging them as ineligible for funding. The caseworker asked for the young person's case to be escalated. The college then ruled that the database was incorrect and the young person was enrolled on their chosen course with full funding.

## Limited ESOL spaces impacting young people's ambitions

Colleges in the UK have seen the demand for ESOL courses increase significantly in the last few years ([AOC, 2023](#); [Hill, 2023](#)). Provisions are struggling to meet the demand with most ESOL providers being "oversubscribed" ([Hill, 2023](#)). Practitioners reported multiple challenges that refugee and asylum-seeking learners are experiencing, including being accommodated in locations with fewer colleges thereby limiting their ESOL options, securing a place in a college that is far from where they live with no option for travel bursaries, and being limited to courses available at their local college thereby curtailing their ambitions for progression. Expanding on this, one practitioner said



*“Most young people think the current ESOL provision at colleges are not sufficient at all. Hence, they try [to] study [the] same courses in different colleges. They want to fill out their free time by studying at colleges” (online form response).*

This quote reinforces what is already known about refugee and asylum-seeking students having high educational ambitions. Our recent research highlights that while getting a place on an ESOL course might be slightly more straightforward, getting on a FE course that would advance their career prospects can be particularly challenging ([Ashlee, 2024](#)).

In addition, lack of sufficient ESOL options for those aged 19+ further limits the ability of refugee and asylum-seeking learners to attain meaningful qualifications.



## Conclusion

This briefing highlights some of the challenges experienced by practitioners and young people during enrolment into FE colleges in 2024. The overarching challenge identified has been the complexity of the FE system and associated difficulties with navigating this system for newly arriving refugee learners as well as practitioners.

Each of the challenges identified merits further examination and in-depth research to appropriately address the barriers to accessing FE experienced by refugee learners.

Despite the challenges, examples of good practice shine through, and practitioners and young people recounted supportive practices encountered in their enrolment journey, highlighting the positive influence colleges can have on refugee and asylum-seeking learners' journeys.

## Top Tips

Below are some tips for colleges to help make enrolment a smoother, more inclusive and accessible experience for young refugee students.

- 1. Work proactively with local refugee organisations.** They will know where the potential learners are and will have mechanisms to share information. You could arrange a day for an organisation to bring a group of prospective learners to undertake enrolments at the same time. You could also organise an open day with tailored advice and support. An additional benefit to developing these relationships is that you can signpost and refer any learners who may require external support services throughout the academic year to these organisations.
- 2. Provide basic training for all enrolment staff** on entitlements for learners with complex immigration statuses, and provide in-depth training for a few staff members who can be a point of contact for any questions that arise during enrolment.<sup>1</sup>
- 3. Prepare an enrolment crib sheet with entitlements for refugees and asylum seekers** for all staff involved in enrolment (City of Sanctuary UK and REUK are in the process of designing a template which will be made available on their websites). The crib sheet should clearly state that enrolment staff should refer queries or uncertainties to designated trained staff members so young people with more complex immigration statuses do not fall through the cracks.
- 4. Make translation facilities available for those with low English levels.** A good practice is to recruit college ambassadors who speak multiple languages to interpret during enrolment. Making basic translation services such as Google Translate accessible to staff during enrolment can also be helpful.

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<sup>1</sup> REUK and City of Sanctuary UK have developed and run training specifically designed for FE staff. The training seeks to help FE colleges grow in their confidence and expertise to support refugee and asylum seeking students. Further information can be found at <https://training.reuk.org/sanctuary>



5. **Provide clarity, but ultimately flexibility, over English language entry requirements for vocational courses.** It is helpful to consider the purpose of the entry requirements and find alternate methods of assessing the young person's current academic level rather than depending on a preset requirement list that could exclude capable and eager learners.
6. **Consider temporary solutions to enable students to begin learning while waiting for bursaries.** The delay in accessing bursaries can be a huge barrier to education, especially for asylum-seeking learners. Temporary solutions would provide learners with the means to access the course immediately after being enrolled. For example, could support with travel and food costs be made available immediately, instead of the 6-8 week standard wait for students?
7. **Join the FE [College of Sanctuary](#) network** to receive updates on the implications of changes in immigration policy for colleges, guidance on improving processes, and access to case studies of promising practices from colleges across the UK.





# Refugee Education UK

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