

# Lighthouse Lates

## Refugee Education: What can the UK learn from humanitarian contexts?

### Introduction

Tuesday 4th March marked the first of our '[Lighthouse Lates](#)', a new series of intimate, expert conversations on critical issues in refugee education, hosted by REUK in our London home. The theme of the evening considered lessons the UK could learn from refugee education in humanitarian contexts worldwide, with a focus on overcoming the barriers that young refugees and asylum seekers encounter when trying to access quality education.

### Summary of discussion

#### 1. Prioritise Learning Outcomes, Not Just Access:



It's not enough to enrol refugee and asylum-seeking children in schools; learning must be at the right level, with a focus on foundational literacy and numeracy, supported by trauma-informed, inclusive pedagogy.

#### 2. Develop Flexible and Diverse Pathways:



Education systems should create accelerated and adaptable learning pathways for overaged and displaced learners, ensuring they are accredited and lead to meaningful qualifications and opportunities.

#### 3. Strengthen Systemic Coordination and Support:



There must be a planned, strategic national approach with coordinated efforts between government, schools, and NGOs, underpinned by political and financial commitment rather than reliance on individual goodwill.

Save the Children's Global Director for Education, Susan Nicolai, discussed lessons learned from global education in emergency contexts, such as prioritising learning outcomes over mere access, developing flexible pathways for students, training teachers to assist displaced students, incorporating psychosocial support, and improving government-agency coordination.

Strategy expert and research advisor at Jigsaw, Hiruy Teka, reflected on his experiences in crisis zones such as Cameroon and Cox's Bazar, highlighting the resilience, coordination, and hope that drive productive educational interventions in the face of often overwhelming challenges.

The Chief Executive of REUK, Catherine Gladwell, emphasised the need for strategic coordination and specialised support for refugee learners while highlighting the UK's legislative commitments and the gaps between policy and reality.

Harneet Singh Baweja, a member of REUK's lived-experience Youth Advocacy Team, also gave a moving testimony during the evening. Harneet described his own experiences navigating various educational systems as a child refugee, highlighting the challenges and opportunities encountered while advocating for more flexible, inclusive, and encouraging educational pathways in the UK.

Reflecting on the experiences of the speakers, Newham College Deputy Principal James Gould discussed the absence of a strategic, planned government approach to refugee education in the UK. He emphasised the importance of trauma-informed instruction, accelerated catch-up learning, and the proactive efforts of individual teachers to assist refugee students, frequently motivated by kindness rather than institutional support.



## Panellist insights

### **Susan Nicolai (Global Director for Education, Save the Children):**

*"Enrolling children isn't enough; learning outcomes must be the priority."*

Susan presented five key lessons from global education in emergencies (EiE):

1. Prioritise learning outcomes over access alone.
2. Recognise and support diverse learning pathways.
3. Strengthen the role of host community teachers through training.
4. Embed psychosocial support in education.
5. Improve coordination among governments, agencies, and schools.

She urged the UK to adopt flexible learning pathways and to ensure political commitment for refugee education.

### **Hiruy Teka (Education in Emergencies Expert):**

*"Education provides a foundation of hope for families and individuals—intergenerational hope."*

Hiruy emphasised the urgent need for coordinated action amid global education crises, highlighting technical, funding, and policy challenges that obstruct access to learning. He stressed that education is a right and a foundation of intergenerational hope, even in crises. Citing examples from Cox's Bazar and Cameroon, he illustrated how bureaucratic barriers, government restrictions, and deliberate attacks on education can make access seem impossible. Yet, through collaboration, persistence, and holistic, safe, and quality learning—including core academics and social-emotional skills—communities can be empowered, and refugees can thrive despite adversity.



## **Harneet Singh Baweja (REUK Youth Advocacy Team Member):**

*"One year makes a huge difference as a child—and that gap can shape your whole future."*

*"I already knew all the maths and asked to be enrolled in GCSE, confident I could catch up. But the teachers didn't believe I could keep up, which I found really odd—it should have been a case of letting me test my ability and try."*

Harneet shared his experience navigating education as a refugee in Belgium and the UK. In Belgium, the flexible system ensured seamless access, while in the UK, rigid policies created barriers. Despite having the equivalent of GCSEs, he was denied school enrolment due to his age and was placed in a basic functional skills course.

Determined to continue his education, he had to self-advocate - negotiating with teachers, seeking out revision classes, and convincing a teacher to let him sit a GCSE exam. His story highlights the additional energy and resilience that refugee students must exert to access education, calling for better advocacy, guidance, and flexible pathways.

## **James Gould (Deputy Principal, Newham College):**

*"Too often, inclusion depends on goodwill, when it should be a statutory duty—just like it is for children with EHCPs."*

James focused on the lack of a coordinated, strategic approach to refugee education in the UK. He emphasised the reliance on individual goodwill rather than systemic support and called for trauma-informed teaching and accelerated catch-up learning. He pointed out policy and incentive gaps that hinder schools from investing in newly arrived refugee students.



The next **Lighthouse Late** will take place **Tuesday 13th May**, titled “**Refugee Education: Ed Tech, AI and the Future of Learning for Displaced Young People.**” You can book [here](#).

We will explore how cutting-edge technologies are transforming education for displaced young people in this thought-provoking panel discussion. Our expert speakers will delve into the potential of ed tech and AI to bridge learning gaps, provide access to quality education, and empower refugee learners worldwide - whilst also examining the risks and ethical dilemmas. From virtual classrooms to personalised learning, join us to discover innovative solutions shaping the future of refugee education.

