Finding Their Way:

The Journey to University for Refugee and Asylum–Seeking Young People in Coventry
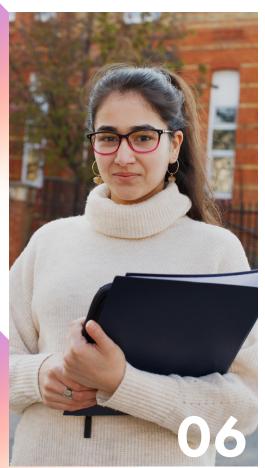
A research report by the University of Warwick's English and Comparative Literary Studies Department and Refugee Education UK

Refugee Education UK

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About the research partners

Founded in 1965, the English and Comparative Literary Studies Department at the University of Warwick is one of the top 30 English departments in the world in the QS World Subject Rankings (2022). The University of Warwick is ranked in the top 10 UK universities for research environment (2021 Research Excellence Framework), with 91% of their research rated as 'world–leading' or 'internationally excellent' (see the Times Higher Education).

Refugee Education UK is a UK–based charity that supports refugee and asylum–seeking young people to access education, thrive in their education and use that education for positive and hopeful futures. Find out more about their work by visiting www.reuk.org.

Key terms

- **Compulsory education.** Compulsory education refers to the education a child is legally required to receive. Requirements vary throughout the UK, but typically involve enrollment between the ages of 5 and 16.

- **Further education.** Further education (or 'FE') refers to education that occurs before higher education, and is intended for students who are above compulsory education age.

- **Higher education.** Higher education (or 'HE') refers to any form of education that results in a level 4+ qualification. For the purposes of this study, we will only refer to universities as the type of level 4+ educational establishment.

- **Refugee.** The term 'refugee' refers to people who have been forced to leave their country of origin due to war, the effects of natural disaster, or a fear of persecution, and have sought refuge elsewhere. For this report, the term 'refugee' refers to those who have had their claim for asylum approved by the Home Office.

- **Asylum seeker.** The term 'asylum seeker' refers to people who have been forced to leave their country of origin due to war, the effects of natural disaster, or a fear of persecution, and are in the process of seeking refuge elsewhere. For this report, the term 'asylum seeker' refers to those who are currently waiting on a response from the Home Office regarding their claim for asylum.

- **Unaccompanied asylum–seeking child.** An unaccompanied asylum–seeking child (or 'UASC') is an asylum seeker or refugee who is under the age of 18 years old, and has arrived in a country of refuge without their parents or carers.

- **Young person.** For the purposes of this study, a young person refers to those aged 16–30.

Introduction

Background

By the end of 2011, 38.54 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced from their home countries. Over the course of the following decade, this number consistently increased to 89.3 million (UNHCR, 2022). To give this number some context, it is a population size shared by DR Congo, the sixteenth most populous country in the world.

Of these 89.3 million, 41 percent — or 36.5 million — are children (UNHCR, 2022). For refugee and asylum–seeking children and young people, education is a fundamental right and a priority. Learning in a safe and nurturing environment provides a sense of routine and normalcy that contributes to their recovery after the life–changing disruption of forced displacement (Burde et al., 2017). Education at the secondary and tertiary level can "open new horizons" for refugee and asylum–seeking young people and has the potential to "transform lives" (UNHCR, 2019a; Slaven, 2021).

Currently, only 6% of the world's refugee and asylum–seeking population successfully progress through post–primary education and reach higher education (HE) (UNHCR, 2022). This means that not only are there millions of refugees and asylum seekers currently missing out on the benefits of HE, but host communities and national education systems are also being deprived. Providing educational opportunities for refugee children and young people has the potential to transform communities, build resilience, increase tolerance and achieve peace (UNESCO, 2019; UNHCR, 2022).

It is not the suggestion of this report that any single organisation or higher education institution (HEI) can begin to resolve the complex and persistent barriers that exist for refugees and asylum seekers trying to access HE. However, this research is grounded in the belief put forward by Universities UK International (UUKI) that "higher education institutions can — and do — play an important role in alleviating some of these challenges" (Slaven, 2021). UUKI's report called on HEIs to develop individual responses that "reflect the desires and needs of the community of learners with whom they will seek to work, and the specific opportunities that might be provided by the strengths, capabilities and context of their own institution" (ibid).

Responding to the call, this research demonstrates how a particular HEI might develop their own individual response to reducing barriers to accessing HE for refugees and asylum seekers. Simply put, this report asks: what can the University of Warwick do to reduce barriers to accessing HE for refugee and asylum–seeking young people local to Coventry?

The research context: Coventry

Recognised as a City of Sanctuary since 2011, Coventry has a long tradition of welcoming people from all over the world. From French nationals fleeing religious persecution in the seventeenth century, to those arriving from the Caribbean and South Asia in the 1950s, from significant numbers of its native population experiencing displacement during the Coventry Blitz in World War II, to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria increasing the numbers of Afghans and Syrians within the city today, the history and present reality of migration in Coventry is rich and diverse.

The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act stipulated that to receive government support, asylum seekers had to accept the first offer of accommodation. In order to ease the pressure of providing asylum accommodation on local authorities in London, Coventry was quickly identified as a "dispersal city" (Murray, 2015). This led to a rise in the numbers of migrant and refugee populations in the city; over the years, Coventry has continued to welcome refugee and asylum seekers, and as of 2021, Coventry is home to the most number of refugee and asylum seeking people in the UK (Sturge, 2022). Coventry is signatory to the Syrian Vulnerable People's Resettlement Scheme – now the UK Resettlement Scheme – and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme and leads a partnership of organisations across the city to deliver on these schemes. Supported by various public, voluntary and community organisations, the city regularly takes steps to assess the wellbeing and integration of resident migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, in order to improve access to resources and services (Harris, 2018).
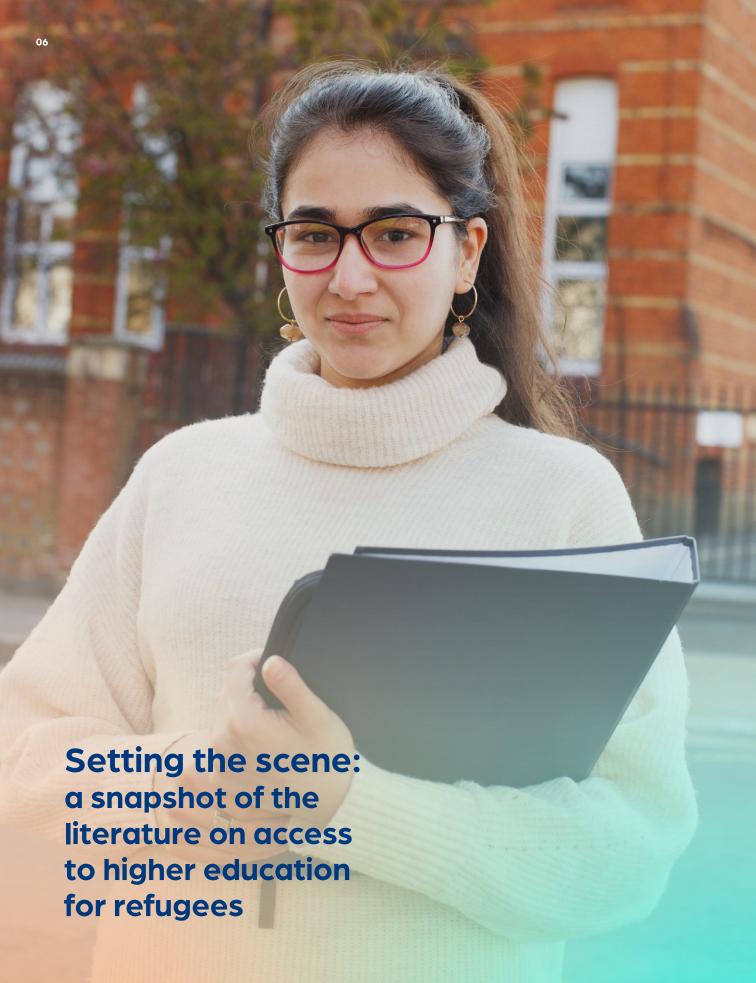
The purpose of this research

A partnership between the University of Warwick's English and Comparative Literary Studies (ECLS) Department and Refugee Education UK (REUK), and funded by the University of Warwick's Enhancing Research Culture Fund (underpinned by an award to the university from Research England), this report takes the global and national state of affairs with regards to refugees' access to HE, and recontextualises it at the grassroots level of a single institution – the University of Warwick – and its local area – Coventry. By doing so, this report seeks to demonstrate the potential for impactful and meaningful research to be generated when a HEI takes a localised approach to understanding what barriers to accessing HE are experienced by refugees and asylum seekers.

The research has three overarching objectives:

- To examine the barriers to HE for Coventry–based refugee and asylum–seeking young people

- To identify strategies for the University of Warwick to address and reduce these barriers for these young people in the community

- To contribute to meaningful dialogue around peer– and community–led research approaches and partnerships between academia and voluntary sector organisations

Ultimately, this study proposes that universities can play a significant role in the lives of refugee and asylum–seeking young people in their local area. By investing in the investigation and clarification of local barriers to education, universities can work towards establishing clear recommendations for addressing those known barriers.

Setting the scene:
a snapshot of the literature on access to higher education for refugees

Refugee higher education around the world

The right to education is enshrined in international human rights frameworks and shared commitments. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which seeks to protect the world's children, is one such framework. More recently, the 2015 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, whereby lifelong learning opportunities are universally promoted, particularly for vulnerable populations such as refugees. However, the effective execution of these shared commitments depends on each signatory country's interpretation of these international declarations; and so, in reality, for refugee and asylum–seeking young people, a multitude of barriers exist that undermines this right to education (Dryden–Peterson, 2016).

The UN agency for refugees, UNHCR, warns that refugee and asylum–seeking students at secondary education level are at the "greatest risk of being left behind" (UNHCR, 2021). Without a secondary education, the route to tertiary or HE is near non–existent; indeed, while the global average of HE enrolment currently stands at 39%, this figure reduces to 6% for the world's refugee and asylum–seeking population (UNHCR, 2022). Note that 6% is an increase of enrolment over the course of the last three years, as until 2019, only 1% of young refugees had access to HE. The 2019 Global Education Monitoring report tells us that for refugees and asylum seekers, access to tertiary education comes at the end of "cumulative education disadvantages which prevent many from qualifying [for HE]" (UNESCO 2019). Commonly, these disadvantages include the inability to evidence prior learning and qualifications, a lack of academic–level language skills, the prohibitive costs associated with HE, and the limited reach of scholarship programmes (UNESCO, 2019; UNHCR, 2019b; Gladwell et al., 2016).

Refugee higher education in the UK

As the localised perspective of this report articulates, there is no shortage of aspiration amongst refugees and asylum seekers to access HE. The current low levels of HE enrolment amongst asylum–seeking and refugee populations in the UK reflect the complexity and significance of barriers that exist for these groups. A 2020 study on this topic concludes by proposing a new term – "super–disadvantage" – to indicate "the extreme degree of denial of equal access to educational opportunities experienced by those with refugee background, resulting from the added, independent effect of their migration experiences, status, and the socio–economic realities of living as a refugee" (Lambrechts, 2020).

Literature describes the following primary barriers to HE as commonly experienced by refugee and asylum–seeking people in the UK:

- A lack of accessible and timely information and support on how to access HE, including information regarding qualification and language requirements, and on legal rights and financial entitlements

- The significant increase to the cost of HE caused by asylum–seeking students being categorised as international students

- The need to provide proof of prior education, and associated costs in providing this evidence

- Further costs associated with accessing HE, such as travel costs, being unfeasible for many refugees and asylum seekers who face financial hardships

- Mental health problems and a lack of mental health and trauma informed support – some refugees and asylum seekers cite the process of applying for HE as further affecting their mental wellbeing

(Elwyn et al. 2012; Jack, et al. 2019; Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Lambrechts, 2020).

While these barriers remain, there are also definite factors that support the access to HE for refugee and asylum–seeking students in the UK. Studies highlight a range of supportive factors, including:

- A welcoming environment, including sensitivity in the way teachers and students who have not experienced displacement relate to refugee and asylum–seeking students

- Financial support that covers tuition, transport, housing and other imminent costs

- Long–term education guidance including on the right to work and study

- Establishing systems for efficient and cost–effective recognition of qualifications and prior learning

- Clear channels of information regarding the support available to refugee and asylum–seeking students

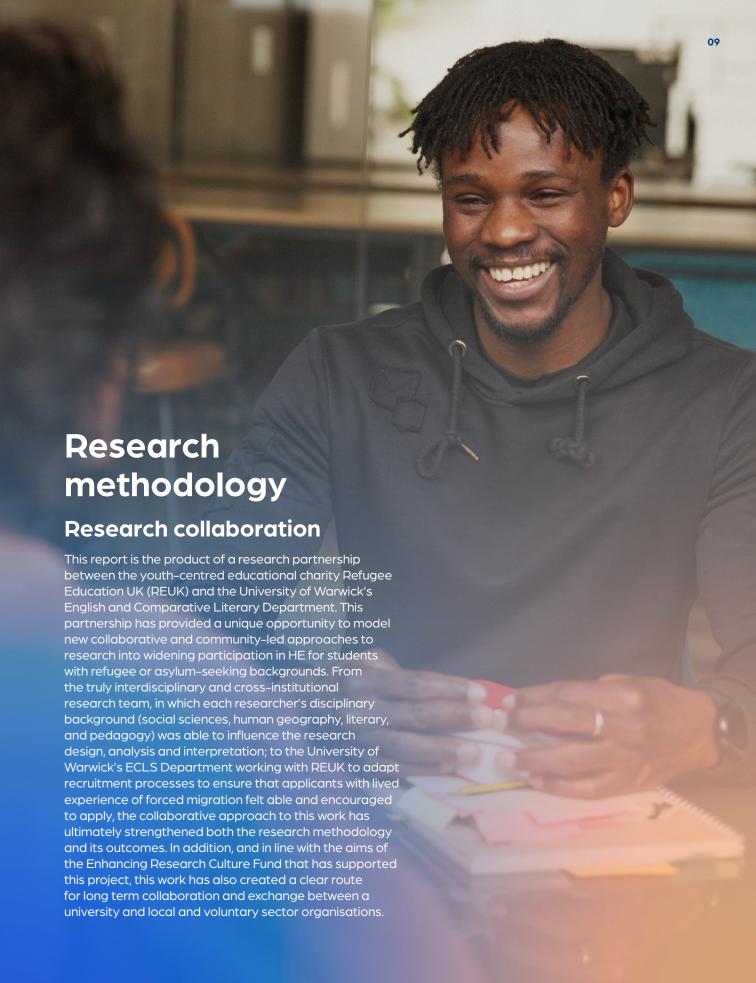(Ashlee and Gladwell, 2020; Jack 2019; UNHCR, 2019b).

Refugee higher education in Coventry

Little research exists on barriers to HE experienced by refugee and asylum seekers in Coventry. However, there is some research specific to Coventry and the West Midlands region on the language requirements needed for refugee and asylum–seeking students to access HE. The 2018 Migrant Needs Assessment report published by Coventry City Council states that in 2017, Coventry had the second highest proportion of pupils in the West Midlands region who had English as an additional language (Harris, 2018). Of these students, significant numbers were of refugee and asylum–seeking backgrounds.

However, the literature suggests that the student experience of ESOL classes in the region is often characterised by long waiting lists, overcrowded classes, inadequate quality of teaching, lack of access to childcare, and high drop–out rates (Murray, 2015; Philimore, 2006, 2011). This experience of ESOL – particularly as ESOL qualifications act as a gateway to many FE and HE qualifications – becomes a barrier to HE.

As seen in the section on barriers to HE in the UK, mental health support to refugee and asylum seekers is critical in enabling them to gain access to HE. However, a study on the experience and views of mental health practitioners in Coventry points to the absence of holistic, culturally and gender–sensitised approaches to mental health and wellbeing support offered to refugee and asylum seekers in the region (Anastasiou, et al., 2021). Systemic barriers such as long delays in getting appointments, budget cuts within the NHS and lack of expertise have added to the obstacles in accessing mental health support in this setting (Anastasiou et al., 2021; Goodman, 2015).

Finally, current literature suggests that most support and guidance provided in Coventry to refugees and asylum seekers wishing to access HE comes from within the voluntary sector; that information is not readily accessible from other sources, such as HEIs themselves, is problematic. In short, asylum seekers and refugees do not always know where they need to go to access the information they need in order to understand the pathway to HE that is specific to their own circumstances (Murray, 2015). Furthermore, the temporary nature of the initial dispersal of refugees and asylum seekers to Coventry complicates how easily and consistently individuals can receive long term assistance and support, including support directly relating to the matter of accessing HE (ibid).

Research methodology

Research collaboration

This report is the product of a research partnership between the youth-centred educational charity Refugee Education UK (REUK) and the University of Warwick's English and Comparative Literary Department. This partnership has provided a unique opportunity to model new collaborative and community-led approaches to research into widening participation in HE for students with refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds. From the truly interdisciplinary and cross-institutional research team, in which each researcher's disciplinary background (social sciences, human geography, literary, and pedagogy) was able to influence the research design, analysis and interpretation; to the University of Warwick's ECLS Department working with REUK to adapt recruitment processes to ensure that applicants with lived experience of forced migration felt able and encouraged to apply, the collaborative approach to this work has ultimately strengthened both the research methodology and its outcomes. In addition, and in line with the aims of the Enhancing Research Culture Fund that has supported this project, this work has also created a clear route for long term collaboration and exchange between a university and local and voluntary sector organisations.

Research questions

The research questions this study seeks to address are:

- What are the common barriers to HE faced by refugee and asylum-seeking young people local to Coventry?

- How do young people navigate and overcome these barriers?

- What networks of support exist to help these young people overcome these barriers?

- Does the University of Warwick currently support access to HE for local refugee and asylum seeker young people? If so, how?

- What strategies could the University of Warwick be implementing to support local young refugees and asylum seekers?

Participatory research approach

Participatory research approaches — whereby research subjects are included in different parts of the research process — aim to change traditional researcher–subject relationships and power dynamics (Clarke, 2004). In research on refugees' lived experiences, participatory research approaches are widely leveraged as a means to mitigate ethical risks by reducing power dynamics between refugees and researchers (Haile et al., 2020; Block et al., 2013). This research study took a participatory approach by ensuring that the research team included those with lived experience of either being an asylum seeker or a refugee in the UK. By including those with lived experience in the research team, this research project addresses the underrepresentation of refugees and asylum seekers in research in a very immediate sense. In so doing, this work hopes to throw light on ways to improve access to and participation in research and innovation careers for people from currently underrepresented groups. Reflecting on his experience of conducting this project's research, Dr Saeid Hmmed (who has lived experience of being an asylum–seeker and refugee) observes:

"I hold a 'marginal position'… living both in the world of the researcher and the researched. Indeed, this 'bridge like' position would fit the situation I found myself in during the data gathering process for this study. This is a highly unstable, complex, multi-layered, dynamic, inter-related and sometimes contradictory position. In our data gathering, I was constantly moving imaginatively back and forth along the insider-outsider continuum from one FG to another, from one interview to another, even from one question to another; at times my experience comes across with that of respondents and at times it diverges. Thus, my position was not static, but fluctuated constantly, shifting back and forth along a continuum of possibilities from one moment to the next, and from one respondent to another. I found my insider position meant greater access, flexibility, quick and tension-free rapport, heart-to-heart conversation, and useful insights for shared experiences, and comfort, although it did not guarantee valid data collection."

Qualitative methods

Qualitative research was chosen to allow a rich and in-depth exploration of the barriers to HE affecting refugee and asylum-seeking young people residing in Coventry, which is currently an under-researched topic. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out over the course of June and July 2022. Conducted online, these interviews were semi-structured in nature and explored key informants' perspectives on the barriers to HE, the factors that support access to HE, and the potential role of the University of Warwick in this process. Additionally, four focus groups (FGs) with refugee and asylum-seeking young people were conducted over the course of July 2022. Three of these were held at the University of Warwick campus, and one at a hotel for asylum seekers. The FGs explored, through visual prompts and interactive discussions, the barriers to HE that young people felt were most evident and pressing, and their recommendations for solutions.

Sample

A combination of purposive and snowballing sampling was adopted to identify participants. The overall sample size was 36, of which nine (or 25%) were key informants, and 27 (or 75%) were young people. These young people were all refugees or asylum seekers currently residing in Coventry and aged between 16–30. Over three quarters (78%) of these young people were male, and 22% were female. The young people that participated in FGs represented eight countries of origin. The countries of origin represented by at least three participants were Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iran, Sudan and Syria. The majority of young people said that they had arrived in the UK on their own as opposed to in families (74%). Just under one third (30%) of the young person sample said that they had refugee or another form of status, while just over two thirds (67%) said that they were asylum seekers. Key informants comprised four categories: voluntary sector staff, local government, social services, and University of Warwick staff.
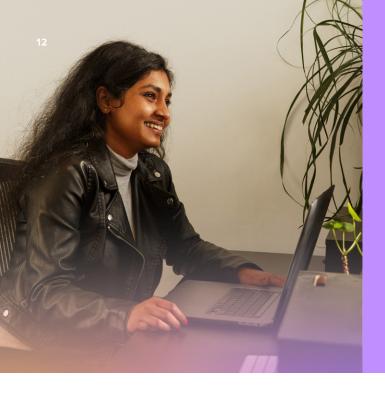
Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on NVivo using an inductive approach to coding, whereby researchers attempted to remove pre–existing ideas and allow the codes to emerge 'ground up' from the data. Three researchers were involved in coding a selection of transcripts to provide an initial set of codes, after which one researcher coded all transcripts, adding to the coding list on an iterative basis. Qualitative analysis focused on identifying prominent and recurring themes and, where possible, an indication of prominence is provided in the findings section (e.g., two thirds of key informants or approximately half of all participants[1]). However, it is important to note that as this is qualitative data, this is neither an objective nor concrete indication of prominence of certain barriers over others.

Research ethics

All research adhered to the University of Warwick's ethics procedures, and ethics approval from the University of Warwick's Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee was successfully obtained (HSSREC Reference Number 118/21–22). Additionally, all research was informed by REUK's research ethics framework, based on 10 years of research with refugee and asylum–seeking young people, and safeguarding policies and procedures. In line with good practice on research with refugees, the research team remained reflexive throughout the process and conducted research activities in a way that put participants' informed consent, rights, dignity and welfare at the centre.

Possible limitations

This research was completed within a six–month funding window and, as such, the sample remains relatively small. However, the focused geographical research area and the exploratory nature of the research means that a small sample was able to provide nuanced and in–depth findings. Additionally, the researchers found that some of the young people in FGs had more limited levels of English than expected. At least one member of the research team in each FG was able to translate questions and responses for some participants and, on occasion, more fluent FG participants stood in to do so. However, the researchers recognise that some elements of verbatim translations may have been lost in the process.

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[1] When quotes are used from key informants in the findings section, they are reported as KI1 (meaning key informant 1), etc.

Research findings

This section presents findings from thematic analysis of KIIs and FGs. It is divided into two parts: challenges with reaching HE and overcoming challenges.

Challenges with reaching university

This section describes the journey to university for refugees and asylum seekers in Coventry. It is divided into three subsections:

- the characterisation of the journey to university
- Immediate barriers to university
- longer–term hindering factors

The characterisation of the journey to university: a long and difficult journey

"We are constantly fighting with time, that's a fact" (young person, FG2)

Woven through participants' responses were descriptions of the journey to university for refugees. Two characteristics were recurring: a long and difficult journey. The difficult nature of trying to reach university as a refugee or asylum seeker in Coventry was referenced in all KIIs and FGs. KI5, for example, said "for refugee young people, I think it's quite a complex and cumbersome journey [to university]".

Four out of nine key informants reflected how only a small number of refugee young people that they had supported had successfully navigated the difficult journey and "got all the way to the university" (KI1).

The length of the journey to university for refugees was referenced in two thirds of KIIs and half of the FG discussions. The journey was described as a "long process" (KI8) that may take "years and years" (KI9). KI2 elaborated on this idea, stating:

"They [refugees and asylum seekers] find themselves at the bottom of the ladder. And the bottom of the ladder means that they have to go through entry level one, two, three, and then they go into their GCSEs, then they probably have to do an access course or something. And again, you know, there are costs, and it's time".

Supporting this notion of starting 'at the bottom of the ladder', two other key informants said that young people often find themselves "starting from scratch" (KIs 3 & 9) in the UK, thereby implying that current HE entry requirements do not acknowledge the educational and lived experiences that young people may already have.

Young people, too, were aware of the long duration of their journey to university. One young person said that "we are constantly fighting with time, that's a fact" (young person, FG3). Another young person in FG3 reflected on a friend who was not present at the FG because they were over the age of 30, the common upper age limit for eligibility for support from youth-focused organisations (and indeed the age limit for inclusion in this research study). Reflecting that they themselves were approaching 30, they said "I want more time". Mirroring this, KI2 reflected on their experience of supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Coventry, remarking that if university does "come on their radar, I think it comes at a very late stage in life".

Immediate barriers to university

Analysis reveals three main barriers to HE. These are: not meeting university entry level requirements, stifled aspirations to pursue university study, and being unable to afford university.

Not meeting university-level requirements

The most prominent reported barrier to accessing university – reported in all research KIIs and FGs – was refugee and asylum-seeking young people's struggle to meet university-level standards and requirements.

University-level English language requirements

The first element of this was meeting English language requirements. Participants described how some young people arrive in the UK with very limited English language skills and embark on a particularly extended journey to "get to a certain level of English before they can start on a course that can lead them to university" (KI8). However, those who have good English language skills may struggle to reach the level of English proficiency required for academic study at university.

Participants mostly attributed this to refugees and asylum seekers being hindered from developing academic language skills in available ESOL courses. Key informants had observed colleges delivering ESOL courses with inflexible pedagogies and content that was neither tailored to the needs of refugees or young people seeking to access university-level academic English skills. Additionally, they observed that young people may be unable to access college for a variety of reasons, including their ordinary residence and limited start dates. Participants described how these young people turn to voluntary sector courses which, while playing a critical role in supporting refugees to "get through or adapt to life in the UK" (KI9), are often neither intended nor able to support advanced levels of English language acquisition. In this way, key informants reported a gap in education-specific support for refugees and asylum seekers outside of early entry-level ESOL courses in Coventry, with KI3 stating that "I would say that when we look at education support in Coventry, it's very focused on basic education". As a result, young people who have "good English but not enough to go to higher education" (KI6) are overlooked, because it may be "too tedious and unnecessary for them to sit in a class where actually there are pre-entry people […] so it could be quite discouraging for [them]".

This theme was also evident in FGs with young people. Participants with higher levels of English language proficiency were acutely aware that they were unable to access language courses with "professional teachers" (FG2) that could successfully prepare them for university.

Additionally, participants described how English language or ESOL courses run by voluntary sector organisations were not always accredited and, therefore, not recognised as formal qualifications.

Qualification requirements

Another challenge for refugee and asylum–seeking young people was having their existing qualifications recognised by universities. Some young people in FGs expressed concern that their education qualifications from their countries of origin were not recognised by universities. For example, one young person in FG2 said "I want my experiences evaluated not wasted". One key informant recognised this issue, stating that "[refugees and asylum seekers] don't necessarily have all their documentation with them [...] so it can be really difficult to verify past qualifications and things like that, and I think it's something that our own admission team really struggles with" (KI7). While options for translating previous qualifications exist, these can be costly and further act as a barrier to access.

Where this challenge exists, young people must start at the 'bottom of the ladder' and study at least GCSE English and Maths to be eligible for university courses. KI1 described knowing qualified young people having to go through the "laborious process of doing a whole year or two years at college" before being able to apply for university.

Additionally, one young person also described concern that universities may not recognise the impact of refugees' previous experiences on their grades. They said how the grades they achieved on a course completed in their country of origin were deemed too low to study at a UK university, despite the fact that they were studying during conflict: "yeah, I didn't get a second upper, but a second lower because [of] my situation back home in [country of origin] when I was at university [...] I can do better if they just give me the chance" (young person, FG2).

Stifled aspirations to pursue university study

> "I want to study but [...] this dream starts to get more and more weaker with the days" (young person, FG4)

The second prominent theme was young people's ability or desire to prioritise studying at university. This emerged in all FGs and all but one KII. It is important to stress that this theme does not mean that the majority of young refugees and asylum seekers do not want to study at university; in fact, 93% of all young person participants – all with varying levels of English, ages and previous educational experiences – reported wanting to study at university. Instead, what this finding emphasises is young people's motivation to pursue university study being adversely affected and eroded over time by external factors that made life and education challenging for them. This is well–illustrated by one young person in FG4: "so I want to study but, at the same time, this dream starts to get more and more weaker with the days because it seems like every[day] I get away from it more and more".

Prioritising work over study

Participants discussed how young people may prioritise employment over university. In some cases, young people may seek work to finance their studies and "provide a roof [over] their head and pay the bills" (KI1). In others, young people may need to work to pay back debts. However, the most reported reason for prioritising work was the "existing pressure to provide back home" (KI6) — that is, to financially support families in countries of origin. Illustrating this point, one young person in FG3 articulated how family responsibilities may force young people to de–prioritise their own ambitions:

> "Even my family [...] they didn't come to the UK, they are still back home, so I have responsibilities towards them. All these things, and like a lot of things going on [...] and sometimes you don't feel like you have the time to think about yourself".

KI2 supported this notion, describing how some young people give up on the dream of a university education because it would mean "suppressing the needs of others to put [their] needs forward".

Whatever the reason for prioritising employment, participants described how young people may become "stuck" (KI1) in jobs that do not nurture education aspirations. Three key informants described seeing young people who were highly educated in their countries of origin working in jobs that did not put their education to use, such as being a taxi driver or working in a warehouse, because they were jobs that do not require advanced English language skills. However, as time passes in these jobs, young people may see little development in their academic English language skills and receive little support or encouragement to access or progress with their education. As described by KI4, once young people start working, "after a couple of years, they don't have any encouragement to go to the university to study there and that is really unfortunate" (KI4).

Perceptions of university's value and accessibility

While not frequently mentioned by young people, key informants described how refugees and asylum seekers may not see university as accessible to them. They discussed how this could be the result of a lack of awareness that they are "able to enter certain places" (KI1), such as universities, or sometimes because they "might just not feel very welcomed" (KI8) or intimidated in community spaces.

Participants also alluded to how young people may have limited self–confidence in their abilities to access university. Describing the main barrier to university for a young person they had supported, KI2 said that "I don't think it was her language, it was more a confidence issue in saying that I can actually do this". With little awareness that they can access university, and with limited self–confidence, findings suggest that young people may be influenced by what they see those around them doing. KI2 described how young people may not find role models – in terms of seeing others choose to pursue and successfully access university – within their communities:

"They look at the areas in which they live in or they look at other friends or people who have been here for a lot longer, maybe are established and have their own businesses. And that's usually what we kind of get, you know, I'd like to have my own shop, or, you know, I'd like to go into barbering, or hairdressing or something like that".

Inability to afford the cost of going to university

"If as an asylum seeker you don't have the means, if you don't have the money [...] you might find yourself not having access to higher education" (KI7)

The final immediate barrier to university for refugees and asylum seekers was the inability to afford university fees. This was referenced in three out of four FGs, and eight out of nine KIIs.

University fees and associated costs

According to key informants, a young person's "immigration status is one of the main barriers" (KI6) to accessing university. The requirement for those seeking asylum and those with some other forms of immigration status to pay "really expensive" (KI7) international student fees was "one of the reasons [...] why higher education becomes almost impossible" (KI5). However, this did not make it necessarily easy for those with refugee status, humanitarian protection and other forms of status that make young people eligible for home fees: even these immigration statuses do not "open all the doors" (KI5) for young people and, as one key informant emphasised, "realistically, home fees are expensive" (KI7).

Additionally, other costs associated with applying for and studying at university – affecting any refugee or asylum seeker seeking to study at university – were also reported as barriers. For example, one key informant described how the process of translating previous qualifications was costly and, "if as an asylum seeker you don't have the means, if you don't have the money, if you don't have what it takes for those documents to be translated, then it means that you might find yourself not having access to higher education" (KI7).

Struggling to access financial support

As emphasised by KI7, many refugees and asylum seekers may not have the 'means' to pay university fees and associated costs. Reasons reported by key informants included not having family members able to provide financial support for education, and asylum seekers not having the right to work to fund their studies. Additionally, many asylum seekers may not be able to access government–provided student loans, and key informants discussed the detrimental impact of this on the possibility of accessing university.

As will be further explored later in the report, accessing scholarships from universities is one way to overcome the financial barrier. However, while for successful applicants scholarships can change the course of their education trajectories, young people in FGs described having applied for scholarships and being unsuccessful, and emphasised that there were too few scholarships to meet their need. Additionally, one key informant described how accessing scholarships could "impact on the [financial] support you get from the government" (KI7) and suggested that this complication acts as a deterrent for those having to weigh up the value of studying with being able to meet their basic needs.

Long–term hindering factors

Underlying these stark barriers to HE for refugees and asylum seekers were several long–term, hindering factors referenced by both key informants and young people. These were:

- Missing or inaccurate information
- Previous education experiences
- Instability and isolation
- The asylum system and procedures

Missing or inaccurate information

"They cannot find their way so easily; they cannot find their path to university easily" (KI4)

Participants described how challenging it could be for refugee and asylum–seeking young people to access information about their rights to and options for university. The reasons reported for this were: the lack of a definitive source of information within Coventry; refugee education not being an immediate priority for support services; and confusing and vague information from universities and colleges.

Young people in FG3 and FG4 described how the UK education system differed to that in their country of origin, in that there were significantly more course options and possible careers that they could pursue. KI4 described how education options in the UK were "so wide" and that young refugees and asylum seekers "may get lost because of [there being] so many things... so they cannot find their way so easily; they cannot find their path to university easily". Informational challenges were reported as particularly prominent for newly arrived refugees in the UK, particularly for those whose limited understanding of the British education system was exacerbated by little or no English language skills.

Participants also detailed how young people may struggle to get the right information about scholarships and other sources of financial support and the process for getting their previous qualifications translated and recognised.

Previous education experiences

"[If young people] haven't even finished secondary school back home [...] it would be very difficult for them to aspire to go to higher education" (KI6).

Refugee and asylum–seeking young people's previous education experiences also contributed to the barriers they faced in reaching HE. Firstly, key informants and young people reflected on how some young refugees' and asylum seekers' aspirations to pursue education in the UK were affected by a lack of positive education experiences in their country of origin. For example, KI4 reported that "when they [refugees and asylum seekers] were in their country of origin, they hadn't [seen] any benefit from their diplomas, so that makes them not trust studying [in the UK]".

In some cases, young people "haven't even finished secondary school back home, so it would be very difficult for them to aspire to go to higher education" (KI6)

Secondly, key informants and young people alike described how young people's experiences with accessing and progressing through college in Coventry could also impact on their aspirations, as well as their ability to meet entry standards and requirements. The lack of access to FE provision was a key concern, with participants highlighting the limited window of opportunity to enrol in college, delaying how soon young people can embark on the journey to HE. Translating for their peer, one young person in FG2 said:

> "There is so much delay in Coventry about getting access to college. Compared to other friends taking the same time but in other cities like London, [young person name redacted] has been trying to get into English class for more than eight months".

Once in college, the slow pace of progress and lack of tailored content in classes was reported to be demotivating. Key informants reported how the young people they were supporting would sometimes report "limited learning" (KI9) in college, attributing this to colleges having "an agenda [...] to roll out people to get them into exams and to get through syllabuses" (KI2), and the limited number of hours in college each week.

Instability and isolation

> "For you to be able to study, especially higher education, you need to have a settled mind" (KI5)

Participants described how being a refugee or asylum seeker often meant living "in a state of not being settled" (KI6), both physically and mentally. Housing insecurity for Coventry-based refugees and asylum seekers was particularly prevalent in participants' responses, which could be "disabling" for young people, "causing them not to think about things like progression to HE or thinking about bigger dreams".

Another challenge was young people feeling socially "isolated" (KI6), unable to make friends or engage with "the basic parts of integration" (KI2) in their new environments. This was something particularly noted for young people who arrive in the UK unaccompanied without a "family support network around them" (KI2). Findings suggest that this isolation could hinder the formation of HE aspirations, as young people may not have others "supporting them into further education, if that's what they want" (KI6). In the absence of positive encouragement, young people may internalise negative narratives about their futures which, in turn, could undermine their self-confidence.

Insecurity and isolation could exacerbate forced displacement-related mental health issues, something that young people in FG3 were particularly concerned by. For example, one young person said, "mental health is a huge part of us because we came from a damaged area, so we have seen things, it's not easy for someone to see and act like it's nothing, it's fine". Highlighting the way in which such mental health issues can impede young people's education progression and, ultimately, their ability to reach HE, KI5 said:

> "For you to be able to study, especially higher education, you need to have a settled mind. You need to have a mind that is prepared to absorb academic materials. You need to have a mind that is set and ready to study. So, if you don't have a mind that is psychologically ready for studies because you are thinking about [...] what you went through back home".

The asylum system and procedures

> "The Home Office says we are not allowed to work or study and can be detained and when we see this it is affecting my passion and hope" (young person, FG1)

The impact of being involved with the asylum system on young people's abilities to reach university was evident. The most immediate impact was their immigration status.

For young people whose status did not afford them entitlements to home fees and financial support from the government, going to university was described as an 'impossibility', even if they are at the right level and have the motivation to do so.

The asylum system also presented longer–term challenges. Participants frequently referenced the requirement for asylum seekers to have been in the UK for six months before being able to access funding to study at college. When combined with limited enrolment dates each year, this requirement significantly delayed young people being able to start their progression towards university–level standards. Young people also alluded to the misunderstanding of this requirement by colleges, describing being told at enrolment "no, you need to be in the UK for six months at least" (FG4).

Additionally, the "hostile" and "restrictive" (KI6) asylum system was reported to negatively affect young people's resilience and motivation to pursue education. One young person in FG1 said: "the Home Office says we are not allowed to work or study and can be detained and when we see this it is affecting my passion and hope". Mirroring this, key informants described how young people may become "demoralised because of the long waiting of the asylum system" (KI6) and think to themselves "'what is the point of studying or trying to go further in education' [...] until they get their status" (KI8).

Overcoming barriers to higher education

'Analysis of participants' responses on overcoming barriers to HE led to two coding areas:

- Enabling factors
- The perceived role of a local university

Enabling factors

Four factors emerged from analysis: interpersonal relationships, young people's strategies, community support networks, and institutional responses.

Interpersonal relationships: mentors and role models

> "They need a helping hand [...] to be able to navigate through the system and to be successful" (KI5)

Participants shed light on the importance of the interpersonal relationships that young refugees and asylum seekers develop. This was discussed in eight out of nine KIIs and one FG. Having someone — whether a member of staff from the voluntary sector or college, or someone else in their community — who could act as a mentor was important in helping young people navigate the journey to university. Analysis suggests this was particularly key in providing encouragement and helping young people (re)discover their higher education aspirations amidst the challenges previously discussed. For example, KI2 described working with a young person to challenge the idea that reaching higher education is impossible by "planting the seed into their minds that this is possible" (KI2). Other key informants' responses support the notion that mentors play a critical role in building up young people's self–confidence and self–belief.

Findings also suggest that mentors can be crucial in providing a "helping hand" (KI5) to support young people "navigate through the [education] system" (KI5) and reach university. These more practical elements of support extended to "1:1 tutoring" (KI9) and breaking down questions and tasks for their courses, be it ESOL or English and Maths GCSEs. This element could be important in helping young people develop the academic and core communication skills needed for university study. Mentors also played an important role in providing administrative support to young people. This included support with a variety of tasks from completing "a simple form that they need to fill out" (KI2), to applying for scholarships and grants.

Additionally, mentors were reported as particularly valuable when they also acted as role models for refugee and asylum-seeking young people. For example, KI2 told of 'buddy' initiatives where student volunteers from "diverse ethnicities, different ages, males and females" were matched with refugee young people. KI2 particularly remarked that young people were inspired by and related to their buddy and reflected that such individuals could act as "bridge" to university for refugees. Role models were also described as helping young people with their English language skills, and that there was value in young people being able to hear others' "success story" (KI3) in terms of how they navigated language barriers. It is worth noting that KI1 reflected that while role models were valuable, they made a particularly "huge difference" for those who are "a bit further down the system and down the process".

Young people's strategies: resilience, determination and helping others

> "It's the system that's wrong, but we are still fighting" (young person, FG3)

The second prominent theme – emerging in one FG and six KIIs – was the strategies that young people put in place to navigate barriers to HE. In FG3, when asked about the solutions to the barriers they faced, one young person said that "it's the system that's wrong, but we are still fighting". This highlights the crux of this theme: young people's ability to remain resilient and optimistic about their futures. Key informants often recognised young people's resilience when asked what things helped young people to reach university. For example, KI1 said "I think just incredible determination and a willingness to prioritise education". The sense emerging from KIIs very much reinforces a remark made by KI7: "I am astounded by the incredible resilience [...] with everything they are dealing with and all the barriers we have discussed to accessing HE".

It is important to emphasise that this theme does not place the responsibility for overcoming externally imposed challenges on young people's shoulders. In fact, practitioners recognised the incredibly challenging circumstances young people faced. For example, KI2 said "I know certain people are proactive [...] but I think a lot of the people that we come across have so many other difficulties in life that university is not on their radar" (KI2). However, what research findings begin to uncover is the remarkable resilience that young people demonstrate, and their ability to remain optimistic and determined to reach their goals, often against the odds.

Key informants described seeing young people "using their own initiative" (KI6) and proactively responding to the lack of clear information about routes to university. For example, KI8 reported seeing some young people who had "somehow found advice that they couldn't get from family or friends or from other organisations" (KI8). They may leverage technology to do this, with KI6 saying "I see some of them using [a] smartphone and Googling and finding out how they could just navigate through the education system and get to higher education".

Young people in FG3 – who were typically further along in their education journeys compared to many participants in other FGs – also expressed eagerness to ensure that they could pass on information and advice to other refugee and asylum-seeking young people. They said "maybe we can help other people [if] they're still struggling. They have dreams [...] they have ability, they have passion". This mirrors insights from KI1 who, when reflecting on the young people he knew who had successfully reached university, said:

> "The three guys I know who got to university were all from [country of origin]. I don't actually know which of those guys got there first and how, but I know for a fact that they would have [been] supporting each other through the process, and who went first would have definitely offered some help with applications".

The local community in Coventry

> "We have lots of people from so many other countries and, you know, the people here are very welcoming, they are very friendly with refugees" (KI5)

A young person's local community was reported by seven key informants to play a key role in helping young people navigate challenges. Findings emphasise the diversity of communities within the city of Coventry. For example, KI5 said that "we have lots of people from so many other countries and, you know, the people here are very welcoming, they are very friendly with refugees". Key informants described strong community networks for refugees and asylum seekers from a range of countries of origin, including from Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq and Syria. These communities play an important role in supporting refugee and asylum-seeking young people's education. For example, KI1 said "the strongest networks are definitely internal within all the different communities". The supportive role that communities play also extended to supporting young people's mental health and promoting belonging – a "sense of community and a sense of pride" (KI7).

Additionally, key informants described how communities shared information and advice with one another. KI6, for example, reflected on how to share news about a sanctuary scholarship, and said "this client group or this population is very good in word of mouth and passing information, and once you pass on information it gets through the community very quickly". This links to young people's resilience and ability to source information about education that is not immediately accessible.

In addition to refugee and asylum-seeking young people's cultural communities, participants also described a comprehensive network of support services for refugees and asylum seekers comprising the local council, voluntary sector organisations, churches, local universities and colleges, and student and volunteer initiatives.

Support services were described as particularly beneficial when they had earned the trust of young people and when they worked in partnership and collaboration with each other to provide education and holistic support. A key role that these organisations seemed to play was showing young people that they belonged in their community and city. One key informant talked about running English classes that focused on learning "outside of the classroom" (KI2). They described taking young people to places in Coventry – including the theatre, Warwick Castle, and Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford. They commented, "the joy that we see on their faces when they [...] enter those spaces that they think they can't actually get to"; in doing so, they shed light on the role of organisations in providing a locally centred welcome while simultaneously nurturing valuable English language skills.

University responses: acting as a bridge

> "[There are] some things we can do, where we can just be more flexible rather than trying to force these students into our existing processes" (KI7)

While less frequently reported than other factors, HEIs across the country were reported by six out of nine key informants to play a key role in helping refugees and asylum seekers to overcome barriers to HE. Participants particularly noted the importance of providing flexible and contextual admissions that creatively and contextually assess young people's English language levels (beyond English GCSEs and ESOL) and prior qualifications. One key informant who worked for the University of Warwick reflected on a potential model of examining English language for refugee students, remarking that "[there are] some things we can do, where we can just be more flexible rather than trying to force these students into our existing processes" (KI7). However, the same key informant cautioned that university admissions teams need more guidance and support beyond simply being told to be 'flexible' to ensure that refugee students can meaningfully engage in university life and learning.

Other ways that universities could help young people to access HE was by providing a foundation year, which was described as "really helpful for them with the language barrier and getting used to the HE system and stuff like that" (KI7). Additionally, the provision of financial support — whether "tuition waivers or scholarships" (KI5) — was also fundamentally important.

Universities were also described as having a role in addressing underlying barriers to HE, and in particular providing clear, accurate and accessible information for refugees and asylum seekers in a way that nurtured, rather than deterred, their aspirations for university. While accessible and thoughtful websites were reported, participants mostly talked about universities having open days that responded to the unique needs and requirements of refugee and asylum–seeking young people, which made information "very easy to access" (KI3).

The change refugee and asylum–seeking young people want to see

> "You have to treat us equal but with more justice" (young person in FG2)

Young people were asked what solutions they thought could be implemented to the challenges they discussed.

Contextual admissions

The most prominent recommendation for change from young people, as emerged from three quarters of the FGs, was the need for contextual admissions from universities. For example, one young person suggested that universities should "lower the admission requirements because we have a different circumstance if they can understand that" (FG1). They also focused on the importance of universities recognising their existing qualifications from and the grades achieved in their countries of origin, a point one young person in FG2 described as a matter of "justice" (FG2).

Clearer information and advice

Young people in three quarters of the FGs wanted clearer and more accurate information and advice about the British education system and "how university works" (FG4); understanding their rights and entitlements; and sources of funding. Young people in FG2 particularly wanted "one place where we go to find all important information".

Tailored English language support

Young people in half of the FGs wanted better English language support that was tailored to the right level, both lower and higher levels. Some young people wanted support that would "make my everyday life simple" (FG2), while others wanted more advanced levels of support. They also wanted more time in ESOL classes in college to learn, engage and progress towards university standards.

Scholarships

Young people in half of the FGs — and particularly those with the English language skills and previous higher education study in their countries of origin — described the importance of more scholarships being available to them.

Policy change

Young people in one FG also wanted the Home Office to grant asylum seekers the right to work so that they could finance their studies, as well as enabling them to study immediately without the six month restriction. They also said that they wanted to be able to access home fees, regardless of their immigration status.

The role of the University of Warwick as a local university

Young people and key informants were asked to describe what they thought the University of Warwick as a local university could be doing to help refugees and asylum seekers in Coventry.

Providing local refugees and asylum seekers with information and guidance

> "[Making information] easy to access in places where refugees and asylum seekers may be" (KI9)

The most prominent theme was making information about routes and access to university accessible to refugee and asylum–seeking young people. This mostly related to the university proactively reaching out to local refugees and asylum seekers; a university could be "visible where asylum seekers and refugees might be" (KI8) and make information "easy to access in places that refugees and asylum seekers may be" (KI9). This could be achieved through putting on "information sessions on access to HE" (KI7) for clients of local organisations, as well as more organic conversations and partnerships. This theme was echoed by young people in FG3 who thought that, as a "big university", the University of Warwick could "access lots of places so [they] can find asylum seekers and talk to them [and] if they are interested [...] just give direction".

As alluded to by these young people, information and guidance from universities may be particularly valuable for those young people who are interested in accessing university. KI3 went further to suggest that the university could partner with local organisations and service providers to identify and provide tailored information and guidance to local refugee young people who have reached the standards and requirements to apply to university. They stated, "if there is a level of collaboration with [the university], we could refer individuals that we believe are ready for higher education [to the university]" so that "specific staff members are ready to actually speak to people on a 1:1 basis depending on their case".

Universities could also provide this information by having "easy to understand and simple" (KI9) information on their websites, as well as hosting open days where there are dedicated staff members who can provide targeted and tailored information for refugees and asylum seekers. The information that participants thought was important to share with refugees and asylum seekers included "how university works" (KI7), as well as "information on how to apply to university, what courses and qualifications they need for certain courses knowing that they may not have the typical A–Levels to get onto those courses" (KI8).

Nurturing refugee young people's aspirations for university

> "It gave them hope to see where they could possibly be in a few years" (KI2)

In addition to reaching out and providing information to local refugees and asylum seekers, another key role for the University of Warwick was nurturing local young people's aspirations for university. Participants predominantly focused on the ways in which universities could welcome students to campus to show them that university is a place where they could belong. This could be achieved through open days tailored to refugees and asylum seekers or by simply

> "invit[ing] a group of people from this client group, [to] walk around, you know [and] just visit the place [...] not really doing anything fancy, just inviting them and making them feel that they are actually going to higher education" (KI6).

Indeed, this was a role that the University of Warwick was has seemingly fulfilled in the past, with several key informants describing trips they had taken with their clients to the University of Warwick. For example, referring to a local trip they took with a group of young people to the University of Warwick campus, KI2 said that they were:

> "mesmerised and it gave them hope to see where they could possibly be in a few years [...] it kind of gave them that idea of 'yeah, I could be here, I could see myself here', and I think that's something that's not really done and not really focused upon".

KI4 also reflected on how such trips were an opportunity for social interactions, friendship–building and could help to reduce isolation among refugee and asylum–seeking young people:

> "We took around 70 asylum seekers there and just to see the [University of Warwick] building and to see the other students walking around the area. It's really totally different [to] where they came from and where they are living at the moment because they are a little bit isolated in the hotels [and] it was something new for them. It was amazing to see that".

Volunteer initiatives – whereby a university partnered with local organisations to provide student or staff volunteers – could also help refugee and asylum–seeking young people realise that they could reach university. KI4 described how the simple act of student volunteers giving up their own time to support young people showed refugees and asylum seekers that they were valued. KI2 also stated that the relatability of student volunteers to refugee and asylum–seeking young people in terms of age, gender and ethnicity could impact on the extent to which they are able to inspire HE aspirations. Examples of University of Warwick volunteer initiatives reported by participants were predominantly focused on the university's Student Action for Refugees (STAR) group, but also included other examples of student and staff volunteering. And while this is promising, these examples appeared to be isolated volunteer initiatives rather than a longer term or systemic approach to volunteer outreach within the community.

Helping local young people meet university–level English language and study skills

Another way that participants thought the University of Warwick could support local refugees and asylum seekers to access HE was through hands–on support to reach university–level standards and requirements. This overwhelmingly related to a university's role in helping refugees to build their academic English language skills. As one young person in FG3 said, "I think it would be great if the university [could] provide ESOL for us". Other young people in this FG agreed, and specifically requested that the university "arrange classes for us with people the same age as us" (FG3).

Key informants consistently emphasised the potential value of the university providing opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to "pick up more advanced English", recognising that "academic language is not the same as everyday used language" (KI7). Examples of the University of Warwick currently doing this were contained to individual volunteers, such as university staff tutoring a refugee young person with their academic English skills. But participants particularly emphasised that there could be a benefit in providing such support through larger scale workshops or courses on campus, to provide a "sort of invented university environment like a seminar [so they can] see how [university] works, what it's like" (KI1).

As well as academic English, participants thought the University of Warwick could leverage its role as a local university to support local organisations' clients with university–style study skills. Reflecting on this idea, KI2 said that student volunteers from the University of Warwick could "buddy up" with refugee young people to work together "on a small project which might be just a small PowerPoint or something in writing, where then you've got people that are buddying up with other people to help them, to guide them, to support them, but also you know make friends with them at the same time". This echoes young people's sentiments from FG3: there is the dual value of such academic support in both increasing young people's skills and ability to meet entry requirements, while also making friends and reducing isolation.

Overcoming financial barriers

The final theme, although less prominent than the others, was the University of Warwick's ability to provide financial support to local refugees and asylum seekers. This could be done through bursaries for young people to progress in their FE study, as well as providing sufficient sanctuary scholarships for university that are accessible to local refugee and asylum–seeking young people. KI6 suggested that while the University of Warwick had a scholarship scheme, they questioned the extent to which this was advertised or known about locally.

They said "if lots of people don't know about the actual scholarship [...] other people could come from elsewhere and take this opportunity as opposed to the local asylum seekers and refugees". It is noteworthy that only one key informant who was not employed by the University of Warwick referenced the university's sanctuary scholarship scheme. While recognising the subjective nature of this perspective and the small sample size, this suggests that there is scope for increased activity and outreach from the University of Warwick.

The importance of working in partnership

Cutting across participants' responses was the importance of the University of Warwick working in partnership with local organisations and education institutions, including schools and colleges. These partnerships would enable the university to reach refugee young people who may have or develop aspirations for university study, as well as adding unique value to charities' programmes, particularly with regards to academic English and information and guidance. Emphasising the power of such partnerships, KI5 recommended that the university should "come closer to the city and work with the agencies and start from there; and everything will unravel from there" (KI5).

The way forward

Conclusion

This research study has cast light on the breadth of challenges Coventry–based refugee and asylum–seeking young people face in reaching HE. Many of these young people are ambitious and strive towards studying at university. But getting there is rarely straightforward; many are required to embark on a long and difficult journey to realise their HE dreams.

While findings from this study suggest that the journey becomes cumbersome because of financial barriers, they particularly emphasise the extent of refugee and asylum–seeking young people's struggle to fulfil university admission requirements, especially with regards to English language. While refugee and asylum–seeking young people at all stages of English language acquisition face challenges, this research reveals that those in the higher stages and who have the potential to study at university soon are falling through the cracks. Participants reported a gap in local provision of advanced, academic English language support for these young people. The reasons for this include ESOL course content not being tailored towards this need, inadequate time spent in college to enable meaningful learning, and infrequent enrolment opportunities in college, the latter exacerbated when young people are told they need to wait six months before being able to access funding for FE study. While voluntary in Coventry provides an array of English and ESOL classes and groups, these are often not intended or able to promote advanced levels of English language proficiency that would enable refugee young people to progress towards and successfully apply for university.

Furthermore, this research suggests that young people who once aspired to study at university may lose motivation over the course of the protracted and challenging journey often characterised by setbacks and a long engagement with the asylum system. Young people who participated in FGs were all too aware of time passing by and that their aspirations and higher education dreams and aspirations may get 'weaker and weaker with the days', eroded by external challenges.

Participants described how young people seek employment because they find progressing in education too demoralising and are unable to postpone earning an income to support themselves and their families. These are often jobs that do not require English language skills, and participants described how highly qualified and ambitious refugee and asylum–seeking young people may become 'stuck' in jobs where they have limited opportunities to maintain or develop their language skills to the level required for university study. This contributes to the eroding of aspirations. Overall, participants remarked that refugee and asylum–seeking young people that they have worked with who have successfully reached university have often done so 'later in life', and possibly after the age of 30, which is often the upper limit for inclusion in youth–focused organisations' programmes and services.

This is not to say that young people are not able to find their way to university. On the contrary, this research identified inspiring examples of Coventry–based young people navigating challenges and successfully reaching higher education. Findings revealed the importance of community support networks, both young people's cultural communities and those formed by community–based charities and support services. They particularly emphasised the value of having a mentor – having someone to lend a helping hand to guide and navigate young people through the education system and nurture their remarkable resilience and determination to pursue their HE aspirations. Notably, these mentors may be particularly effective when they were relatable and inspiring – in other words, acting as a role model by refugee and asylum–seeking young people that reaching university is possible, and that university is a place where they could belong. In this way, findings allude to the value of peer–to–peer mentoring, enabling refugee and asylum–seeking young people who have successfully navigated barriers to university share the information and strategies that were helpful for them with other refugee and asylum–seeking young people, and proactively support each other.

Through examining the journey to HE for refugee and asylum–seeking young people in Coventry, this study proposes that universities can play a significant role in the lives of refugee and asylum–seeking young people in their local area. Actions as simple as welcoming refugee and asylum–seeking young people onto their campus could shift their perceptions of universities from a potentially unwelcoming and daunting environment to one that welcomes diversity. Universities are also uniquely positioned to fill the gap in advanced, academic English support for the refugee and asylum–seeking young people who are falling through the cracks, and to ensure that their scholarships are accessible to those local to them. The findings from this study clearly point towards the power of university collaborations with local support networks to reach local refugee and asylum–seeking young people and provide them with the support and information needed to nurture their determination, abilities and skills to fulfil their HE dreams.

Recommendations

Grounded in young people's and practitioners' ideas for change and overcoming barriers, this report makes the following recommendations:

The University of Warwick should:

- Work in partnership with charities, such as REUK, to set up an on-campus course to provide advanced English language support, including on academic study skills, for refugee and asylum-seeking young people with higher levels of language skills. This could include peer-to-peer mentoring aspects, facilitating an on-campus welcome and a 'taster' of university life, alongside direct support with university applications and personal statements

- Follow the example of a number of HEIs, including Queen Mary's University of London and the University of Edinburgh to use discretion to charge all forced migrant applicants the equivalent of home fees

- Work in partnership with refugee education experts to audit the Sanctuary Scholarship process, producing concrete recommendations for strengthening the model, including for reaching local refugees and asylum seekers

- In partnership with local charities, invest in regular and thorough training and guidance for admissions staff on access to HE for refugees and asylum seekers

- Refer student volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds to charity organisations or other support services that facilitate mentoring for local refugees and asylum seekers

- Consider setting up a collaboration with other city services to create a referrals scheme where clients can be passed onto university if ready for HE, and for the university to have staff ready and informed to facilitate case-specific conversations with clients

FE Colleges should:

- Deliver courses that provide advanced and academic language skills for specific groups of refugee young people who are soon ready to apply for university. Ensure these courses are accredited and tailored to this distinct group of young people in terms of their previous educational experiences, ongoing challenges, and English language learning needs

- Establish bursaries for young people who are unable to access financial support from the government before they have their six months ordinary residency

- Review ESOL provision to ensure it is sufficient for the population it serves

- Consider enabling enrolment onto ESOL courses at multiple points throughout the academic year

The voluntary sector should:

- Considering the lengthy journey to university for refugees and asylum seekers in Coventry, consider a broad definition of 'youth' to ensure sufficient support is provided for those who are older and still trying to reach their university goals

- Have early conversations and 'plant seeds' about education goals and aspirations with refugee and asylum-seeking young people; do not assume that this is put on hold until their status is achieved, as valuable progress can be made in this time.

- Establish mentoring schemes in Coventry, including those with peer-to-peer elements

Refugee education experts should:

- Provide clearer guidance for universities for contextually assessing young people's prior education experiences and qualifications and English language level, beyond simply suggesting 'flexibility'. Collaborate with the University of Warwick admissions teams to plan tangible and realistic actions that the university can implement to achieve this flexibility

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