



Refugee Education UK

The Bell 
Foundation

Education for late arrivals

Examining education provision for displaced young people arriving in the UK late in the education system

Executive summary

Foreword

Written by Angel, an REUK youth advocate

Education is an inherent human right, fundamental to all, irrespective of borders or circumstances. Access to schooling and guidance from teachers should be universal, transcending barriers, for it serves as the cornerstone of our humanity, nurturing knowledge and fueling curiosity.

For asylum seekers and refugees, who have endured unimaginable turmoil in their homelands, **education emerges as a beacon of hope amidst darkness when arriving in a safe country.** It represents not just the acquisition of knowledge, but a pathway to rebuilding their lives in a foreign land. Through education, they are not merely taught facts and figures; rather, they are introduced to a world of boundless opportunities and supportive communities.

Indeed, education becomes their sanctuary – a realm of hope, dreams, and belonging.

As soon as I arrived in the UK, at the age of 12, starting school became a priority. However, it took me almost two months to be enrolled in school. It was not until my family and I settled in a small town in a house provided to us by the Home Office that I was enrolled.

I entered Year 8 at the very start of 2016, yet this still made me feel like an outsider; everyone seemed to have already formed friendships and settled in, while I struggled to find my place in the school or adapt to the way that classes were taught. I vividly recall my first day of school. Upon returning home, I found myself in tears, confiding in my mum that I dreaded going back. It took me roughly three years to fully adjust and establish connections. At first, language was a significant barrier, as I had little grasp of English. However, being young made it easier to pick up.

Yet, there's an element of luck involved in such experiences. I can't help but imagine the immense challenge it would be for someone arriving in Year 10 with limited English proficiency, expected to grasp the curriculum and sit for GCSE exams in less than a year. Unfortunately, schools often overlook such circumstances.

So, research like this is really important as it sheds light on the current system. It helps educators identify where things aren't working well and how they can make them better for asylum seekers and refugees settling into new communities. Through research like this, teachers can learn about the common problems that young refugees and asylum seekers face when they arrive late, and they can come up with ways to help them settle in at school. The teachers, therefore, will acquire an essential awareness on the situation that asylum seekers and refugees end up in. **This awareness will help prevent young refugees and asylum seekers from losing hope and to keep fighting for their dreams through education.**



About the organisations

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.

The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. Through generating and applying evidence, we aim to change practice, policy and systems for children, adults and communities in the UK disadvantaged through language. The Bell Foundation is the operational name for The Bell Educational Trust Limited. Find out more at www.bell-foundation.org.uk.

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This document contains the executive summary of the report. The full report and an accompanying policy brief, including detailed recommendations, can be found [here](#).

Executive Summary

Education is a right for all children, as enshrined in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This right is not suspended for those children who have been forced to flee their homes.

The UK is a party to the UNCRC and, therefore, recognises and protects the right to education for all displaced children. However, this right is far from guaranteed in reality. Evidence demonstrates that numerous barriers make accessing education difficult, and that these accumulate and become increasingly complex as displaced children progress through the education system (Ashlee & Gladwell, 2020). Delays in accessing education are particularly acute for those arriving late in the education system, at the upper secondary and further education levels (Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018).

This report presents the findings from a research study that examined the experiences of displaced young people, aged 13-19, who arrived in the UK late in the education system – referred to as late arrivals. The research study used a mixed methods approach and reflected the experiences of more than 400 individuals, predominantly charity, education and local government stakeholders. It involved an online survey with 180 practitioners; an analysis of 222 queries to REUK’s advice line from late arrivals and those who support them; and interviews and focus groups with 23 practitioners.

The research found that:

Late arrivals may remain out of education for extended periods of time

- Nearly two thirds (62%) of 133 survey respondents reported instances of late arrivals not accessing any form of education for prolonged periods of time.

- Just under half (47%) of the 222 queries to REUK’s advice line were about young people not currently in education. These queries included young people out of education for six months and over a year.
- Those left out of education experience negative effects on their wellbeing and safety: they may face isolation, a deterioration of mental health and vulnerability to exploitation, instead of making meaningful progress and contributions to life and society in the UK.

Accessing secondary education becomes increasingly difficult the later young people arrive

- Research findings demonstrate that accessing education becomes particularly challenging for those who arrive mid-year in Year 11 when their peers are preparing for GCSEs. 80% of 112 survey respondents thought it was either difficult or very difficult for a young person to get a secondary school place after the winter break of Year 11.
- Young people who arrive at a Year 11 age may encounter enhanced challenges. Schools are unlikely to accept them and so they may remain out of education until they turn 16, the age that they are generally eligible to access further education. This period of time was described by survey respondents as a “no-man’s-land”.
- The top four barriers to secondary school access, as reported by 121 survey respondents, were: the complexity of placing in-year arrivals; a lack of available school places; changes to or uncertainty with young people’s accommodation, including because of dispersal policies; and

schools being unable or unwilling to accept late arrivals.

Accessing a meaningful further education place can be challenging

- While getting a place in college was generally perceived as easier than getting a place in secondary school (37% of 141 survey respondents thought it was either difficult or very difficult to get a place in college), this mostly related to getting a place on an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course.
- Getting a place on a further education course with components that advance young people's career or education aspirations was described as more challenging, including because of entry requirements for such courses. Research participants reported how, in this way, young people's options and opportunities narrow at the further education level.
- The top four barriers to further education access, as reported by 145 survey respondents, were: a lack of available further education places; changes to or uncertainty with young people's accommodation placements, including because of dispersal policies; unclear or inaccurate information about accessing further education as a displaced young person; and complex admissions and enrolment processes.

In the absence of school or college places, the charity sector is left to bridge gaps

- When asked what practice they had observed in the absence of a school or college place, 75% of 133 survey respondents reported temporary, informal education provision run by charities or voluntary groups. This was

followed by interim education activities coordinated by the local authority, as reported by 49%.

- Respondents described challenges facing charity sector and local authority provision, reporting how it is often under-funded, under-resourced and stretched, and so undermining its reach and impact.
- While the charity sector was perceived to play a crucial role in bridging gaps in education whilst children are waiting for school or college places, findings emphasised that it should not be considered a replacement or substitute for accessing education in a supported, mainstream education environment.

Ensuring late arrivals access their right to education can and should be addressed. Doing so would benefit and advance cross party efforts to tackle inequality through educational attainment.

It requires a coordinated and intentional approach from the Department for Education, the Home Office, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, local authorities, and secondary and further education institutions to reduce barriers to education access. Evidence-based recommendations to this effect are made by this report, and further detailed in an [accompanying policy brief](#).



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