



Refugee Education UK

Getting AHEAD course - findings from focus groups

Introduction

In 2022, the University of Warwick and Refugee Education UK (REUK) conducted research examining how to reduce barriers to accessing HE for refugee and asylum seeking young people local to Coventry ([Ashlee, Clayton, Hmmed and Jose, 2022](#)). Building on this research, the University of Warwick, in collaboration with REUK, is developing a short course for refugee and asylum seeking young people in Coventry. The course will include academic study skills, an experience of university life in the UK, and information about accessing university. The course is called 'Getting AHEAD (Access to Higher Education and Academic Development)', and will be piloted in March 2025.

To adopt a participatory approach in designing the Getting AHEAD course, the project includes a research component involving three focus group discussions with young refugees and asylum seekers currently living in Coventry. Two of these group discussions took place face-to-face with asylum seekers and refugee young people living in Coventry, while one group discussion was held online with sanctuary scholars currently enrolled in higher education. These discussions aimed to explore ideas for the course, gather input on its structure and design, and to hear participants' insights around creating an inclusive university classroom. The in-person focus groups were conducted at the University of Warwick in November 2024 and the online focus group took place in January 2025.

In total, 18 participants took part in the focus groups, with the majority being asylum seekers. The participants represented diverse nationalities. Most of the participants were male, although four female participants also took part. A summary of the participants' characteristics is presented below in two separate tables: one for the group discussions with refugee and asylum-seeking young people, and the other for the group discussion with sanctuary scholars.

The duration of the participants' stay in Coventry varied, ranging from less than one month to two years. Six participants reported having previously attended higher education or graduated from universities in their home countries. Additionally, the majority of the young people not currently enrolled in education expressed interest in pursuing higher education in the UK.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics (in-person focus groups with refugee and asylum-seeking young people)

Gender	12 male	2 female
Nationality	Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Yemen, and Kuwait	
Previous experience in higher education (in countries of origin)	Three have postgraduate degrees, two have undergraduate degrees, and one graduated from college	

Table 2 illustrates the characteristics of sanctuary scholars at the University of Warwick who participated in the online discussions. Three sanctuary scholars took part in an online focus group, and one was interviewed online individually.

Table 2. Participants' characteristics (online focus group with sanctuary scholars)

Gender	2 male	2 female
Nationality	Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen, and Lebanon	
Previous experience in higher education	Two participants had been enrolled in university before coming to the UK. All are currently studying in the UK: two are enrolled in a postgraduate course, and two in an undergraduate course.	

Key themes and findings

This section synthesises key themes and findings from the online and in-person focus groups, and their implications for the Getting AHEAD course.

Insufficient information about the UK education system

This theme highlights the need for accessible, clear, and targeted information to help young people from refugee backgrounds navigate higher education in the UK. Participants reported a lack of information on various aspects of the UK education system, including university admissions, potential academic pathways, and the recognition of prior qualifications.

- **University admissions process:** Young people highlighted insufficient information on university applications, particularly regarding required documents, qualifications, and pathway courses.
- **Higher education pathways:** Participants, especially those without prior higher education experience, expressed uncertainty in selecting appropriate university courses. Asylum-seeking students specifically struggled with unclear information about their eligibility to enroll. For example, one participant, who had been in the UK for 15 months, shared that he only recently learned he could have pursued higher education instead of spending months in his hotel room.

- **Recognition of prior qualifications:** Participants faced challenges in understanding whether their previous educational qualifications would be recognised in the UK. They also reported limited awareness of the process for obtaining overseas degree equivalency.
- **Access to funding and scholarships:** Most participants lacked sufficient information about available scholarships and financial support. Additionally, they were uncertain about where to find this information.

Language barriers

Another frequently mentioned barrier to university access for young people from refugee backgrounds is the language barrier. Participants acknowledged the availability of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provisions but repeatedly emphasised the need for an academic English course focused on university-level language skills.

Financial barriers

Financial barriers were among the most frequently mentioned challenges, particularly for asylum seekers who were ineligible to work in the UK, as well as those who needed to financially support family members in their home countries.

- **Difficulty covering expenses:** In the UK, people seeking asylum are classified as international students and are required to pay high international tuition fees. Additionally, they are not permitted to work or access student finance (Student Action for Refugees, 2021). As a result, covering essential expenses such as tuition fees, transportation, food, and housing becomes an overwhelming financial burden, which participants found nearly impossible to manage. Asylum-seeking participants also expressed concerns over the high cost of international tuition fees, which posed a major obstacle to accessing higher education.
- **Financial responsibilities:** Many male participants identified the need to financially support their families back home as a key barrier to pursuing their education.

Legal barriers

Participants who were seeking asylum or awaiting a decision on their claim expressed concerns about starting a course only to be forced to drop out if their asylum claim was rejected or a removal order was issued. Additionally, they highlighted the impact of the six-month¹ rule on their access to further and higher education. Asylum seekers can attend further and higher education, unless they have a “no study” bail condition attached to their Bail 201 letter ([REUK, n.d.](#)). However, asylum seekers aged 19 and over are not eligible for funding to support further education courses until six months after submitting an asylum claim, if no decision has been made (see [REUK, n.d.](#)), and so would have to fund

¹ Individuals are eligible for courses funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) if they meet the following criteria: 1) asylum seekers who are still awaiting a decision after six months; 2) asylum seekers who are still awaiting a decision on an appeal six months after lodging it; 3) refused asylum seekers receiving Section 4 support; 4) those who have been granted refugee status, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave to remain, their spouses, civil partners and children; and 5) those with indefinite leave to remain ([Refugee Council, 2017](#)).

courses themselves. Those aged 18 and under can enrol in education at any point (though there are still many barriers and delays; see [Ashlee, 2024](#)).

Mental health challenges

According to the participants, particularly those who are seeking asylum, mental health challenges hinder their access to higher education in one of the following ways:

- **Mental health issues due to displacement:** Some participants highlighted that trauma, conflict, and forced displacement negatively impacted their wellbeing, making it harder to prepare for higher education. They also mentioned that the uncertainty of their legal status, particularly for asylum seekers, along with social isolation, added to their mental distress.
- **Low confidence:** Participants mentioned that some factors such as language barriers diminish their self-confidence.
- **Lack of motivation:** Findings show that the prolonged asylum process, financial struggles, and limited access to knowledge about existing provisions discourage young asylum seekers from pursuing higher education.

Insights on inclusive and trauma-informed pedagogy

Research indicates that trauma can have a significant neurobiological impact on individual learning, potentially affecting concentration, memory, executive functioning, and information processing (Cimesa et al, 2023). It may also influence language acquisition and the socio-emotional aspects of learning, including students' engagement with both peers and instructors (Johnson, 2018). According to our data, especially in discussions with the sanctuary scholars, participants emphasised the importance of a trauma-informed approach to teaching. A trauma-informed approach means recognising how common traumatic stress is and the impacts of trauma, as well as taking steps to avoid “people becoming retraumatised or unnecessarily stressed by interacting with practitioners/service providers” (National Education Union, 2024).

The participants highlighted several key practices that contribute to a trauma-informed and inclusive classroom:

- **Sensitivity to trauma and distressing topics:** Sanctuary scholars appreciated when teachers were mindful of avoiding traumatic subjects, particularly war and forced displacement. They valued staff who did not expect students to share personal traumatic experiences within the class. Avoiding discussions of current conflicts was also seen as essential in preventing distress.

In addition, some participants described good practices where teaching staff supported them emotionally and were flexible. They reassured students that they could leave the class if they felt uncomfortable.² Clearly communicating that students could step out at any time when feeling distressed contributed to a sense of being safe.

² One sanctuary scholar said, for example, “I had brilliant teaching staff who would just let me leave whenever I need to, and I wouldn't feel pressured that I need to wipe my tears off quickly and come back into the classroom, I could take as much time as I needed. But it sort of is built like, this kind of trust, and this feeling of comfort is built through like, consistent interaction with the teacher, and then, like, making you feel like you can do that and you're not, like, obliged to come back to the classroom and continue and contribute to the discussion”.

- **Finding the right balance with sympathy:** Participants also noted that overdoing sympathy and pity could make them feel different from their peers, which sometimes became a barrier to fully integrating into the classroom and on campus. They mentioned the need to integrate into university life without being defined solely by their legal status or background. They therefore didn't want to be singled out as sanctuary seekers.³ Participants preferred that teachers avoid drawing attention to their refugee or asylum seeker status unless the student explicitly chose to share it. They also appreciated when teachers respected their privacy by not asking about their immigration status.
- **Involving students in decision-making:**⁴ Sanctuary scholars highlighted the importance of collaboration in shaping their university experience. They valued opportunities to be actively involved in decision-making, emphasising how such engagement helps their voices be heard.

Image 1. Using Microsoft Whiteboard, sanctuary scholars shared their ideas on what makes a university classroom welcoming and inclusive for refugee-background students.

What makes a <u>university classroom welcoming and inclusive</u> for refugee-background students?				
Teaching method	Not trying to tie class content with students' personal experiences	Be careful with sensitive content, and add warning at the start of the class or discussion	Not to assume that all students have the same knowledge or background and they would understand what is being taught	
Relationships (with teacher, peers and staff)	Understanding and normalisation of personal feelings that may be invoked during certain discussions	Realising that it's okay not to talk about things you don't want to talk about when it concerns you and your personal experiences - either with your peers or the teacher	get more 1 to 1 support from the teacher if possible discussing certain themes.	Over-sympathy and pity is not useful and can act as a barrier to blending in
Curriculum	Discussion of current conflicts/wars should be conducted with the consideration that people in the classroom may have been affected by	be less biased with certain stances / opinions. Have an overview of different views than one focused point of view.		
Support and services	Budding up schemes, allows us to meet more people, or have that one person to go to.	Tailored support to help refugee students spread awareness about the situation in their own countries		
Other	I think maybe have extra language classes to improve our english or written english.			

³ For example, a sanctuary scholar stated: "over sympathy and pity can be a barrier to blending in, like, over sympathising, treating this person with extra special care, that sort of thing makes them feel different... so there's some sort of balance that should be put into consideration".

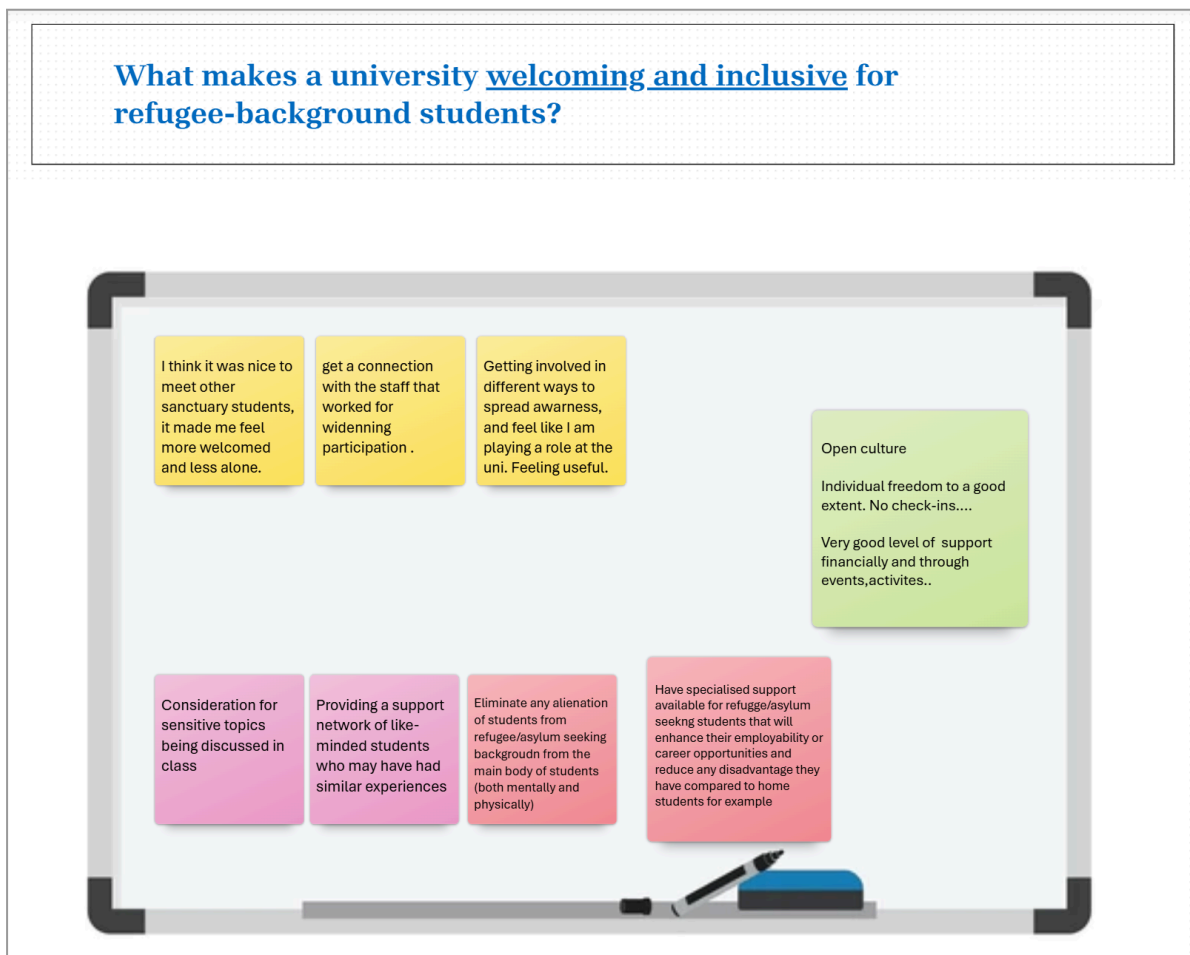
⁴ A sanctuary scholar mentioned: "I like it [when] the uni gives you opportunities to get involved in different ways".

Broader reflections on an inclusive campus

- **Trauma-informed spaces and trained staff:** Participants emphasised the importance of staff training in fostering an inclusive university environment. They noted that training helps staff handle sensitive topics appropriately.
- **Peer support and connecting students with communities:** Participants specifically highlighted the role of buddy schemes in creating a more inclusive campus. They suggested that such schemes could help sanctuary scholars connect with other student groups.

Some sanctuary scholars also expressed the need for opportunities to engage in advocacy and support efforts related to their home countries. They suggested that universities could provide platforms for those who wish to raise awareness, fundraise, or contribute in other meaningful ways to support communities in their countries of origin.

Image 2. Sanctuary scholars shared their ideas on what makes a university welcoming and inclusive for refugee-background students.



Recommendations for the course

Based on the focus group discussions, the following suggestions and recommendations for the design of the Getting AHEAD course emerged:

- **Access to Information:** Participants underscored the need for clear guidance on application processes in universities. This includes the provision of information and resources related to admissions criteria and processes.
- **Information on equivalency and recognition of past qualifications:** Students with overseas qualifications required information on degree equivalency to understand how their prior education is recognised in the UK.
- **Information on eligibility for higher and further education with different immigration statuses:** Participants pointed to the need for information and resources on how to access higher and further education with their asylum-seeking status. Information on accessibility of and eligibility for different courses and funding with different types of immigration status would be a useful component of the course.
- **Information on funding and scholarships:** Many participants highlighted the importance of accessible information about scholarships, including eligibility criteria and application deadlines. Some participants expressed interest in part-time courses and scholarships that would enable them to continue to support their families financially while studying.
- **1:1 support or academic counselling:** participants who had not previously enrolled in higher education expressed the need for academic counselling when selecting a university or college course. These participants also highlighted the importance of access to information about the UK's higher education system to help them make informed decisions. This might include information about the different qualifications available at different kinds of institutions (e.g. further education colleges and universities) and how these link together.
- **Academic English:** Participants highlighted the need for an advanced English language course tailored for students who have surpassed ESOL levels and do not find ESOL courses particularly useful.⁵ Specifically, they seek a course that focuses on academic English to support their studies in a higher education context.
- **Support with personal statements and scholarship applications:** Participants also noted the need for guidance on writing personal statements for UCAS and scholarship applications. Incorporating in-course exercises that help them develop their writing skills can be particularly beneficial in preparing them for these applications.⁶
- **Examples from sanctuary seekers who have accessed higher education:** In the online focus group, participants pointed to the value of hearing from individuals

⁵ One participant stated, for example, that most available English language provisions “are only conversation classes and mostly everyday interaction focused and they are once a week. (They are) not very helpful for university level and academia”.

⁶ One sanctuary scholar said, for example, that “it would be nice to have something about how to write up scholarship applications. Because ... you have to write a whole personal statement for university application. That would be nice if you have like a kind of information pack at the end to give them to use when they're applying... I think it would be nice if you could include related exercises during the course, like can you write me a paragraph about yourself? And they could get inspired by that paragraph and write a personal statement later on for UCAS”.

with lived experience of forced displacement who have been able to access higher education, and who can talk about their own experiences and how they got to university.

- **Provision of a written information pack:** Another suggestion from the online focus group was for a physical information pack, gathering the information shared during the course in one place in a way that can be easily referred back to.

Conclusion

The findings highlight several key barriers for asylum-seeking and refugee young people in accessing higher education in the UK. A major challenge is the lack of clear and accessible information on university admissions, academic pathways, degree recognition, and financial support, making it difficult for students to navigate the system. Language barriers also persist, with many participants emphasising the need for an academic English course tailored to university-level skills. Financial constraints, especially for asylum seekers who cannot work or access student finance, pose significant obstacles, as does the pressure to support families back home. Legal uncertainties further complicate access, with some fearing they may have to drop out due to their asylum status. Additionally, mental health challenges, including trauma, social isolation, and lack of motivation, were reported as factors affecting students' ability to pursue higher education.

The participants' recommendations highlight the clear need for the course to focus on academic English while also providing tailored information packages for students from refugee backgrounds. Many students who have moved beyond ESOL levels struggle to find suitable language support that prepares them for the demands of higher education, particularly at the postgraduate level. Additionally, the need for clear guidance on university application processes, degree equivalency, and scholarships underscores the importance of tailored resources that address the unique challenges faced by the participants. By incorporating academic writing support and tailored information on accessing higher education, this course can play a crucial role in bridging the gap and ensuring that young people with refugee backgrounds are better equipped to navigate the UK's university system.

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