

Language provision and sanctuary scholarship schemes

A case study from a Welsh university

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Dr Mike Chick
Dr Cath Camps

Contents

1. Foreword
 2. Executive Summary
 3. Context
 4. Methodology
 5. Discussion
 6. Concluding Remarks
 7. Bibliography
 8. Acknowledgements
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1. Foreword

The Welsh Refugee Council have long recognised the importance of supporting access to education and I am very impressed by the University of South Wales' scholarships and bursary schemes for people seeking refuge. Providing educational opportunities is one of the main principles of the Welsh Government's "Nation of Sanctuary" aspiration and the initiatives detailed on these pages are evidence of how universities are uniquely placed to contribute to this humanitarian ambition. The sanctuary schemes provide desperately needed linguistic and financial support for refugees and people seeking asylum in Wales and voices heard in this report build on research which evidences how critical English language education is to forced migrants who want to access higher education. Offering bursaries to support language learning opens the doors to study, qualifications, and employment. The schemes hold up a vision of sanctuary as a place where forced migrants can flourish, reaching their full potential and making their distinctive contributions to helping Wales become a vibrant, progressive society. The voices contained within this report are testament to the crucial role universities can play in allowing those seeking safety in Wales to live their lives with dignity. Moreover, providing forced migrants with access to higher education allows the creation of spaces to bring people together, which is vital for breaking down barriers, promoting understanding, and enhancing integration.

Harry Iles - Chair of the Welsh Refugee Council

2. Executive Summary

This report details one university's attempts to comply with the calls to action by numerous governmental and charitable organisations with regards to the humanitarian crisis of growing numbers of displaced people around the world. The University of South Wales (USW), like many in the UK higher education sector, has been committed to widening access for forced migrants for many years. This has included creation of, in 2017, two Sanctuary Schemes which support access to study for both asylum seekers and refugees.

One of the components of the USW Sanctuary Schemes has been the provision of language support via free initial assessment of language levels, and places on the university pre-session language course. The importance of language competency is widely recognised, not least by the fact that nearly all universities in the UK deliver pre-session courses for international students who need to improve their English proficiency and academic skills before embarking on an undergraduate or postgraduate award.

This qualitative study, therefore, looks at the Sanctuary Schemes initiated at the university and explores the impact of language provision on applicants to the university, current students and also graduates from the schemes. Specifically, we were particularly interested in their perceptions and experiences of the:

- + recruitment process
- + learning environment
- + language provision.

The views of 15 individual Sanctuary Scheme applicants were gathered through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Email exchanges also provided supplementary data to assist with further clarification where needed.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by USW's Faculty of Business and society Ethics Committee.

2.1 Principal findings

The transcribed interviews provided rich data on a number of recurring themes. This enabled the identification of ways in which the sanctuary schemes may be developed in the future and also reaffirmed how crucially important the schemes were to the lives of those fortunate enough to obtain a scholarship.

The findings endorsed the belief that, in attempting to widen access to include forced migrant students, universities need to provide:

- + comprehensive programmes of language and academic support
- + focused Pastoral Care.

In addition, the study identified the following areas as challenges forced migrant students face in applying to and accessing university:

- + a lack of awareness of the existence of scholarship schemes
- + difficulty providing required documentation
- + financial constraints.

The reflections of the fifteen participants are inspiring, and provide valuable insights into how we may further widen access to this vulnerable section of our society. The study makes the following recommendations which, it is hoped, will encourage others to introduce or expand their support for displaced people in our communities.

2.2 Recommendations arising from the study:

- + **Language provision:** Assessment of language proficiency along with English language and academic study skills support, should be included as part of a sanctuary scheme.
 - + **Better marketing of Sanctuary Schemes:** Universities should be aware of the need to develop more effective marketing strategies of Sanctuary Schemes in collaboration with third sector organisations, such as Refugee Councils, [Refuaid](#), and local charities.
 - + **Designated points of contact in university departments:** Designated contacts should be identified to help prospective students navigate the application processes including Sanctuary Schemes and language tests.
 - + **Buddying/mentoring scheme:** Buddying/mentoring schemes should be instigated to support students whilst studying.
 - + **Personal tutors:** Tutors should have training on how to best support forced migrant students, especially with regard to the pastoral and wellbeing issues.
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- + **Student voice:** Universities have small numbers of forced migrant students within their student population. It is imperative, however, that their voices are actively sought so that any arising needs can be addressed.
- + **Future Research:** It is suggested further research is undertaken to investigate the impact of sanctuary schemes on the scholar's family and wider networks.

3. Context

3.1 Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary

Each year, thousands of people who are seeking refuge from danger, harm or persecution are given sanctuary in Wales. Figures released by the Home Office (2020) show that in the year ending June 2020, there were approximately thirty-two thousand applications for asylum in the UK. From this total, just over three thousand people were subsequently dispersed to Wales. This annual figure has remained more or less constant over the last five years or so. In addition, twenty thousand people have been resettled in the UK since 2015 as part of the Syrian Vulnerable People Resettlement Programme. 1,200 of these displaced people have been rehomed in Wales.

The labels “asylum seeker” and “refugee” are often misunderstood, and the following may be useful to note. An asylum seeker is someone whose claim to be a refugee is currently pending. A person applies for asylum on the grounds that return to their home country would lead to persecution or harm. Around half of all asylum seekers are eventually granted refugee status¹. Access to student finance for study at university is also dependent on an individual's immigration status. For example, asylum seekers are treated as International Students and are not eligible for student finance whereas people with refugee status are eligible. [UNICEF](#) have produced an excellent guidance for universities on these important differences. For the rest of this report, the terms *forced migrant* and *people seeking sanctuary* will also be used. These terms refer to and include both refugees and asylum seekers.

In the United Kingdom, Wales is the only nation that has developed a strategy which includes measures to support people seeking sanctuary to access higher education. As part of its Nation of Sanctuary, Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan (2019), the Welsh Government makes direct reference to the part that universities can play in the welcome and integration of the thousands of sanctuary seekers who are dispersed to Wales, by the Home Office, each year. The Nation of Sanctuary Plan includes the aims of ensuring that “*Refugees and Asylum Seekers can access educational opportunities, including language skills, to help*

¹ For further information on the labels used in the immigration process, see: [UNHCR - Asylum in the UK](#)

them rebuild their lives and fulfil their potential” and that universities “identify opportunities to increase the participation and retention of refugees and asylum seekers in Higher Education” (2019: 26).

However, widening access to ensure that forced migrants are treated equally when applying to enter university is not so simple. This is because immigration status, financial constraints, unfamiliarity with the application process, and a lack of evidence of prior learning are all barriers that need to be surmounted. Moreover, there is a further obstacle that is common to nearly all forced migrants hoping to study in higher education - language. Indeed, English language competency is the barrier to education and employment most often cited in research into integration (eg see Holtam & Iqbal 2020; HM Government 2018). To make matters even more difficult, since 2015 swathing cuts to the funding of language education programmes for migrants in Wales (ESOL) mean that people seeking sanctuary have fewer options than ever before to improve their language to a sufficient level to begin an undergraduate or postgraduate degree award.

3.2 USW response to the humanitarian crises

In **2015**, the University of South Wales signed a non-time framed Memorandum of Understanding with the Welsh Refugee Council (WRC) in recognition of the burgeoning partnership between the institutions. That partnership formed an award-winning programme to design and deliver English language classes for forced migrants at the WRC’s head offices in Cardiff. Details of the collaboration can be found [here](#). Working with the Welsh Refugee Council meant that USW staff were able to develop expertise in the issues facing forced migrants who wished to access higher education.

In recognising the substantial linguistic barrier to accessing university, USW launched their Refugee Bursary for Language Study programme in **2017** and, at the same time, began offering two annual scholarships for people with asylum seeker status. Both schemes are detailed in Section 3.3 of this report.

USW had been an institutional supporter of the Council for At Risk Academics (CARA) for many years. In **2018**, academics at the University became involved in a newly created programme of support for Syrian academics who, because of the civil war, have been predominantly based in Turkey. Since becoming involved with that programme, USW staff have regularly contributed to the provision of Academic Skills Development, English for Academic purposes language support, and research programmes for the Syrian academics.

In **2019**, USW supported the creation of its first Refugee Champion role. The remit of that position is to advocate for and promote issues surrounding forced migrant access to higher education as well as overseeing initiatives to support their academic and pastoral welfare while at university. Also in **2019**, the University of Sanctuary sub-group was formed. This team, comprising academic and administrative staff from across the university, with formal terms of reference and identified meetings, is now a recognised sub-group of the

University's Equality and Diversity Steering Group (EDSG) which reports directly to the University's Academic Board. This development has meant that issues surrounding access to university and support for forced migrant students are now embedded within the University's formal reporting structure.

In **2020**, the Vice Chancellor of USW signed the Universities of Sanctuary [pledge to commit to working toward the UNHCR goal of 15%](#) of refugees having access to higher education worldwide by 2030. That goal forms part of the UNHCR's (2019) [Global Framework for Refugee Education](#).

As a result of these initiatives, launched between 2015 and 2020, USW was awarded [University of Sanctuary status](#). Later that year, 'Retention of University of Sanctuary Status' was included as an action point in the [USW Strategic Equality Plan](#) (2020-2024: 1.3) with the aim being to support and implement the action plan produced by the University of Sanctuary sub-group and to ensure that USW is a place where refugees and people seeking asylum feel safe and welcome.

3.3 Sanctuary Schemes and the role of English Language competency

In its Guiding Principles for Sanctuary Scholars, Article 26, a project of the Helena Kennedy Foundation, details a series of ten guiding principles "designed to respond to the specific needs of forced migrants who are undertaking, or seek to undertake, higher education in the UK" (2018: 6).

Article 26 – Ten Principles

1. The right of forced migrants to access higher education
2. Equal treatment and non-discrimination
3. The right to privacy
4. An outline of Sanctuary Initiatives
5. Underlying principles for the design, administration, and implementation of
6. Sanctuary Initiatives
7. Selection processes and removal of
8. procedural barriers
9. Communication
10. Academic, pastoral, and professional support
11. Student progress and participation
12. Staff training

Language provision and sanctuary scholarship schemes

Dr Mike Chick and Dr Cath Camps

The first of Article 26's principles, recommends that, "HEIs shall endeavour, within the means available to them, to provide opportunities for Sanctuary Scholars to access higher education" (2018: 10). Of note here is that if a potential applicant to university does not have the requisite English language competency, all other barriers become meaningless. For without English language skills, a student is neither able to study nor integrate easily into university life.

That English language competency is the largest (though certainly not the only) barrier to accessing education is widely noted. For example, as mentioned previously, the Welsh Government has produced policy documents that encourage universities to play a role in alleviating the barriers to entry faced by people seeking sanctuary, which include linguistic challenges. Moreover, the UNHCR (2020: 45) has recently urged universities to "Offer scholarships and other ways for refugee students to access tertiary education" and also to "Provide language courses for refugees who do not speak the language of instruction." In addition to scholarships and language education programmes, a document produced by UNICEF (2020: 3) points out that forced migrant applicants who do not speak English as a first language are often required to produce an "IELTS" certificate of language competency². Obtaining such a certificate is costly, time consuming and thus can be another barrier to entry. Given that, it is unsurprising that the UNICEF advice is for universities to "Explore alternatives to evidencing English language proficiency."

All universities in the UK deliver language preparation programmes designed to prepare fee-paying international students (from non-English speaking countries) for the linguistic demands of study at university level, and also to equip them with the academic study skills necessary for success on degree-level awards. Very few, however, currently offer pre-sessional places (prior to university entry) on language programmes, free of charge, for forced migrants who wish to access higher education.

The University of South Wales is the only university in Wales that offers language education as part of its Sanctuary Schemes. There are currently two schemes of support for forced migrants at USW. The first is for people who are seeking asylum and who are aiming to study post-graduate awards – two of these scholarships are available each year. [The scholarship](#) covers the full cost of tuition for the course and also up to £1000 for course related costs. These post-graduate scholarships also include a free language assessment. Since the Academic Year 2017-2018, six Sanctuary Scholarship schemes have been awarded to people seeking asylum in Wales.

The second is the [Refugee Sanctuary Scheme](#) which offers places on its pre-sessional courses for people with refugee status who have met the academic requirements to study at university, but do not yet meet the linguistic requirements. Refugees qualify as home students in Wales and thus are entitled to the same options for student finance as anyone else. Such funding does not, however, include courses of English language education.

² The International English Language Testing System ([IELTS](#))

Since the Scheme was launched in the Academic Year 2017 -2018, ten refugees have been granted places on the scheme.

A feature of both scholarships is that neither requires an IELTS, or any other certificate, to evidence language level. The language assessment of all candidates is carried out, free of charge, by staff based at the University's Centre for International English. Thus, the cost and time of evidencing language competency, as pointed out as a barrier to entry in the UNICEF document, are bypassed. Since the Academic Year 2017-2018, 16 Sanctuary Scheme applicants have taken these free language assessments at the University.

This study, therefore, as well as looking at the Sanctuary Schemes overall, wished to explore the impact of this free language provision on Sanctuary Scheme applicants to the university, current students and alumni. Specifically, we were particularly interested in their perceptions and experiences of the:

- + recruitment process
- + student learning environment
- + benefits of language provision.

4. Methodology

This small-scale research project aimed to capture the voices and experiences of forced migrant students who:

1. Have completed study on a scholarship or bursary scheme at the USW.
2. Are currently enrolled on either of the schemes.
3. Were unsuccessful in their applications to study at the University.

Given the small numbers of participants involved, the realities of researching during Covid, and the sensitivity required, the sampling method adopted for the study can be broadly termed a 'convenience sampling' approach. That is, the sample was chosen on the basis of its availability (Bryman 2016: 167). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten forced migrant students and applicants. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. A further five students, who had elected not to be recorded, replied to a brief questionnaire. E-mail correspondence with various academic and administrative staff involved in the organisation of the Schemes also formed part of the data collection. All participants consented to participate in the study on the understanding that their data would be anonymised. In order to further protect anonymity, all quotes selected for inclusion in the report are attributed to "Sanctuary Scholar", regardless of whether they were a refugee or person seeking asylum successful or unsuccessful in their application. Following collection, the data was subject to close scrutiny, enabling a thematic analysis to be undertaken.

The study was granted approval by the Faculty of Business and Society Ethics Committee.

5. Project Outcomes and Discussion

As set out previously, this study wished to explore the impact the Sanctuary Schemes, and especially the impact of the bursary for language education. The focus included the University's recruitment processes, its learning environment and the perceptions of the benefits of the Sanctuary Schemes. This section will identify outcomes related to each of these foci and the emergent themes. The Discussion will be framed around related principles set out in Article 26 (2018).

5.1 The recruitment process

The second principle from the Article 26 guidelines that we focus on here concerns the selection processes and removal of procedural barriers to university study. This principle states specifically that universities shall “*work towards removing all barriers that may impede the ability or capacity of Sanctuary Scholars to begin, continue or complete their studies, as far as it is practicable to do so.*” (Article 26: 13). The application process for university can be demanding and time-consuming for any applicant. For example, collating the evidence required when trying to demonstrate prior learning, in addition to arranging the various grants and loans involved in higher education study is challenging for everyone. However, forced migrant students have extra barriers to contend with when applying for university. These obstacles need to be recognised, and processes amended for the effective implementation of a sanctuary scheme. In the interviews conducted for this study, three thematic areas of concern emerged relating to the recruitment process. These were **awareness, documentation and finance**.

5.1.1. Awareness

The sentiments of the participants in this project support the assertion that many people seeking sanctuary are oblivious to their study rights, and to the opportunities that exist in higher education. In the summer of 2020, a small scale, online ‘Information Session’ for forced migrants was delivered by staff at the University. As two interviewees who had attended the event expressed in subsequent correspondence:

“More publicity should be done. Especially with organisations that work with people seeking asylum. Interacting with other sanctuary seekers and those supporting them, I came to realise most people are not aware of the schemes.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar applicant)

“You need, maybe, more festivals or more fairs just to explain to the people. We need help with the first steps, help to understand how the system works, how the process will go. That is too difficult, too difficult to be honest.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar applicant)

A mature student applicant, who had also attended the information day, explained how even though they were an experienced, qualified professional in their home country, they had had great difficulty attempting to understand the process of accessing university in the UK, reflecting that:

“At the start of my journey into this, I was searching all the time, trying to understand the system. It was really difficult for me doing that alone, you know.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar applicant)

The need for more direct information, support and guidance was clear from the interviews with all the participants, as summed up in one of the responses:

“I realised I had been waiting for someone to help. I really wanted someone to have a seat with me and tell me, look (name deleted), if you want to go to these schools you have to do this and this and this, then you have these options...”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar applicant)

The reflections from another interviewee also evidenced these misunderstandings and revealed the confusion that exists about the need for IELTS certificates to get into university in the UK. They recalled that:

“People don’t know that they can study even if they are seeking asylum. And that’s what happened to me. My aim when I attended that information day was to ask about the IELTS, and if I take it, how long would I need to wait until I could apply to university? But then I was surprised that oh, I can do an English language test at the University. I don’t need to enrol an IELTS course!”

(Sanctuary Scheme Scholar)

5.1.2 Providing documentation

Reports cited earlier in this paper, by the UNHCR (2020), UNICEF (2020) and Universities UK (2018) all allude to the fact that complex personal histories, together with the range of immigration statuses that currently exist, will often result in added complications for the forced migrant university applicant.

Difficulties in ascertaining which documents were required, and in actually being able to provide the requisite paperwork, were a common theme in the interviews. This was sometimes because in making a claim for asylum, the Home Office also require original documentation to be supplied. In such cases, it is normal procedure for universities to

Language provision and sanctuary scholarship schemes

Dr Mike Chick and Dr Cath Camps

contact the Home Office for confirmation of study status. This, in itself, can cause problems and delays for the aspiring applicant, as one interviewee recalled:

“When I asked my solicitor, is that OK that the University contacts the Home Office and obtains proof of my claim? She began shouting on phone telling me, that no one is allowed to contact with the Home Office about my case!”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar applicant)

Moreover, for both the Asylum Seeker Scholarship and the Refugee Sanctuary Scheme, there is more form filling needed than for a standard application - as both the award application and the scholarship application need to be applied for, on top of organising a language test, if necessary. For a person in the middle of the asylum process, who may not have all the original documentation needed, and may be in the situation where the Home Office have also sought original documentation, the obstacles can begin to mount up:

“The University asked me for some documents that I had already shown when I applied for the university course. I then needed to apply for the scholarship so I showed the documents they asked for again but when I wanted to enrol on my course, they said you can’t sign in because you, you’re not allowed. They were the wrong documents...”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

The introduction of any new scheme that involves different administrative and academic departments working together will often encounter teething problems. To qualify for a scholarship, the applicant needs to first apply for and choose an academic course, then apply for the scholarship and arrange an English language test. The complexity of this process is also a challenge for the various university departments involved and can result in misunderstandings, as one interviewee described:

“I was confused when I applied to university. They told me first I have to do the English test and then apply for the scholarship. But when I was going to do the English test, they told me that first I have to get the scholarship and then do the English test.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

As a matter of fact, the majority of interviewees referred to the difficulty they had in understanding how Sanctuary Schemes worked, as one explained:

“The applying process is too complicated. We need somebody to help us along all the process of applying.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

Indeed, this project has brought attention to the fact that few forced migrants are conversant with the process of applying for a university. They are often unaware of what qualifications or experience are required for entry and often unfamiliar with the range of possible courses that are on offer.

5.1.3 Finance

As mentioned in section 3.1, entitlements to education differ depending on an individual's immigration status. For example, people with refugee status can access student finance (though not for language education), while people seeking asylum in the UK are not allowed to work, do not qualify for student finance and, for fee-paying purposes, are classed as International Students. The vast majority of people seeking asylum depend on the UK government support of a little over £35 per week so it is unsurprising that accessing higher education is almost impossible for this group. For refugees, the cost of a pre-sessional course is also prohibitive. The following responses from interviewees describe the situation clearly:

“I can say that it is impossible for an asylum seeker to pay the funds.”

“I would not have been able to do a university course, or even any other course, without the University support that gave me a bursary to support my master's degree.”

“I wouldn't have been able to pay for the pre-sessional.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholars)

With regard to English language provision, the issue of IELTS and the time and cost of studying for it, and obtaining certification, also featured in many of the conversations, illuminating how accessing and studying for the qualification was a barrier for many. The following thoughts on this encapsulate why organisations such as UNICEF (2020) have called for universities to explore alternatives:

“The cost of an IELTS course, or getting an IELTS certificate, is a pretty high cost for us and cannot be covered without outside help. This is one of the reasons that many asylum seekers and refugees cannot seek to follow a university course. They lose time without being able to do something for themselves, until the improvement of their situation.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

“The main problem that any refugee or any asylum seeker faces is to get the IELTS certificate. Many people I met couldn't join the universities because of the IELTS certificate.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

“Many students have been denied a place at university - not because of the IELTS exam itself, but because of the cost of the courses that teach students the IELTS test. The courses are in private colleges and the cheapest ones are about £800 a month.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

5.2 The student learning experience: academic, pastoral and professional support

The principle from the Article 26 guidance document that we draw on here concerns the support students receive while at the University. In that document (Article 26 2018: 14) it recommends that Sanctuary Scholars should “*have access to appropriate and comprehensive support during their studies, in particular, academic, pastoral and professional support.*” The issue of support, and the need for it as a forced migrant in a British university, emerged in nearly all the interviews.

People seeking refuge in the UK, as is also the case for most international students, usually come from countries with distinct higher education practices. It was clear from responses in the interviews that the academic skills, assessments, and overall culture in a British university often differs quite dramatically to systems in students’ home countries, as the following scholar explained:

“You know, the educational system is very different here, in the UK. The work and assessments are focused on research and on us making personal efforts. It was not like that in my country. I have to get used to it, you know [laughs]. I find it [laughs] ugh, I find it a little bit difficult.”
(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

The expectations and understandings of staff-student relationships may also lead to unrecognised barriers that can impede the academic support staff might otherwise be happy to offer. One interviewee explained how professional relationships in previous educational institutions had shaped how they approached academics. They recalled how:

“I come from (country deleted). There, we cannot talk equally to the lecturer or our teacher. We are scared of the lecturer in case he does something bad, you know. So, I’m scared of this now.”
(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

Such revelations about the cultural differences strongly point to a need for tailored support systems to be in place for forced-migrant students, especially if they have not had the chance to experience a pre-session course as a stepping-stone into the culture of UK higher education. One interviewee, reflecting on what would have helped them during their study, suggested that there should be a named person, a mentor, for each student. They advised that:

“What I think is, there should be a tutor or somebody who can check on the student from time to time. Maybe once a month, you could send him, him or her a message, to ask how are they doing and how are their studies’ going?.”
(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

There is clearly merit in the proposal to have a named person that a forced-migrant student can approach for help, advice, or guidance. Indeed, the data here suggest that numerous departments should have a designated-person who can become expert in the needs of forced-migrant students – this would include lecturers, staff based in various Student Support services, as well as those offering language support. The following reflection provides a reminder that, as a result of difficult personal backgrounds, a large proportion of forced migrants suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders. Attending university means that a student can access essential student wellbeing services. Moreover, it became clear from talking to the scholars that being a student is, in itself, highly beneficial. As one respondent described:

“I enjoyed every single day at university because I suffer from PTSD. Because of this, I needed something to do, somewhere to go and enjoy, and to make friends. University was such a safe, safe place to go.”
(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

Thus, it is not solely the help, advice and support made available by directly by various university departments that emerged as being necessary for success – essential as these services are. What also surfaced in the interviews was the clear psychological boost that scholars experienced in having a goal to aim for, gaining a structure to their daily lives and building hope for the future, as this reflection exemplifies:

“When you are not allowed to work, filling your time with something useful is so important. You search the internet but not because you have to - you do it because you don’t have anything else to do. But when you have the opportunity to study, to do something useful you feel, in yourself, like you are doing something good. Good for yourself, your family, or your country, even to the UK. Yeah. And that’s really good for my future, for everyone’s future.”
(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

5.3 Student perceptions of the benefits of Sanctuary Schemes and language provision

Education not only grants a sense of hope for the future, but, as students enter into the culture of student life, make friends, and adapt to the structure it entails, they begin to feel that they are part of something. Anecdotal evidence, research reports, and our own experience, tally with how one interviewee expressed their thoughts on language, education and integration:

“Nothing is more important than English.”
(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

Language provision and sanctuary scholarship schemes

Dr Mike Chick and Dr Cath Camps

Another respondent captured both the importance of language and how it is key to providing a sense of purpose. In describing their university life, they illuminate how language and study can be so valuable to forced migrant students:

“it’s so very important for your state of mind. When you go to the University you see people, you talk to your tutors, speak in the class, chatting to your classmates, you know. It gives you that sense of belonging, it makes you forget some things.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

One interviewee explained how they had not spoken any English at all before arriving in the UK. Nevertheless, by studying hard for years, in their own time, they were now in a position where many doors were open – even PhD level study:

I hope I can do a PhD. Why not? If you have the chance to get PhD, why not? I remember when I came here at first. I was 17, imagine - 17? I didn’t speak any English at all!”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

Most students are delighted to get into university, but it could well be argued that for people seeking sanctuary, a place at university really is life changing. The following reflection reveals how gaining a place on the pre-sessional language course, had enabled the student to set off on a life-changing path:

“Getting the scholarship has made me feel that I will achieve my goal! After I finish the course Pre-essential, I will study Computer Sciences including the foundation year. This (the scholarship) gives me the chance to develop my knowledge and my skills, and to be able to survive in the society that I am living in.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

Another interviewee expressed similar feelings and explained how entry onto the pre-sessional course meant that the obstacle preventing them from moving on with their life had been removed:

“Uh, on the first day when they accepted me on to the pre-sessional course, I mean in the first day I attended Uni, I cried. I cried, because I had been planning to study to be an aircraft designer for so long and finally I did it I did it. And I was like, thank God, I will never let my family down.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

As described in section 3.3, scholars on the post-graduate scholarships for asylum seekers have access to the language assessments but are not funded for pre-sessional places as well. However, a pre-sessional course can be a tremendously valuable stepping into academic life not only for the language education but also for the study skills needed for higher education. Nearly all respondents suggested that such linguistic and academic preparation might have helped a great deal, as these reflections exemplify:

“Doing a Pre-sessional course would have been a very useful for me as a new student here in UK. The course would have learned me new skills and helped me to adapt better with the Uni life.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

“I missed all the English sessions before I started my course because I joined the course so late. I don't know how that will affect me, but I feel that it would have been better for me if I joined the pre-sessional course.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

Finally, what all respondents stressed was that being able to attend university gave them such hope for the future. Studying meant that they were no longer wasting precious time but doing something positive and constructive. This is so important to mental wellbeing, especially for people who have often been through very difficult times:

“When I started studying engineering, uh, I had a dream that I wanted to complete my studies. The war hadn't yet started in my country and I dreamt to do it there, in my country. But then the war came and when I arrived here, I thought, OK I will try to complete my dream and I will try to forget about my country and everything that happened to me. I need to have a fresh start. And this is that start that - I can begin a master's degree.”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

“When I was offered the scholarship, I didn't believe it at first. It is a big, big opportunity they have given us. So, we have to do our best and uh...why not aim to be the best student in the course?”

(Sanctuary Scheme scholar)

6. Concluding remarks and recommendations

The data drawn on for this study shows clearly how important education can be for people whose lives have been turned upside down by displacement. For everyone, gaining qualifications provides a degree of security for the times ahead, but for people seeking refuge in another country, the benefits of attending a university are even more immediate. Higher education study provides hope for the future, a structure to daily life and opens the doorway to meeting others and integrating with a new community.

Nevertheless, as this report has illuminated, many potential forced migrant students are missing out on the chance to access university due to barriers such as awareness, documentation, language, and finance. Until there is a change in immigration law, for example, by allowing people seeking sanctuary to work or access education, then university sanctuary schemes offer the best prospect for facilitating the education and integration of forced migrants who aspire to study at higher education. The Student Action for Refugees website, ([STAR](#)), lists nearly sixty universities that now offer sanctuary scholarships. The breadth of support is heartening, however, not many universities appear to be offering language education and academic preparation as part of their sanctuary programmes.

As this study has shown, ensuring that language and academic study skills provision is included as part of a sanctuary scheme, for example by opening up places on a pre-sessional programme, is essential in reducing the barriers to higher education faced by people seeking sanctuary. Funding pre-sessional language schemes, will enable even more forced migrants to experience the sense of hope and belonging that has been reported in this document.

6.1 Recommendations

We set out below a series of recommendations arising from the study.

6.1.1 Language provision

- + **Language provision:** English language and academic study skills support, should be included as part of a sanctuary scheme, for example by opening up places on a pre-sessional programme.
 - + **Evidencing language competency:** Universities should seek alternative ways of evidencing the language competency of forced migrant applicant, for example, by successful completion of a pre-sessional course or by assessment carried out by a university's English language teaching staff.
-

6.1.2 Recruitment

- + **Better marketing of Sanctuary Schemes:** It is clear that knowledge of Sanctuary Schemes and the rights of forced migrants to study are not well understood in the community. We recommend that universities work with third sector organisations, such as Refugee Councils, [Refuaid](#), and local charities in order to publicise bespoke open days for forced migrants in their region.
- + **Designated points of contact in university departments:** Designated contacts are essential in recruitment to help navigate the system and help applicants through the application for Sanctuary Schemes, language tests and so on. In many universities this may well involve one person to deal with applications treated as international (for people seeking asylum) and another person to deal with applications from people with refugee status (treated as 'Home' students).

6.1.3 Student Learning Experience

- + **Buddying / mentoring scheme:** To ensure that forced migrant students feel supported, and have someone that can offer help, independent of their academic award, it would be beneficial to instigate a buddying / mentoring scheme for each sanctuary scholar.
- + **Personal tutors:** Such tutors should have training on how to best support forced migrant students, especially with regard to the pastoral and wellbeing issues identified in section 5. Pastoral support can have a major impact on a forced migrant student's chances of success at university.
- + **Student voice:** The cohort for this study is small as the numbers of forced migrants on the sanctuary schemes are small. At USW only two scholarships are granted each year to applicants seeking asylum. For applicants with refugee status, as previously mentioned, ten applicants have been able to enrol on Degree Awards following successful completion of a pre-sessional course. Including these numbers, there are a total of fifty-four students with refugee status currently studying at the University. Other universities will also have small numbers of displaced migrant students within their student population. It is imperative, however, that their voices are actively sought so any arising needs can be addressed.

6.1.4 Future Research

What this study has highlighted is the positive effect that Sanctuary schemes have on the individual scholars involved. The research did not, however, explore how such schemes might impact more widely, that is to say on a scholar's family, or community networks.

Finally, it is our hope that the accounts contained in this report will encourage others to introduce or expand their support for the displaced people in our communities.

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8. Further reading

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Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201
enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500
communications@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

   @AdvanceHE

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