

**“Education is supposed to be free for all”:
Asylum seekers’ experiences of accessing further and
higher education in Scotland**

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Equal access to
education for all.

In Scotland, we believe that asylum seekers are currently being denied their right to education. Here we share the experiences of asylum seekers calling for an education system that provides a ladder of hope to build a brighter future.

This research was carried out as part of the Rights in Action project being conducted by the Poverty Alliance. Rights in Action is working with communities across Scotland to raise awareness of how human rights can be used as a tool in the fight against poverty, to increase their capacity to address human rights issues and create a supportive community of practice and to support participatory research projects on human rights issues in Scotland.

As part of Rights in Action, the Poverty Alliance have worked with a group of four community researchers with experience of the asylum system on a participatory research project examining barriers to education faced by asylum seekers in Scotland.

We would like to thank the participants who took part in this research for their time and for sharing their experiences and knowledge.

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Our research

This research was conducted by four community researchers with experience of the asylum system with the Poverty Alliance. Over nine months, community researchers have explored asylum seekers' experiences of accessing further and higher education in Scotland and developed recommendations for the Scottish Government and college and university sector.

As part of the Poverty Alliance's Rights in Action programme, we began by focusing on asylum seekers' experiences of economic, social and cultural rights as defined by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).¹ The right to education emerged as an important, interconnected right for asylum seekers in Scotland, as without full access to education, asylum seekers are not able to access opportunities around work. That young asylum seekers in Scotland are not able to access apprenticeships also emerged as a significant issue.

To understand asylum seekers' experiences, we conducted three focus groups with 18 asylum seekers between November 2022 and January 2023. We asked them about their understandings of their rights to education, the barriers they have faced and what could be done to ensure their rights to education are fulfilled. Most participants were studying at college, and a few were trying to get funding to go to university. Five of the asylum seekers we spoke to were young adults aged under 22 but they had not attended school in Scotland.

Asylum seekers' rights to education in Scotland: the current context

In Scotland, asylum seekers' further and higher education options are very limited. Current funding means that asylum seekers can only study English as a second or other language (ESOL) and part-time non-advanced or advanced courses. Asylum seeking young adults are also not eligible to apply for modern apprenticeships in Scotland unlike their peers.

University is only an option for asylum seekers who successfully receive a scholarship. In recent years, the Universities of Sanctuary initiative has built a movement to support access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers. In Scotland, there are currently four accredited Universities of Sanctuary (Dundee, Glasgow, Edinburgh and St Andrews).ⁱⁱ Accredited universities are expected to meet minimum criteria including offering scholarships, but a target number is not stipulated.ⁱⁱⁱ The Universities of Stirling and Strathclyde also provide scholarships for refugees and asylum seekers.^{iv} An online search of these universities for this research found that the number of scholarships for 2022/23 provided varies (Dundee: 5, Edinburgh: 4, Glasgow: 20, St Andrews: 12, Stirling and Strathclyde: not specified). Scholarships vary in the types of financial support provided but all fully waive tuition fees. The Student Action for Refugees (STAR) network currently provides an online resource for refugees and asylum seekers on scholarships, bursaries and fee waivers in the UK.^v

In Scotland, there are 5,210 asylum seekers in receipt of support, most living in Glasgow.^{vi} There is no publicly available data on how many asylum seekers are at college or university but the small number of university scholarships available means that university is only an option for a limited number.

Recent research found a variety of challenges and barriers preventing New Scots from accessing education across all age groups including complexities and problems related to funding for further and higher education and problematic education models and practices perpetuated by service providers.^{vii} The review determined that it is not clear that the aims of the *New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy 2018-2022* around education are being met and signalled that changes and improvements should happen within the new strategy.

Our research provides important evidence on the experiences of asylum seekers themselves. Article 13 of ICESCR, the right to education, states:

“Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realising other human rights. As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalised adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities.”^{viii}

Our research shows that the current educational landscape in Scotland is preventing asylum seekers from being able to fully realise their human right to education.

Research findings

What are the barriers?

1. Inadequate funding

Through the research, we have heard how funding conditions restrict asylum seekers as they are only eligible to do part-time courses fewer than 16 hours a week. We heard from asylum seekers who have had to do a part-time course over two years rather than one year with the rest of their peers due to this restriction. There

was also an example of colleges exercising discretion with one participant sharing their tutor had let them do the full-time hours for her course.

A main concern for asylum seekers we spoke to is the lack of university scholarships for asylum seekers. A few participants had applied for scholarships but had been unsuccessful.

**"Some universities have scholarships, but they can be very competitive if you want to get in, because they have very limited places for scholarships."
(Adult)**

In one focus group, participants discussed how access courses into higher education are also out of reach for asylum seekers due to a lack of funding support. It was highlighted that the University of Glasgow has recently introduced some free places on their access course.

2. Lack of information and support

The current provision of information and support for asylum seekers on their education options is not enough. Asylum seekers who took part in the research told us that:

- They do not know where to go to find out about going to college or university
- There is a lack of informed student advisors at colleges and universities
- Colleges provide varying levels of support for educational materials and transport

Findings from the research suggest that there is variation in how much support and funding there is available for educational materials (e.g. books) and for help with transport costs across colleges. At some colleges, asylum seekers shared that they were always sent transport money, but other participants had not had this experience.

"Asylum seeker students aren't eligible for discretionary funds...they end up compromising on necessities like food or transport to cover course related expenses". (Young adult)

"What I understand about the education system in Glasgow here is the asylum seekers are not eligible to everything... I asked my lecturer for a laptop and wi-fi. She's told me I wasn't eligible". (Adult)

At the moment, the responsibility is often placed on asylum seekers to find out about their rights and education options. Several participants said that they had to fight or be very vocal to get their rights.

"Most of what I know now regarding accessing education is a result of personal efforts in researching and linking information I collect from different sources." (Young adult)

One participant said that whilst there was very little personal support, they had received “meaningful support” from Skills Development Scotland. A few participants said that the Bridges Programme in Glasgow had also been helpful.

Another issue raised in the research was a lack of consistency on what level of courses asylum seekers are being allowed to take at college. Several had started at SCQF 4 or 5 but had quickly been moved up to level 6.

“I’ve seen a lot of people start from level four. But later when they have the information, and they know that, ‘oh, I’m not supposed to be here’, they apply for level seven, and they got it.” (Adult)

Whilst several participants were studying HNCs, another participant’s understanding was that “HNC and HND are off limits”.

3. Recognition of previous education and English language

The absence of clear recognition criteria for previous experiences, qualifications and certificates was also discussed. One young asylum seeker said:

“There’s a lack of alternative exams or assessments to recognise and certificate asylum-seeking students’ talents and expertise in certain areas, where their certificates couldn’t be recognised, or simply when they don’t have a paper certificate for that skill (e.g. English fluency).” (Young adult)

Participants in the research felt that there needed to be more recognition of the challenges that this presents for asylum seekers.

“Asylum seekers don’t have their certificates with them. You didn’t come to this country to study. You came for safety. To protect yourself. So why do I have to go to the college or university to apply and I’m being told to bring my certificate? There should be another way.” (Young adult)

How the university sector recognizes levels of English was also raised as a barrier. Universities often require that applicants have passed the English language test through the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) which costs up to £205. The need to provide this evidence after completing HNC courses was questioned:

“I cannot comprehend the common sense, you know, the logic of these people especially this admission in the university. Because I can finish my HNC... Why do I need an IELTS?” (Adult)

4. Discrimination in the education system

Many of the asylum seekers who took part in the research are highly educated and felt that they are not being treated with dignity and respect. Several shared examples of being pushed to do courses they did not want to do. Being pushed to do ESOL courses despite speaking English was mentioned several times.

“It meant that I just had to say, “I’m not doing it, I’m not doing it.” But if it’s someone else who’s really not that strong enough to advocate for themselves to say, “I’m not doing this,” you’re easily pushed into ESOL classes, even though if you’re not... though you’re not going to benefit.” (Adult)

One participant described really having to fight against a college to do the course she wanted to do. She faced discrimination and stereotyping from the college:

“When I started to achieve high, that’s when I got lecturers coming to me saying, you know, ‘you know, we’re so sorry, we didn’t know, you know, our assumption is that asylum seekers can’t speak English. They are not educated’.” (Adult)

A lack of recognition of individual asylum seekers’ capabilities and experience was also mentioned. Participants said that there is an assumption that asylum seekers should all start at SCQF level 4, without recognising individuals’ previous education experiences.

5. Issues around identification

Recognition of ID was also raised as an issue that creates barriers for asylum seekers. For example, one participant shared that they had been asked to provide their Application Registration Card (ARC) to apply for a scholarship which the Home Office refused to renew. Their only other form of ID, the BAIL 201 letter, was not accepted as a form of ID for the scholarship programme. Other participants said that the BAIL 201 was usually accepted.

Barriers to education: impacts on asylum seekers

Participants in this research shared the disappointment and frustration they feel with the current system. Young adults shared the negative impacts on their futures as they talked about not being able to pursue their dream career.

“If I’m given the power to change something about the system, I think I would change the way people are being treated when it comes to education. I met a lady who had a PhD but right now, what she is doing is studying a level 5 course at college...It’s depressing.” (Young adult)

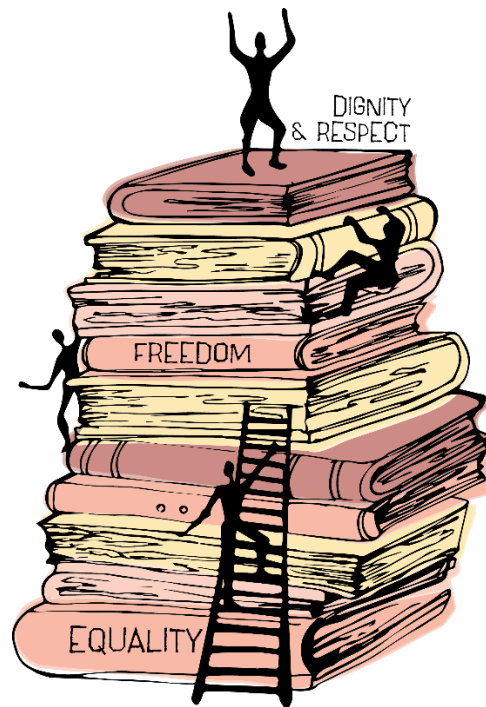
“I wanted to get into nursing... I did everything to get on the course. Later I was told I could not do the course because I was an asylum seeker. I went back home. I could not sleep.” (Young adult)

How can we create a just education system for asylum seekers?

Education is a devolved policy issue in Scotland. The Scottish Government and university and college sectors should work together to ensure that asylum seekers right to education is fulfilled. In a just education system, asylum seekers should have equal access to further and higher education opportunities.

Recommendations from our research include:

1. Ensuring asylum seekers are informed of their options and supported in their education pathways through:
 - Having informed advisors at college and university
 - Providing 1:1 support for asylum seeking children and young people in school
2. Ensuring equal access to further and higher education through:
 - Providing free access to the International English Language System (IELTS)
 - Fee waivers for all full-time college courses
 - Providing funding for university courses including access courses
 - Support from educational institutions around transport and education materials
3. Extending the modern apprenticeship scheme to asylum seeking young adults



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Illustrations by Sophia Neilson

ⁱ Pearson et al. (2022) Marginalised Communities and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Scotland: A literature review. [Microsoft Word - RIA Literature Review PDF Final 2022 \(povertyalliance.org\)](#)

ⁱⁱ [List of Universities of Sanctuary | City of Sanctuary](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Universities of Sanctuary Resource Pack 2019: [The Universities of Sanctuary Handbook - Universities of Sanctuary \(cityofsanctuary.org\)](#)

^{iv} Scottish Funding Council and QAA Scotland (2022) Supporting Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Scottish Higher and Further Education. [Supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Scottish higher and further education \(enhancementthemes.ac.uk\)](#)

^v [Student Action for Refugees \(star-network.org.uk\)](#)

^{vi} Home Office (2023) Asylum seekers in receipt of support. [Asylum and resettlement datasets - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

^{vii} Phipps et al. (2022) The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland. [Media 900243 smxx.pdf \(gla.ac.uk\)](#)

^{viii} Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (nd) d) General Comment No. 13: The right to education (article 13) (1999). [d\) General Comment No. 13: The right to education \(article 13\) \(1999\) | OHCHR](#)