Improving Access to Higher Education and Employment for Forced Migrants

Celebrating a Decade of Swansea City of Sanctuary:

A Conference in Partnership with The Open University

With thanks to

For more information about this conference, please visit our website where you will find our programme, speaker biographies, presentations, and full conference credits.

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1. Executive Summary

The conference included several first-person accounts from individuals with lived experience of seeking sanctuary and then accessing Higher Education and Employment. The barriers are different for each person. However, having arrived in an unknown country after fearing for one's life, the experience was generally marked by total uncertainty and loss of self-esteem. It meant having to start life again in the face of racism and others' low expectations of what someone seeking sanctuary could in fact achieve.

In the UK, perhaps the hardest thing is the treatment received from the Home Office, which many forced migrants find incomprehensible, as well as cruel. Most newcomers don't expect to not be allowed to work, or to be greeted by a "hostile environment" and a labyrinthine system suffused with what has been termed a "culture of disbelief", with apparently interminable delays and threats of destitution, detention, and deportation.

There was consensus that in order to counteract the many negatives in re-building a life after being forced to leave one's home, empowerment is at the heart of everything. People seeking sanctuary should get support from the moment they arrive. Most importantly, this support should be empowering, person-centred i.e., driven by the person being supported themselves, dignified and respectful, acknowledge people's humanity, their diverse experience and skills and the barriers they face, and finally should be realistic both in managing expectations and in fostering ambition where appropriate.

All services, organisations and public bodies dealing with those seeking sanctuary should consider and provide this empowering type of support. Most of the conference was taken up with presentations and discussions on the barriers to higher education and to employment, and recommendations for support to overcome these barriers.

The main barriers to accessing Higher Education were seen as:

- poor language skills
- inability to pay fees and insufficient funding
- inadequate information around support and eligibility
- misalignment in strategies and lack of commitment as an institution
- digital inequality
- lack of recognition of prior qualifications and experience

For Employment and Career Progression, the main barriers identified were:

- lack of information and guidance for both forced migrants and potential employers
- mental health issues and low self-esteem
- poor English proficiency
- cultural differences and racial prejudice
- financial difficulties
- unrecognised or outdated qualifications and skills

The main proposals for overcoming these barriers were divided into recommendations for different actors, as in the following tables.

Table 1: Recommendations to overcome barriers to Higher Education

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions
   a) Expand existing scholarship provision and set up new Sanctuary Scholarships
   b) Align strategies through improved communication, information provision and training
   c) Become a University of Sanctuary
   d) Expand existing scholarship provision and set up new Sanctuary Scholarships
   e) Provide financial support
   f) Provide wraparound support systems
   g) Improve digital inclusion
   h) Provide alternative qualification recognition procedures at enrolment
   i) Develop a supportive student and staff community
   j) Conduct evaluation and research to improve outcomes and co-create with people with lived experience

Recommendations for communities
   a) Create strong networks across HEIs
   b) Create strong networks and collaborative partnerships between HEIs, community organisations and all levels of devolved government

Recommendations for policy makers
   a) Continue to create an environment of welcome and integration through adequate policies
   b) Continue to work towards policy change for eligibility to HE, including financial support
   c) Widen provision of digital literacy and language skills

Table 2: Recommendations to overcome barriers to Employment and Career Progression

Recommendations for policy makers
   a) Support for all forms of career support and guidance
   b) Integration Support "from day one"
   c) Recognition of prior qualifications and informal skills
   d) Research on the career aspirations and needs of forced migrants
   e) Allowing more asylum seekers to work: a Welsh list of shortage occupations
   f) Funding for start-up businesses and training

Recommendations for communities
   a) 'Holistic Integration Hubs': career pathway support for forced migrants and information for potential employers
   b) Mentoring schemes
   c) Better networks and communication
   d) Volunteering linked to skills

Recommendations for employers
   a) *Work opportunities and placements*
   b) *Businesses of Sanctuary*

Before closing, we were reminded of some general principles:

- The importance of adopting a two-way give-and-take model for support, rather than a one-way charity model of provision

- The potential of partnerships (two examples from the Open University were the Uber Learning as a Benefit programme; and a partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions to provide access to OpenLearn courses)

- Theory of change: social change can come from building relationships and using tools and labels, such as Universities of Sanctuary and Businesses of Sanctuary, to legitimise the human impulse towards mutuality and providing support for each other

- Solidarity and empowerment: *"You cannot walk alone".* Support must value the individual, celebrating their skills and attributes, and be aimed at empowering them to reach their potential.

2. Introduction

In 2020, Swansea celebrated the 10th year anniversary of becoming the first [City of Sanctuary](#) in Wales. Within their year-long celebration, [Swansea City of Sanctuary](#) partnered with [The Open University](#) and held an online conference on 14th June 2021 focused on the following questions:

- What are the main barriers to Higher Education and Employment for forced migrants?
- What good practices and policies are needed to overcome these barriers?
- How can Wales become a true Nation of Sanctuary?

The day-long conference welcomed over 250 guests throughout the day, and sought to forge an initial dialogue between five key groups of stakeholders in light of the [Nation of Sanctuary manifesto](#):
1. Policymakers
2. Providers – Higher Education
3. Providers – Employment organisations
4. Support Organisations for Forced Migrants
1. Forced Migrants

2.1. Overview of Conference

This conference aimed to explore how to improve access to higher education and employment opportunities, including the role of Further Education, for forced migrants in Wales and beyond. It was designed to identify key barriers and ways of overcoming these barriers. It brought together policy-makers, people with lived experience of forced migration, researchers and academics, and community organisations to debate these matters at a moment when Swansea celebrated a decade of being a City of Sanctuary, and also when the Welsh Government's [Nation of Sanctuary Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan](#) might be realised following elections in May 2021. With Wales and Scotland leading the way in challenging to the UK government's 'hostile environment', the conference would have important implications for the UK as a whole.

Our event was made up of 4 sections; this report will follow a similar structure. We began with an Opening Plenary, introducing the issue of access for both higher education and employment for forced migrants in Wales. Following this was the Higher Education Plenary which homed in on specific topics in relation to HE accessibility and barriers. Similarly, the succeeding section of the conference was the Employment Plenary, which focused upon topics of access and barriers to employment. Finally, we had a Closing Plenary, which summarised many of the themes present throughout the day, and some finalising comments to bring our conference to a close.

2.2. Definitions and Considerations: Forced Migrants and Displaced People

According to the latest [UNHCR report](#) (2021), more than 82 million people worldwide are forcibly displaced. Among them are nearly 26.6 million refugees, around half of whom are under the age of

18. The reasons why people are either internally displaced or forced to migrate from their countries are multiple and can range from climate change, natural or man-made disasters, to war, persecution or adverse economic conditions caused by colonialism and corporate aggression.

In referring to people who are forcibly displaced, a number of labels such as labels 'asylum seeker', 'refugee' and 'forced migrant' are used, often interchangeably, without a real understanding of the distinction between them.

According to the UNHCR definition, 'refugee' is someone who has "fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and ... crossed an international border to find safety in another country". Under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, anyone who claims refugee status should have a fair hearing and be given protection, or 'asylum', if they need it. However, this is a wider definition, based on rights and protection afforded through international legislation and does not refer to legal status in the UK, which is where confusion often arises.

Generally speaking, to gain refugee status in the UK, people need to claim asylum. Thus, an *asylum seeker*, or a person seeking asylum, is "a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded" (Refugee Council, 2021). If that person's claim is approved, they are granted *refugee* status, which is a legal status in the UK, as opposed to the wider meaning described above. If their claim is rejected, however, they are asked to leave the UK voluntarily, or can be forcibly removed (deported), unless (but in some cases even whilst this is ongoing) they have a pending appeal.

Displaced people may arrive in the UK through various relocation schemes, such as the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, and could also hold other types of legal status, such as Humanitarian Protection, where they are found not to be a refugee, but are nevertheless at risk of serious harm on return to their country of origin. Until recent changes to UK immigration law, a child who arrived in the UK without either a relative, family member or a customary care giver was identified as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) and was placed into the care of a local authority, whilst their asylum claim was being processed. People who are allowed to remain the UK are granted leave to remain, for a limited or indefinite period.

It is worth noting that whilst the terms refugee, asylum seeker, etc. describe a legal status, (and one which may be temporary and subject to change), these are not personal characteristics and they do not define the people whose life circumstances force them to migrate.

A forced migrant is defined as "any person migrating to escape persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood" (The International Organization for Migration, 2021). This report will often use the term 'forced migrant' as an umbrella term, as this does not assume any legal status, but includes asylum seekers, refugees, people with humanitarian protections, as well as a number of people with other types of insecure immigration status and undocumented migrants.

Although we use the term forced migrants for the sake of simplicity and inclusion, seeking to include all those who are forcibly displaced, regardless of their current legal status, this is done in

acknowledgement of the fact that the language we use may fall short of how some people see themselves, or how others see them and that these definitions can change over time. Furthermore, it is important to remember that this is not a homogenous group and that the ambitions and desires of displaced people are as diverse as their languages, cultures, political views, economic and social backgrounds.

2.3. Higher Education and Forced Migrants

When considering specific groups of displaced people in relation to tertiary education, it is important to understand that access and barriers can differ, depending on legal status as well as particular circumstances. However, forced migrants are likely to encounter a number of similar barriers to accessing higher education, according to the Higher Education Policy Institute, such as lack of finance, mental health issues due to trauma, inadequate language skills or lack of documentation, to name just a few. Those who have arrived in the UK as children (UASC) have experience of being in the care system. Many of them have caring responsibilities. Due to the fact that many sanctuary seekers flee war zones, there is also a high incidence of disability amongst this group[1]. A sanctuary seeker is likely to experience an intersection of disadvantage due to race, disability, and location in areas of multiple deprivation (IMD).

Many people who are forced to flee to the UK, find it difficult to navigate financial, cultural and institutional barriers and finding places with a culture of hospitality eases their difficulties. Whilst some of the barriers to higher education for adults with a forced migrant backgrounds are shared with other disadvantaged groups, sanctuary seeking learners experience an extreme degree of denial of equal access to educational opportunities due to the ways in which these barriers accumulate, interrelate and exacerbate each other, leading to *super-disadvantage*, a term coined by Lambrechts (2020)[2].

> *"Equal access to education is embodied in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and it's one of the main things that helps people build professional networks here and rebuild their lives again and contribute to society in a positive way. Yet, unfortunately, for many people, going to university or accessing education can seem like an impossible goal or something that they don't even have a chance to consider. For me personally when I applied five years ago now to university I applied as an asylum seeker and it definitely seemed like an impossible goal for me to access but fortunately because there was scholarship and support in place, able to continue my education just as my other peers and I did feel like there was an opportunity for me to feel equal to all the other students in the college."*
>
> - Representative of Universities of Sanctuary

According to UNHCR, of the 26.4 million people with refugee status globally at the end of 2020, just 3% were currently enrolled in higher education, a considerable way off their target of 15% by 2030.

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[1] See University of Sanctuary resource pack. https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/68/2019/04/smaller-file-size-UOS-Resource-Pack-FINAL-12-SINGLE-PAGES-1.pdf

[2] Lambrechts, A. A. (2020) 'The super-disadvantaged in higher education: barriers to access for refugee background students in England', *Higher Education*, Volume 80, Pages 803-822. [Online version: https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10734-020-00515-4.pdf]

Equal access to higher education is embodied in [Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](). It is vital to recognise how fundamental equal access to higher education is for forced migrants, not only in terms of initial access, but also to allow for continuation of studies, re-qualification, re-skilling or upskilling. Access to higher education helps individuals strengthen professional networks, while rebuilding their lives and contributing to society in a positive way.

There are a number of arguments for easing access to higher education for forced migrants, ranging from those of an ethical and legal nature, underpinned by The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, to which the UK is a signatory, which stipulates that States have a legal obligation to protect refugees ([UNHCR]()) and Article 22.2, which protects the right to further and higher education for all, to those of an economic nature. Research[345] shows that investing in integration and support, namely language classes, education, employability and trauma rehabilitation is a more economically viable strategy, rather than spending on sustaining costs alone (providing necessities like food and housing) and that an economy is likely to grow as a direct result of accepting forced migrants.

Displaced people bring with them a variety of skills, experiences and world views and can make valuable contributions to society and to the HEIs where they study and work by adding a diversity of voices, knowledge and expertise. It enhances engagement with new and path-breaking decolonial, and trauma-informed approaches and it challenges inequalities, helping institutions to meet their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion goals.

2.4. Employment and Forced Migrants

As with Higher Education, barriers to employment for forced migrants differ according to their legal immigration status6. In general, asylum seekers are not allowed to work, with very few exceptions such as the possibility of applying to work in a restricted list of shortage occupations after six months with no asylum decision. On the other hand, those with any form of leave to remain have no legal restrictions on what employment they can take. However, many of the other barriers faced by forced migrants in entering Higher Education also apply to accessing employment, such as lack of finance, issues related to trauma, language proficiency, etc. There are also particular problems caused by the career gap while fleeing and seeking protection in another country, and by different standards and cultural expectations in employment.

In general, those seeking sanctuary in the UK are as diverse as the host population in terms of areas of interest, skills and qualifications7, and may even be better qualified on average than the rest of the workforce. However, refugees have much lower levels of economic participation than the rest of the population (29 per cent compared to 60 per cent for ethnic minorities in general in 20048; 40% in Wales in 20209). They tend to work in just a few areas of low-paid employment and

[3] Legrain, P. (2016) 'Refugees work: A Humanitarian Investment That Yields Economic Dividends', *TENT,* [Online version: http://www.opennetwork.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Tent-Open-Refugees-Work_V13.pdf]

[4] Fratzscher, M., & Junker, S. (2015) 'Integrating refugees: A long-term, worthwhile investment', *DIW ECONOMIC,* Pages 612- 617. [Online version: https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.519306.de/diw_econ_bull_2015-45-4.pdf]

[5] Bager et al. (2018) 'Does multidisciplinary rehabilitation of tortured refugees represent 'value-for-money'? A follow-up of a Danish case-study', *BMC Heath Servres Research*, Volume 18, Pages 365-378. [Online version: https://bmchealthservres.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s12913-018-3145-3.pdf]

to work unsocial hours Those who come to the UK with experience in areas of skill shortage, such as medical staff or teachers, very often do not return to their professions.

Access to work is a key marker of integration for forced migrants. However, due to the significant barriers to employment, many forced migrants are underemployed or unemployed. This is a lost opportunity for the host society, and for businesses and other employing organisations in particular which could benefit from their skills and experience. Hence as much effort as possible should be made to facilitate speedy integration.

3. Conference rationale: The Policy Context in Wales and the UK

Forced migrants bring a huge variety of skills, experiences and abilities and have great potential both for personal development and for contributing to society and economy. However, there are a great many barriers to be overcome in order for them to realise this potential. Many local and national initiatives and institutions aim to provide support to overcome these barriers, but this is within a policy environment that differs between the devolved nations.

Recent changes to immigration law have seen the replacement of several kinds of legal status, including 'temporary admission', a type of leave given to asylum seekers in the UK, with 'immigration bail' and 'no study' conditions, affecting not only those in detention but other groups without leave to remain and is retrospective. This, together with other bordering policies, for instance exclusionary rental legislation and reporting of migrants, sees the state implementing borders beyond physical barriers into civil society and everyday life and converting landlords and educational institutions into border guards.

Immigration policy itself, with this notorious "hostile environment", is not devolved. However, education and support for access to employment are both areas where the devolved administrations have made strong in-principle commitments, such as that from both the Scottish and Welsh Governments that "Integration begins from Day One", with its implication that access to their services should be equally available to all irrespective of immigration status.

Swansea was the first city in Wales to be recognised as a City of Sanctuary in 2010. Since then, the sanctuary vision has expanded across Wales, to be taken up in other cities and places as well as in the idea of Wales becoming a *Nation of Sanctuary*, and eventually the Welsh Government's [Nation of Sanctuary Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan](#), launched in January 2019 in the Senedd by then Deputy Minister Jane Hutt, who, as Minister for Social Justice in the new Welsh

The Senedd, Cardiff

Government, was the opening speaker during our conference. This plan is strong on principle and has much in common with the Scottish Government's [New Scots: refugee integration strategy 2018 to 2022](#), but is perhaps relatively weak on practical application in different policy areas.

3.1. Realising the Potential of Forced Migrants: Expectation versus Reality

The [Welsh Refugee Coalition](#) has developed a new Manifesto entitled *[Nation of Sanctuary – making the vision a reality](#)* which highlights seven Key Priorities for the full implementation of this plan, and which all Welsh parties and candidates for the 2021 Senedd elections were asked to endorse. These Key Priorities are reproduced in Table 3.

This conference took place in [Refugee Week](#), June 2021, six weeks after the elections and the formation of new administrations in Wales and devolved nations in the UK. It focused on the gap between, on the one hand, the *expectation* that the plan should make a difference to the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Wales and to the communities in which they live; and, on the other, the *reality* that this difference is much clearer in some areas than others and generally does not match the expectation.

Table 3: Nation of Sanctuary: Key Priorities

1. **Make the Nation of Sanctuary vision a reality** through a new strategy with clear actions, dedicated budget, cross-departmental commitments, timescales and a robust monitoring and evaluation framework.
2. Introduce a cross-cutting **commitment on access to all Welsh public services** for everyone who needs them, regardless of immigration status.
3. Ensure **integration from day one** through orientation, language support, training, and targeted support to develop skills and employment opportunities.
4. Ensure **access to health and social services, in particular specialist mental health services**, with better interpretation support and steps to overcome cultural barriers.
5. Improve **access to education for migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people**, including education-related financial support, transport, school meals and childcare.
6. Develop **effective support for employability and progression** once in employment, through specific career pathways to priority sectors, volunteering, work related language skills and other training.
7. **Secure safe and dignified accommodation for all**, including projects to support and provide advice to people made homeless and destitute, widening the pool of suitable accommodation, and ensuring digital access for people in asylum accommodation.

3.2. Embracing, Shaping and Replicating Sanctuary

Between opening and closing plenaries, the conference was split into two halves. The first concentrated on Higher Education and the second, on Employability Policy and Practice. In addition, parallel group discussions and other elements of the conference were organised with three cross-cutting sets of considerations in mind:

Embracing Sanctuary – examples of organisations and specific policies which have embraced the principle of sanctuary and turned it into action.

Shaping Sanctuary – how the lived experience of seeking asylum (including both opportunities and challenges) have shaped the way in which the principle of Sanctuary is expressed, including how it relates to policy and budgets.

Replicating Sanctuary – what we have learnt over 10 years, what we continue to learn, and how knowledge can be shared both by building on good practice locally and replicating from one organisation or locality to another, and through organised elements of monitoring and evaluation built into broader policies.

4. Opening Plenary

The conference opened with a Plenary panel of four speakers. Firstly, Jane Hutt MS, Minister for Social Justice in the Welsh Government, followed by Elodie Mignard, Programme Manager from Scottish Refugee Council (SRC). We then introduced Alphonsine Kabagabo, Director, Women for Refugee Women, and finally, Stepheni Kays, Community Development Outreach Manager, Hywel Dda University Health Board.

4.1. Empowering and Appropriate Support

The last two of the panel speakers, as well as the Chair for the whole day, Ahmad Al-Rashid and many other speakers during the day, were, or had themselves been refugees at one time, with lived experience of the issues under debate during the day.

The first-person accounts highlighted how, importantly, this lived experience is different for each person. The common thread, however, lay in how, having arrived in an unknown country after fearing for one's life, it was generally marked by total uncertainty and loss of self-esteem. Having

Ahmad Al-Rashid, Chair of Conference

to start life again in the face of racism and others' low expectations of what someone seeking sanctuary could in fact achieve, has been a shared occurrence.

In the UK, perhaps the hardest thing is the treatment received from the Home Office, which many forced migrants find incomprehensible, as well as cruel. Most newcomers do not expect to not be allowed to work, or to be greeted by a "hostile environment" and a labyrinthine system suffused with what has been termed a "culture of disbelief", with apparently interminable delays and threats of destitution, detention, and deportation.

The two refugee speakers cited a number of examples of support they had received, and which themselves had later been involved in providing to others. This included a support worker who had helped them put together a personal integration plan; an Oxfam advocacy group for women seeking sanctuary; a local university access course designed to consider individual needs and outside responsibilities such as childcare; agencies and charities from Careers Wales to the local Citizens Advice Bureau and which had offered volunteering opportunities, good training and approachable supervision; the *Welcome to Swansea* mentoring scheme, and broader networks of support such as *Sisters Not Strangers*. This has gone beyond teaching women to learn English, to helping them have a voice and not just be recipients of support, but to contribute, for example, to their report on 100 women who became destitute: "Will I Ever Be Safe?".

All these examples demonstrate that, in order to counteract the many negatives in re-building a life after being forced to leave one's home, empowerment is at the heart of everything. People seeking

sanctuary should get support from the moment they arrive. Most importantly, this support should be empowering. It should:

- be person-centred i.e., driven by the person being supported themselves

- be dignified and respectful

- acknowledge people's humanity, and their diverse experience and skills

- acknowledge the barriers

- be realistic both in managing expectations and in fostering ambition where appropriate

All services, organisations and public bodies dealing with those seeking sanctuary should consider and provide this type of support.

4.2. Integration Strategies – Scotland and Wales

The conference included speakers from Scotland, as well as Wales, in order to put the day's discussions in the context of what could be done by the devolved administrations, always recognising the limitations imposed by the UK government's "hostile environment" policy. We were also reminded that the new Nationalities and Border Bill looks likely to make things worse, penalising those who arrive by an "irregular" route. It is imperative to make it clear that this does not correspond to the public's wishes or their natural impulse towards welcome. In fact, there is a need in the whole of the UK to welcome everyone so that they can contribute to our society and economy.

The two opening speakers presented some basic principles on which Wales and Scotland could agree:

- A rights-based approach

- The need to move away from labels, to recognise the person before their status, and that people arrive with skills, talents, and experience, not only needs

- Use of the Ager and Strang framework[6], with its four overall themes: achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education and health, which are mostly within the spheres of the devolved powers of the Welsh and Scottish administrations

- "Integration from Day One"

- The importance of a societal approach, not just welcoming but harnessing the opportunities brought by newcomers for strengthening the economy and communities

These imply equal access to services for all, irrespective of immigration status. In both Scotland and Wales, free ESOL classes are indeed offered to all seeking sanctuary on this basis, but unfortunately

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[6]Ager, A. & Strang, A. (2008) 'Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework',
Journal of Refugee Studies, Volume 21, Issue 2, Pages 166–191. [Online version: https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article/21/2/166/1621262]

there are constraints on the devolved powers and some UK-wide rules, which create differences in entitlement, hence making it difficult to maintain this principle in all areas.

In Wales, these principles are embodied in the 2019 Nation of Sanctuary Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan. On behalf of the Welsh Government, Jane Hutt MS made a number of points and gave some assurances:

- The Welsh Government has called for asylum seekers to be eligible for Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), in line with the principles above, but so far have not overcome the problems of implementing this

- They praised the accreditation of many Welsh HE institutions as Universities of Sanctuary

- They noted the HEFCW Consultation on Supporting Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Higher Education (Circular W19/44HE)

- The Welsh Government is in favour of allowing asylum seekers to work, supports the Lift The Ban campaign, and opposes the UK government's new Nationalities and Borders Bill

- They have funded the temporary installation of internet access into asylum accommodation in Wales for a period of 6 months

- They maintain a Sanctuary Website, which can be used in many different languages, to help sanctuary seekers to understand their rights

- Their ReStart programme (currently ending in December 2021) takes a holistic approach to ESOL and employability for refugees. It ensures access to the Business Wales Barriers Fund, which helps with starting businesses. In December 2020, it published a Report on Refugee Integration, Employer Engagement Opportunities, and in January 2021 a Toolkit for Employers on harnessing the skills of refugees in the workplace

- The Welsh Government will host an Employability Event before the end of the year and will launch a campaign, with the Institute of Directors in Wales, to involve more businesses in supporting refugee employment

The Scottish equivalent of the Nation of Sanctuary plan is the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. The audience heard of several Scottish initiatives, particularly on employment support, which appear to go further than their Welsh equivalents. In particular, these focus on ensuring equal access to mainstream employment services, rather than creating separate schemes for refugees. Thus, for instance, new refugees get immediate access to the Fair Start Scotland employment support service, without the six-month delay applied to someone newly unemployed.

The Scottish Government is also developing Migrant Skills Recognition and Accreditation Project for recognising prior learning, including informal learning, as well as formal qualifications from other countries, and is funding a pilot run by Glasgow Caledonian University.

In general, The Scottish Government promotes a two-pronged approach. On the one hand this means supporting refugees to identify their own learning and employment goals as part of a broader context. In pursuit of this, the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) has produced a series of toolkits on Holistic Integration Planning, which include individualised Employment Action Plans for refugees. On

the other hand, there is employer engagement, including targeting different sectors, and a focus on explaining the rights of refugees and ensuring understanding of the necessary documentation.

Some of these Scottish examples could provide useful models for future Welsh programmes, including what may follow the ReStart programme.

5. Higher Education Plenary

During the Higher Education half of the conference, we introduced five key speakers to open the plenary. This included contributions from [Universities of Sanctuary](#) (UoS), [University of South Wales](#), a Sanctuary Scholar from [University of Wales Trinity St. David](#) (UWTSD), [The Open University in Wales](#), and [Swansea University](#). This panel provided valuable insights into the barriers faced by forced migrants wishing to access Higher Education, while recommending initial solutions to overcome those barriers.

The opening plenary was followed by parallel group sessions, which allowed for open and in-depth discussion between stakeholders, conference contributors, as well as any other interested parties in our audience. Within the sessions were contributors from [Gower College Swansea](#), The Open University in Wales, University of Wales Trinity St. David, and various representatives from different [Student Action for Refugees](#) (STAR) groups.

NylahMAK, Swansea College of Art Graduate

Our four parallel sessions focused on four different areas of Higher Education:
1. Pathways from Further Education to Higher Education
2. Applying to become a University of Sanctuary
3. Being a University of Sanctuary
4. Student Outreach, Support and Engagement

Using thematic analysis of transcripts, notes and summaries taken both from panel speakers and from each of the parallel sessions, we were able to identify six outstanding sets of barriers to accessing Higher Education and three sets of recommendations of strategic approaches towards improving access to Higher Education for forced migrants at the level of Higher Education institutions, communities and at a policy level.

5.1. Barriers to Higher Education

5.1.1. Language skills

A set of issues in relation to language skills were identified during the conference as a major set of barriers for forced migrants wishing to attend Higher Education. These issues range from lack of an adequate English language level and lack of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for the area of study interest, to lack of access to English classes and the accessibility, cost, accuracy and relevance of language qualifications.

Refugees and asylum seekers may have excellent qualifications and the exact experience necessary to begin a course, but they also then need the right level of English language skills, and EAP, before they can consider applying. For those in the asylum process, once refugee status is granted, individuals wishing to begin a university course may be able to access grants and loans much like any other student – but what they cannot usually access is *full-time specific language support*.

Many universities have formal language requirements such as an [International English Language Testing System](#) (IELTS) certificate before students can enrol on a course. Some institutions use more informal language testing, such as Duolingo and Password, but their accuracy and relevance to a HE context are questionable, as are their privacy.

There are free English language classes available to prepare individuals for IELTS exams, however, there are often long waiting lists to access these classes. Additionally, the IELTS exam itself costs between £170-£195, not including cost of travel, as these exams are often located in larger cities – Aberystwyth, Bangor, and Cardiff in the Welsh context[7]. Cost of travel, childcare issues and lack of information can often prevent forced migrants from accessing these. As an alternative, some English language lessons are available online, however, as discussed below, digital poverty and lack of digital literacy can often prevent forced migrants from seeking those lessons.

5.1.2. Fees and funding

The inability to cover tuition fees as well as any study material costs, act as another major barrier for many forced migrants in accessing or pursuing Higher Education. Notably, financial difficulties can affect students from all backgrounds and can act as a barrier to non-migrant students, too, but not to the level they affect forced migrant students. Entitlements to education differ depending on an individual's immigration status and there is also a level of variability between the four nations in the UK. Those with refugee status in Wales can access Student Finance Wales, whereas most refugees in Scotland may have their fees paid by the Students Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). However, individuals who are seeking asylum are not allowed to work, cannot qualify for student finance, and are usually classified as International Students for fee-paying purposes. International undergraduate fees vary considerably, from a minimum of around £11,000 per year to as much as £30,000 per year, whereas those legally considered to be "home students", pay a maximum of £9,250 per year in the UK[8].

In addition, the [Government Asylum Support](#) of £39.63 per person per week simply does not stretch to support any additional educational costs including equipment, stationery, or travel. Therefore, in order to study, students must be able to obtain a bursary or scholarship. However, just two universities in Wales are acknowledged as Universities of Sanctuary: Cardiff Metropolitan University and the University of South Wales[9].

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[7] There are 78 centres offering IELTS tests in the UK. The following link provides a list of all these centres, of which only 3 are in Wales. 'Take IELTS test in or nearby The United Kingdom', *English Exam*, accessed on Sept 9th 2021 [Online: https://www.english-exam.org/IELTS/test-center-search/the-united-kingdom/]

[8] Playdon, J. (2021) 'How Much Does It Cost To Study In The UK?', *Top Universities*, accessed on Sept 5th 2021 [Online: https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/student-finance/how-much-does-it-cost-study-uk#:~:text=Now%2C%20UK%20and%20EU%20students,Survey%20of%20University%20Tuition%20Fees]

[9] List of Universities of Sanctuary: https://data.cityofsanctuary.org/universities/list#overlay-context=schools/list

According to [UCAS](), over 70 universities in the UK offer scholarships for asylum seekers and refugees. In 2020, the [Refugee Study]() acknowledged four universities in Wales who offer a form of sanctuary scholarship: Cardiff Metropolitan University, University of Cardiff, University of South Wales, and Swansea University; and more being introduced. Scholarships and bursaries are excellent in financially supporting refugees and asylum seekers, but they are scarce. There are rarely more than one or two scholarship opportunities offered in each institution (although University of Wales Trinity Sant David have funded four scholarships in 2021).

Providing sanctuary scholarships or bursaries is a major criterion for accreditation as a University of Sanctuary (UoS). There are currently 24 such accredited universities in the UK, only two of which are in Wales (Cardiff Metropolitan University and University of South Wales), although more are in the process of seeking accreditation.

In addition to scholarships, students need to financial support to access adequate accommodation (sometimes on campus accommodation is included with some bursaries), books, devices, travel and to meet other necessary living costs. When universities provide scholarships, there is often a lack of understanding of how any financial aid may be inaccessible due to lack of bank accounts, or harmful to them or their wider family - where these are made to people on asylum support, the Home Office may consider them to be luxuries and then deduct the entire sum from their and their families' support, leaving them destitute.

> Funmilayo Olaniyan, a Law student at UWTSD, explained her journey into higher education during the conference, expressing that her scholarship allowed her to feel *"just like any other student in the class"* which *"boosted [her] confidence and morale"* ([see full clip here]()). Funmilayo went on to highlight the significance of access to higher education for helping sanctuary seekers' mental health, self-esteem, and subsequent acceleration of integration into the community.

5.1.3. Adequate information around support and eligibility

The absence of established professional networks for practitioners working with forced migrant students was one of the primary issues identified within the discussions. Additionally, there is a significant lack of communication between universities that may host those in need, organisations which provide legal advice and information and local community organisations providing support to forced migrants.

The support available often goes unnoticed, as there are *no firm information points* in the community for people seeking to enter or proceed with Higher Education, and many are given a great deal of conflicting information by different sources. Our panel of speakers described how going to university or accessing education can seem like an "impossible goal" or "something that forced migrants don't even have a chance to consider". The conflicting information and confusion around what resources are available notably heightens this issue of creating a seemingly unfeasible goal.

Within HEIs themselves, there is a lack of clear knowledge or rights and entitlements for different categories of forced migrants, which creates confusion when seeking to provide information, such as

that in relation to who is classified as 'home' student for fee purposes and what is in the power of the institution to do in terms of policy changes. For instance, it is often misrepresented that asylum seekers are not allowed to enrol in HE – this in fact, is up to the institution and the real issue in relation to this category of forced migrant students may be that of funding and financial support eligibility, not enrolment. For students involved in the asylum process and who are refused, the Home Office may seek to apply a 'no study' 'immigration bail' condition, which the institution may be able to contest, however, some HEIs may be reluctant to do this, due to fear of losing their Tier 4 licence, which is a large source of income.

This limited knowledge around rights and entitlements in HEIs also means that often, they are unable to adequately support students with information and guidance around their legal status and are sluggish in responding to changes in students' legal status or circumstances. A lack of training for student support and admission services can also mean that HEIs do not often support their forced migrant students through trauma informed practices.

5.1.4. Misalignment in strategies and lack of commitment as an institution

The discussions also highlighted a severe lack of communication not only between universities and organisations, but also within Higher Education establishments themselves. In several institutions there are a variety of highly motived, knowledgeable, and committed individuals both academic and non-academic working individually or within their units and undertaking valuable work either in research or on the ground with forced migrant students or communities. However, there is no unified strategy, no common goals, or a complete misalignment between these groups and those higher up. This results in inconsistencies across the institution in strategies towards overcoming issues of access for forced migrants and a lack of communication strategy and information flow.

As it is already particularly difficult for forced migrants to find support within a university, the lack of a unified approach and knowledge about entry requirements or scholarships can leave people feeling lost and hopeless. The issue is not a complete lack of support or information, but that not enough people are made aware of the support or information available, and so the lack of networking within institutions was identified as playing a major role in this disconnect. Poor internal communication is evidence of inadequate institutional commitment, and results in a struggle to create an environment of welcome and inclusion.

At a sector level, the forced migrant students are not a group targeted by initiatives designed to widen access and participation in HE. Universities across the UK nations will produce widening access and participation strategies and plans and will set targets for different underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, reporting on them to their relevant funding body, for instance, the Office for Students (OfS) in England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) in Scotland and The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

As most institutions do not gather data on this cohort, there is a lack of understanding of their needs and challenges and how HEIs could redefine them and include them within their Widening Access and Widening Participation strategies. Although not usually named in any policy documents, forced

migrant students are likely to share markers of disadvantage with target groups identified in these. For example, forced migrants in the UK are likely to be located in POLAR3 quintile 1/SIMD20 areas[10], be disproportionately BAME[11], and to have experienced trauma-related mental health issues or disability[12]. Unaccompanied minors seeking asylum are 'looked after' and will have experience of being in care[13]. This suggests that forced migrant students are likely to have at least one characteristic that most HEIs report on to their funders.

The lack of acknowledgement of the intersection of the disadvantages which forced migrant students experience, means institutions fail to demonstrate a commitment to a clear strategy in relation to offering a place of welcome and sanctuary, leaving activity to be driven by a few committed individuals often responding to needs as they arise. This lack of strategy leads to disparate activities, lack of communication, adequate staff training and necessary budgets, therefore not providing an appropriate response to the needs of forced migrant students.

5.1.5. Digital inequality

Another barrier faced by forced migrants is digital inequality, whether that may be one, or several of the following: lack of digital literacy, lack of equipment, inadequate broadband availability, or cost of internet access.

Adequate and sufficient access to the internet and digital devices, as well as basic digital skills are essential for applying to Higher Education and for being able to participate in courses, especially during the pandemic. Online learning was made available in many institutions through lockdown due to COVID-19; this brought attention to asylum seekers being unable to access lessons due to difficulties with adequate Wi-Fi provision, or complete lack of Wi-Fi. Not only this, but it is made incredibly difficult for those seeking asylum to set up bank accounts and contracts, so students are very often on pay-as-you-go deals to access the internet. For instance, an hour-long online meeting on pay-as-you-go costs around £5, which, for those on approximately £39 per week (Government Asylum Support), is simply not viable. Additionally, where people may be able to acquire devices, not all have the required digital skills to study online at tertiary level and there is not enough provision for teaching those who struggle. People can often be completely excluded from online society as they cannot contribute or engage in a meaningful manner.

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[10] Whilst the data on accommodation is not disaggregated by SIMD, this can be deduced from research undertaken by the Scottish Refugee Council which shows that most refugees accommodated in Glasgow City are in social housing types and areas associated with SIMD20 locations. Netto, G. & Fraser, A. (2009) 'Navigating the Maze: Refugee Routes to Housing, Support and Settlement in Scotland', *Scottish Refugee Council*, accessed on Nov 5th 2021 [Online: https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Navigating-the-maze-Refugee-routes-to-housing-support-and-settlement-in-Scotland.pdf]

[11] The majority of forced migrants in the UK are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities (BAME), as indicated by the data sets in UK government data (2020) on asylum applications, initial decisions and resettlement. Newell, B. (2021) 'Immigration Statistics' *Home Office*, accessed Nov 5th 2021 [Dataset: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/910545/asylum-applications-datasets-jun-2020.xlsx]

[12] Many sanctuary seekers have a history of multiple traumas (see p.24). Universities of Sanctuary (2019), Resource Pack, Page 24, accessed on Oct 29th 2021 [Online: https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/68/2019/04/smaller-file-size-UOS-Resource-Pack-FINAL-12-SINGLE-PAGES-1.pdf]

[13] Kennedy, L. A. & Connelly, G. (2015) 'Supporting the education of looked after children with uncertain immigration status', *CELCIS*, accessed on Oct 29th 2021 [Online: https://www.celcis.org/old/index.php/knowledge-bank/search-bank/supporting-education-looked-after-children-uncertain-immigration-status-guidance-professionals/]

5.1.6. Recognition of prior qualifications and experience

One of the other significant barriers to accessing Higher Education is the lack of recognition of prior qualifications. The National Academic Recognition Information Centre offers industry skill statements and individual evaluations of prior overseas qualifications in reference to what they are equitable to in the UK, these statements can cost between £50 and £184 (NARIC). Many non-UK qualifications, especially from outside the EU, are not recognised or even considered, despite students having taken exams and achieving very good grades in previous educational settings.

Forced migrants bring a huge variety of skills, experiences and abilities and have great potential both for personal development and for contributing to society and economy. However, when valuable qualifications are not even recognised, many people find themselves having to re-start their education or career path altogether and to requalify for jobs which they have already gained valuable experience in. The homogenising approach to education is simply unequal and not at all inclusionary. In addition, this comes with a cost to our economy, where we could all benefit from the skills and expertise of forced migrants, particularly in professions where we experience shortages.

> About 1,200 medically qualified refugees are recorded on the British Medical Association's database. It is estimated that it costs around £25,000 to support a refugee doctor to practice in the UK. Training a new doctor is estimated to cost between £200,000 and £250,000.
>
> - Refugee Council

5.1.7. Other barriers

A number of other barriers that forced migrants face in terms of accessing education were mentioned, but not discussed in great detail and they may require further discussion and investigation in the future. Experiencing cultural shock; lacking support systems and communities; lack of study skills and knowledge about options for routes into HE and lack of childcare support for students can all act as additional barriers, making the disadvantage and lack of representation in HE more acute.

5.2. Recommendations to overcome Barriers to Higher Education

The conference highlighted the important and valuable role different actors like the state, educational institutions, the community, and individuals play in the lives of forced migrants, both in meeting challenges, as well as in their integration and success. Without the ambition for reform in many aspects of public life and without the drive and continuous hard work of dedicated networks, departments, formal and informal groups and individuals, no progress or change would be possible.

What came across clearly, has been that all change must be made together, in cooperation, collaboration and co-creation, but with clearly defined roles. No action can effectively be taken in silos, and everyone has a specific contribution to make in removing or lowering the barriers to

Higher Education for forced migrants. Work towards making access to Higher Education more open to forced migrants should be undertaken at every societal level.

In order to apportion responsibility effectively, this report makes three sets of recommendations, grouping them according to the appropriate audience. This is done in an attempt to place accountability on the right actors, to ensure that the actions taken are effective and follow a joined-up approach.

5.2.1. Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

a) Develop an institutional commitment, effective strategies, and policies

Sanctuary scholarships and bursaries are a crucial element of providing access to Higher Education; however, these schemes require a far deeper commitment from institutions. Universities and Further Education institutions have a vital role to play in cultivating a culture of welcome and inclusivity at every level within their institutions. They can play a significant role in catalysing welcome beyond their campuses and into their local communities. The 'Learning, Embedding and Sharing' approach put forward by Universities of Sanctuary supplies institutions with an excellent framework to help them work towards a better sense of welcome and inclusion by developing an institution-wide commitment to removing or lowering barriers to access to education.

Creating effective strategies to widen access to forced migrant students is only possible when institutions make a commitment to working at university wide level to remove the barriers, which in turn is reliant on acknowledging the unique range of challenges which this cohort faces. In doing so, educational institutions can go beyond formal definitions of underrepresented groups offered by funding bodies and redesign these to recognise that they share indicators of disadvantage with target groups identified by them. Making this group more visible in strategic planning will undoubtedly influence policy and future strategies and including them in their Widening Access and Participation strategies can demonstrate a clear commitment in relation to offering an environment of welcome and sanctuary. Furthermore, creating strategic long-term goals will create more sustainable programmes.

Policies designed to reclassify forced migrant students as 'home' students for fee paying purposes, to include them in targeted Widening Access and Participation activities and to provide support analogous to the needs and challenges experienced further demonstrate this commitment and helps to develop effective interventions.

b) Align strategies through improved communication, information provision and training

Effective sharing of clear and accessible information improves communication within the institution itself and is vital for a more strategic alignment. Several in-depth discussions recognised the demand for a true alignment between strategic and operational work within universities. Work on the ground must be matched by a strategic desire from the establishment itself to drive those initiatives forward through an institutional approach. Higher managements must make an effort to establish and maintain communication with those undergoing operational work within the universities as well as those with lived experience, in order to fully understand the issues at hand and be able to address them correctly. Communication between all stakeholders is therefore vital to maintain this alignment.

A key aspect of effective activities in relation to improving access to HE for forced migrants is providing an environment where those working students have the relevant skills and knowledge to provide the support necessary. Staff training, both more generally in terms of institutional processes, support available and administrative logistics, but also in terms of trauma informed practices, is necessary to ensure that students receive effective and timely assistance and that no additional administrative burdens are placed on them.

In addition, staff working with sanctuary students should be provided with relevant guidance in relation to legal issues to avoid inappropriately adopting Tier Four monitoring protocols rising from a need to fulfil any obligations to the Home Office. Furthermore, staff should be able to provide basic information to students in relation to their status and eligibility to HE and funding and be aware of the correct course of action and options available to them when a student's status changes. This can be managed effectively by providing a first point of contact, or a named person, as discussed further below.

In addition, maintaining communication with partners through research and collaborations integrating learnings will allow universities to better work intersectionally across categories. Communication between institutions and amongst staff is key - stronger networks must be formed in every direction to truly create the 'streams of sanctuary' vision put forward by the UoS initiative and create an institutionally welcoming and inclusive environment.

c) Become a University of Sanctuary

The Universities of Sanctuary initiative asks for mainstream organisations and institutions to be committed by pledging to the principles and the values of City of Sanctuary movement. Becoming a University of Sanctuary has a variety of benefits for HEIs, from becoming part of a network of like-minded institutions which share similar values of social justice and integration to visibly responding to student and sector pressure and being part of a growing movement to counter discourses of xenophobia and racism. In addition, becoming providing sanctuary to

forced migrant students and academics enriches academic discussion and output, harnesses talent and improves teaching offers, ensuring that everyone benefits.

In order to fulfil the vision of a Nation of Sanctuary, there must be a push for all universities and Higher Education institutions in Wales to work towards achieving University of Sanctuary status.

d) Expand existing scholarship provision and set up new Sanctuary Scholarships

It was recognised that sanctuary scholarships and bursaries offered by various Welsh universities have proven to be a success in the movement towards achieving better access to Higher Education. Funmilayo's example above is a prime example of the value that scholarship schemes bring to forced migrants; not only in reducing the stress of fees and funding, but also developing a sense of wellbeing. Although there are some scholarship schemes in place, more are needed; the applicants for scholarships heavily outweigh the number of scholarship places available. Continuing to maintain, learn from, and expand these schemes is a clear starting point in tackling barriers of access.

Funmilayo Olaniyan, Sanctuary Scholar at UWTSD

Three sets of actions can be taken in relation with scholarship provision. The first is to understand the specific needs of this cohort and to ensure that scholarships are set up on a 'Sanctuary Scholarship' model, to include not only fee waivers, but also financial and in-kind support to help with living and studying costs, which is in proportion to the actual need. The second is to identify the groups of forced migrant students most in need of scholarship provision. The third is to identify the shortfall in scholarship provision, whether at undergraduate, postgraduate taught or PhD level and set up scholarships which best plug this gap.

Taking a cohesive and well informed approached informed by evaluation and research ensures that needs, barriers, and challenges are properly identified, and the right scholarship provision is made.

e) Provide financial support

As discussed above, any scholarship provision is strengthened and made meaningful by adequate financial support which meets the actual needs of this cohort. A clear understanding is needed of how ineligibility for Student Finance can affect certain forced migrant groups and how receiving a sanctuary scholarship may in fact be detrimental to students, leaving them ineligible for asylum support. Any financial support should be able to anticipate the regulatory frameworks within which forced migrant students live and ensure that alternative in-kind provisions are made, and creative solutions are employed to meet these needs.

As post-pandemic teaching slowly becomes more in-person, forced migrant learners should be given the opportunity to access transport support, such as free bus passes. Ideas such as

transport refunds or free transport, supermarket vouchers, digital device loans and others are good examples of in-kind, thoughtful alternatives to cash and provide vital support. In general, forced migrants should have full access to any other kind of financial support available to home students, such as hardship funds

f) Provide wraparound support systems

Forming clear and direct information points within Higher Education institutions was also recognised as necessary within our discussions. An online and perhaps also physical location was suggested - a virtual or physical space which holds all relevant information and access to available networks. Sanctuary scholars and those interested in learning more about forced migration, whether staff, students, or the general public, can go to these information points for access to scholarship Information, Advice and Guidance (AIG), informal and formal language support, career advice, Student Action for Refugee (STAR) groups, mentorship, or to have a conversation with a dedicated advisor.

An example was provided during the parallel discussions, for an 'Access to Education' website, which could collect potential pathways to careers and link students for opportunities and mentors. Additionally, a recommendation for a more creative aspect of the information point was provided - perhaps including photographs, art, poetry, etc. to build this sense of belonging, especially for those who desire visual accessibility, moving away from overwhelming amounts of text.

Pastoral and wellbeing support is an essential aspect of wraparound provision for this cohort. It is important both from an institutional perspective and from a sanctuary scholar's perspective that there is a designated point of contact for the institution, a named person with relevant training (both in terms of legal issues, trauma informed practice and mental health support), who is able to adequately and efficiently support students. This advisor must be a passionate individual who can personally guide and inform those going through their educational journey, rather than being an anonymous character. These points of contact are vital for providing a continuous sense of welcome and inclusion. Scholars should be reassured that their experience and wellbeing is being taken into consideration throughout their journey, rather than feeling lost and in need of seeking out information for themselves with a lack of support or direction.

Central information hubs may take a variety of forms, whether virtual or physical to suit different institutions, but whatever the format, they should be accessible, comprehensive, supported by support practices within the institutions and underpinned by research and training.

g) Provide adequate and accessible English language classes

English language classes are a vital step for many forced migrants in order to access Higher Education. Universities run pre-sessional programmes designed for international students, and some provide full-time intensive language development courses linked to academic study skills, to get their language competency to a level good enough to begin a degree program. Traditionally, these courses provide for wealthy students coming from countries such as Saudi

Arabia, China, Korea, or UAE, and are not an option to those with refugee status in some universities in Wales, due to the accessibility barriers they raise. The course length can range between 4 weeks to 1 year, depending on the institution and the individual's language competency level to begin with, and can cost from £1,900 up to £12,000. Forced migrant students are simply priced out of these classes. Opening up these pre-sessional classes and offering fee waivers would be an effective way of widening access to HE.

In addition to English language skills in general, HEIs need to consider the need for providing EAP courses. Discussions within sanctuary and academic networks reveal that all students benefit from EAP provision, regardless of whether they are native English speakers or not, but that these courses would be particularly advantageous to forced migrant students.

These pre-sessional classes might also have to be adapted to cater for the specific needs of this cohort of students – needs which may differ from those of international students – not just in terms of language learning and study skills but also, for example, psycho-social support to deal with traumas of war and displacement and to provide a decolonised approach. Each university will need to think through carefully how best to support refugee students and integrate these systems of support into regular structures. Dedicated staff to deal with providing a smooth transition from Further to Higher Education will further assist these processes.

h) Improve digital inclusion

Financial and material difficulties were prominent barriers mentioned within our parallel sessions. However, digital equipment, adequate broadband availability, internet access and digital literacy are all essential for applying to and for engaging with Higher Education courses. This need has been amplified by the sudden move online of brick-and-mortar institutions, due to Covid-19.

In order to provide adequate access to this group of students, HEIs must design and implement digital inclusion funds and schemes which take into account the specific needs and challenges of this group of students. Access to loaned digital equipment (laptops, tablets, etc.) and free 30GB Data Sim Cards to take part in online learning were ideas presented within our discussions. Digital skills classes to improve digital literacy could be run alongside English language, EAP and study skills offers, to ensure that forced migrant students have the skills to be included, actively participate and be successful in HE, regardless of whether this is in person or online.

i) Provide alternative qualification recognition procedures at enrolment

In order to ensure that rigid admission policies do not exclude students whose forced displacement resulted in loss or damage of documentation, HEIs can work across units, both academic and non-academic, to provide contextualised admissions and develop assessment frameworks for educational level, language proficiency and qualifications.

Alternatively, they could adopt the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, in line with other European universities. This has been launched by the Council of Europe in 2018, after being successfully piloted through tested methodologies and is in a format that facilitates its use

both within and beyond the refugee's host country, making it portable and eliminating the need to repeat assessments.

j) Develop a supportive student and staff community

Another suggestion takes the form of student support through Sanctuary Ambassadors/Champions, peer mentors, and STAR groups. Organising a community of Sanctuary Ambassadors with real experience who can "buddy-up" with potential forced migrant scholars and provide them with support, would be a step-forward in creating a welcoming and inclusive student community. These individuals would act as another available contact for scholars throughout their journey and would allow for a connection with a current student who has been through the process first-hand. Additionally, those universities aspiring to University of Sanctuary status, should work towards the establishment of a Student Refugee Action (STAR) group, which can help asylum seekers and refugees with provision of important information and guidelines, as well as support and student community.

Building this diverse student community of Sanctuary could also open doors to countless opportunities, including informal language development. For example, one of the parallel sessions brought forward the idea of informal student language groups, which could centre around developing language to a higher level through engaging with communal games and activities, such as a chess language group. Similarly, peer mentor schemes could be set up for students learning English where, for instance, a Level 2 student could mentor a Level 1 student and so on. This mentoring scheme has been trialled at the Open University in England and could very easily be replicated in other institutions.

These mentorship schemes could extend to staff from forced migrant backgrounds, such as CARA fellows, to offer academic and non-academic support for better integration.

k) Conduct evaluation and research to improve outcomes and co-create with people with lived experience

It is important to note the value of strategies, policies and practice which is underpinned by evaluation and research. Gathering relevant data, within GDPR and ethical bounds, analysing it and using it to inform future programmes is necessary in order to fully understand the needs and challenges of this cohort. In addition, incentivising students to declare forced migrant status will help HEI's better target their initiatives and students better access them.

It is essential that HEIs centre the lived experience and expertise of Sanctuary students and staff to ensure a participatory, co-produced and decolonial approach to research and evaluation. Additionally, making sure that Sanctuary students are at the centre of the process, will create resilience through strength-based approaches. Co-creation with students builds long-term capacity, *doing with*, rather than *to*, in an equal and reciprocal partnership where it is recognised that the benefits are mutual.

A co-creative approach shares effort and expertise and restores dignity, recognising the value of both partners in the process. In addition, this approach has the potential to save time and cut costs of re-designing and re-implementing.

5.2.2. Recommendations for communities

a) Create strong networks across HEIs

Sanctuary networks are vital in all spheres of society to achieve a sense of welcome. Networking with the appropriate organisations is a good example of the 'learning' stage of development in the UoS approach, along with research undertaken by the universities themselves. Universities need to build productive connections and partnerships with their local community and local refugee organisations to fully understand the challenges faced by forced migrants.
Stronger relationships between universities and Further Education institutions at a local level would go a long way to helping improve access to education. This would help to widen the progression pathways between institutions through articulation agreements and equip institutions with the knowledge to implement and 'embed' structures that will help to overcome challenges. Universities can also share their experiences, good practices, and research with other universities through the UoS networks. Conferences such as the one being reported here can also be considered as the 'sharing' stage of UoS commitment and developing a deeper understanding of the issues at hand with all the relevant institutions.

Sharing data and information, collaborating on research, and working in partnership across the sector and with those who have lived experience, will create strong foundations across networks, on which to build on good practice and expertise, to the ultimate benefit of all.

b) Create strong networks and collaborative partnerships between HEIs, community organisations and all levels of devolved government

It was recognised that conflicting information and confusion around support is often a direct consequence of a lack of clear communication between universities and local community organisations. Establishing relationships between various Higher Education institutions and external support services is essential. Not only will establishing Sanctuary networks provide all parties with a better understanding of what support is available, but it will also allow for a space for stakeholders to learn from each other, share experience and expertise, and maintain a sustainable and ongoing discussion about issues, priorities, and potential gaps in support.

The UoS initiative recognises a value of shared experience and productive communication. Focus groups with students, undertaking joint events with local communities, and creating online spaces for continued dialogue were mentioned in our parallel sessions, all of which are good proposals for initiating this discussion and maintaining those networks.

Collaborative partnerships between HEIs and local organisations supporting forced migrants were also mentioned and are in process of being piloted at the OU. One is in relation of study skills provision with ESOL support, working with the Scottish Refugee Council and the Bridges Project and the other is in relation to creating legal guidance in relation to detention to removal for forced migrant students and staff supporting them. Both projects centre those with lived experience and take partnering approaches co-create meaningful resources and are good examples of effective collaborations.

5.2.3. Recommendations for policy makers

a) Continue to create an environment of welcome and integration through adequate policies

Devolved governments are best placed to create an environment of welcome in their own nations in collaboration with relevant non-government agencies through strategies which set out a vision of welcome and safety for all. This vision can be operationalised through policies which ensure that nations are places of safety, inclusivity and equal access to education, employment and life opportunities and that diversity is valued and celebrated in its communities.

An effective approach would be one which provides a clear framework that can be followed by all levels of government in devolved nations, which ensures working in partnership with all those involved in working towards the integration of forced migrants and which places them at the heart of this work.

b) Continue to work towards policy change for eligibility to HE, including financial support

Policy makers in devolved nations should continue to work towards fairer policies in relation to eligibility to HE, both in terms of funding eligibility at a UK government level, as well as in relation to national Widening Access and Participation strategies, definitions and targets at national levels, to ensure that forced migrants do not continue to be excluded in multiple ways.

As a good practice example of the latter, Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP) has recently formally acknowledged forced migrants as a distinct Widening Access and Participation group and has set up a cross-sector network for practitioners. As one of the two pillars of the Framework for Fair Access, SCAPP can feed any relevant recommendations in relation to this group into the annual report made by the Commissioner for Fair Access to Scottish ministers.

Forced migrants also need full access to any other financial support available to home students. Policy makers should ensure there are no administrative barriers where these funds come from devolved government sources, such as [Financial Contingency Funds](). It is vital to ensure refugees continue to be eligible for such funds, and to enable those seeking sanctuary to also be eligible for support.

c) Widen provision of digital literacy and language skills

Whilst difficulties with digital literacy is not limited to forced migrant students, with many students from various backgrounds having an inadequate level of digital skills to successfully complete HE studies, this barrier for forced migrant students is often compounded by inadequate English language skills.

Offering digital literacy classes is one crucial step in tackling online inclusion to all students. Such classes would show, for example, how to navigate university course websites, attend online classes, or how to submit assignments. It was suggested in the conference, that these classes need to be delivered across the whole spectrum of digital knowledge, so as not to single out students, or to appear patronising. Universities that have tech teams of students and volunteers

could, for example, provide this help and teaching those in need on how to navigate online learning.

With the difficulty of universities, local community organisations and individual forced migrants finding funding for internet access such as WiFi or 3G Roaming, this is something that should be considered within the Asylum Support plan, or as a separate funding for forced migrants wishing to enter Higher Education.

Similarly, English language provision should be widened to cater not only to those in large cities, but also in rural areas and also to those whose multiple responsibilities, such as caring or child-care are barriers to attendance. These could be provided online, in addition to in-person, in collaboration with providers who are experts in distance learning provision, such as the Open University and with community partners who can offer extended networks of on the ground support to participants.

6. Employment Plenary

The second half of the conference focused on Employment. To open this plenary, we had contributions from the [Welsh Refugee Coalition](#), based on their online workshop on Refugee Employability on 26th April 2021, from [Refugee Education Training Advice Service](#) (RETAS) in Leeds, reflecting on their experience of employment support and mentoring, from [Down to Earth](#) (DTE), a local environmental charity with experience of providing skills-based training and volunteering, and from individuals with lived experience of navigating entry to employment or setting up in business. This panel discussed barriers and proposals for what is needed to help improve employment opportunities for those seeking sanctuary in Wales.

These introductions were followed by parallel group sessions, which allowed for open and in-depth discussion between stakeholders, conference contributors, and other interested parties in our audience. Within the sessions were contributors from [Ethnic Youth Support Team](#) (EYST), with experience of providing short-term work placements, from an experienced careers coach currently at the [Centre for African Entrepreneurship](#) (CAE), and from the Welsh Government's [ReStart](#) scheme.

Our three parallel sessions focused on three specific areas:
1. Employment Support
2. Entrepreneurship
3. Businesses of Sanctuary

As with the previous section on Higher Education, we have based this section of the report on thematic analysis of transcripts, notes and summaries taken from panel speakers and parallel sessions. By this means, we have identified six outstanding barriers to accessing employment.

6.1. Barriers to Employment and Career Progression

6.1.1. Lack of information and guidance for both forced migrants and potential employers

There is significant support potentially available to help refugees into employment – from Job Centres, Welsh Government, local authorities, FE Colleges, grant-funded organisations, and the wider Third Sector. Throughout our discussions, however, there was a consensus that this is not widely known, with widespread experience of a significant lack of information and guidance available for forced migrants wishing to enter employment. Consequently, those in need often lack knowledge or confidence of the systems and processes involved in applying for jobs in Wales and the rest of the UK. It ought to be noted that asylum seeking migrants rely twice as much as others on public employment assistance[14]; this lack of knowledge poses a larger threat to those most in need.

It was recognised, by means of contrast, that for those in the general population, such information and guidance is made available well before they enter the jobs market. For example, job applications

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[14] Kone et al. (2019) 'Refugees and the UK Labour Market', *COMPAS*, accessed on Nov 3rd. [Online: https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/ECONREF-Refugees-and-the-UK-Labour-Market-report.pdf]

and interviews are often taught and rehearsed during secondary school in the UK, to prepare students for future employment. This advice covers practice interview questions and business terminology which may arise in the application process. There is, however, no clear system to give equivalent guidance to those who enter the UK for the first time. Funding rules often prevent such services from being provided for asylum seekers, and, where there is provision, those potential users without employment rights may not see the need for it. On the other hand, new refugees have little time for such training once they receive status, as there are so many other immediate issues to solve.

Additionally, some with lived experience shared that they had no opportunity to have any contact with anybody who could direct them towards the correct information, and no way of finding training which could refresh their course or their existing skills. Not knowing what Government initiatives are available is a major barrier for forced migrants – there is also a variety of fantastic projects within the community, but not enough people are aware of them. Not only this, but employers also mentioned during the conference that it is difficult to identify and reach out to refugee job seekers.

On a similar note, it was noted that forced migrant voices are not heard anywhere near as much as they ought to be – not understanding the barriers being faced by forced migrants is a barrier in itself. Many with lived experience felt as though they were simply repeating themselves during the conference. This is a consequence of not enough communication happening between organisations, and not including the community which is directly affected.

> *"As we work together, we learn together how we can provide more support and better services to refugees and asylum seekers in our communities"*
> - Representative of Down to Earth

6.1.2. Mental health issues and low self-esteem

Another significant barrier recognised was forced migrants having low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in attempting to apply for roles. Forced migrants can feel lost, lacking a sense of belonging when they are in a brand-new place and don't have knowledge of what is available to them. Then, extended periods of waiting for a decision on an asylum claim while not being allowed to work can mean that a person cannot fulfil any role which they see as meaningful. This can intensify the loss of self-esteem, especially for men whose cultural norms lead them to expect to be the breadwinner and to provide for their dependants.

Those with lived experience shared that once they had received refugee status, they were met with the enormous questions of "what next?", "what do I want to do with my life?". Once they receive status, there can be a rush to find employment, and many refugees consequently end up doing low-skilled jobs. Not only this, but there are also extremely long waiting lists for those suffering with mental health issues, which are very often a result of the traumatic journey many forced migrants have been on, combined with the 'limbo' of waiting for a response from the UK's asylum system, which can often take years to reach a final decision.

6.1.3. English proficiency

As noted by Down to Earth during their plenary presentation, a 2004 [study by the Institute for Public Policy Research](#) found that proficiency in English was the number one barrier for refugees in getting employment in the UK. Seventeen years on, it is still recognised as a main barrier to employment. According to ReStart, one of the main requirements for most employers is good English proficiency, especially in high-end jobs, and employers often ask for a certificate or statement of recognition. Many fields have their own vocabulary, including jargon, and jobs in those fields require specific forms of English. Forced migrants may be fully equipped with skills, abilities, and previous experience, but with a lack of relevant English proficiency they will often find themselves in low-skilled and low-paid jobs, unable to fulfil their true potential.

Some with lived experience shared that they felt far more empowered and confident once they had a better understanding of the English language. As discussed previously, access to free English classes can also take a long time and other options may be costly, which is another barrier that must be recognised. Even when accessed, formal English classes do not necessarily include the particular language required for specialist fields of employment.

6.1.4. Cultural differences and racial prejudice

Another barrier presented was cultural differences. For example, those who have moved to the UK may not understand the way in which applications work, as mentioned above. Not only this, but there could be difficulty in understanding cultural expressions of emotions that are embedded within all social systems and are not taught explicitly. This can make it extremely difficult in obtaining employment or starting up a business.

Institutional racial prejudice also acts as a major barrier. Potential employers, who do not know enough about other cultures, may make decisions based upon racial stereotypes and lack of understanding, often unwittingly. There is a strong sense of employer unfamiliarity with refugees and asylum seekers, and employers often fear what they don't know or understand. Many employers have no knowledge of the forced migrant community and this lack of understanding creates a clear barrier preventing potential workers, including those who are highly skilled, from being easily employed.

6.1.5. Financial difficulties

When forced migrants obtain leave to remain and start looking for work or to set up in business, they will have gone through a longer or shorter period of enforced poverty, living on the paltry allowance paid to asylum seekers. They will have little or no resources of their own, but many reasons for needing money quickly, including their own needs which have been postponed, family elsewhere needing financial support or to be brought to the UK for family reunion, and the need to save in order to pay for the future cost of applying for a renewal of temporary leave to remain and, eventually, British citizenship.

These problems apply to all new refugees. However, it is particularly difficult for forced migrants to start up a business when they have financial difficulties. With a lack of access to adequate start-up finance, no extra resources, little income, and no financial history to present to a bank for borrowing money, starting up a business is unfeasible particularly given the need for an immediate income for reasons mentioned above. Similarly, forced migrants are extremely unlikely to have access to family and friends who could potentially help with investments.

These same financial pressures make it difficult for new refugees to take time out to attend training courses, whether aimed at helping them become entrepreneurs or at upgrading employment-related skills.

6.1.6. Unrecognised or outdated qualifications and skills

Much like with accessing higher education (see section 4.1.6.), prior qualifications not being recognised is a clear barrier for forced migrants seeking to enter employment. Often, forced migrants who were business owners in their country of origin have tried to set up a similar business in Wales, but have significant difficulty as their qualifications are not recognised in the UK. Or someone previously in a professional job may attempt to set up in business in order to avoid the need for specific qualifications. Most of the time, mechanics, plumbers, electricians, engineers etc. do not want to spend their time or do not have enough money to go back to college or university to re-sit their exams, and so are left with very few choices for potential employment. This is a complete waste of valuable skills and expertise.

A related problem comes from the enforced career break represented by the time spent fleeing from danger, travelling, somehow getting into the UK, and then waiting in the asylum system. It is not just that qualifications are foreign and hence it is unclear to the UK employer what knowledge and skills they represent. That knowledge may itself have become out-of-date, those skills may have degraded through lack of practice, or the field concerned may have advanced while the forced migrant was blocked from upgrading their skills or taking part in career enhancement programmes. There were several examples among those with lived experience at the conference. For example, one person had been a qualified nutritionist but now felt it was unrealistic to take the time needed to catch up with advances in the field when she needed to earn as soon as possible.

6.2. Recommendations to overcome Barriers to Employment and Career Progression

The following strategic approaches towards improving access to employment and career progression for forced migrants have partly been developed using the same thematic analysis of transcripts, notes and summaries as for the analysis of barriers. However, since the discussion at the conference did not definitively result in agreed conclusions, the recommendations are also the views of the editors of the reports.

As with the recommendations for overcoming barriers to Higher Education, these recommendations ideally require different actors to work together, while having different roles and playing their part in different and particular ways. Hence, as with the previous section, we make three sets of recommendations here, each for a different audience. However, note that, while proposals for Employment Support projects are located here as recommendations for "communities" because they are often run by community-based voluntary organisations, in practice such projects may also be run directly by devolved governments (included here under "policy makers"), FE colleges or even by employer organisations.

6.2.1. Recommendations for policy makers

a) **Support for all forms of career support and guidance**

Career support for forced migrants is essential. They need information, advice, and guidance from specialist advisors, with fast-track access to vocational studies for those who need it. With some important caveats (see below), many of these needs parallel those of other disadvantaged groups. The most essential point may be to ensure that forced migrants have good access to, and knowledge of, mainstream employment support services.

However, mainstream services such as job centres are under-funded and have recently suffered considerable further cutbacks. In order to provide a reasonably comprehensive service for refugees as well as their other clients, they would require considerable additional resources.

There have been specialist services, such as within the ReStart programme, which reach out to new refugees. Such services ought to be continued and expanded, either within mainstream services or separately, to ensure that advice and options on employment opportunities can be given to those who need it most immediately. Before moving entirely to integrating refugee employment support in Wales into the mainstream, it will be essential to conduct a full evaluation of the ReStart programme, bearing in mind the recommendations below for services specific to forced migrants.

As a next step, there is a need for more clarity about how well existing services are working in this area and how to improve and publicise them better. Referrals to study could be in the form of employment training workshops which cover the application process, provide interview practice and support putting together CVs. Similarly, language support could be offered (including fast-track access to ESOL classes). Offering more informal language learning could also be extremely helpful, providing the opportunity to practice English in a relaxed and casual environment. This would ideally include groups or conversation clubs with common interest in specific fields. More intense support is needed to help forced migrants understand business and other specialised language, as well as legal and tax regulations.

Finally, policy in this area should explicitly provide for a variety of employment support schemes by a range of providers, including those mentioned below as recommendations for communities or for employers, such as mentoring schemes, Businesses of Sanctuary, and others.

b) **Integration Support "from Day One"**
Ideally, support for 'holistic integration', including career support, would be available "from Day One", in line with the principle of universal inclusion embraced by the devolved administrations. This would mean providing support to asylum seekers even though they are legally prohibited from working and is something which cannot be done by mainstream employment support services. Such support would be invaluable in preparing people for employment in their new country before their successful grant of leave to remain suddenly requires them to do everything to insert themselves into society within the 28 days grace period before they are evicted from their asylum accommodation.

c) **Recognition of prior qualifications and informal skills**
There is an opportunity for devolved governments to implement strategies which value the input of forced migrants and the potential for economic benefits deriving from this. Schemes which invest in establishing a framework for recognising overseas qualifications, such as the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, or similar to the Scottish Government's pilot Migrant Skills Recognition and Accreditation Project, with those which upskill and reskill could be particularly valuable in plugging the gap in shortage occupations, as well as bringing in expertise which could be a real asset to employers and ultimately the economy.

d) **Research on the career aspirations and needs of forced migrants**
Throughout the conference, many individuals with lived experience expressed their success stories. We should note, however, that almost by definition the stories of those who have been less successful are much less well known and were not presented.

The ReStart scheme is attempting to match businesses with individuals. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about what types of jobs and careers forced migrants are seeking and why, so the matching is perhaps a bit one-sided.

Better knowledge is needed, hence more research, especially on the career aspirations and needs of forced migrants, including poorly networked, newly arrived asylum seekers, and how well this corresponds with the support services and employment opportunities available. In addition to formal research, it is important to build into any initiative a way of listening continuously to the voices of forced migrants, both users of services and others.

e) Allowing more asylum seekers to work: a Welsh list of shortage occupations

Creating opportunities to work in specific shortage occupations is an ideal way of allowing those seeking asylum to gain access to the job market before achieving refugee status. Excluding asylum seekers from employment does not benefit our community or individuals seeking asylum in any way; it is a misuse of available skills and expertise. Not only this, but working can allow asylum seekers to feel valued, and can improve overall mental health and maintain some continuity with their previous experience.

Hence all possible pressure should be directed towards lifting the ban on working for asylum seekers, either entirely or with few restrictions.

In the meantime, as in Scotland, a specific Welsh list of shortage occupations in which asylum seekers are allowed to work should be created and given as much legal force as possible within the devolved powers of Welsh Government.

f) Funding for start-up businesses and training

Across the UK 24% of working refugee migrants are self-employed, compared with 14% for the general population. There is a need to promote access to support and funding for refugee entrepreneurs, including ensuring they have good knowledge of and access to the Barriers Grant that Welsh Government implemented at the start of this 2021. Start-up loans for up to £2000 could be made available for people who have good business ideas, which can support them in the initial set-up of their business.

New refugees also need immediate access to funds for various reasons. For example, they may otherwise be forced to take more menial employment as a ready way to earn money quickly, and hence forego training they would need before seeking employment requisite with their skills and aspirations.

With regard to finance for training, forced migrants attending vocational courses also need full access to financial support available to other students. As with funding for access to HE, policy makers should ensure there are no administrative barriers where these funds come from devolved government sources, such as the Financial Contingency Funds. It is vital to ensure refugees continue to be eligible for such funds, and to enable those seeking sanctuary to also be eligible for support.

6.2.2. Recommendations for communities

a) 'Holistic Integration Hubs': career pathway support for forced migrants and information for potential employers

As well as promoting better access for refugees to mainstream career support, there should also continue to be 'hubs' specialising in refugee employment and other aspects of individual integration. One possibility would be to borrow the term 'Holistic Integration' from Scottish practice[15]. These hubs would be locations or online spaces with nation-wide information for both forced migrants and employers, as well as other relevant agencies such as FE and HE institutions. These would build on best practice within the ReStart programme. Across Wales there ought to be the same information available – we should be 'joining the dots' to make the information more accessible.

The Holistic Integration Hubs should also provide career pathway support to talk through realistic goals and plans for future careers. These can be available for those who come to Wales with existing experience and can include professional recognition of skills, expertise, and qualifications as well as finding ways to recognise pre-existing experience and skills which are not reflected in formal qualifications. UK systems and standards may be different, but a qualification or informal skills should still be recognised at some level.

Industry specific business training could also support those with less experience in certain areas of employment. Additionally, there should be advisors who can support those who wish to start up a business. These hubs should not be just about training, but also some degree of advocacy. They could also provide mental health packages or regular check-ins to those who may need support at a time where entering employment may seem daunting.

Provision of information to employers should be done in different, complementary ways. Again, building on best practice in ReStart, as well some of the examples from Scotland and elsewhere, one way would be by publishing toolkits. Another important strand in this provision of information would be to initiate a team of refugee speakers willing to share their experience of the barriers to employment and how they have overcome them and progressed. Both toolkits and speakers would help employers to learn about the forced migrant community, their rights and the regulations that apply to them, the barriers they face, and how to get in touch with potential employees. They could also straighten out any misconception of forced migrants and flatten any stereotypes which may persist in the mind of the employers.

b) Mentoring schemes

Mentoring and buddy schemes are specific forms of career support which have a lot of potential. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect sufficient funding for paid mentors for all new refugees. Some combination of professional mentors with volunteers is called for, focused within key sectors so that, for example, retired doctors, journalists or tradespeople in different fields, or successful entrepreneurs, can volunteer to mentor refugees wishing to enter and progress in those areas, and be supported themselves in doing so. Such schemes exist, particularly for medical staff, for example NHS schemes in certain regions and, in Cardiff, DPIA's Wales *Asylum* Seeker & *Refugee Doctor* & Dentist's Group (WARD). More generally, the Growing Points social mobility charity, in its partnership with Leeds City of Sanctuary, may offer a model.

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[15]Strang et al. (2014) 'The Holistic Integration Service', *Scottish Refugee Council*, accessed on Nov 1st 2021. [Online version: https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Holistic-Integration-Service-year-1-evaluation-report.pdf]

As with other forms of career support, such mentoring arrangements would ideally start as soon as possible after the arrival of the mentee in the country, while they are still an asylum seeker. It might work well for an existing mentoring scheme such as [A Better Welcome to Swansea](#) to expand in order to provide mentoring over a longer period that could extend into the time when asylum seeker gains leave to remain and is entering employment. It would also be very useful for mentoring to extend into the mentee's time in employment. This would help overcome the reluctance of some employers to take on otherwise suitable refugees for fear they would need too much supervision and support before reaching their undoubted potential.

c) **Better networks and communication**

Throughout the conference, the success stories of individuals with lived experience demonstrated how many initial jobs and skill developments were found through networking. Conversely, one reason why the stories of those who have been less successful were not presented may be that those people were less likely to be part of the network of the conference organisers.

Much like for access to higher education, networking is vital for improving forced migrant access to employment. This means that, from "Day One", asylum seekers need as many opportunities as possible to meet a range of people, both others seeking sanctuary and those with longstanding connections in British society.

At another level of networking, it is also important for services to create good relationships with other organisations, in order to continue the conversation on barriers, and work together to overcome them. Communication between all parties is vital, particularly the partnerships between the Third and Public sectors, and not just the refugee sector reaching out to employers.

As is apparent from the experience of the ReStart scheme, establishing and maintaining networks with employers is one vital step in creating smooth transitions into employment. By networking, employers are able to get recommendations from others, much like how the system of employing 'familiar' individuals to fill these roles works now. Similarly, refugee business owners are unlikely to have a good network from the start of their business, so encouraging networks with all parties can help support start-up refugee businesses grow even further.

One useful networking initiative would be to set up regular meetings of those involved in refugee employment support in a city such as Swansea.

d) **Volunteering linked to skills**

Many contributors to the conference found that volunteering plays a significant role in helping forced migrants on their journey towards employment. Volunteering can create more opportunities and provide guidelines for accessing them, while raising awareness of what's available. Volunteering also helps with informal language support, cultural awareness, and developing transferable skills as well as maintaining and updating existing skills. Most importantly, it is available to all irrespective of immigration status, including asylum seekers who

are not allowed to take paid employment, and hence is a most important way of providing support "from Day One".

The [Down to Earth](#) Project, which offers a unique approach to community engagement, also brings attention to the vital importance of developing 'soft' skills and building self-confidence through emotional literacy, leaning how to make your voice heard, developing an understanding of the differences in how we express emotions in the UK, providing opportunities to cook and eat with others, and trying numerous adventure activities. Volunteering is ideal in creating meaningful work, which can help individuals feel as though they are contributing to society, helping create a sense of belonging. Not only this, but volunteering creates an incredible sense of welcome and inclusion within the community, something that is so important when moving to a new country.

> *"When becoming a refugee there is a decision to study to fulfil our aspirations or to work to fulfil our needs…volunteering is the bridge between them"*
> - Conference contributor with lived experience

In general, the option of volunteering should be encouraged, and more opportunities ought to be made available to forced migrants. Specifically, more attention should be paid to providing volunteering opportunities that develop transferrable skills and where possible are tailored to the individual in terms of developing, maintaining, and updating skills relevant to their preferred future career path.

6.2.3. Recommendations for employers

a) Work opportunities and placements

For those who have refugee status or other form of leave to remain, more work placement opportunities and apprenticeship schemes for full paid training should be implemented. There are already programmes whereby apprentices are paid throughout a course while they achieve their qualifications, which has proven to be so successful in encouraging individuals to finish courses with less of a financial burden, and with a connection to an employer ready for when they complete their studies. More schemes such as these should be made available.

Due to Brexit, European funding managed by Wales Council for Voluntary Action ([WCVA](#)) is now ending. Funded paid placements and internships provided excellent and valued work to many forced migrants; there is an urgent need for similar funding to be put in place.

> *"I think placements are crucial for people to not only develop skills but develop the confidence to work in the UK and gain more qualifications"*
> - Conference contributor with lived experience

b) Businesses of Sanctuary

Finally, support for the UK City of Sanctuary's 'Businesses of Sanctuary' initiative would be very welcome. Such support should recognise the real difficulties faced by progressive employers in

finding the resource required to support and mentor new refugees into careers within their organisations. There may be scope for including forced migrants in schemes similar to the UK governments [Access to Work](#) programme, which can provide resources for those requiring mental health support at work.

It would be important for the 'Business of Sanctuary' accolade to be reserved for businesses which are full-heartedly committed to inclusion in all their employment practices and throughout the organisation. However, even a small number of such businesses could act as models and be the basis for networks of support among employers aspiring to the same standards of excellence – including support for employers to allow them to take on individuals requiring additional support within employment.

7. Closing Plenary and Conclusions

The conference closed with a Closing Plenary panel, with contributions from four speakers: Parvati Raghurum, Professor of Geography and Migration at The Open University; Simon Tindall, Head of Skills and Innovation at The Open University; Sian Summers-Rees, Chief Officer of City of Sanctuary UK; and Sibusisiwe Mbwembwe, General Manager, African Community Centre, Swansea.

Rather than summing up or making recommendations, these speakers mostly provided ideas and inspiration to take away.

7.1. Looking wider for ideas

The first two of the final panel speakers gave contrasting opinions of looking more broadly for new approaches to the issues of access to higher education and employment for forced migrants.

First was a four-part analytical framework from a geographical perspective, together with some general observations. The four parts of the framework were:

1. Destinations: How where people come from might affect their reception

2. Temporalities: Implications of shifts in immigration status over quite long periods

3. A whole-life perspective: What education can learn from employment and vice versa

4. Intersectionality: What is the gesture of hospitality? and the importance of familiarising others in an institution (staff or students in a university; employees and managers in an employing organisation) with the cohort of newcomers

More generally, it is important to adopt a two-way give-and-take model for support, rather than a one-way charity model of provision. This involves considering how to make learning more integrative and the importance of communities of practice in which the interests of forced migrants are represented as well as involved ordinary members of the receiving community and those professionally involved in offering support – which again leads on to questions about the role of intermediaries, including potentially those from the same country as new arrivals.

In complete contrast, the second speaker presented two practical examples of partnerships undertaken by The Open University which could provide models for adaptation in Wales or elsewhere:

1. The Uber Learning as a Benefit programme, in which a major employer pays for free Higher Education for their employees and family members; and

2. A partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions to provide access to OpenLearn courses for those attending job centres or on universal credit.

Such examples should lead us to think widely about the potential for new partnerships across sectors and boundaries which could have considerable mutual benefits.

7.2. A Final Word

Our final two speakers reminded us of some broad linked principles and sources of inspiration. Firstly, the importance of collaboration: between sectors (Government, public institutions such as universities, third sector and private sector); between forced migrants and their local supporters.

Secondly, theory of change. City of Sanctuary is based on a vision of hospitality and inclusion, and the idea that social change can come about through building relationships and using tools and labels, such as *Universities of Sanctuary* and *Businesses of Sanctuary* to normalise the vision and demonstrate how people's impulse towards mutuality and providing support for each other can be publicly acknowledged as the right way to proceed.

Finally, solidarity and empowerment. The last two speakers both referred to the words of Martin Luther King: *"You cannot walk alone".* Throughout the conference, the importance of learning from those with lived experience as refugees was emphasised by many – it also closed with another such speaker. Speaking from her own experience, she spoke of how she had been supported to achieve meaningful employment and become a life coach and motivational speaker. Her story underlined once again the importance of support being a two-way process centred on the individual, valuing, and celebrating their skills and attributes, and aimed at empowering them to reach their potential.