



University of Brighton

Refugees into Higher Education - A report from the Health & Social Policy Research Centre at the University of Brighton for the Community University Partnership Programme

Laura Banks & Dee MacDonald - December 2003

Executive Summary

1. Background

In June 2003 the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) of the University of Brighton commissioned research into the needs of refugees in accessing higher education (HE). This research is part of the university's ongoing commitment to 'widening participation' – a central government initiative to attract non-traditional students into HE. A clear objective of the study was to inform appropriate content of an Information Day. The objective of the research was to obtain in-depth information from refugees on their educational background, educational needs and aspirations, information and support services and barriers to accessing and continuing in HE.

The research focused on refugees living in Brighton & Hove but has wider implications for refugees nationally. There was a clear focus on working in collaboration with community partners as part of the project research team, which included 3 local refugee organisations and 2 education providers.

2. Research methods

The research involved a mix of both qualitative and quantitative methods, including:

- semi-structured interviews with 3 community groups and 2 education providers working directly with refugees;
- semi-structured interviews with 18 individual refugees;
- three versions of a short questionnaire to stakeholders, refugees and relevant agencies.

3. Findings

Analysis of the interviews with individual refugees, which attempted to capture something of their individual experiences and needs, indicated four groupings on the basis of age at entry to this country along with level of education/qualifications acquired before entering the UK. The following key points emerged:

- The younger a person is on entering the English education system, the more confident they are likely to feel about their language skills, raising aspirations.
- Information and guidance offered at school and college tended to be lacking in terms of choices relating to long term education or career goals. Advice and support available through

community groups was seen as particularly valuable for those aged over 21 with no family support.

- For those entering directly into Further Education college or 6th form, language support, careers advice and course-related financial information needs to be improved to encourage/facilitate application and progress to HE.
- Many of those who were over 18 on entering the UK had experienced difficulties obtaining clear and accurate information regarding recognition of prior qualifications. Perceived lack of options in terms of refreshing or updating previous learning resulting in lowering of aspirations.
- For those aged 19 or over, concerns were raised regarding the cost of further education and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) courses and the limitations on hours of study if in receipt of state benefits.

The data gathered highlights a severe gap between previous education and qualifications gained in home countries and educational/employment achievement in the UK. In addition, this data raises practical and ethical issues related to monitoring of refugee students.

Barriers to accessing higher education

Through the interviews and questionnaires, a number of barriers were identified. It is recognised that whilst some of these are of particular relevance to refugee students (e.g. standard of English, recognition of previous qualifications), others could relate to all non-traditional students wishing to enter HE.

Chapter 5 outlines the findings under each of the following headings:

- **Finance**
- **Information and guidance**
- **English language**
- **Recognition of qualifications**
- **Childcare / other caring responsibilities**
- **Socio-cultural influences upon attitudes and aspirations towards education**
aspirations and the influence of a refugee community / perceptions of age / perceptions of gender / perceptions of the rewards of education / racism / anxiety and depression

All respondents were asked to make suggestions for addressing the barriers they had identified. The information gathered formed the basis of the final recommendations.

4. Summary of Recommendations

Note: Please refer to the full report for details of each recommendation.

Reference to University in the recommendations relates specifically to the University of Brighton.

1. The University should actively continue to build relationships with community groups and service providers with a view to forming networks and partnerships within Brighton & Hove and other areas of interest in Sussex
2. Through partnership work, the University should identify personnel working with refugees in an advisory capacity and ensure they receive appropriate guidance and training to ensure refugee students understand university application and admissions processes

3. Outreach work undertaken by the university should be sensitive to the needs of potential refugee students
4. Through partnership work, the University and other education providers should explore issues of evidencing and accepting prior learning and produce clear guidelines.
5. Through partnership work and linking with existing projects, the University and other education providers should explore possibility of 'testing' for skills/knowledge where documentary proof of prior qualifications is unavailable.
6. The University should ensure that there is a staff member with responsibility for providing guidance from initial enquiry through to on-course support for refugees.
7. The University should ensure internal student support services are adequately trained with regard to issues related to refugee students, particularly around facilitating access to therapeutic support during studies when necessary.
8. Through partnership work and linking with existing projects, the University and other education providers should develop mentoring schemes relating specifically to the academic experience and educational progression
9. Partners to explore level of provision and appropriateness of local support services with specific reference to therapeutic support.
10. Partners to explore with Sussex Learning and Skills Council (LSC) current local provision of English language qualifications and support, to establish if fit for purpose particularly with regards to level of provision.
11. Partners to explore with Sussex LSC the possibility of increasing ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision and ensure it is timetabled appropriately.
12. Explore in partnership how progression pathways can be eased for students aged 19 plus who wish to access education, paying specific attention to related costs.
13. Partnerships to fully involve those providing careers guidance in order to ensure progression pathways to HE for refugees are fully supported and available to all age groups.
14. The University to explore, and improve where necessary, their recording of information to facilitate monitoring of number of refugee student applications and enrolments.

A full copy of this report is available on the Community University Partnership Programme web site at www.cupp.org.uk

For further information about this report or the Refugees into Higher Education project please contact Cherie Woolmer on (01273) 64 2713 or email c.woolmer@brighton.ac.uk

For further information about the Community University Partnership Programme please contact Elaine McDonnell on (01273) 64 3004 or email e.mcdonnell@brighton.ac.uk