

# Supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Scottish higher and further education



## Background

Initial scoping for the [Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme](#) in 2020 highlighted that one issue high on the agenda for many Scottish higher education institutions is how best to support refugees and asylum seekers, an issue that has since been brought into sharper focus due to developments in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Institutions have adopted different approaches to this issue, informed by their understandings of the needs of their learners, staff, and the communities in which they are based. The purpose of this report is to summarise current practice across the sector and to highlight good practice in order to support institutions seeking to develop approaches and resources. It concludes with pointers to future sector-wide development, and links to organisations and resources that offer support in this area.

## Definitions

The UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as ‘someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion’.<sup>1</sup> In the UK, those with refugee status have the same rights as UK citizens and can apply for indefinite leave to remain after five years.<sup>2</sup>

An asylum seeker is a person who has formally requested asylum in a given country and is awaiting government recognition of their refugee status.<sup>3</sup> In the UK, this can take several years, during which time asylum seekers are usually not permitted to work and are provided with only very basic support.

## Method

This report considers practice at all 19 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland, along with a sample of six colleges selected on the basis of location. Information was gathered through a combination of desk-based research (a scan of institutional websites) and follow-up enquiries to every institution. It is important to emphasise that there is likely to be further institutional practice not captured in this report, particularly in colleges where information was less readily available than HEIs.

## Summary of current practice

### Overall institutional approach

Many institutions include support for refugees and asylum seekers as part of their work in widening participation (WP), and some state this explicitly (for example, mentioning refugees and asylum seekers in lists of characteristics/experience that would qualify an individual for WP support). The University of Dundee, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow School of Art, Scotland’s Rural College, and the University of the West of Scotland are all such examples. However, it is likely that the WP approach is common to almost all institutions, even where not explicitly stated. The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) explicitly includes refugee/asylum seeker status for eligibility,<sup>4</sup> and all Scottish HEIs are partners in the programme with the exception of the Open University in Scotland.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.unhcr.org/uk/3b66c2aa10](http://www.unhcr.org/uk/3b66c2aa10)

<sup>2</sup> [www.gov.uk/settlement-refugee-or-humanitarian-protection/eligibility](http://www.gov.uk/settlement-refugee-or-humanitarian-protection/eligibility)

<sup>3</sup> [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/the-truth-about-asylum](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/the-truth-about-asylum)

<sup>4</sup> [www.scottishwideraccess.org/national-is-swap-for-me](http://www.scottishwideraccess.org/national-is-swap-for-me)

The Open University's approach to access, participation and success (APS) includes 'Recognition of the multiple identities that part-time adult learners present, requiring inclusive approaches to support, based on individual circumstances rather than support as a result of belonging to a particular group'.<sup>5</sup> This approach is in evidence at other institutions, including Glasgow Caledonian University and Scotland's Rural College. Universities Scotland's Guarantee of Fairness when Applying to a University in Scotland<sup>6</sup> is broadly aligned with this approach. The Guarantee was developed by all Scottish HEIs with the exception of the Open University in Scotland and is explicitly referenced by several institutions, including the University of Edinburgh and Queen Margaret University.

Institutions with University of Sanctuary status (University of Edinburgh, University of St Andrews) demonstrate a community approach that brings together learners, staff and members of the wider community who have experience of forced migration: for example, information for current and prospective students may be positioned alongside information about the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA).

The approaches described above are not mutually exclusive and may be combined in different ways within institutions.

## **Admission and pre-admission**

The quality of information available on institutions' public websites is variable, but several institutions have pages dedicated to support for refugees and asylum seekers that are particularly easy to find and clear to read (University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee; University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of St Andrews). Of these pages, some explicitly state that the institution is committed to providing dedicated support to refugees and asylum seekers from the first point of contact and throughout their studies. Several institutions provide named contacts (University of Aberdeen, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, Scotland's Rural College, University of Strathclyde), and Scotland's Rural College consider this support as part of their Corporate Parenting responsibility. A small number of institutions explicitly state that they can offer refugees and asylum seekers specific guidance on entrance requirements (University of Aberdeen, University of Glasgow), and the University of Aberdeen offer campus visits. As stated above, some institutions explicitly state that refugees and asylum seekers qualify for WP status, and several institutions additionally make clear the specific access programmes that are available (University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Glasgow, Glasgow School of Art, University of the West of Scotland). The University of Glasgow further supports asylum seekers applying to its Access Programme by waiving their fee and covering their UCAS fee where applicable. Some institutions additionally make clear that contextualised admissions and adjusted offers are available to refugees and asylum seekers (University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland's Rural College, University of St Andrews).

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[www.open.ac.uk/about/wideningparticipation/sites/www.open.ac.uk.about.wideningparticipation/files/files/APS%20Strategy.pdf](http://www.open.ac.uk/about/wideningparticipation/sites/www.open.ac.uk.about.wideningparticipation/files/files/APS%20Strategy.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Universities-statement-full-with-branding.pdf](http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Universities-statement-full-with-branding.pdf)

## Financial and practical support

The University of Aberdeen and the University of Glasgow explicitly state that they can provide refugees and asylum seekers with advice on financial support, which may include help with making funding applications and registering these learners with 'home' fee status (it should be noted that while this is generally supportive, there are certain circumstances where 'home' status can inhibit access, for example to foundation courses for international students). Aberdeen and Glasgow, along with Glasgow Caledonian University and Robert Gordon University, make specific mention of access to scholarships, bursaries and hardship funds, and Robert Gordon University also offer an exemption from a fee deposit usually required of international students. Some institutions provide scholarships specifically for refugees and asylum seekers (University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, University of Strathclyde).

Securing accommodation can be challenging for refugees and asylum seekers, especially those with families. Little information was available about practical support on offer in this regard, although the University of Aberdeen operates a rental guarantor scheme, and the University of Glasgow's Humanitarian Scholarship for asylum seekers includes accommodation if needed.

The University of Edinburgh's Refugee Advisory Service provides practical support to refugees and asylum seekers, including legal support relating to their status, language support and counselling. Language support is also mentioned by the University of Glasgow (which offers up to 10 free places each year) and Perth College UHI. The University of Glasgow offer laptop loans and the University of Aberdeen offer specific support with careers advice.

City of Glasgow College, Dundee and Angus College, Glasgow Clyde College and Glasgow Kelvin College provide clear information on residency for the purposes of application and finance, access to ESOL English classes, and additional support such as childcare and laptop loans.

## Links to other organisations and wider initiatives

At the time of writing, two Scottish HEIs have University of Sanctuary status (University of Edinburgh, University of St Andrews) and others are working towards this status (University of Aberdeen, Open University). This process requires institutions to demonstrate that, across all levels of their organisation, they are *learning* about sanctuary, *embedding* concepts of welcome, safety and inclusion, and *sharing* learning and good practice.<sup>7</sup> At the University of Aberdeen, the development of an institutional community of practice and the coordination of student support are supporting the process of working towards University of Sanctuary status.

Several institutions explicitly state that they have links with CARA (University of Aberdeen, Abertay University, University of Edinburgh, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling). On a local level, institutions work with various authorities and initiatives to support refugees and asylum seekers, such as the University of Aberdeen's links with the Grampian Regional Equality Forum and the University of Strathclyde's links with the Bridges Programme. Many institutions and students' associations also participate in Refugee Week each year, taking the opportunity to raise awareness of some of the issues facing those with experience of forced migration.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/68/2021/08/Guidance-notes-and-Minimum-Criteria-to-accompany-UoS-award-application-April-2019.pdf>

## Specific examples of good practice

- The University of Aberdeen's University of Sanctuary Working Group and its developing community of practice are facilitating a more joined-up approach to supporting refugees and asylum seekers.
- The University of Edinburgh's Refugee Advisory Service provides a central hub to support refugees and asylum seekers. The institution is conducting research to learn more about the experience of students with experience of forced migration.
- The University of Glasgow offers a fee waiver for asylum seekers on its access programme and will also cover UCAS fees for these students. The University's Humanitarian Scholarship has two streams - one for asylum seekers (full fee waiver, accommodation if needed, and £5,000 to help with study costs) and one for refugees (£2,500 for study costs per year of the degree). Both undergraduate and postgraduate courses are eligible, but some courses are excluded.
- Glasgow Caledonian University is leading the Skills Recognition Scotland project, which is aiming to develop a national process for migrant skills recognition in Scotland.
- Glasgow Clyde College and City of Glasgow College were partners in the Scottish Government-funded New Refugee Doctors Project, providing English language training for refugee doctors.
- Glasgow Clyde College was a partner in the ESOL 16+ Programme, a project that aimed to improve the education of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. This took a holistic approach, addressing gaps in knowledge of key subjects as well as offering pastoral care and teaching English as a second language.
- The University of St Andrews' Refugee and Forced Mobility Network has supported the development of institutional strategy and policy for academics at risk, and a resource hub for current support, projects, research and teaching relating to refugees and forced mobility. This approach was catalysed by the University of Sanctuary application process and was strongly supported by senior management.
- The University of Strathclyde match students who have experienced forced migration with fully trained and supported volunteer mentors, and have found that this approach - in combination with its scholarships - has had a positive impact. The institution also has a specific scholarship for asylum seekers which covers fees and study-related expenditure and is designed to avoid jeopardising any entitlement to Home Office Support. The institution has now partnered with the Carnegie Trust to extend the capacity of the scholarship programme.

## Pointers for future sector-wide development

- A key challenge across the sector is the differing capacity of institutions to offer support. It would be worth exploring whether certain types of support - for example, English language teaching bursaries - might be pooled, to ensure that any places not used by one institution can be used by another.
- Smaller institutions may be able to respond more quickly to legislative and policy changes, but would still benefit from stronger networking to ensure that information can be shared efficiently across the sector. The developing Practitioners' Network may help to facilitate this.
- Links between HEIs and colleges could be strengthened in order to ensure that learners with experience of forced migration are fully supported.
- A further challenge is to ensure that scholarship holders across Scotland are aware of opportunities for professional networking and career development. This needs to be handled sensitively to avoid scholarship holders feeling that they are being singled out.

## Useful links

- [CARA \(Council for At-Risk Academics\)](#)
- [Refugee Education UK](#)
- [Scholars At Risk Network](#)
- [Scottish Refugee Council](#)
- [Student Action for Refugees \(STAR\)](#)
- [UCAS HE Provider Good Practice Briefing for Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Students with Limited Leave to Remain](#)
- [Universities of Sanctuary](#)
- [Universities Scotland: Refugees Welcome](#)

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