Third sector support in access to higher education for refugees in Ireland – chances of new forms for collaboration between civil society, universities and newcomers

Nina Lueck
Sutherland School of Law, University College Dublin, Ireland
nina.c.lueck@gmail.com

Abstract
This article analyses the situation of refugees in Ireland when they are at third level institutions, and it examines the process of accessing universities and colleges. The article illustrates the support mechanisms refugee students can avail of, and how charitable organisations and volunteers can facilitate both the enrollment process, and the study conditions for students with a flight narrative. It also questions our binary notions of refugees. 51 problem-centred interviews (Witzel and Reiter) were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis. Based on Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss), the paper acknowledges the diversity of interviewees and uses the data analysis for inductive reasoning regarding the necessity of future research into tailored support for refugee students. The interview analysis provides the basis of a Forum Theatre Play (Boal) which has been written in a collaborative playwriting process. Instead of writing about research participants, there is true account of their narratives. The paper concludes by highlighting the merit refugee students bring to the academic community, and to their host society. It informs about necessary policy changes and the need for enhanced support mechanisms by charities, universities, and communities during refugees’ educational journey.

Key words: refugees, charities, access to higher education, collaborative playwriting, Forum Theatre

I. Introduction

Only 3% of refugees have access to higher education in Ireland compared to 37% globally, according to the United Nation’s refugee agency (UNHCR). This article provides an account of how civil society supports access to higher education for refugees in Ireland. It challenges our binary notions of refugees by illustrating individual narratives. By overcoming the “othering” of refugee students, it serves as an appeal for civil society and the academic community to realise the benefits of access to higher education for them. With this access comes an integration into third level education, thereby creating the added benefit of easier integration into the labour market.

This article stems from research under the EU Horizon 2020 project “HEforRForum – Access to higher education for refugees in Ireland and Germany – a Forum Theatre approach”. The project, which was funded between autumn 2019 and autumn 2021 by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Intra-European Standard Fellowship, uses an

innovative mix of methodologies such as combining problem-centred interviews (Witzel / Reiter) with a strong narrative element, providing a thematic analysis of the work (Braun / Clarke), and allowing collaborative playwriting of a Forum Theatre play (Boal), which involves the staging of young people’s lived experience (as newcomers to Ireland) in being excluded or included from the higher education system.

Asylum seekers and refugees who are strong enough to come to Ireland often display a lot of potential and a willingness to contribute to Irish society. Ireland has developed enormously in the last decades in terms of demographics and adaptability. It is amongst the youngest countries in Europe. It has an education system that is often praised for its quality, and the flexibility of its labour market is almost unprecedented within the EU. However, those at the margins of Irish society do not necessarily benefit from these advantages. Asylum seekers often face living conditions that are not in line with Ireland’s international and EU obligations, as well as its own domestic legal standards. Trying to access higher education poses challenges for refugees. These difficulties range from eligibility for higher education and funding, to financial, logistical and emotional support while being a student with a flight narrative.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused additional barriers to studying remotely. Unsuitable conditions in direct provision such as room-sharing and no access to laptops, workstations or a quiet room are just some of the incremental challenges for refugee students affected by the pandemic.

In this article’s conclusions, the potential for further cooperation between the third sector and public authorities are shown. The steps Ireland has taken to provide for access to its tertiary system are summarised and recognised. The concluding remarks also show what further steps are necessary, in order to ensure that the tremendous potential refugee students have, as well as the assets they bring to society, are not all lost in financial and non-financial barriers. This includes the barrier of direct provision, which is a dehumanising system, both for students and for all other residents alike.

Alongside humane living conditions, access to education is key to ensure not only integration, but also agency, empowerment and participation, which are crucial for the benefit of the “receiving” or host society.

Charities and non-governmental organisations together with key actors from universities, have improved the accessibility to third level education for refugees. The Places / Cities of Sanctuary Movement\(^9\) which spilled over to universities and colleges, illustrate one example of such activity. They are committed to supporting international protection applicants in accessing third level education.

**III. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This article draws findings from problem-centred / narrative interviews with 51 students and aspiring students. The interviews were conducted between February 2020 and August 2020, and they encountered a dualistic setting. While one third of the interviews took place on a face-to-face basis on campus, the remaining two thirds had to be conducted remotely, due to the long nationwide lockdown in Ireland\(^10\) and two regional lockdowns for County Kildare and County Dublin\(^11\).

The problem-centred interviews with a strong narrative element lasted between 45 and 120 minutes each.\(^12\) They were flanked by interviews with charitable organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)\(^13\), which provide support for newcomers who would like to access education. Knowledge gained through data collection and evaluation were organised in an inductive-deductive mutual relationship. The concept of problem-centred interviews borrows from the theory-generating procedures of grounded theory established by Glaser and Strauss.\(^14\) The four instruments used for the problem-centred interview are a short questionnaire, interview guidelines, tape recordings and a postscript. Interviews were conducted in the English language and followed the interview guidelines. Each interview was transcribed.

The data was then analysed in a comparative and systematic way using Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis.\(^15\) To this end, each interview was coded by a multi-level procedure. Following the themes that emerged from the coding process, a Forum Theatre play was written in a collaborative playwriting process. The link between the interview analysis and the play provided for an engaged approach from all involved, as it focuses on collaboration between refugees, asylum seekers, non-profit organisations and colleges / universities, and it furthermore ensures agency by providing a safe and

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\(^10\) The first nationwide Ireland Lockdown lasted from March 12 until May 5, 2020.
\(^11\) The lockdown in County Kildare lasted from 7.8.-31.08.20. While for Dublin City a lockdown was not formally announced, only essential travel was allowed. Until the date, travel within Ireland is restricted to what is deemed “essential”.
\(^12\) Witzel and Reiter (n 2); Elliot G Mishler, ‘Narrative and Identity: The Double Arrow of Time’ in Anna De Fina, Deborah Schiffrin and Michael Bamberg (eds), Discourse and Identity (Cambridge University Press 2006).
\(^13\) Those organisations were, alongside numerous small local charities and community initiatives, the Irish Refugee Council (IRC), the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI), the Immigrant Council of Ireland, Doras which is Limerick based and NASC; and the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre in Cork.
\(^15\) Braun and Clarke (n 3).
pleasant space for storytelling, thus ensuring the research can have its maximum impact. The mixed methodology can ensure a genuine societal impact by empowering and contributing to capacity building within the third sector landscape, within the refugee community, and within the higher education institutions. Refugee students are able to bring to the public some of the narrative themes of displacement, arrival, finding a new home, aspirations and hopes for their education and professional future within the theoretical framework of *Grounded Theory* and Freire’s *Pedagogy of Liberation* and *Critical Pedagogy*. Like Boal, Freire analysed and de-constructed oppression. His *Pedagogy of Liberation* assists students to develop consciousness of freedom, recognise authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and ability to take constructive action. *Boal’s Forum Theatre* is one form of taking such action as it transforms the theatre audience from spectators to *Spect-Actors* by inviting them on stage, replacing the protagonist who faces oppression, and thereby altering the plot.

The described methodology mix (problem-centred interviews, storytelling, collaborative playwriting from the interview analysis) within the theoretical framework of *Grounded Theory* and *Pedagogy of Liberation* meant an involvement approach whilst ensuring empowering, agency and social action for change.

**IV. Literature Review**

There is extensive research on access to higher education for refugees, in particular in relation to non-EU countries. There is also some relatively recent research on access to third level education for refugees and asylum seekers in EU countries and the UK.  

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17 UN High Commissioner for Refugees, ‘UNHCR Agenda for the Integration of Refugees in Central Europe’ (UNHCR, April 2009) <www.refworld.org/docid/4bfe72542.htm> accessed 28 August 2021; Anna-Lena Claeyς-Kulik, Thomas Ekman Jørgensen and Henriette Stöber, ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions: Results from the INVITED Project’ (European University Association 2019); European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Integration of Young*
but very little information, let alone research, for Ireland in particular. Existing scholarship tends to focus on information barriers, policy analysis and considerations, and, more frequently, the gender dimension. This article gives voice to current and prospective refugee students who talk about the effect that inclusion and exclusion from third level education has on them. This includes factors such as their careers, their mental health, and their overall well-being. This article also shows that the frequently cited shrinking space for civil society is in fact a changing space. Soft law and its flanking categories amount to this changing space. Third sector actors must use it distinctly and courageously to form new collaborative partnerships that combine intercommunity dialogue and the multi-dimensional process of integration.


19 Adam Pickering and others, ‘The Shrinking Space for Civil Society: Philanthropic Perspectives From Across the Globe’ (European Foundation Centre (EFC) 2016).
V. Interview Analysis

1. Overview

As the pandemic hit Europe at the beginning of the year and consequently caused European lockdowns, the interviews are divided into a pre-pandemic and in-pandemic phase. In terms of coding the interviews, this primary research reveals a binary context concerning barriers for refugee and asylum seeker students. While pre-Covid participants faced huge issues with the cost and duration of public transport between the accommodation centre and their universities, and subsequent problems such as missing out on meals and a lack of sleep\(^\text{20}\), the pandemic posed a new set of barriers for refugee students. The large majority of participants who lived in direct provision at the time of the interviews lacked proper study equipment to join the transition to online lectures and tutorials. Most participants had a (pre-paid) mobile phone of their own, but no laptop. Private initiatives and fundraising by charities to organise laptops for residents in direct provision did happen. These initiatives are still ongoing as of today,\(^\text{21}\) but they could not make up for the government’s failure to act fast for residents in direct provision. As late as autumn 2021 interviewees still shared rooms with more than one person. Suitable study conditions in direct provision are generally non-existent. There are hardly any quiet rooms such as a library where students can read and study, and there is an inherent tension when a student needs to follow online lectures while a roommate who is not pursuing a degree does not. Other challenges caused by the pandemic are the lack of opportunity to socially / physically distance in direct provision and the lack of hygienic measures. This occurrence still applies as of today in many hostels.\(^\text{22}\)

2. Problem-Centred Interviews

a. Recruitment, Sample, Scheduling, Duration

Several channels were used to recruit participants. The interviews were coded and analysed in a systematic way, using *Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis*\(^\text{23}\).

The transcribed material was used to write a *Forum Theatre (Boal)* play about exclusion from and access to higher education in Ireland for refugees and asylum seekers. The play was written in a collaborative playwriting process with 14 participants who

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\(^{20}\) Many participants have reported falling asleep during classes due to sleep deprivation. Two participants reported that they feel asleep during an exam.

\(^{21}\) For example, *Windows4Opportunity*. *Windows4Opportunity* is a powerhouse of charities and organisations with one common goal, providing access to education for people living in direct provision. Their aim is to provide laptops to people living in direct provision whose opportunity to avail of an education has been stunted by their circumstances & lack of access to technology. Further information can be found at: https://recruitrefugeesireland.com/windows-4-opportunity/ (last accessed on 10/06/2021)


\(^{23}\) *Braun and Clarke* (n 3).
volunteered to get involved in the writing process. The play is entitled “Food or Thought”. Theatre workshops and the play had to be rescheduled due to the pandemic.

Participants were invited to use a stage name, which appeared on all documentation. The key to the real names is password protected. A large majority of interviewees made use of their stage name, in particular those who had spoken out against their treatment in direct provision and who had consequently faced maltreatment by hostel management.

“It has been really challenging, especially when I’ve been more involved in activism and speaking out against direct provision. So sometimes you become a target for some of the management. So like in my previous hostel I was kind of like, every time, looking for small, small things to kind of victimise you or try to single you out in an incident. So it is always like you have to keep your head within the rules, and sometimes some of these rules don’t make sense.” (Nano)

“Direct provision is a slow death for us. Sometimes I think I would rather take a bullet to my head than die the slow death. I am strong and I am resilient, but many of my friends are not able to cope. I have lost three friends to suicide already.” (Cassandra)

b. Countries of Origin and Age Structure

The 51 interviewees came from the following countries: Malawi, Kenya, Syria, Nigeria, Uganda, India, Zimbabwe, Angola, Iran, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Rwanda, and Lesotho, with a dominance from Zimbabwe, Burundi, Uganda and Nigeria.

The age structure was diverse, the youngest interviewee being 16 years of age at the time of the interview and in transition year at an Irish secondary school. The oldest interviewee was 62 years of age and pursuing a course at University College Dublin. The average age was 27.6 years. What all interviewees had in common was that there was “never a plan to leave home”, as one interviewee described. She had been asked by her mother to pack one suitcase after her dad had announced it was time to get married. At the time the respondent was 11 years of age. In all cases respondents were forced to leave their country by political or personal circumstances, which meant that they had a fear for their life.

“I actually never heard of Ireland. I didn’t know anything at all. My Mam did everything, and then she just came the last, at the last day and gave me all the paperwork and the passport. She had done everything. I only knew I was coming to Ireland at the airport, and I had never heard of the country Ireland, so I just had to. She gave me a paper and read it about it and what I’m going to do and all that. (Maria)

c. Languages

When I arrived in Ireland, I was completely English-less. (Eric)

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24 The Transition Year (TY) is a one-year programme taken after Junior Cycle and before the two-year Leaving Certificate programme. The youngest participant came to Ireland within the family reunification scheme. His dad had been living in Direct Provision for more than ten years.
It was really difficult cause of the language first, getting used to the accent as well. Yeah and the way people here behave, like teenagers. It’s not the same as back in my country, so I had to get used to it. Yeah, and learned the language mostly. (Ceasar)

I think the biggest challenge was, you know, the English. You know, as a no English speaker, it was hard to get the level. You know, to be able to have the level required to attend a college. So you had to do a lot of exams, a lot of yeah... So that’s why I say, probably, that was the biggest challenge to attend the college, to get the level required, you know, to the English level required to get to my own college. (Simba)

The large majority of interviewees had little or no English when arriving in Ireland. Consequently, many of them struggled when filling out forms, both concerning their status and when seeking to obtain legal representation. The language obstacle is a common theme that runs through the life of the interviewees once they arrive in Ireland. Prior studies have shown that students with a refugee background, who do not speak English as their first language, are significantly constrained both in their access to higher education and in navigating through the academic year. Many participants reported a common issue that anyone who has ever learned a foreign language would have experienced. When being “exposed” to this new language without interruption in a country where the language is spoken, it is not only challenging, it is also tiring. There are neuro-vascular reasons for this: Broca’s area in the left frontal lobe of the brain is in constant attention mode, which has physical and psychological repercussions.

The language barrier also influences the use of online resources, which are part and parcel of today’s application and enrolment process into higher education. Language barriers cause information barriers, in particular in relation to “cold knowledge” and “hot knowledge”. Whereas “cold knowledge” is gained through officially provided information by universities, colleges, and the Central Applications’ Office (CAO), hot knowledge is gained through social networks and through “the grapevine”. It is often perceived as more reliable, as it stems from direct experience of peers.

In English, I cannot remember some words. This English all day, I suffer from memory loss and daily migraine. (Saeed)

Participants reported that it was a great relief if they occasionally could speak in their first language, which again, any foreign language learners can relate to.

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25 For Ireland, a qualitative study (Harris and Chonaill) provides an analysis of obstacle faced by migrant students whose first language is not English. For the US, there are two studies (Kanno and Varghese; and Andrade) which illustrate the effects of language barriers and the tailored support that is needed. Harris and Chonaill (n 25); Yasuko Kanno and Manka M Varghese, ‘Immigrant and Refugee ESL Students’ Challenges to Accessing Four-Year College Education: From Language Policy to Educational Policy’ (2010) 9 Journal of Language, Identity & Education 310; Maureen Snow Andrade, ‘International Students in English-Speaking Universities: Adjustment Factors’ (2006) 5 Journal of Research in International Education 131.


27 Such as, for example, manuals, booklets, guides and webpages.


29 The first languages participants spoke were: Chichewa, Shona, Kirundi, Portuguese, Farsi, Swahili, Ndebele, Arabic, Rwandan, French, Yoruba, Hindi, Kikuyu.
It is great for me to speak in my first language because I can explain everything better. (Arturo)

The language barrier is one side of the coin. The other side is that once respondents were given the chance to enter English classes and could improve their language skills, the speed and the endurance with which they learn is very impressive. Respondents who had been in Ireland for more than two years had excellent English skills, often in addition to two other languages. A common feature is that those who struggle the least to pick up a new language are children and teenagers. This is particularly true if they either learned another language at school in their country of origin, or if they had to learn another language during their flight.

Moving around has taught me a lot. Plus, I learned a lot more languages cause I’m usually good with languages. I can learn them easily. (Tom)

For any society, bi- and multilingual citizens are an asset. Together with their first and second language, they bring along the culture that is expressed in these languages, and they enrich the host society.

d. Qualification of Participants from Home Countries

The educational and professional background of participants was very high in most cases. The majority of participants were enrolled in universities, pursuing a degree, or had graduated from a university with a bachelor or masters degree. A few participants had worked in academia. Most of them had jobs, and only a tiny percentage had no equivalent of the leaving certificate or university degree.

The wide spectrum of professions from participants ranged from those who left their home country while studying for their leaving certificate, to employees with a university degree, PhD students and university lecturers, to accountants, and registered surveyors and analysts, to self-employed business people. The interviewees’ schools, degrees or professional backgrounds were as follows: IT / system integrator (2x), accounting diploma (2x), masters in maths and stats analysis, professional dancer and choreographer, assistant at administration, law student (4x), medical representative for a pharmaceutical company, salesman, bachelor in psychiatric nursing degree, self-employed (5x), owner of a garage, Pitman Certificate and basic office practice, graduate from paramedical school, degree holder in medical nutrition therapy and public health, degree holder MBA, PhD student (3x), holder of diploma in software engineering, street artist, holder of diploma in social care, housewife (2x), cinema employee, degree holder in education, degree in accounting, degree holder of library information science, owner of a pharmacy, MA degree holder in town and regional planning, urban planner for government, research assistant (3x), author, degree holder in theology, registered quantity surveyor, architect, university lecturer (4x), lawyer specialised in criminal law, and secondary school pupil (several times).

It is thus evident that participants bring a wealth of experience, skills and languages to Ireland, which is for the benefit of Irish society. As research participants come from

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very different academic backgrounds, they need time to adjust, and they sometimes struggle to decipher academic conventions and new learning styles. This goes along with a devaluation of their prior academic achievements and degrees. The often described “non-recognition” of prior qualifications and the de-skilling process of highly qualified immigrants during the asylum process is hugely problematic,31 and from an Irish perspective, an act of economic self-harm to enriching existing capital.32

Because for any profession you need continued professional development, but in asylum I couldn’t do that. So that is why it was hard. When I got out of the system, so it was not as easy as I thought it would be to get a job, and that is the reason I decided to get back to education.(Ruby)

The recognition of the equivalent to leaving certificates or university degrees from their home countries often poses huge burdens on prospective students. They either cannot present the documents they are being asked for by public authorities due to their flight narrative, or when they can, non-EU qualifications are not recognised in Ireland. This also means limitations placed on access to paid jobs in order to support themselves.33

It’s very important for me to do this course, because my certificate that I got from Uganda does not apply, so I cannot work in Ireland, and also a reason because the curriculum that I did is not the same curriculum that Ireland has here. So then, the other thing is I’ve always wanted to become a nurse so...I also applied to CAO so I want to get a degree in psychiatric nursing. (Olive)

3. Flight Narrative

a. Mental and Physical Health

I feel so non-existent. (Time)

The flight narratives of research participants are as individually unique as their personal and professional backgrounds. It ranges from escaping a child marriage, escaping from sexual and physical abuse, journeying through several countries, being disowned by family members, to having to resort to catching a flight to Dublin to save their lives.

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32 Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Continuum 1999).

Some participants faced political or religious persecution. Others were persecuted for activism and speaking out on environmental protection. Many participants volunteered, which was the cause for being persecuted by public authorities. Some participants faced oppression because of their gender or sexual orientation. Other interviewees fled war and tribal conflicts. Very frequently, it became obvious that living in direct provision led to the reinforcement of mental distress and trauma. It prevented interviewees from healing. Also, studying with or in spite of PTSS, anxiety or depression, leaves students with an additional burden. This can amount to a large barrier, as the psychological support that students can seek via central services at universities does not have the staff capacity to deal with severe forms of PTSS in the right frequency and intensity. Tailored support needs to be established.

I came... you know like I would not go through that process, because it is something I don’t want to remember again. It brings back my stress you know. I feel like I’m dead. I keep trying, keep trying. I cried, I do whatever, I pull myself, it is not working. After seeing a therapy doctor, I still come back to my shadows you know. (Time)

It is not only the mental health that is neglected in direct provision. Most research participants reported no access to necessary medicine, to medical cards, or access to GPs and hospitals.

Some participants left their home country at a very young age with the help of a relative or friend, such as Maria, who was escaping child marriage when heading for Ireland.

So basically, my Mum helped me to come here, and I was escaping from my Dad. My Dad put me into marriage, and then I was there for a few months, and after that I went and stayed with my auntie, and then after that I was taken to my Mum’s friend...and then I had to escape, so my Mum had to hide me somewhere no one knew. (Maria)

A large number of participants reported overthinking and depression. It is also important to note that the majority of interviewees are afraid to accept professional help, be it for cultural reasons or for anxiety.

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And I feel like if I share, like I’m scared, they make bullying or something like that. So I prefer keep everything to myself. (Umanuela)

Morrice rightly notes that the refugee identity is generally disparaged, which aggravates generating self-respect and dignity. She uses Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” to describe that refugee students’ identities generate distinction and exclusion.

b. Status and Legal Representation

Unfortunately my solicitor didn’t turn up. (Anthony)

Living in direct provision is characterised with excessive waiting times for official decisions to be made. International protection applicants face lengthy, bureaucratic procedures concerning their status, which have been even more extended due to the pandemic. For students or prospective students, this often means that they face a double uncertainty about their future. They have neither certainty about their legal status, nor about their educational future.

Ireland has a legal aid regime designed to support those who cannot afford legal representation by themselves. Only a very small percentage of participants arranged legal representation independently. The Legal Aid Board (LAB) has to process around 3,500 new cases each year and is not sufficiently staffed to deal with the ever growing backlog. During the interviews it became apparent that legal representation varies hugely in quality and commitment from case to case. Some participants reported that they felt neglected by their legal representatives. Others were satisfied. Interviewees who were directly connected to legal representation by the Irish Refugee Council were very content with the legal advice they received. All participants drew attention to the fact that the legal representation was limited to the asylum procedure and their status decision, and would not go beyond this. If, for instance, an interviewee had been offered a Cothrom na Féinne Scholarship to study at University College Dublin, but lived in Direct Provision in Galway, the request to transfer to a hostel nearer to UCD for educational reasons would not be something the legal aid lawyer would help with.

There is one assigned to me by Legal Aid. Yeah there is one I think. But it is specifically for my international protection case, nothing more. It’s specifically for that. So for any other issues that I may bump in, they are not available for that. (TheiDikondo)

I had a legal aid lawyer but she was no help. So I got myself a private lawyer. (Arturo)

36 Morrice (n 7) 666.
39 ibid 11.
An additional burden for participants is that they report the lack of transparency in decision making in almost every aspect of their life, but in particular by public authorities and private companies who run direct provision centres. Apart from arbitrary and non-transparent decision-making, the lack of communication by public authorities, and sometimes even by their own legal representatives, was cause for concern. Accounts of how their legal representatives communicated with them, or if they communicated at all, greatly differed.

Because the scope of legal representation is limited to the status decision, interviewees often have to sort out getting access to healthcare and GP visits by themselves. In the same way that they have to request a transfer of accommodation for educational reasons. Even though charities such as the Irish Refugee Council, MASI and DORAS often serve as a first port of call for international protection applicants in medical, educational and vocational questions, this still cannot shield the fact that there is no robust state system in place to provide the very basic health services. This is particularly critical for participants with mental health issues, such as PTSD and depression, and for participants who faced physical and/or psychological abuse.

I have nights I would wake up with tears in my eyes. I would pray. I would pause trying to think where, if things don’t work out, and what could I tell my kids, because even us moving here you know, even as a parent, you find yourself making a difficult decision. (Charity)

4. University Life for Refugee Students

In analysing the 51 problem-centred interviews, a picture emerged of what it is like to be a student with a flight narrative. The following section deals with themes that can be identified and linked in various ways. Firstly, it became apparent that a social network is key to settling in and succeeding at university. Secondly, in looking at the access process and support mechanisms, including social networks by charities (thirdly), such as the Irish Refugee Council, and by university staff, it becomes clear that these are essential factors in encouraging participants to join a degree programme in spite of financial, logistical and emotional barriers. A fourth paragraph looks at the prevalent theme of volunteering, which a large majority of interviewees have participated in themselves. Fifthly, narratives of feeling included in, or excluded from university life are analysed. Studying from and in direct provision is another section that deserves to be scrutinised. Lastly, the issue of finances and transport will be examined.

Part VI. is dedicated to the challenges arising from Covid-19. The final part (VII.) gives voice to participants dreams and aspirations for their future lives, before illustrating the assets of integration into higher education. The article will finish with its concluding remarks.

a. Family and Friends / Social Network

My husband and my third daughter are not with us and that hurts. (A, mother of three)

41 The Irish Government has identified the need to abandon the private-run system and switch to a publicly funded system of accommodation for applicants of international protection applicants. See Government of Ireland (n 48).
My mother… me and her we are close, really close. We were really close together so she cannot, sometimes yeah. I don’t want to think about these things now. (Saeed)

I have friends but I prefer to stay alone. I stay alone most of the time. (Umanuela)

Some participants who had to leave family members during or before their flight narrative, be it children, siblings or parents, were struggling with the lack of direct emotional support in the enrolment process or while at university. It is therefore all the more pivotal that university staff are a first port of call, both for administrative issues and for academic matters. Luckily, the majority of students experienced enormous support from student advisers and their lecturers, and a personal relationship had been built up during the enrolment process and as the academic year progressed. Many interviewees who came to Ireland without family members reported the dependency on a functioning phone and stable internet connection, which can be accessed on campus, but not necessarily in direct provision. Quite a few students struggled with the financial and emotional burden to support family members in home countries.

Privacy remains an issue for participants who share rooms. For participants who arrived in Ireland with family members, their support was crucial when navigating the first weeks and months in Irish higher education. On campus, the picture is ambivalent. About one third of the interviewees connected to other students, including Irish students, while another third preferred to keep completely to themselves. Another third described how they formed social bubbles with fellow students from their home countries, such as Olile who revealed that she mainly connects with fellow Zimbabweans at her university.

All aspects that deal with the social network were grouped under “family” and “friends”. This thematic group is pivotal, as living in direct provision while being a (prospective) student requires not only financial and logistical backing, but also emotional support. The interviews revealed that those participants who had close contacts with either family members (in Ireland or in their country of origin), or with friends, are able to master their personal situation better and can navigate the multifaceted barriers to higher education with greater resilience.

I have, I have a few friends. Like, I’m a shy person and I’m not really like social...I was always scared to go out and... yeah but I have like, I have a few friends, I have Philippian friends, Nigerian friends and Irish friends. (Princess)

As for keeping in touch with family at home, the result was split. In roughly half of the cases, students had family in their country of origin, but faced communication problems of a technical or monetary nature. In the other half of cases, the family setting was a reason to leave, especially in the case of violence by family members against the participants.

Marriage was arranged for me at 16 by my dad. I escaped from him with the help of my mum. I now have contact with my mum and siblings on the phone. (Aida)
In cases where the family setting in their country of origin was not the reason to leave, bonds have remained close, and participants suffer because of the separation. A few participants have applied for family unification and are awaiting the decision.

*The only thing I want to change is bringing my mum here.* (Tom)

*My brother is a bit lost here (in DP). My sister back home is growing up without dad.* (Hussein)

*When I left my kids they were babies. Now they are teenagers.* (Peter)

Equally, half of the participants described making friends and socialising with other students, while students also reported not socialising for various reasons. These reasons for wanting to be on their own include feeling ashamed of living in direct provision, lack of trust in people, struggling with being in another country with uncertain status, and trying to concentrate on studies and passing exams. The construction of a refugee identity is often accompanied with low self-respect and a diminished feeling of worthiness.\(^{42}\) Living in direct provision, and being ashamed of it, adds to this form of “othering”.

*I made friend at college. It was easy because my classmates were so outgoing, so we would chat and you know have free time to talk to each other. So the college organised outings. So we went two times for outings, so we got a lot of time to interact and get to know one another. Yeah….*(Olive)

*There is a difficulty in trust issues, cause yeah you meet these people, you don’t know them much, and so it would be hard to trust them a lot… Yeah, and due to the situation that we all live in, it’s hard to trust each other.* (Anthony)

*I don’t believe in trust anymore, because I come through a lot of stress here.* (Time)

**b. Access Process**

There is no automatic access to third level education in Ireland. International protection applicants might be asked to cover the fees as international students, which are substantially higher than for EU students. They might get a fee waiver, or they might obtain private grants and scholarships. Students are able to access state funded student schemes, such as Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), if they fulfil certain criteria\(^{43}\) or the student support scheme\(^{44}\). Some Irish universities run one-year preparatory courses that are funded (Foundation Access Course). All Irish Universities (and a few colleges) offer Sanctuary Scholarships to international protection applicants. In any case, the information about how, where and when to enrol is difficult to navigate in, or from direct provision. In cases where interviewees had friends or family members who had already managed to access third level education, word of mouth information and support proved beneficial to prospective students. In general, navigating

\(^{42}\) Morrice (n 7).

\(^{43}\) International protection applicants are eligible when they have obtained refugee status, subsidiary protection, or permission to remain.

\(^{44}\) For students who are in the international protection process and who have not received a deportation order.
educational pathways and entry requirements has proven to be a huge barrier for respondents when starting their educational journey in Ireland. Understanding the different levels of education and access possibilities are confusing for newcomers. It is all the more vital that charities, such as the Irish Refugee Council, publish free downloadable material on their webpage, such as the education booklet that is revised every academic year. This booklet helps prospective students to navigate access to colleges and universities and to explore funding options. The personal support by family members, friends, volunteers and charity and university staff is nonetheless the most vital aspect.

*My two siblings study at UL*. My dad went to UL. It is a family tradition by now. *(Tom)*

*It was not easy to understand the application. I had help from someone who was already enrolled at UCD under sanctuary programme (masters).* (Mandy)

*I had a lot of support from teachers and coordinators, passed level 5 with merit and 6 distinctions. For uni enrollment I had support from friend who enrolled before and knew the process.* (Maria)

*Every time I needed support, C (name of university staff member) was there.* *(Priscilla)*

Participants who were interested in a particular course or subject, at a particular university, also reported that having a dedicated contact person in the University, such as student advisers, helped a lot to navigate the access hurdles.

*Like I have been in close contact with T (name of university staff member), and I just spoke to him today, and like I speak to him very often and emails and everything.* *(Hussein)*

Some interviewees found it difficult to figure out that for undergraduate studies, the place for university was applied for via the Central Application Office (CAO), whereas the scholarship application was a distinct application made to the university directly.

The interviews demonstrated that students with a background in international protection application were extremely resilient and coping well with hurdles, such as expensive transport and a very long distance to travel between their hostel and their university. Some interviewees had tried to transfer accommodation for education reasons, but the decision on the feasibility of transfer is entirely arbitrary, and there are no clear rules or guidelines. Throughout the interviews, it became obvious that, for instance, a student living in direct provision in Dublin, had to organise travelling to a college in the West of Ireland, whereas another interviewee from Limerick had to travel to their Dublin University to attend lectures. Both students were denied changing accommodation in exactly the same month. For both students it meant an additional and unnecessary hardship to tackle the transport issue.

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45 University of Limerick
When I got on the access course I was still in Dublin. They transferred me to Kerry. So I requested for a transfer. They got back to me. They said nobody is forcing you to stay in direct provision or anything. So if you like, you may leave. Just provide us with new address, but for transfer, forget it. They just... the centres are full. But they tell you the centres are full, but each and every day you will see people getting transferred. (Lawrence)

There is also a correlation between managing the entire enrolment procedure and attending classes, improving knowledge or passing exams. The overall mastery of student life brings back agency and self-determination to interviewees. It improves their self-esteem and fosters their healing process.

This make me to learn me and also help me to speak English, because I can see myself improvement since I started going to college. Before I go to college I felt it wasn’t enough for me, and I decided to go to college and I can see myself a big improvement.(Umanuela)

As for the study experience, being a student has a healing effect on participants:

I would say for me I’d say going to uni means more than just going to college and advancing myself, and you know. It means I get to have a sense of community. I would say that is the only time I get a sense of community, a place whereby I don’t have to feel like an asylum seeker. It is the only place where I get to be a student. (Priscilla)

So I was really happy the first time. I was very happy because the students, the teachers were really really welcoming and actually caring like if you need something they tell you, you don’t have to keep quiet, you let us know like. There were a lot of care and I really loved that, and also the students were very very nice, very nice to me. (Nancy)

c. Support from the Voluntary Sector

There was a time I had to go to St. Vincent’s to ask for help. (Michelle)

This Irish npo helped me to enrol into college. (Simba)

Where K.(name of volunteer) works they are kind of an exception, because you know life happens and life is a journey, you meet people, all kinds of people, but I will say like I have been so blessed that people that I have met along the way, they are good people and they really really encouraged me, they listened to me, they know where I’m coming from. They really really understand me. Do you know that kind of a way. So yes, and K’s organisation is something like that. I am women’s link person you find, like everything about me is women’s link, from childcare to life to support, it’s them. They are the path of my journey. Like even when I am kind of, I can’t really, I don’t think I can do this, they are kind of like yes you can. They’re kind of like my cheering team, you know, so they’ve been very very supportive even when I was at home. (Bukola)

My lawyer is from the Irish Refugee Council. (R)
The support students have received from charities such as the Irish Refugee Council (IRC), NASC, Immigration Council, the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (Masi), Doras in Limerick, the Immigrant Council of Ireland, St. Vincent's, Recruit Refugees Ireland, along with many others including small community initiatives, can only be described as an asset that Ireland can be very proud of. Both on an organisational and on a personal level, support is such that the lives of international protection applicants would be a lot grimmer if it were not for so many non-governmental organisations and their volunteers, who are supporters, advocates, and counsellors.46

Yeah they paid my fees and also support for transport to go to college from Portlaoise. From Portlaoise to Red Cow, no from Red Cow to Liberty College. (Umanuela)

Respondent (R): (The University) It’s in Dublin, and you know, before they had to consider my qualifications, I did pre-nursing just to help me get a job as I persist with my qualifications to be accepted here.
Interviewer (I): And how long was the pre-nursing course?
R: That was 9 months.
I: And how did you finance the fees? Did you get funding? Or was it fee free?
R: It was fee free. The only funding I got was the transportation, because I needed transport from, and I got it from a refugee supporting group: Dun Laoghaire Refugee Project.(Anthony)

This charity, they helped me organise a laptop for my kids during lockdown.” (Olive)

5. Volunteering

I started to teach dance in schools. (Time)

Yes I travel to Dublin every day, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, and I’m doing voluntary work in my community place. I work with the kids as assistant of the library here. Also I am assistant of the teacher in the..., they do a homework club yeah and also I’m voluntary work for Voice of Migrant. (Umanuela)

...I only started volunteering at a charity shop, and on Saturdays I also do tidy towns, Ashford Tidy Towns where we do the tidy towns. It’s also volunteering as well. (Gabriella)

A strikingly high percentage of interviewees47 have mentioned volunteering activities, either in their country of origin, in Ireland, or both.

47 Out of 51 interviewees, more than 40 were or are involved in volunteering activities.
Almost every second participant has been active in volunteering. In some instances the activities were also the cause for having to flee their home country. Olive, for instance, left her home country as she was persecuted for volunteering in Uganda, where she worked with young adults with intellectual disabilities. For other participants, volunteering was not the reason for having to leave, but just something that was part of their daily life.

Yeah, I used to have time for my hobbies. I used to play soccer and basketball and yeah, those my hobbies, but still, I would find time to, I used also to run aid in communities, groups like Rotary. Yeah, so I used to get time to meet people and have a chat and yeah. (Anthony)

Of those volunteering, many help newcomers to fill in paperwork, to explain the asylum system, to pass on information about support mechanisms and legal aid, and to help in accessing education. One participant set up a computer club for kids in his direct provision centre. Other participants gave English lessons to adults and children in direct provision.

So I do lots of volunteer work. I still go to (name of direct provision) to support other Syrians who live there. So that support could be just going with them to like a government agency to finish some paperwork, filling forms, teaching their kids like with their homework, or when they have exams. I actually did one coding club there in the summer, and I taught one class of special English to young teenagers who missed school upon arrival into Ireland. I also used to volunteer with ISPCC, which is the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children as a community navigator in (name of direct provision). So I was helping the families integrate into their new community. What else? I was volunteering with Drogheda Homeless Aid in Drogheda. (Sam)

Many volunteering activities in Ireland have a direct link to participants’ professional aims and dreams, as Michelle’s case demonstrates.

I would love to work with young people, especially with disabilities. When I was in Kerry I formed a youth group. I was the co-founder of a youth group of people living in direct provision...So we formed a youth group in, we were in partnership with Irish Refugee Council, sorry, so the name of the group was Killarney African Youth Tribe. We were trying to make young people living in direct provision integrate with the community. It was a successful project. It was funded by European Youth... I don’t remember the organisation, but we were in partnership with KDYS as well. So it is something that I know I am capable of you know, especially working with young people with disabilities. It’s a group of people that are marginalised and left out, so I would love to work with young people with disabilities. (Michelle)

I was volunteering actually. I was volunteering in people with special needs, so that’s where I got like I was inspired from where I was volunteering. I was very inspired to learn, to know how to take care of old people, you know, to have a lot of experience, and I really love helping, you know, so I did that... (Nancy)

Volunteering plays a crucial part in the participants’ lives. It means exchanging ideas, accessing valuable information. It also means a way out of isolation, and it fosters a
sense of belonging and purpose in a phase that is otherwise characterised by uncertainty. This phase also has a lack of transparency and a lot of waiting for decisions for which participants have by and large no influence.

6. Living in Direct Provision as a Student

Summarising the interviewees’ accounts of living in direct provision while being a student, affirms that direct provision is a totally unsuitable form of accommodation for a student, let alone for a student who before or during their flight experienced persecution, violence or sexual violence. Direct provision reinforces trauma. Living in direct provision does not allow residents to heal from their trauma. It de-skills people, causes depression, anxiety, and lowers people’s self-esteem day by day.48

After 11 years in direct provision, you don’t feel anything anymore. (Peter)

The accommodation centre, it makes me sick... it can turn an innocent person into something they would never do. (Hussein)

We have cameras watching our every move. There is no privacy. That is direct provision. (Cassandra)

I am, it’s like a hotel so all we have is our room, where we stay and a kitchen, sort of a dining area where we go for meals, so it is less routine us. We know we need to have breakfast at a certain time. We need to have lunch at a certain time and your dinner at a certain time. If you miss those times, that means no meals for you, or you have to outsource, or I don’t know what to do then. (TheiDikondo)

I am not safe in direct provision. (Time)

You get to the point where one day you wake up and you’re just not the same person you were yesterday. (Michelle)

But I’ve seen many people been affected more than me. Some break down, especially those who have families and children, that’s tough. (Anthony)

Waiting, boredom and no adequate activities are a huge issue. Participants frequently reported de-skilling because of living in direct provision – a circumstance which will cost the Irish government presumably more money than offering adequate activities.49

My life changed because when I was in asylum. I wasn’t doing anything, like my routine was sleep, wake up, eat, sleep. That was it. And with my skills and experience, I got de-skilled whilst in asylum. (Ruby)

So because of situation, because of direct provision system, I have to cook for myself in a shared kitchen, a busy kitchen, always bad smell, frying smoke, smoke, smoky, smoky

49 Hillebrand (n 41).
but it’s okay. It’s okay, it’s not really big problem. I can manage my time. I can schedule my time and just sit. Unfortunately just sit. But it’s not enough for me. It’s not really enough. (Saeed)

Because direct provision centres are run by different private companies, there is no unified standard (i.e. also no minimum standard) concerning room or food quality, and the treatment of residents varies hugely from centre to centre. Issues of privacy and personal freedom (to go out or to sleep elsewhere) are regulated differently.

Just looking at the aspect of food, there are very different rules in the 38 centres in Ireland. Some hostels allow residents to cook for themselves, while some provide meals at a certain time, which means for students that they have to make the choice between attending meals or attending lectures.\(^{50}\) They may often have hours of travel away from their hostel. No participant living in direct provision was given the option of a packed lunch in pre-pandemic times.

7. Finances and Transport

It is a challenge to get to anywhere from Rathmore, Ashford. (Gabriella)

I have 2 hours 40 minutes of transport every day between Clondalkin and UCD, and a lack of sleep. (Cassandra)

The money for transport does not cover my actual travel costs. I have a long journey, and then I study at night due to the noise in direct provision. (Arturo).

I travel from Waterford to Dublin, but during week I stay in homeless shelter. (Time)

I am doing blended learning with An Cosan. I have to travel from Kerry to Dublin once in a while, at my own expenses. The only way to get there in time is by plane which is 120 EUR. (Michelle).

Despite financial support by universities and colleges (most Irish universities and colleges are Universities of Sanctuaries, with the majority of them offering University of Sanctuary scholarships), which cover a living allowance, and in some instances, one-off payments for books or transport, the financial situation for refugee and asylum seeker students remains dire. It is a regular occurrence that those who secure a place at university under the University of Sanctuary Programme have to decline, as they cannot manage the cost of travel along with other challenges that arise from the long distance between their accommodation centre and university.

This is particularly severe for students who live in direct provision, where meals are provided three times a day, and where there exists no possibility to cook for themselves. Many interviewed participants reported that by attending lectures, they missed out on the meal times in direct provision. This resulted in them regularly feeling hungry, as within the living allowance for asylum seekers, there is no money budgeted for food if the hostel is contracted to look after catering. In addition, public transport in Ireland is relatively expensive, and connections are insufficient in terms of frequency.

\(^{50}\) This is how the name of the theatre play “Food or Thought” emerged.
Yes, so I had two options. Either one was the bus or the train. So depending on my class and how early I wanted, that would determine which one I would use. So on normal day, when I have classes around after midday, I can afford to take the bus, because it is a 2.5 hours journey to campus from Newbridge on the bus. So if I had classes very early in the morning, like around 9/10, then I would prefer to use the train, because it is faster and shorter, so expensive. (Nano)

Closely intertwined with financial constraints are the limitations concerning the labour market.

The confidence that you get when you’re working, like the feeling that you have purpose in life, because being in asylum strips that away from you. You feel like you are a charity case most of the time, which is demeaning. (Ruby)

Often, interviewees felt that there is a lack of information about the financial implications of accepting a university place. A finance clinic that is offered by some universities is a first step in the right direction.

Well I think we need help in terms of the fees paid at university, because it is very expensive. Then also accommodation, and as a person I have no, I have no state, like to make a case which university they’re going to give me, but if they could give me a university, for example, Athlone Institute of Technology, it’s close to where I’m living. So that would help reduce the transport costs. (Olive)

VI. Annex 1: Covid

Well before Covid I think campus was one of my favourite places to be. (Nano).

I have been assigned a lawyer by legal aid, but due to the pandemic I have not met him. (Indira).

First of all, the accommodation style in this hotel is pretty rough. We have up to 4 people in a single room. It’s a small room, but in my case I am in a small room with 3 other people, with 2 other guys. So we are 3 in a room, and it’s a pretty small room, and in terms of my studies online, the hostel has a facility for Wi-Fi and study room, but the Wi-Fi is not reliable, and I basically had to be using my phone as a hot spot to engage in my classes, or even to, like, to do my basic research for my essays and every other school work that I had to do. In terms of getting time to study, even though there are study rooms in the hostel, which I basically had to plan my schedule around when it is less noisy, because since the hostel does not have a facility for kids to play, so most of the families that have kids, they kind of have a time during the day when they play, and it’s noisy, and most of the time where they play is around the study rooms, or they have other location called the sitting rooms. So most of the time I have to plan my schedule around times when I know the kids are not around, and also times when other residents will not be using the rooms. So that will mostly be at night, like from 9 upwards or sometimes midnight. So that it is when it will be quiet, and in terms of the Covid, the stress is, I can’t account for where my other room mates are during the day. So even though basically there are no options for social distancing in the centre, but you have all the notices from the management to social distance, but it is not practical,
because I’m living in a cramped condition with 2 other people, and it’s stressful, and it’s more like you rely on faith. If you are religious you rely on God. That okay. None of my room mates is going to contract Covid and pass it onto me. So it’s stressful and psychologically you always have to look for some sort of escape, because you are constantly reminded that you’re in a situation where anyone can infect you, and not so much attention is being paid by the HSE to living conditions here, so it was more stressful psychologically for me to be here… (Nano)

Recalling the financial and logistical barriers the transport system means for most respondents, one might assume that moving to online learning during the pandemic might have improved things for those students who live in direct provision. The opposite is true, as direct provision is in essence not a suitable accommodation for students. Lack of laptops, stable WiFi and sharing rooms meant that interviewees struggled even more than before Covid 19 restrictions. Before the pandemic, interviewees had to make the choice between food or education, and many of them faced the situation of not attending meals because of that conflict in times. During the pandemic, interviewees were now faced with the double challenge of attending six hours of classes on a mobile phone, while dealing with the fact that meal times were the only times where quietness could be found in the room that they shared.

VII. Annex 2: The Magic Wand

The final question that has always been asked at the end of interviews was what people would want most if they had a magic wand that would grant them whatever they wished.

As diverse as the dreams turned out to be, there is an overall theme that appeared in all of the answers. Participants wished to be allowed to integrate into and contribute to Irish society, educationally, professionally, and as a person.\(^{51}\) Not being seen as “an asylum seeker”, “the refugee”, a charity case or “a sponger”. Closely connected to the wish to integrate and contribute is the wish for a sense of belonging, which has a subjective and social dimension. The first one is “feeling at home”, in the sense of an embeddedness. The second one, “making a home” as a process.\(^{52}\)

On a very personal level, participants often wished for family unification and security for their family, in particular on the journey to Ireland from war and persecution, as well as security and safety in direct provision.

Participants who have children wished for good education and chances for their children, and for themselves. Both men and women who were in their twenties to forties dreamed of settling down one day and starting a family. All participants wished to leave direct provision at the earliest feasible point of time.

\(^{51}\) See Hayes (n 25). The story of Anna Kern, a – then – 19 years old asylum seeker from the Ukraine living in direct provision in Knockalisheen, Limerick, had received much media attention. Anna had received 575 points in her Leaving Certificate but could not afford the full year tuition fees of EUR 17,000. She eventually secured a scholarship and in the awarding ceremony she said: “I am really enjoying college and studying physiotherapy was a dream come true for me and I hope to work in Ireland after I graduate.”

Professionally, all participants wished to be allowed to work to obtain / finish their degree, and work and contribute.\textsuperscript{53}

No dream was beyond what would address the very basic wishes anyone would have for their life.

*Interviewer:* If you had a magic wand, what would you like to change?
*Respondent:* Access to education. Not to have restrictions to say you have to wait a certain period for you to get, cause I think it’s, we are wasting time, the 9 months, just to do like basic computer classes, whereas in that time we would have done maybe a first year of the access, and then you proceed to the next thing, and also access related to healthcare and transport. Those are the most challenging situations that we are facing.(Gabrielle)

*Education is important, because it is the best legacy you can have, and it opens doors. Like why would I want to be on social welfare when I know that if I am qualified and I have the skills?! I have better pay, better life opportunities, a better life for me and my children. You know that kind of a way. I’m grateful for the social welfare, because it is what is keeping us so far, but I am the kind of person that I like to do. I like to be independent in everything, financially inclusive. So yeah. (Bukola)*

Like, as I say, education is key. It opens up every door that you can possibly think of. So with education you can go further. So I don’t think, if you don’t have the education or the background of education with you, you can go anywhere you want to go. In order to reach those highest levels in life you need to have education.(Immaculate)

**VIII. Access to Higher Education as a Value and a Commitment**

The values and assets of integration can be looked at through a socio-economic, historical, and legal lens to name but a few. As Lenette has pointed out, integration into the higher education system does not only prevent further marginalisation, it also increases a refugee’s potential to contribute to a country’s economic success, and is therefore an economic imperative.\textsuperscript{54} She also stresses that the role model function of refugee graduates cannot be estimated high enough.\textsuperscript{55}

The UNHCR has pointed out for a long time that access to education protects a society in various forms and that it strengthens community resilience.\textsuperscript{56} This is particularly the case for access to third level education for women. In general, there is a correlation between the access to education for women and the wealth of a society. This correlation stretches out to marginalised groups, such as international protection applicants. Education is a tool of empowerment, as it provides the knowledge and skills that individuals need to live productive, fulfilling and independent lives. Furthermore, access to higher education enables asylum seekers and refugees to rebuild their lives. Education plays a crucial role in inclusion and integration.

\textsuperscript{53} Kambule and Mulhall (n 43).
\textsuperscript{54} Caroline Lenette, ‘University Students from Refugee Backgrounds: Why Should We Care?’ (2016) 35 Higher Education Research & Development 1311, 1312.
\textsuperscript{55} ibid 1313.
\textsuperscript{56} United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Ireland (n 1).
In practice, barriers faced by refugees include language barriers, cultural barriers, bureaucratic hurdles in the application process, fee and financial barriers, the non-recognition of prior degrees, a lack of documents, and the totally unsuitable living conditions in direct provision. As Natalya Pestova has pointed out as early as 2013, living in direct provision is THE barrier to higher education in Ireland. 57

At the same time, education is the main integration tool which reintroduces a sense of cohesion and routines in the lives of refugees, 58 and education plays a crucial part in social and emotional healing. 59

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire drew attention to the fact that any host society benefits from newcomers. He pointed out that knowledge is a product of socio-cultural conditioning and that what refugee students bring as part of their cultural capital leads to enriching the existing capital. 60

IX. CONCLUSIONS

Access to higher education is a human right, which is very often denied in practice in Ireland. The reasons for this are complex. They have their origins in economic, political, socio-legal and practical circumstances.

As UNHCR education consultant Robyn Fysh has outlined, collaborative and consultative processes with all stakeholders (education providers and users, civil society, policymakers) are necessary to share best practice and provide the best outcomes. 61 In the Irish context, this could amount to a roundtable with the stakeholders involved, in order to create tailored support for refugee students. This would consist of expanding the support mechanisms and best practices that are in place at Irish universities and colleges, but also strive for more tailored support where this is required. This support should certainly be financial (an adequate living allowance that reflects the actual cost of food and transport; offering finance clinics), but also logistic (travel distances between accommodation and universities), psychological (designated PTSS specialists form a diverse background amongst counselling services), and social (peer-mentoring and a buddy-up system).

In the Irish context, Coughlan et aliter have warned that the disparity of access to higher education threatens social cohesion and fundamentally disrupts the integration process. 62 Significant economic implications follow from barriers to university education. The system of direct provision hinders access to higher education by its very stark nature. Young people are not allowed to move closer to universities and colleges, which often means that the place they are offered cannot be realised due to a lack of

57 Pestova (n 25).
58 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (n 24).
60 Freire (n 42).
funds for travelling, or due to the lack of public transport. The initiatives that so many tertiary institutions in Ireland have made through the Sanctuary status and movement is compromised by direct provision.

The removal of institutional barriers to higher education remains an ongoing task for all stakeholders. Frequently, interviewees had described themselves as “second class students”. One example of this is a university where refugees were given a place to study, but were not allowed to use the sport facilities that make up a crucial hub for students to meet, form friendships, work in teams and celebrate success. Luckily, the university in question has changed this policy: refugee students have now full access to sport facilities.

In the future, discrimination and stigmatisation in the classroom must be called out by lecturers.

Giving or granting access to further education is not enough. Students with an asylum or refugee background need ongoing support by central services, and in particular student advisers, counsellors, and facilitators during teaching and exam time.\(^{63}\)

While the enormous achievements of charities and volunteers on and off campus is an asset, it should not let the State deny its responsibility for institutional and governmental support mechanisms.

One example for the ongoing support that must be budgeted for, are the finance clinics which some universities offer to grantees of its Sanctuary Programme and Cothrom na Féinne scholarship.

Students are often not aware of central services by university, in particular in the area of support for students with mental health issues. Targeted and repeated email systems throughout the academic year are necessary across all higher education institutions in Ireland. This is not only an effective way to inform students about support they can avail of, but it is also non-cost-intensive. The support that follows such targeted emails must be tailored and holistic.

Of those interviewees who were aware of support mechanisms, many described fear of further stigmatisation by using university services, such as in the area of counselling for mental health issues. Most asylum seekers come from countries where there is less openness to and acceptance of mental health issues than in Ireland. Information sessions by staff who work in these central services are a minimum requirement to ensure familiarisation with what is on offer, which makes availing of the services less of a burden.

Diversity in these services is a key problem as well. Many interviewees have reported an inhibition threshold, as key staff in these services tend to be, in interviewees’ eyes, white and middle-class. It is therefore desirable that colleges and universities implement their equality and diversity commitments on paper when recruiting staff for these services. Beginning to fill vacancies with graduates who have an asylum

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background would be a good start. Lived diversity enhances identification and trust. It is also desirable that further education institutions employ staff who are trained in dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder.

As West (1996) has described it: “Higher Education is potentially a space in which to manage and transcend feelings of marginalisation, meaninglessness and inauthenticity in interactions with others; in which it is possible…to compose a new life, a different story and a more cohesive self”.64

Civil society and those who work in higher education, together with refugees and decision makers must collaborate ever more to make this the new lived reality.

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