

Access to Higher Education for Resettled Refugees in England

A Guide for Community Sponsorship Groups:
Short Version

Introduction

Refugee young people in the UK consistently prioritise their education and have high aspirations to study at university. But there are many challenges that make accessing university difficult for them.¹

Purpose

This guide, which is a short version of a [more detailed guide](#), is aimed at Community Sponsorship Groups supporting refugees with aspirations to study at university. It intends to provide an overview of:

- the key challenges facing refugees applying to undergraduate studies at university
- the key considerations for refugees when deciding to apply to university.

The [full version](#) of this guide also provides step-by-step guidance on how to support refugees throughout the university application process. It also provides information on alternatives to university and additional helpful resources.

¹ Ashlee, A and Gladwell, C. 2020. Education transitions for refugee and asylum-seeking young people in the UK: exploring the journey to further and higher education. Unicef UK.

The role of Community Sponsorship Groups

As a Community Sponsor, your role will be to walk with a resettled refugee through the university application process. While you cannot make decisions on their behalf, you can:

- help them find the information they need to make decisions that are right for them
- provide emotional support throughout the university application process
- provide practical support, such as by reading through personal statements and helping them to prepare for interviews

This type of support can play an important role in helping refugee young people reach university. It is suggested that you should put in place regular support meetings from the summer before applying to university, with more frequent meetings around the time that they are preparing their applications.

Scope

While this guide has been developed with young people, aged 17-25, in mind, much of the guidance applies to older groups of resettled refugees who aspire to study at university.

This guide applies to resettled refugees living in England. If you are supporting refugees outside of England, please visit the [UK Council for International Student Affairs](#) (UKCISA) to understand the specificities of fee status and costs of university for [Wales](#), [Northern Ireland](#) and [Scotland](#).

Key issues to consider

This section summarises the key issues pertaining to refugees' access to university.

Fee status

Whether a young person is categorised as a 'home student' or an 'overseas student' will depend on their immigration status. Those with refugee status are normally categorised as 'home students'. This means that they are eligible for university tuition fees which are capped at a lower level than overseas students. 'Home student' fees are currently up to £9,250 a year for full-time students, but the cost may be slightly lower for some universities and/or courses chosen.

Eligibility for student finance

Young people with refugee status will also normally be eligible for student finance (financial support provided by the Government to some university students in the UK). There are two main loans that undergraduate students with refugee status in England can apply for:

- **A Tuition Fee Loan**, which is a loan that is paid directly to the university to cover the cost of a student's tuition fees
- **A Maintenance Loan**, which is a 'means-tested' loan that helps students to cover their living costs (such as rent, food, transport etc...) while studying at university.

Currently, all student loans will need to be repaid once the young person starts earning a salary of £25,000 per year.

It is important to note that refugees may not be eligible for full student finance if they have already completed some or all of an equivalent degree programme before. This may affect those with refugee status if they studied at university in their country of origin before they were forced to flee. If this is the case, they should consider applying for scholarships. See [here](#) for more.

Some refugees may be nervous about taking out a loan. This might be because they do not fully understand what they involve, or have negative associations with loans. Some refugee young people may not be able to take out loans due to religious reasons (see [here](#) for more information). These young people may need to apply for scholarships (see [here](#)).

Evidencing prior learning

To be accepted onto an undergraduate course, a young person will usually need one of the following qualifications:

- A Levels
- BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) qualifications at Level 3
- International Baccalaureate
- NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) at Level 3
- Access to HE courses

If a young person has not studied in the UK before, they will need to evidence their existing qualifications, including those from their countries of origin and/or countries of asylum. They can do this through UK NARIC, an organisation that provides statements of comparability for those with international qualifications. An application can be submitted through UK NARIC's [website](#). There is a small cost for doing this.

Some young refugees may be unable to prove the qualification that they achieved before they arrived in the UK: they could have fled their homes without their certificates or transcripts, or they may have been lost or destroyed. In this case, some universities have alternative ways of assessing a young person's academic level in order to process their university application.

Universities should also take into account some of the challenges students may have faced in pursuing higher education: this is known as contextual admissions. While all universities should take context into account when deciding who to offer a place to, but in reality some institutions give more weight to contextual admissions than others.

Academic English

Some refugees, particularly those recently arrived in the UK, may not have the academic-standard of English needed to thrive at university, and may need to consider taking further English courses before applying to university.

Many universities require applicants to have a good level of English before they will offer them a place. They may want an applicant to have passed (usually obtaining a 4 or a C) GCSE English Language, or to sit an alternative English language test and achieve the minimum score required.

The International English Language Testing System (IELTs) is the most popular English language test used by universities to determine English levels. Taking an IELTS test costs money, and financial support may be required. Find out more about IELTS [here](#).

Other issues to consider

Other issues affecting refugees' access to university include **application pressures and mental health**, and **inaccurate information, advice and guidance**. For more information about these issues, please see page 7 of the [full guide](#).

Deciding whether to apply to university

It is important that a refugee young person feels ready and is in the right position to apply for university. There are some considerations to think through before fully embarking on the process of applying for university.

Hopes for going to university

In the early stages of the process, it is worth having a conversation with the young person you are supporting about why they want to go to university. Talk to them about what they hope to get out of university and the type of course they want to study.

Use the [course search](#) section of the UCAS website and spend some time browsing possible courses to help the young person understand their options. Encourage the young person to think about a course that brings together things they enjoy, things they are good at, and the careers they are interested in.

You could help a young person book on to an open day at prospective universities. Many universities now offer virtual open days too. It is also worth contacting the Widening Participation (sometimes also called Widening Access) team to ask if there are any events for prospective students (particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds). For example, some universities are able to arrange for prospective refugee students to meet current students who are also from a refugee background, should this be of interest to the applicant.

And remember, university is not for everyone. There are valuable alternatives to university that may be better suited to some young people based on their educational backgrounds and their career aspirations. See [the full guide](#) for information on alternatives to university.

Existing qualifications

It should become clear from browsing courses the type and level of qualifications that a young person will need to successfully secure a place at university. Remember, A Levels are not the only qualification that allows young people to go to university.

If you have any doubt that a young person's qualifications will be accepted (both those achieved in the UK and in other countries), it would be worth calling the Admissions teams at universities to double check at this stage. It may also be useful to enquire, even at this early stage, about whether the university has a contextual admissions policy.

If the universities will not accept a young person's grades or qualifications, you may need to talk with the young person about postponing and doing one of the qualifications required at their nearest Further Education (FE) college before applying to university. See the [full guide](#) for more information.

English language

At this stage, it might be clear that a young person's English language does not reach the academic standard required to apply to university. And, even if you think the young person could achieve the minimum score in an English test, you may feel that they would benefit from waiting a year and taking further classes to improve their English. Talk this through with the young person. You could explain that they are more likely to enjoy and get the most out of university when they are confident with their English.

This might be a difficult decision for the young person to make, so make sure your conversations are sensitive and do not push them.

If a young person wants to proceed and apply for university, you could call the Admissions teams at possible universities to ask about their particular English language requirements. It is advisable that the young person takes their IELTSs (or GCSE English) before they apply. (Some universities may, however, give a young person a conditional offer, conditional on them getting a particular IELTSs score or GCSE grade).

Next steps and key dates

If the refugee you support has decided that they want to apply to university, read [the full version of the guide](#). It provides detailed, step-by-step guidance for Community Sponsorship Groups supporting refugees with aspirations to study at university. It provides additional guidance on:

- Deciding where to apply to university
- Applying to university
- Waiting for responses
- Planning where to live
- Applying for financial support
- Getting ready to start

Key dates

In the meantime, make sure to keep in mind the following key dates:

- **Summer before applying to university:** If possible, start to think about university courses the summer before applying to university. The summer can be a useful time for a young person to build up additional experience or complete some reading that will help with their personal statement and university application.
- **Mid-September:** The application form can be started, but a young person can register with UCAS before then.
- **15th October:** All applications to Oxford or Cambridge, or any course in medicine, veterinary medicine/science or dentistry must be submitted, including references.
- **15th January:** The majority of other applications must be submitted, including references. But, try not to leave the application until the last minute.

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Refugee Support Network is a UK-based charity helping refugee children and young people build more hopeful futures through education. Their direct programmes and research combine to enable young refugees to access education, thrive in education and use their education for positive impact in the world. Find out more about Refugee Support Network [here](#).

