

The Situation of Asylum Seekers in Higher Education in England

By Sasan Panbehchi, assisted by Roger Ellis

Abstract

Higher education in the UK is an extremely challenging place for asylum seekers who have not been granted refugee status or indefinite leave to remain. Asylum seekers are treated not as home students but as international students, unable to fund themselves like home students by loans, and expected to pay at the start of each term the much greater fees they are charged. This is the direct result of a government policy that has only recently (in 2012) come into force. The author offers his story as a specific example of the difficulties such students face.

Introduction

Readers of this journal will know well the difficulties faced by asylum seekers in this country, even those studying in UK universities. My story, as the son of an asylum seeker and a first-year medical student at Sheffield University, provides a pointed and painful instantiation of this phenomenon.

My father was a prosperous businessman in Iran. In 2006 he took part in a protest against public attacks on the Turkish language, which our family speaks. He was arrested, beaten up, and held incommunicado for ten days. On his release he was regularly called in for interrogation, and constantly spied on and harassed by the authorities. He decided, in the end, that he had no option but to flee the country with his family. Thus, in February 2007, carrying what we could and walking by night through the snow for two days, we made it over the mountains to Turkey, where my father had arranged transport in a truck with a hidden compartment. We travelled for ten days, not knowing where we were going, and hardly ever able to leave our cramped quarters. Eventually, we were dropped in an alley in a huge city. This turned out to be London. My father got to a police station to ask for help (at that time, none of us spoke English). We were handed over to the Borders Agency and moved, first to Leeds, and then to Sheffield, which is where we now live.

Since this is my story and not my father's, I do not need to linger on the difficulties of those first years for all of us, especially my parents. Refused permission to remain in the country, facing the rejection of every subsequent appeal he made, and unable to get work, my father suffered from constant depression. My mother kept the family together – at what personal cost you can readily imagine. I lost my childhood: once I had learned enough English at school, I regularly had to help out as interpreter for my father.

In 2012, at the best state secondary school in Sheffield, I gained 3 A-levels in Science subjects (A*, A, and B) and an A* in Iranian. For years I had wanted to study medicine. The

year before, I had applied to Sheffield's medical school. With my science results I was accepted, and started in October 2012.

But that is when my problems really started. New legislation affecting Universities in England had come into force in February 2012, and was to have a crippling effect on asylum-seeking students, me included. Thus, had I gone to Sheffield a year earlier my situation would have been very different, and much easier.

In July 2011 my family had been granted temporary leave to remain in the UK for three years, so my father was able to work from then on. In May 2012 he opened an Iranian restaurant that is now beginning to pay for itself, and is popular with local people. But our legal status was unchanged, and we will have to reapply in July 2014 for permission to remain for another three years.

As the son of an asylum seeker, I am treated as an international student, and expected to pay the much higher fees that international students must pay (c. £125,000 for medicine) in comparison to home students. This problem affects all students, even British-born students, who have not lived in this country continuously for three years before entering University. Additionally, once you have registered as an international student, you cannot change your status midway through your studies.

Not only that: the University stipulates that international students pay all fees for each academic year in advance, a term at a time. Otherwise they cannot progress to the next year of their studies, much less graduate at the end of the course.

I paid for my first term's fees with family savings and a grant I got from the University of York. The rest of this year is being paid for by a loan by English friends. Until that loan was offered I had the enormous uncertainty of my future to cope with on top of the pressures of my studies, and found it almost impossible to concentrate on my work. Now at least I am free, for the time being, of that worry. But, upon passing the year, I will then have to face the same problems again at the end of the summer. Should I be compelled to withdraw at the end of my first year while I wait for my father to be granted permanent right to remain in the UK, I will then have to start my studies all over again, since the Medical School has decided, from September 2013, to restructure its degree course.

My family do not have the money to pay for my course: most of what they had has gone into the family restaurant, which could never make enough profit to pay for my studies. The failing Iranian currency means that, month by month, the amount I could get from my family funds in Iran gets smaller and smaller.

A tiny hope remains. The University has declared itself a University of Sanctuary (Mayblin 2011). What this will mean in practice no-one seems to know. A new committee has been set up, however, and is due to meet at the start of May 2013 to consider the practical implications of this promising declaration. I have written to the University Registrar a letter of appeal,

with supporting letters from my local MP and other Sheffield professionals, which I hope will be forwarded to that committee. I have also enlisted support from student bodies, particularly the Students' Union, student representatives of STAR (Students Against Racism), and student representatives of the British Medical Association. I would value enormously any representations readers could make for me at this time to the University: or more widely. My situation is nearly, if not quite, unique. The University of Sheffield is unable to provide numbers of asylum-seekers studying for degrees at the University, and I know of only one other in Sheffield. It is horrible that individuals in my position should be deprived of their right to continue their studies and, in this example, be denied the opportunity to contribute to the welfare of their adopted country by practising medicine in the NHS.

If nothing comes of my appeal to the university, any information readers may have concerning people or organisations I could approach to help me raise the costs of continuing my studies would be hugely appreciated. A group of friends has already started to campaign on my behalf. Readers could contact them, or me, at any of the addresses below.

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References Cited

Mayblin, L. (2011), 'Beyond the Hostile State: Imagining Universities of Sanctuary', *Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration*, **1**(1): 31-34.