Towards a University of Sanctuary: Cultivating a culture of welcome within, and beyond, LSE

Kate Buckley

This study set out to explore how the LSE could further develop a culture of welcome for forced migrants within its own campus, in the wider community, and across the Higher Education (HE) sector in the UK.[1] It is hoped that, if implemented alongside current efforts, the recommendations detailed in this report will allow the LSE to attain University of Sanctuary status – a status which signals a university's commitment to **"Welcome people seeking sanctuary into their communities and seek to foster a culture of awareness and inclusivity"** (University of Sanctuary 2019: 1). As such, the recommendations below are formulated with the key requirements to become a *University of Sanctuary* in mind: to **learn** about sanctuary, to **embed** this learning in the university institution, and to **share** learning and opportunities with the wider community (*ibid*). Given that the LSE is currently attracting relatively few students from forced migrant backgrounds at both Undergraduate and Graduate level, this holistic approach is doubly important in terms of highlighting how the LSE can work to encourage more applications in the future from people from forced migrant backgrounds.[2]

Research questions

1. How can the LSE better support its students from forced migrant backgrounds on campus? The LSE offers support for the tuition fee and living costs for offer holders at both Undergraduate and Graduate level whose immigration status is refugee, asylum seeker or person with humanitarian protection (persons with Discretionary /Limited Leave to Remain in the UK are offered funding only at Undergraduate level). But how else can the LSE create an environment in which its students from forced migrant backgrounds can flourish?
2. What can the LSE do to help people from forced migrant backgrounds in the wider community to reach their potential?
3. How can the LSE join a network of universities working to improve the culture of sanctuary in HE?

Methodology

This report draws on insights gathered through 15 semi-structured interviews with LSE students from forced migrant backgrounds (both Undergraduate and Graduate); LSE teaching and professional services (PS) staff; staff from the national *Student Action for Refugees (STAR)* organisation; and staff from Birkbeck, University of London – an institution providing innovative inclusive access to HE. The project was advertised through different mediums to the student body,

---

[1] **A note on terminology**: this report uses 'forced migrants' as an umbrella term to account for several legal statuses: refugee, asylum seeker, persons granted humanitarian protection or limited/discretionary leave to remain and stateless persons.

[2] Due to General Data Protection Regulation it was not possible to ascertain the precise number of students from forced migrant backgrounds at the LSE. Following discussions with Recruitment and Admissions, it is estimated that there are currently less than 10 across the school.

however, all student participants were recruited through the researcher's own connections. Student interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using NVivo 12. Written consent was obtained, and material was anonymised. Staff participants were also selected by the researcher on the basis of their teaching/PS role, but these interviews were not recorded. All participation was voluntary. That student participants were reached through the researcher's own connections is a limitation, nevertheless, the study does not claim to be widely representative but curates the subjective experiences of students alongside other voices in a way that culminates in directions for future action.

The interviews

3	1	4	4	2	1
LSE students	LSE alumnus	LSE teaching staff	LSE PS staff	NGO staff	Birkbeck staff

Key findings

Application Process

- When applying to the LSE, some students found it **difficult to navigate the LSE website** and to find sufficient information related to their legal status and available funding.
- Students mostly had a **positive experience during the application stage** – praised Recruitment and Admissions for being flexible and personable.

Wellbeing

- Students from forced migrant backgrounds deal with **extra stress factors** (e.g. experience legal limbo while waiting for formalisation of status or care for family members) – these impact negatively on wellbeing and academic work.
- Students are often **reluctant to reach out to LSE staff/students for support**, they prefer to find solace in networks outside the school.

Legal Status

- Students sometimes had to navigate complications that were caused by **staff misunderstandings** about the specificities of their legal status.

LSE Culture

- Students sometimes felt as if they **did not belong at the LSE** owing to their background and the prestige of the school.
- Students suggested that there is a **stigma in the student body surrounding scholarships**, where students generally believe that scholarship recipients are filling a quota.

Wider Community

- Groups within the LSE have previously organised projects to support forced migrants in the wider community, these have worked well but have been **isolated events**.
- LSE STAR hosts educative events, raises funds and campaigns on-campus for issues concerning forced migrants, but **more interaction with the student body is needed**.

Recommendations

1. **LSE Website**: Provide additional signposting and further information on the scholarship application process.
2. **Wellbeing**: Provide each student from a forced migrant background with a mentor – someone who is well-informed about their legal status and aware of and able to recognise signs of psychological or emotional struggle. Students to be introduced to their mentor in their first term and to meet at least once a term to establish a support system.
3. **Legal Status**: Provide all teaching and PS staff with brief training to raise awareness about the barriers to learning that students from forced migrant backgrounds face. Such training could take the form of a short film created by LSE students in collaboration with local organisations supporting the entry of forced migrants into HE.
4. **LSE Culture (Inclusion):**
   a. Continue to foster a culture that embraces a diverse student body across the LSE. Make students aware of the benefits of bringing new perspectives and cultures together on campus and continue to celebrate LSE's Widening Participation work through campus media, student volunteer opportunities and panel discussions.
   b. Increase visibility (with consent) of students from forced migrant backgrounds at the LSE, not simply by singling them out during Refugee Week, but by celebrating them as part of the university through student experience campaigns. Mentors can ask students if this is something they would like to participate in.
5. **LSE Culture (Scholarships)**: Continue to raise awareness of scholarships among the student body and the importance of these for increasing social mobility through celebrating scholarship recipients and their achievements (with consent) in the LSE blog, for instance.
6. **Wider community:**
   a. Partner with organisations like *Refugee Support Network* to host schemes for forced migrants in London like English language classes, CV advice and career support sessions. The LSE Migration Studies Unit (Dr Eiko Thielemann) is happy to oversee such projects but a small group of students, who will pass the baton of knowledge and experience of good practice onto a new group each year, will be required to organise such activities.
   b. Through communication with organisations that support forced migrants in the local area, make sure that people seeking sanctuary are aware that the LSE library is open to the public and perhaps offer subsidised bus fares for trips to the library.
   c. Invite people from forced migrant backgrounds to give lectures or share their experiences in both relevant teaching classes and at university-wide events (like those currently organised by LSE STAR).
7. **Sustainability**: Assign a staff member with the responsibility to sustain a culture of welcome at the LSE. This is important as a large proportion of the community (student body) is transient. This staff member should link together actors including LSE's Migration Studies Unit, Admissions and Recruitment and LSE STAR into a broader network to facilitate projects like those suggested above and to push for the inclusion of steps towards sanctuary in strategic planning and professional development plans where possible. In addition, this staff member could liaise with other London universities to share good practice.

Selected quotes from student participants

"I would suggest anything that could keep checking that they [students] are doing alright because, as I was telling you, I had a breakdown experience."

"It can be frustrating because you don't know if they [staff] will have the understanding of what the status is – it's quite important because I have limited leave to remain and it means that my ability to go to university could differ quite drastically."

"LSE is considered a really prestigious university, a lot of people from certain backgrounds think that it's almost impossible to be at."

"There's a stigma about scholarships […] only my friends who have trouble with social mobility and are from a particular background are open to the idea of scholarships."

A final word

Given that relatively few students from forced migrant backgrounds are currently enrolled at the LSE, the recommendations outlined above might seem ambitious. It is hoped, however, that this research has highlighted the importance of not only helping current students at the LSE, but also of cultivating the conditions necessary to encourage more future applicants from forced migrant backgrounds and, as an institution founded for the betterment of society, of supporting people from forced migrant backgrounds in the wider community.

I am grateful to the students, teaching staff, PS staff and others who so generously gave their time to participate in and contribute to this research project. Thanks also to Branwen Spector for her supervision and to everyone involved in the Change Makers initiative for providing this invaluable opportunity.

Selected Bibliography

Grace. A. & Margolis. B., "Resource Pack" 2nd ed., *University of Sanctuary* (2019) <https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/68/2019/04/smaller-file-size-UOS-Resource-Pack-FINAL-12-SINGLE-PAGES-1.pdf> [accessed 10/06/2020]

Hughes. N. & Beirens. H., "Enhancing educational support: Towards holistic, responsive and strength-based services for young refugees and asylum-seekers" in *Children & Society*, Vol. 21., No. 4. (2007), pp. 261-272.

Ivanova. K., "Guidelines on the assessment of applications from persons from forced migration backgrounds", *The London School of Economics and Political Science* (Unpublished paper), 2018

Oliver. C. & Hughes. V., "Bordering education: Migrants' entitlements to post-compulsory education in the United Kingdom" in *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, Vol. 27., No. 2-3. (2018), pp. 128-144.

Schneider. L., "Access and aspirations: Syrian refugees' experiences of entering higher education in Germany" in *Research in Comparative and International Education*, Vol. 13., No. 3. (2018), pp. 457-478.

Stevenson. J., "The aspiration and access to higher education of teenage refugees in the UK" in *Diversity and Inclusion*, Vol. 37., No. 5. (2007), pp. 671-687.