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action of churches together in scotland

Church and Society Network Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group

Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Higher Education in Scotland August 2013

The Christian faith recognises the inherent worth and value of every single person, and that all are equal before God. Human beings are created in God's image, and the teachings of Jesus Christ included the injunction to 'love your neighbour', to 'love your enemies', to 'do to others as you would have them do to you'.

These ideals are reflected in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says that: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

Scottish Churches have for many years offered practical and spiritual support and solidarity to asylum seekers and refugees, people who have made it to the United Kingdom after fleeing danger and persecution in other countries. In 2012 the Church and Society Network of Action of Churches Together in Scotland established a group (the Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group) to take forward work relating to asylum seekers in Scotland. This common witness from across the Christian traditions is a heartfelt symbol of the united Christian concern for those on the margins of our society.

Churches in Scotland have had a longstanding commitment to education. The earliest schools and universities were established by Church institutions in the Middle Ages, and following the Reformation the ideal of a school in every parish was the basis for one of the world's first universal education systems. Enlightenment, improvement and education, in order that all people can have lives which flourish remain key aims for the Churches' support for world-class education in Scotland. In the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to education...Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

In the spring of 2013 the Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group considered the issue of Higher Education opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees. The group undertook to write to the Universities and Higher Education Institutions regarding their policies and practices with regard to admissions for asylum seeker and refugee students.

The following report is a summary of these responses and some points for further consideration are included at the end of this paper.

The Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group is grateful to the individuals and institutions which have co-operated so willingly in providing this information:

- Edinburgh Napier University
- Glasgow School of Art
- Open University in Scotland
- Queen Margaret University
- Robert Gordon University
- Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Abertay Dundee
- University of Dundee
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Glasgow
- University of St Andrews
- University of Stirling
- University of Strathclyde
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- University of the West of Scotland

Fees

The Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group asked **what fees should asylum seekers, or children of asylum seekers, or refugees be charged for studying at Scottish Universities.**

Responses from Scottish Higher Education institutions indicate that there is a wide variation in practice.

For asylum seeker-related admissions, several institutions suggested that the United Kingdom Council of International Student Affairs (UKCISA) as a useful source of information. The guidance on their website www.ukcisa.org.uk sections headed 'Category 9: Refugees and family', 'Category 10: Those not granted refugee status but allowed to remain in the UK, and family', and 'Category 11: Children of asylum seekers and unaccompanied asylum seeking children' may be most relevant.

Levels of student fees, awards and support are subject to a considerable degree of government regulation. Further information about what fees should be paid is available from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) www.saas.gov.uk.

There was a considerable degree of inconsistency about how individual institutions categorised the status of asylum seekers and refugees. Responses included:

- All asylum seekers are charged home fees.
- Asylum seekers are treated as international students, and are required to pay International Fees.
- At the University's discretion, fees for asylum seekers can be waived.
- Asylum seekers and their families would be considered home students if they have been resident in Scotland for three years.
- Only children of asylum seekers who had lived in Scotland for three years and are under 25 years of age at the start of the course would be considered a home student.
- Young asylum seekers qualify for home fees if they meet the criteria set down by the Scottish Funding Council for such applicants.
- As soon as an asylum seeker is granted refugee status they become entitled to Home Fees.
- Applicants who have been granted refugee status (and their families) are be classed as Home students only if they have been resident in the UK for the relevant 3 years.
- Applicants who have been granted refugee status by 1 August of the year they are starting the course would be classified as a Home student.
- Fee status is incredibly complex and is considered using various criteria, not just immigration status.

Numbers

The Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group asked **how many asylum seeker and refugee students are currently enrolled at Scottish Universities.**

Most Higher Education institutions reported that they did not collect this information.

Some said that during student matriculation some students had the option to self-identify as asylum seekers or refugees and that a handful (in three cases, around 20) had declared this.

Some of the smaller institutions reported that they had no asylum seeker or refugee students currently studying with them.

Financial Support

The Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group asked about any **financial or other support for asylum seekers**.

Responses included:

Policy guidance is set by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and most institutions referred to this.

An individual institution may have a Discretionary Fund, but normally this is only available if the student has been classified as a home student for fee purposes.

The Open University in Scotland has an active partnership with the Bridges Programme (www.bridgesprogrammes.org.uk) who support refugees and asylum seekers.

The University of Edinburgh offers funding from the Silber Bequest (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-funding/postgraduate/international/other-funding/silber>) to assist prospective postgraduate students living in the UK who have been granted refugee status.

Some institutions may be able to make small grants from an International Hardship Fund for students classified as 'international' for fee purposes, or, depending on the individual circumstances Humanitarian Support may be offered.

Many institutions made reference to the support they offer all their students in financial difficulty, but did not have a specific programme to support asylum seekers or refugees who may have particular needs.

One institution replied that it takes a pragmatic and sympathetic view of these cases, whilst complying with Scottish Government guidance; although they do not have a formal process to either offer financial support or proactively recruit asylum seekers to the University, during the 2012/13 academic year they did help a student whose application for refugee status had been delayed (through no fault of his own).

Outreach

The Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group asked '**do you encourage asylum seekers who live in Scotland to apply to university?**'

The Glasgow School of Art responded by pointing out that it provides guidance and support to any student experiencing difficulties entering and progressing in Higher Education, and that asylum seekers and refugees are encouraged to apply to their extensive Scholarship Programme, which provides financial support to students with exceptional talent or those facing significant financial difficulties. The GSA provides pastoral and academic support to asylum seekers and refugees via their Student Support and Development Services, including

advice on finances, accommodation, health and well-being and the practicalities of being a student.

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Musicworks department runs a number of projects in areas of multiple deprivation where young people, some of whom may be asylum seekers, can access their music centres.

The University of Strathclyde runs activities on widening access to the University which includes work with schools and colleges which asylum seeking children may attend.

The Open University points out that it offers a number of community-based programmes which use their opening modules as a route into higher education, which include a diverse range of participants and may well include students who are refugees or asylum seekers.

Most institutions reported that they had no particular campaign or marketing aimed at recruiting asylum seeker or refugee students, but that they underlined their commitment to equality, to open recruitment based on merit, that they encourage and welcome applications from all sectors of society and from applicants of all backgrounds. Several institutions also pointed out that they would recognise a wide range of entrance qualifications, including those gained in other countries in addition to non-certificated and experiential learning, and would take into account individual circumstances in the case of asylum seekers or refugees if, for example, an applicant's education was disrupted when fleeing persecution.

Other information

The Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group asked if there was **anything else to be aware of**.

Several Universities underlined the importance of the UKCISA, the Scottish Funding Council and SAAS websites as a source of independent advice and guidance for students studying the UK. Potential students should be directed to these organisations as early as possible. If students receive good advice and guidance at an early stage in the enquiry/application process, this enables them to make more informed choices.

A number of institutions also wanted to draw attention to their own statements of equality and diversity, saying they would not discriminate against asylum seeker or refugee applicants, or that they welcome a diverse student population helping create a vibrant educational experience for all.

The University of the West of Scotland reported that a former student who was an asylum seeker was featured in the University's Alumni magazine, highlighting their experience of successfully studying at UWS.

Points for consideration

For asylum seekers, their families, and refugees in Scotland

- Many Scottish Universities would welcome the presence of a diverse range of students to help create a vibrant atmosphere for learning. You should be encouraged to think about whether Higher Education is right for you. If you are interested, you should find out more information as soon as possible about what your circumstances might mean in terms of fees and financial support.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs	www.ukcisa.org.uk
The Student Awards Agency for Scotland	www.saas.gov.uk
The Scottish Funding Council	www.sfc.ac.uk

- You should also find out more information from the institutions(s) that you are interested in applying to, to find out more about if you might be eligible for any discretionary, hardship or humanitarian support.
- The University of Edinburgh has a fund for refugees undertaking postgraduate study – the Silber Bequest.

For local churches, charities and organisations that work with asylum seekers, their families, and refugees

- Is there anything you could do to support someone you know who could benefit from studying at university?
- Encouragement, help with information, ideas about course, practical support during the application process, or simply sharing what a University education can be like and what difference it can make to somebody's life.

For University chaplaincies

- From our research it seems as though there is likely to be a tiny number of asylum seeker or refugee students. How might your service to the whole University community include any extra or particular support to meet the needs or concerns of asylum seekers or refugees?

For Scottish Churches

- Asylum seekers in particular are very often vulnerable people on the margins of society. The asylum application process has been widely criticised for poor quality decision-making, and many congregations especially in Glasgow have experience of the day-to-day difficulties for asylum seekers such as destitution, hostile bureaucracy and racist attitudes in society.

- What can be done at a national level to keep the voice of the asylum seeker heard, and for the commitment of the Christian Churches to be in solidarity with the dispossessed to remain clear?

For Universities and Higher Education Institutions

- From our research there appears to be a considerable variation in approaches to how to classify asylum seekers or refugees for fee purposes. It would be helpful for prospective students to be given clear and accurate information.
- Asylum seekers, their families, and refugees face particular challenges and difficulties. It would be appropriate to consider how information encouraging applications from asylum seekers and refugees could be distributed.
- Celebrating the participation of asylum seekers and refugees in the life of the University can be an important demonstration of a commitment to diversity and welcoming student applications from all walks of life. Featuring stories of such students in prospectuses, magazines or other publicity would be very appropriate.
- We remain grateful to all those involved in the administration of the Universities who work with applicants and students who are asylum seekers, their families, or refugees. As should be the best practice everywhere, we commend an approach which treats individuals on a case-by-case basis, and which considers the needs of asylum seekers and refugees with pragmatism and sympathy.

For the Scottish Churches Asylum and Destitution Task Group

- To present the contents of this report at a future meeting of the Action of Churches Together in Scotland Church and Society Network, and to send copies of the report to Scotland's Universities and Higher Education Institutions, SAAS and UKCISA, the Scottish Refugee Council, University Chaplaincies and the Scottish Government.