



YOUNG ASYLUM SEEKERS

WHAT HELP DO THEY NEED TO PLAN LEARNING AND WORK?

NICEC

National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling

The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling is a network organisation and subsidiary of CRAC. It conducts applied research and development work on career guidance, in educational institutions as well as in work and community settings. Its aim is to develop theory, inform policy and enhance practice through staff development, organisation development, curriculum development, consultancy and research



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Young asylum-seekers, whether here with their families or on their own, face particular difficulties in making career plans, caused in part by the timing of the decisions about their refugee status which cut across secondary and further education transitions. But the greatest challenge of all is that they do not know what they are planning for. Will they get leave to remain when they reach the age of 18?

Between April 2007 and March 2009, a two-year project funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation explored the help needed by young asylum-seekers to plan learning and work. Young refugees and asylum-seekers themselves designed the questionnaires, carried out the interviews, and analysed the results. Staff at Connexions Leicester Shire and researchers from the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling worked with them to explore whether young asylum-seekers were getting the help they needed with education and training decisions.

The project offered an unusual opportunity to combine insight into the complex difficulties experienced by the young asylum seekers, with an understanding of the challenges facing the professionals and others trying to help them. It highlights the patchwork of interlocking roles and responsibilities which are themselves subject to constant policy shifts.

Young asylum-seekers are in urgent need of good, ongoing advice and support for planning learning in relation to realistic employment ambitions. This is hard for those here on their own but is also hard, in different ways, for those here with their families or carers. Plans need to take into account the two possible outcomes of their asylum application, and also the possibility that there may be periods of waiting up to a year or more. Better inter-agency working, based on an understanding of the perspective of the young people themselves, is essential, and better liaison between statutory and voluntary agencies would help all concerned.

This Briefing was prepared by Ruth Hawthorn, and based on project reports by Sokol Hoxha, Rosie Ilunga and Eileen Cusey (Connexions Leicester Shire) and Ruth Hawthorn and Barbara McGowan (NICEC)

HOW THE PROJECT WAS CARRIED OUT

Fieldwork took place in the City of Leicester and around between June 2007 and November 2008.

Connexions Leicester Shire trained six young refugees and asylum-seekers to act as researchers. This team asked 18 UASCs and AASCs from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Somalia and Zimbabwe what help they had needed, what they had received and who from, how useful it was, and what further help they would like. The respondents ranged in age from 15 to 19.

Project workers from NICEC asked ten young adults who had been through the experience of seeking asylum, what they felt would have helped them. They came from Iraq, Congo, Eritrea and Somalia.

NICEC researchers talked to staff from 15 agencies that support young asylum-seekers.

NICEC met with representatives from three of the refugee communities in Leicester: the Afghan community, the Kurdish community and Somali Development Services.

KEY

AASC:	Accompanied Asylum-Seeking Child (arriving with a parent or carer)
EAL:	English as an additional language
ESOL:	English for Speakers of Other Languages
NASS:	National Asylum Support Service
PA:	Personal Advisor with the Connexions Service
RCO:	Refugee Community Organisation
RASAP:	Refugee and Asylum Seekers Advice Project (based at the Leicester Racial Equality Council).
UASC:	Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child (arriving in the UK on their own)
UKBA:	UK Border Agency

Quotations in pink are taken from the young researchers' report, prepared by Sokol Hoxha and Rosie Ilunga.

NUMBERS

UASCs can be moved between Local Authorities and they themselves sometimes move without telling the agencies that support them. Social Services in Leicester knew of 17 UASCs during 2007-08 under 18, but said there was also an unknown number of others in the City not under their care. Numbers for AASCs are equally uncertain: the agencies that support them count family groups but not numbers or ages. Based on the data available our very rough estimate is that there are around 300 AASCs in the City of Leicester during 2007-08. There are more UASC boys than girls, possibly a ratio of around 3:1, but the figures seem to be more equal for AASCs.

THE CHALLENGES

Advice on learning opportunities, and an understanding of future work options, is crucially important for young asylum-seekers in secondary school and up to age 18, given the sequence of hurdles they must overcome during that period.

'The important thing is they accept me or not. If I stay, I continue to study, and choose my course and subjects. I can do nothing in Afghanistan. Maybe prison, maybe somewhere else.'

Possible deportation at age 18. All young asylum-seekers are granted temporary leave to remain in the UK until the age of 18. Up to that age they are entitled to full-time education and most other sources of support available to young UK nationals. A priority is to learn English. But depending on the age at which they arrive they must also make choices about what to study in secondary school, and then where and what to study after 16.

Their plan has to take into account at least two possible futures: at age 18 they may get permission to stay in the UK, or they may be sent back to the country they left ('parallel planning'). In some cases, even when they reach 18, it takes time to confirm a decision or its implementation, so young people can be left for a year or more after 18 unable to implement any plan.

At age 17½, half-way through any two-year course in further education, their case must be presented to the UK Border Agency (UKBA) so that a decision can be taken and implemented on their eighteenth birthday.

'I can't say, because I don't have a decision - I don't know where I will be - I don't know what is my future.'

Discontinuities at age 16. At age 16, in some Local Authorities young people move from a secondary school to a sixth form or further education college. Here they may do a one- or two-year course, and then some make the transition to higher education at 18 or 19.

In addition to the transitions experienced by all young people, UASCs at 16 may transfer from foster care to go into a hostel or other accommodation. Some UASCs, who have been moved by the UK Border Agency between Local Authorities for secondary schooling are returned to their original Local Authority at 16.

AASCs too have new problems at 16. Child Benefit is discontinued, and they are not entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance.

Uncertainties about age. People fleeing their country often have no chance to collect identification documents before they leave. On arrival in the UK the precise age of a young asylum-seeker is key and if they have no documentation they undergo examinations. This is an inexact science. One medical expert recently said it is possible to confirm age within an accuracy of two years. Even this is disputed: physical and social development can be advanced or slowed by levels of nutrition and stress, and sometimes be advanced in some ways and slowed in others. Major school transitions happen in rapid succession at 16, 17½ and 18: misjudgement by one year can make a significant difference to the life of an individual.

'He arrived when he was 14 and a duty social worker put him in a hostel with adults and he wasn't put in education.'

Additional hurdles. Individual children may have particular problems that affect their ability to plan. It is important to bear these in mind, but without assuming they will affect all. They include:

Loneliness and anxiety. Although mixed with the relief of being away from physical danger, both the young people, and the young adult group, reported acute loneliness and anxiety.



'I felt alone, and sad, no understand anything. I didn't know what I could do. I felt safe, only safe.'

Possible lack of education so far. Some young asylum-seekers arrive from countries where educational provision has never existed, or has broken down, or from which for some reason they have been excluded. They arrive here full of hope but in some cases with little understanding of what might be involved.

'Because in my country there is no college - no school.'

'In Afghanistan I couldn't even go to school because I was a girl - my father taught me at home.'

The effect of distress. Research suggests we need to be reasonably clear about our past if we are to plan the future. Until a young person has managed to digest and understand the path that took them as a child, often through catastrophe and a dangerous journey to an unfamiliar foreign country, it can be particularly difficult for them to think beyond the immediate present. Their ability to respond appropriately even to the present may be impaired. Emotional and physical consequences of trauma can be delayed and appear only after practical issues have been resolved.

'[I felt] shocked and so scared about what I was going to do in the future- what to do - and was thinking where am I going to sleep tonight and what would I eat - I had no money'

The consequences of social exclusion. When frameworks are repeatedly shattered young people are more susceptible to anti-social influences: they may get into trouble with the police, or disappear into the informal economy or worse.

WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Both UASCs and AASCs are entitled to help from schools and colleges, and the Connexions service (although one problem the young researchers discovered is that young asylum-seekers themselves do not know what to expect: when the help is not good they do not know they could hope for more, or how to go about seeking it). Each group has additional sources of help.

a) **Family support.** Respondents from both the peer research group and the young adults group regarded the support of family, where it was available, as very important. AASCs have that support, but the families themselves may be distressed. While still waiting for a UKBA decision, asylum-seeking families do not receive the help of Social Services. They may need help in understanding the educational system and the labour market of a western European country

Representatives from the Somali, Afghan and Kurdish communities, including parents, described the high value placed by their culture on education, and mentioned the fear in some families that if their children mixed too much with local English children, the apparent indigenous indifference to education might rub off on them. While understandable, this can get in the way of AACSCs picking up more constructive information about culture and opportunities, and also inhibit their learning of English.

Refugee Action, which works with asylum-seeking families, made two other points relevant to AASCs and career planning:

- Asylum seekers are forbidden to work so children grow up in homes where parents (and grandparents or other relatives) are unemployed (with an additional stress perhaps where the family was well educated and high earning in the past).
- Asylum seeking families may come from cultures with very different career expectations, for example of the role of women.



b) Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs).

Asylum-seeker families and UASCs often have the support of their own national community. Members meet together for mutual support, and over time are able to set up arrangements to help each other.

[Some] talked about the importance of meeting people from their own cultures. One said that they found a church where a lot of people from their country went. They said that is where most of their friendships came from, and that they were helpful, saying that it 'makes me feel like I'm with family'.

RCOs are an important source of support and information for the parents of AASCs and will arrange ESOL classes, sport and cultural activities for UASCs and AASCs of their community. They are not always well placed to give careers advice, but they impart strong cultural values about the importance of education, and they want their young people to do well. But RCOs have their own challenges:

Patchy provision. In smaller centres such as Leicester there can be a variation in the power of the RCOs to help. One RCO was so far out of town, one of our young adult group told us it was too difficult for him to travel to it. Eritreans told us their community is so small there is as yet no RCO to serve their needs.

Lack of premises. Leaders of the smaller communities told us of their difficulties finding, and affording, premises even for just a few hours a week, to run advice or educational programmes. Even then, funding is usually short-term. RCOs, or some of their activities, can come and go.

Not always sympathetic. While supportive for a nationality or language group, an RCO may not be of help to a new arrival who comes from a different political faction within it. One RCO leader we spoke to said they did try to support everyone from their country, but a UASC may not be aware of that.

c) Refugee support agencies.

These are often voluntary sector agencies funded through local authority and other grants to support refugees and their families once they get their positive decision. Many are able to provide some advice also to asylum-seekers. In Leicester we spoke to managers and staff at Refugee Action (which has branches also in other cities) and at the local Refugee and Asylum Seekers Advice Project (RASAP).

Refugee Action receives funding from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to help asylum-seeking families, but not enough to provide the level of advice possible through Social Services. Refugee Action's help over children's education is limited to practical issues such as admissions, though they have been able to provide awareness-raising sessions for staff and children in schools about refugees. Links between the NASS-designated agency and the Connexions service would enable Connexions at least to know where AASCs were and explore whether they would like help.

RASAP has a strong tradition of holistic support, and a commitment to carry help through until the need is met: exactly the kind of help that refugee and asylum-seeking families need. However, *RASAP* has insufficient and short-term funding, so the service may be cut off, or drastically cut back, at the end of any financial year. But *RASAP* could help Connexions, schools and colleges, through its well-established list of interpreters, and had suggestions for ways in which schools could help AASCs and UASCs better (see Recommendations).

d) **Social Services.** UASCs under 16 who are fostered are supported by one Social Services team. A separate team (of three) shared the support of the UASCs over 16 in Leicester during the period of the project, and they had a strong relationship with the young people on their list (though there are others in the City not on their list).

'Really helpful – in my country I never heard of anything like social services'

The UASCs interviewed were generally happy with the support from their current social worker. But there were less happy stories about previous social workers elsewhere including problems of mistrust and high turnover.

All young people in care, including UASCs, have a Personal Education Plan, and those leaving care should have a Pathway Plan. These include education and training plans based on assessments by every agency which has worked with the young person, specifically including schools, social workers and Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs). The young person is given a copy of the Pathway Plan, which should be reviewed every six months. This could be a useful tool for the young person and the helping agencies, but the young people involved in this project seemed to be unaware of the relevance or even existence of this.

The young researchers found that referral to Connexions came from many different agencies. 'We think that this is good in one way because it means a lot of people know that Connexions can help, but at the same time it doesn't seem consistent. If all young refugees have a Social Worker first and they know that Connexions can help, then why aren't all the referrals from Social services?'

e) **Connexions.** At the start of the project, Connexions Leicester Shire appointed a PA with responsibility for UASCs who played a key part in this project. The respondents in the peer research greatly valued his support. Other PAs attached to schools, and with other specialisms, told us they were keen to help their young asylum-seeking clients but would themselves like a source of specialist help (see Recommendations). The UASC specialist PA told us he had never been consulted over Pathway Plans.

f) **Schools and colleges.** The full range of challenges facing young refugees and asylum-seekers in school are well described by others. We highlight here some that are particularly relevant to making career decisions, from discussions with teachers of English as an Additional Language (EAL), with Connexions PAs, and with further education college support staff.

Individual school teachers and college tutors are eager to help both AASCs and UASCs and arrangements to support looked-after children such as designated teachers and mentors benefit UASCs particularly. One of the young adult group said that once he got to college, it was a teacher there who encouraged him to go for higher education. *'Once you get to know people they start to take an interest in you.'* But there are problems, including:

Poor communication at arrival or transfer. Secondary school teachers told us that they did not receive information about asylum status, either from the Local Authority at admission, or from primary schools on transfer. College staff told us they did not receive information (especially the Personal Education Plan) when young asylum-seekers arrived at college. A child may ask for anonymity for fear of bullying.

New arrivals have to learn English. In school they spend much of their time out of mainstream subjects having EAL tuition. They may therefore not make normal progress in main school subjects, and subject- and form-teachers cannot get to know them so well.

With initially hesitant English they may advance more slowly in language-based subjects compared, say, with mathematics, art or technical subjects. The school may enter them for exams in those subjects because they are likely to get better grades rather than ones suited to their actual interests and aptitudes.

In college, they can enrol on ESOL courses, but then transfer to mainstream subjects can be challenging and it can involve more than one step: initially to a less language-based subject and only later with encouragement to a subject they really want to pursue. This can involve more academic years.

'I want to improve my English, and then I can decide what subject is good for me. The important thing is to improve my English.'

Dispersal between City schools. Several cases were mentioned to us where the journey to school was complicated and lengthy. This is hard on the child, and means it is difficult for the family or foster carer to attend parents' evenings and build up a relationship with teachers, important to making good educational decisions.

Frequent school moves. Refugee Action told us of additional problems for AASCs resulting from sudden school moves. If newly-arrived families initially find accommodation with friends or relations, but then this breaks down, they are entitled to accommodation through NASS but will have no choice over where they are sent (further problems arise if asylum is refused, during appeals and then after final refusal).



h) Psychological services.

Individual personality is an important factor: some individuals are inevitably less self-assured than others. But some have had experiences that so severely undermined their confidence it was harder for them to make use of the help available. In extreme cases they can be referred for psychiatric help.

The Director of the Clinic for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry told us about the difficulties of working through interpreters, and also the pressures caused by waiting lists and insufficient staff time. Some UASCs were referred with serious psychiatric symptoms, where clinical help was needed urgently. But some referrals were of young people who were very worried and had language problems, but were not mentally ill. For these he stressed the importance of:

- activities with other young people
- a strong ongoing relationship with a responsible adult

He also warned:

Foster parents. Shared ethnicity of foster family and child could be less important than a strong understanding of UK ways of life and institutions.

Project funding. However good the initiative, when helping programmes are provided through short-term funding and then cut, the damage done to their trust of all provision may undermine any temporary benefit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall conclusion from this study is that young asylum-seekers, AASCs as well as UASCs, are in urgent need of good, ongoing advice and support for planning learning in relation to realistic employment ambitions. Better inter-agency working, based on an understanding of the perspective of the young people themselves, is essential, and better liaison between statutory and voluntary agencies would help all concerned.

Specific recommendations at national and local level are grouped here by the agency to which they are most relevant.

TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Age assessments. There are enough interruptions already in the brief period between 15 and 18. On humanitarian grounds flexibility in favour of the child is urgently needed.

- Instead of assuming a young person is not entitled to a service until their age is confirmed, the assumption should be that they are so entitled until proved otherwise.

Better written information.

- A handout at the first Home Office point-of-entry interview, in simple, clear language for young asylum-seekers on where to go for help with basic needs, including education and the Connexions service, with local contact addresses.

TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Authority awareness of numbers. Monitoring of numbers of AASCs as well as UASCs is essential: without it the Local Authority cannot know if it is meeting its duty of care.

- Information about asylum and refugee status, and previous education, should be shared with schools and transfer with the child from primary to secondary to further education, respecting confidentiality as appropriate.
- As the Integrated Youth Support Service is rolled out, information about AASCs as well as UASCs in each patch should be available to IYSS staff.

Interpretation. All respondents spoke of an urgent need for more help with interpretation. The telephone Language Line is not easily accessible for the young person themselves, and we were told their interpreters do not have enough specialist or local knowledge.

- Local training programmes in community interpretation are needed, for increasing inclusion as well as supporting local services such as education and health.
- Connexions and other agencies could draw on the interpretation skills in the refugee and asylum-seeking community via refugee support agencies such as RASAP in Leicester.

Another told us about how he was robbed by someone in his hostel, but when he went to the police station he couldn't report it properly. He was then robbed a second time by the same person, but didn't even try to report it, because he knew he wouldn't be able to explain it.

School admissions policies for young asylum-seekers. Long journeys to school impede home-school links, important for making good educational decisions.

- Allocation to schools of UASCs and AASCs should take account of travel times and expertise in working with this group in the schools.

English as an Additional Language. EAL teachers suggested ways in which resources could be shared between schools, but more is needed overall, and would benefit other new arrivals.

- Resources for EAL teaching in schools should be increased

'If you can't speak English, you can't solve your own problems.'

Support for Refugee Community Organisations. RCOs cannot provide essential support to UASCs and the families of AASCs without premises. These do not have to be extensive and could be shared.

- Some RCOs need help in applying and then making best use of all potential sources of grant income.

Continuity of support. The value of a single champion, mentor, or guardian who will stay with them through to 18 and beyond emerged from current and former UASCs. A local Council for Voluntary Service could help, if ongoing funding for administration, co-ordination and support, could be found.

'It would be better if you had one person to help you with everything. To explain college, housing, everything: one person instead of having a social worker, a Connexions worker, and a housing support worker.'

- A befriending scheme could address loneliness, discontinuities of support, bewilderment about UK institutions and lack of role models.

ON INTER-AGENCY WORKING

Inter-agency links. Connexions PAs are able to help with decisions about schooling or training, but not enough agencies know about them. Even where someone in the agency knows it, not all individual staff members are aware.

- Connexions should proactively seek links with the local NASS agency, to identify AASCs, as well as the relevant Social Services teams in their locality
- A single well-publicised contact point in Connexions for issues around asylum-seekers and refugees would help other agencies build these links.

The two smaller RCOs in our project were unaware of the Connexions service. RCOs provide advice in the relevant languages and could interpret for Connexions staff.

- Better outreach by Connexions to RCOs would give a significant return on effort.

The Integrated Youth Support Services (IYSS), being introduced at the time of this study, could be a solution to inter-agency working.

- Awareness of the issues faced by young refugees and asylum seekers should be part of IYSS staff development.

Home-school links. RASAP suggested schools could:

- Run workshops for parents, guardians and foster parents of new arrivals explaining the significance of parents' evenings and the role of Connexions. (RASAP could support this with interpreters)
- Identify mothers from each language group who speak sufficient English to interpret. They could encourage friends to attend school events.

Combating loneliness, encouraging integration, developing self-confidence. We visited the Dreamers project in Loughborough where young asylum-seekers and refugees could get together and work out solutions for themselves with support from skilled youth workers.

- Any or all of the Youth Service, Libraries, Further Education, Connexions and Social Services could build on local existing, but insecurely-funded, voluntary sector initiatives (such as Leicester's 'Freedom Youth Club') to develop similar provision.

CAREERS ADVICE

Support for Connexions PAs. A group of school-based and other PAs told us they too would like help with face-to-face interpretation. In addition, they wanted:

- A colleague with expertise in needs of AASCs as well as UASCs who could advise other PAs and link with external agencies as suggested above
- A link to a website that would provide up-to-date, user-friendly information on legal issues and sources of help (national as well as local)
- A straightforward protocol on working with young people who may be asylum-seekers.

Voluntary work. We heard of several examples of asylum-seekers helping others whose English was less good, thereby increasing their understanding and confidence and making contacts who could eventually provide references if they get leave to remain. If not, they have experience that may help wherever they go next.

- Connexions, Social Services, RCOs and other agencies should encourage young asylum seekers to get involved in community activities.

One young person said he didn't have friends, but that he met another asylum seeker at the hostel who 'Showed me every thing like where to play football and how to get to and from town'.

This Briefing, and a copy of the full report of the project, can be downloaded from www.nicec.org.uk

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