



Higher Education Inclusion for Refugees and International Protection Applicants in Ireland through the Universities of Sanctuary Movement—‘Today I have the keys, and I am wearing my good coat’

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PROLOGUE BY KINDA NASSLI

I have the keys in my hand to one of the offices in the Adult and Community Education building at Maynooth University, where I am doing a radio interview to share how being a University of Sanctuary student at

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Maynooth changed my life. Today, I own the keys of my life as a Syrian refugee woman in Ireland, but I am thinking about the long journey I have been through to be here today. The trauma of the war, the fear while protecting my babies, the shame of being a refugee, and the pain of being stereotyped. But today I have the keys and I am wearing my good coat.

When I left my home with three kids, newborn twins and a teenage boy, I did not know where to start, what to pack in three suitcases. How could I measure my forty-three years in kilos? Fifty kilos to get ready to leave my dangerous, sweet home and go to the 'safe' unknown. The only thing I needed to pack for myself was my good coat. This coat waited in my suitcase for three and a half years, unable to wear it, because refugees are expected to look vulnerable and dress from charity shops. When I went into one of the charity shops, asking about the price of jeans, the lady looked at me and said, 'These jeans are for a model, they're not for you, darling'. Or the advice I received from my Iraqi friend; 'Dear Kinda, I want to give you a tip. Please forget who you were in Syria and accept who you became in Ireland. You are now just a refugee. No one cares if you have a bachelor's degree, or you were working in TV. You must start over again from zero'.

My mother started from zero when she was 40 years old. She joined law school and became a lawyer. I need to be like her but being a 'safe' refugee made me feel vulnerable. The label itself swallowed me, and I vanished into this black hole of a system of accessing higher education, the difficulties of leaving my kids, and navigating complicated transportation to arrive at a destination where I could find my identity again.

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My friend was wrong. There are people in Ireland who care about me and my life experience. I joined College Connect¹ and met wonderful people who want to help refugees and asylum seekers. I was awarded a University of Sanctuary scholarship by Maynooth University. I gained my voice again and I found a place for me in my new home, Ireland. Today, I am a proud mother and a friend who supports my Syrian community, who wants to learn more about how to integrate in Ireland. I also engage with my Irish community, who want to learn about Syrian culture, too. Access to higher education is how we, as Syrian refugee women, will be empowered.

INTRODUCTION

Our intention in this chapter is to explore higher education as a public good, and to outline the modes of exclusion and inclusion of refugees and international protection applicants (IPAs), or forced migrants, in terms of access to higher education (HE) within a broader societal context. Regarding exclusion, we focus specifically on forced migrants and their right to, or lack of, access to HE in Ireland, and lay out the specifics of how many are on the margins of Irish society because of law, politics and public policy. In terms of inclusion, we contextualise the rationale for Universities of Sanctuary Ireland (UoSI), a grassroots movement initiated and led by staff and students in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs), to challenge inequity to access to HE for forced migrants. UoSI is a national network of Irish universities that has challenged the status quo by collectively offering over 500 scholarships for IPAs and refugees. This was not a national mandate nor one led by government. It is a movement that evolved despite, rather than because of, national concerns, and led by those who have seen an injustice within the HE system. This is followed by a presentation of some findings from research conducted with Sanctuary scholarship recipients and other HE stakeholders. The chapter culminates with a reflection of the role that UoSI has played,

¹ College Connect is a Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH 3) initiative, funded by the HEA, that encompasses four HEIs in the Midlands and North Dublin area of Ireland. PATH 3 is intended to provide funding to support the development of regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education by specified groups.

to date, in the Irish HE context, complementary to the objectives of the national Irish Race Equality agenda as set out by the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2022), to ascertain whether UoSI is living up to its aim of transforming lives, institutions and society.

HIGHER EDUCATION, PUBLIC POLICY AND FORCED MIGRANTS

Legal systems, in Ireland and elsewhere, create various categories of forced migrants. Persons seeking refugee status or subsidiary protection status, collectively known as international protection applicants, are lawfully residing in Ireland for the duration of their protection claim (International Protection Act 2015) (Government of Ireland, 2015a, 2015b) (see s.2 and s.16). A person's migration status impacts significantly on their entitlement to access a range of social rights in Ireland—social welfare, social housing, ability (or not) to enter employment and entitlement to access education (Thornton, 2021). Persons recognised as having some form of protection status—as a refugee, a programme refugee, or entitled to subsidiary protection or temporary protection—in general have the same rights as Irish citizens, including access to higher education. International protection applicants (IPAs, also known as ‘asylum seekers’) may wait several years for a lawful determination of entitlement, or not, to some form of protection status. While awaiting determination of protection status, IPAs are faced with an inability to flourish. There are restrictions on their right to work. IPAs are placed in a separate social welfare system, known colloquially as ‘direct provision’. Decisions on whom they live with and the food they wish to eat are taken away from IPAs (Thornton & Ogunsanya, 2023). Therefore, IPAs in Ireland cannot do what they value, and what they have reason to value, such as obtaining secure employment, housing or accessing HE (Sen, 1999). Sen's capability approach provides us with a useful analytical framework. It seeks to philosophically assess a quality of life that persons are able to achieve. We posit that access to HE is a social good that people have ‘reason to value’. However, for IPAs, the question of access to HE (what Sen would term ‘functionings’) may be in abeyance or unachievable linked inherently to Ireland's educational policies that in effect limit access of IPAs to HE. This limitation is not based on any sort of prohibition of IPAs from accessing higher education, but rather the lack of resources to enable entry to HE for the vast majority. The philosopher

Hannah Arendt has noted that the world finds nothing sacred in the ‘abstract nakedness of being human’ (Arendt, 1958). For Arendt, it is one’s legal status as citizen that generally secures most readily an ability for one to live their life as they choose. For IPAs in Ireland, the ‘right to have rights’ remains in suspended animation until such time as they are either recognised as having a protection need, or removed from the country (Oudejans, 2014). The precise rights one enjoys depends inherently on the particular legal status of forced migrants.

Participation of refugees in higher education strengthens national education systems to the benefit of both host and refugee communities, and the UN Refugee Agency has set a ‘15by30’ target to ensure that 15% of young refugees, approximately 500,000 in total, can access higher education by 2030 (UNHCR, 2021). However, it is well documented that forced migrants face a series of obstacles and challenges when accessing higher education (Bajwa et al., 2017; Cronin et al., 2020; Dajani, 2020; Lambrechts, 2020; Sartori & Nwanze, 2021). Only 7% of all refugees transition to HE, compared with a global average of 47%, (UNHCR,), and while there is a dearth of statistics in Ireland, it is recognised that there are significant barriers to accessing university education (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021). For certain categories of forced migrants, those who are seeking or who have been granted protection or residency, a complex tapestry of policy rules and legal dis/entitlements can act as a significant barrier to entry to higher education.

Access to higher education in Ireland is subject to persons meeting a certain level of achievement in Ireland’s final State examination (the Leaving Certificate) or equivalent foreign qualification (Devereux & Whelan, 2021; Quality Qualifications Ireland, 2024). Entitlement to have fees publicly paid to pursue a course of study in a HEI in Ireland is based on two conditions: citizenship/legal status and length of residence. Irish, UK, Swiss or European Economic Area citizens who have had three years of continuous residence in these countries can have fees paid to pursue an undergraduate degree in public universities in Ireland (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2024). Entitlement to a maintenance grant requires meeting the same residency requirement, along with an income threshold means test (Student Universal Support Ireland, 2024).

Forced migrants are also subject to a three-year residency requirement to access so-called ‘free fees’, otherwise those not meeting this three-year requirement will often have to pay international fees. The calculation of the three-year period includes the time a refugee would have spent in the

international protection system. For those granted subsidiary protection or permission to remain in Ireland, the residency requirement is calculated from the date of issuance of this permission. A limited scheme permitting IPAs access to free fees and a maintenance grant to participate in higher education was introduced in 2015 (Government of Ireland, 2015a, 2015b). This was restricted to IPAs who had at least three years of secondary level education in Ireland, who completed their Leaving Certificate and did not have an outstanding deportation order. Since 2022, Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) administers this ad-hoc scheme, which, while its remit has been expanded, is subject to yearly approval by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science' (DFHERIS), the latest approval provided for the 2024–2025 academic year (DFHERIS, 2024). IPAs who have been awaiting a determination of their protection claim for a period of three years may be entitled to free fees and a student maintenance grant to study in universities (DFHERIS, 2024, Clause 3). Persons with a deportation order have no entitlement to free fees or a maintenance grant. On one hand, HEIs have obligations to promote access for socially and economically disadvantaged persons (Universities Act 1997, s.55 (as revised); Technological Universities Act 2018, s.9). However, other aspects of law and policy can frustrate this aim.

Forced migrants who do not meet residency requirements, but who do meet educational entry requirements are considered 'international students'. Gilmartin et al. (2021) highlight the various tensions arising from governmental, political and university institutional dynamics, co-creating legal, economic and personal precarity for international students. International students are highly valued in the Irish university sector, given that they may pay more than triple the amount for the degree programme than non-international students (Finn et al., 2022). Some international students have identified themselves as "cash cows" to prop up the underfunded third-level system' (Capplis, 2022), while being quoted international fees has been highlighted as one of the main barriers in terms of access to HE for refugees and IPAs (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021).

Within Ireland, one's forced migration status is determined through a series of legislative enactments, wherein such status can limit access to various social rights. At one end of the spectrum, persons with a protection or residence status, will have access to social rights akin to Irish citizens. Legal limitations on equal access to social rights for IPAs are

seen as legally permissible on the basis that the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) has a legitimate interest in restricting IPAs' social rights to prevent 'welfare tourism' (Osinuga v Minister for Social Protection, 2018). IPAs without means are entitled to communal shelter, the provision of meals and specific services and a weekly payment of €38.80 per adult and €29.80 per child (S.I. 230/2018, 2018). The totality of this system is known as 'Direct Provision' (DP). Smyth (2014), O'Reilly (2018) and Lentin (2022) all highlight the significant violations of human rights that occur in the DP system. The lack of flexibility and compassion in some centres result in people going to college hungry as they miss the set meal-times; walking very long distances as they are unable to afford the bus fare, often the while dealing with racism and a lack of cultural awareness by others both on and off campus (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021). Despite the Irish government finally acknowledging that the DP system violates human rights (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth [DCEDIY], 2021), there has been no progress in dismantling this system (Thornton & Ogunsanya, 2023). Instead, there are plans to further expand the system to accommodate a higher number of arrivals of international protection applicants (DCEDIY, 2024). The legal limitations on accessing HE for forced migrants can be viewed through the prism of bordering practices (Murray & Gray, 2023). Bordering practices refer to everyday obstacles that forced migrants may face when living in society, whereby their legal status-or lack thereof- continuously impacts on their ability to engage with society. While forced migrants are not legally excluded from accessing higher education in Ireland a key bordering practice relates to most forced migrants being treated as international students for the purpose of fees. Therefore, financial independence is seen as a prerequisite to accessing higher education. Bordering practices also fail to take into account language and literacy issues, interrupted schooling, mental health issues, xenophobia, stigmatisation and fears of deportation. These are often interrelated and exacerbate each other, having been termed 'super-disadvantage' by Lambrechts (2020).

Migrant women face even greater disadvantages. A study by AkiDwa,² a national network of migrant women living in Ireland, found that migrant women encounter a multitude of traumatic and stressful experiences in their lives prior to migration, during the migration journey, but

² Akina Dada wa Africa means sisterhood in Swahili.

most particularly in their post-migration lives (AkiIDwA, 2020). Child-care costs in Ireland are among the highest in the OECD (Doorley et al., 2023) and therefore, childcare, or the lack thereof, is a major barrier to social integration for migrant women, as it limits opportunities for employment and education, and increases social isolation (AkiIDwA, 2020). Women who participated in research through the aforementioned College Connect project described threats by Direct Provision centre management to report mothers trying to access higher education as failing to adequately provide care for their children (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021), while Syrian women in Ireland communicated a fear of becoming involved in Irish society as a result of Islamophobia and a lack of awareness at all levels of Irish society about Arabic culture. Contrast these limitations on access to HE, to the experience of another subset of forced migrant—Ukrainians granted temporary protection in Ireland due to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. In 2023, an ad-hoc scheme was established to cover fees and provide a form of maintenance grant for Ukrainians granted temporary protection (DFHERIS, 2024). This evidences the capacity of government to acknowledge the importance of HE for persons with temporary protection, which begs the question, as to why there is significant less support for other forced migrants.

UNIVERSITY OF SANCTUARY IRELAND MOVEMENT

Universities have traditionally focused on the three pillars of teaching and learning, research and service. The service pillar is what concerns us here and it is often ascribed different terms within the literature including engagement, third mission, knowledge transfer, social responsibility and, more recently, academic citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007). The concept of academic citizenship has wide and varied interpretations, but research indicates that academic citizenship implies a broader requirement or emphasis or practice in connecting academic 'work with the concerns of society' (Macfarlane, 2007, p. 264). This pillar is often articulated in the literature as ostensibly capability enhancing (Boni & Walker, 2013) but expressions can be more rhetorical than real in many instances. The Universities of Sanctuary Ireland (UoSI) initiative was established in 2016 as a type of academic citizenship to work with concerns of society, and at HE institutional level to be more inclusive in response to a lack of

political will at government level. Based on the City of Sanctuary (CoS) movement, which started in 2005 in Sheffield, UK (Bauder, 2017), UoSI-accredited institutions receive designation based on commitment to, and evidence of, three core principles: learning what it means to seek sanctuary; taking positive action; and sharing best sanctuary-related practice (Cronin et al., 2020; Daniel & Crosbie, 2022; Grace & Margolis, 2019). Since its inception, the growing network of UoSI (9 universities in the country) has challenged the status quo by offering, to date, over 500 forced migrant scholarships for a range of programmes including undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, diplomas and access courses (UoSI, 2024). Terms and conditions for these scholarships differ between each of the universities, including eligibility criteria, stipend rates and application deadlines (Irish Refugee Council [IRC], 2023). Many HEIs that have not yet received UoSI designation, also offer similar scholarships. For those forced migrants, who otherwise do not qualify for free fees and a maintenance grant, Sanctuary scholarships offer the most accessible entry route to higher education.

The UoSI scholarship statistics are reported to the Global Compact for Refugees on a regular basis (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024) in fulfilment of its pledge at a collective level to provide greater access to higher education for those forcibly displaced, and, in so doing supporting *Objective 2: Enhance Refugee Self-reliance*, and *Objective 3: Expand Access to Third Country Solutions*. While the scholarship offerings constitute a core activity, Universities of Sanctuary must also demonstrate a willingness to engage in inclusive practices involving both the host HE community and refugee cohorts, ideally in a reciprocal learning and sharing environment, e.g. the DCU Mellie storytelling project (Daniel, 2022).

UoSI was advised by the umbrella organisation, Places of Sanctuary Ireland (PoSI), a not-for-profit organisation with charitable status, to establish a steering committee with rotating chairpersons and to invite representatives from sanctuary accredited HEIs to participate. A positive outcome of this initiative has been the process of coalition building across the HEI sector in the context of increasingly competitive national and global markets. In addition, and in keeping with the ‘nothing about us without us’ principle of inclusion embedded within the sanctuary ethos, allyship with related Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and forced migrant groups, including the IRC, Doras, and the Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland (MASI), has helped inform UoSI policy

and practice. Sanctuary scholarship holders are also included in the forum, which strategises against forms of injustice embedded at structural level in HE and state-level institutions and services. The steering committee, while it does carry the responsibility of (re)accrediting HEIs is largely made up of HEI staff and students who contribute on a voluntary basis. This work is not always accounted for in workload allocation templates and underfunding of this vital service contribution is an identified issue that needs to be addressed, especially as it is acknowledged that UoS initiatives contribute to institutional rankings, particularly in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion and community engagement, adding value to branding and public relations initiatives.

In 2022, a study was conducted with a variety of stakeholders, including existing and former Sanctuary scholarship holders, UoSI personnel and NGO representatives, to ascertain the extent to which Universities of Sanctuary in Ireland are ‘getting it right’. This research was borne from a desire to understand at a deeper level the impact that Universities of Sanctuary are having on the lives of forced migrants. This research also included the impact of sanctuary status on the host HEIs. These were examined through the lens of Nussbaum’s capability perspective (Nussbaum, 2011). In particular, we wanted to better understand how UoS create opportunities for these cohorts to do and be what they value and have reason to value (Sen, 1999) and for such institutions to be human development friendly (Boni & Walker, 2016). Following ethical approval for this study from Dublin City University (DCU), a survey was conducted with students together with a series of focus group (FG) interviews with academic and professional staff and NGO representatives. Twenty-three students responded from four accredited Universities of Sanctuary (UoS) across the country and were canvassed on questions relating to the following themes: preparation for study; financial support; the level of welcome experienced; participation and empowerment; identity and belonging; and looking to the future. Wellbeing and inclusion were two overriding factors that informed all the themes. This was in keeping with the epistemological framework adopted for the study concerning students’ expansion of capabilities and the freedom to do and be what students value and have reason to value. The focus groups focused on the HEI as a potential space for ‘fertile functioning’, that is, access to and achievement in HE, will also benefit other aspects of a student’s life (Wolff & De Shalit, 2013). Human development therefore underpins the ethos and practice in various domains, including

teaching and learning, research, engagement, policy and the wider HE environment (Boni & Walker, 2016).

From the Sanctuary student perspective, the understanding of what the UoS programme is, and how it impacts them, is voiced largely positively, often via a rich assortment of concepts and metaphors, including windows, bridges and keys, signifying access to spaces of safety and learning. These UoS are thus identified as welcoming homes. Hopes and dreams, joy and happiness are aspirations and sentiments expressed as respondents contemplate their experiences as a Sanctuary scholarship recipient. Many write of the opportunities that the scholarship, and the initiative overall, presents. These range from developing confidence and self-esteem, through opportunities to integrate in an inclusive environment, to allowing them to aspire and reach for (now) tangible goals. The valued scholarship is seen as an invitation to create a new life in Ireland, and beyond. The following quotes illustrate these sentiments:

It is an opportunity of a lifetime to give the people in need another chance in life and to help them gain their hopes and dreams again.

It's a very empowering space that will one day help in making the world a better place and to help one another always.

It is an opportunity to grow one's confidence in terms of integration to Irish culture.

My window to opportunities and becoming independent in the near future.

An inclusive space where all cultures and ethnicities are accepted on campus.

As scholarships are a key aspect of the UoS initiative due to the financial barrier accessing HE in Ireland, fee waivers and material supports such as laptops, meal vouchers, transport cover, free bicycles, etc. all contribute greatly to the wellbeing of Sanctuary scholarship holders. This wellbeing is manifested in different ways, including psychological wellbeing, such as feeling free from worry, feeling blessed and comforted; securing autonomy and self-actualisation; and having the opportunity to reciprocate and give back to family. The scholarships also help people to regain control over their lives, enabling them to plan their life and their studies. While the positive benefits are clearly evident and dominate the responses, there were a couple of more muted responses, including a negative one, indicating that the scholarship negates social welfare entitlements:

There's so much support provided but, sometimes, it takes time.

The major issue is housing and the effect the scholarship has on the eligibility for any other social welfare payments such as back to education.

Concerning equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) matters, attaining a Sanctuary scholarship allows students to escape the trapped identity of 'asylum seeker', giving them the opportunity to be and do what they value intrinsically and individually (Sen, 1999), feeding into the related sense of wellbeing engendered by autonomy. This is illustrated in the following:

[T]he opportunity to get the scholarship has ensured that I get the opportunity to interact with university culture independently from my identity as an asylum seeker which is amazing.

The staff focus groups also alluded to positive benefits from the host community perspective, both at individual and institutional level, with the network of UoSI being singled out as 'foundational' and a 'super-structure' in terms of the support it provides. However, many voiced concerns that sanctuary work is largely done on a voluntary basis, on top of competing professional demands. A need was expressed to create the role of dedicated Sanctuary Support Officer, who would be able to provide services based on equitable (rather than equal) needs. Additionally, the creation of the post would send out a message about the value of sanctuary across the university. To date only two of the UoS HEIs have created this role. Participants also spoke about the vital role that sanctuary 'champions' play in each institution but expressed concern about sustainability of the programme if left to individuals to promote and maintain sanctuary values and practices. The importance of having sanctuary inscribed in HEI strategic plans was seen as vital for sustainable practice. One respondent says:

[It] is an accountability mechanism [...] if it's in the strategic plan and is identified as one of the priorities, whether that's a priority for action or priority as part of our ethos.

In many instances, respondents referred to the fact that sanctuary work is woven into intercultural and global citizenship ideals, which all HEIs purportedly subscribe to. They raised concerns about the sanctuary endeavours being equated with 'white saviour' and 'charitable'

dispositions, and that it is not sufficiently embedded within institutional structures and practices, as per these comments:

Sanctuary is not just charity, sanctuary is being a global citizen. And that switch is not happening yet, you know: people don't see it like that because it costs money.

[Sanctuary] also needs to appear at deeper levels, all throughout the curriculum...universit[ies] talk in their strategic plans about widening participation and [say] very little about how you actually concretely embed those values in the curriculum.

Other points raised include the importance of students taking the initiative and not leaving it solely in the hands of staff; the need for intercultural and trauma-informed training for academic and professional staff alike; and concerns about preferential treatment being given to certain cohorts of forced migrants, including Ukrainians, thus creating an unequal and unfair system.

DISCUSSION

Students from forced migrant backgrounds bring with them a unique approach that forces us to examine our systems and structures more closely. Yet, we still appear to be a long way off from a more strengths-based approach that moves beyond viewing diversity as a matter of representation in HE settings, and instead considers equality and equity alongside diversity. There are differences between 'race equality' and 'race equity'. Race equality, the preferred term utilised by the HEA, is defined as equal representation, opportunities and experiences of all racialised HEI staff and students in Irish HEIs (HEA, 2023). This focuses on outcomes. Race equity, on the other hand, challenges and seeks to fundamentally change the systemic societal causes of racial disparities that require race equality measures (Minow, 2021). Race equality measures can and do include people of migrant and racialised backgrounds (Kempny & Michael, 2022); therefore, forced migrants cannot be left out of the drive to address race inequalities in higher education and the creation of inclusive spaces where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive irrespective of their ethnic background. Achieving race equity for forced migrants, the majority of whom are racialised persons, requires

an overhaul of broader HE entry policies, as well as changes to migration systems.

The process of becoming a University of Sanctuary scholar highlights the complexity of the issue of access to higher education for this cohort, exposing opportunities for better commitment to race equality and broader issues of inclusion and belonging on campus, though the scheme, while undoubtedly providing vital support, does raise the question as to whether they relieve pressure on the government to radically reform its policies on access to HE for the refugee and protection seeking communities (Cronin et al., 2020). UoSI provides a shared space of dialogue, mutual support and identifying institutional practices focused on encouraging HEIs to reflect critically on how they can enact solidarity beyond the State (Murray & Gray, 2023). This solidarity has been expressed by many Irish HEIs by introducing their own pathways for forced migrants to access higher education. This, in its own way, seeks to achieve equity in access to HE for forced migrants, in spite of broader state policy, in particular through fees, that results in exclusion of most forced migrants from HE.

As explored throughout this book, equality, diversity and inclusion within higher education in Ireland has had a prominent role and is a core priority for the sector, driven by government policies, strategies and funding arrangement. Universities were encouraged to address gender equality issues through signing up for accreditation with the UK Athena Swan programme, and eligibility for national research funding is dependent on Athena Swan accreditation at Bronze or Silver level (O'Shea, 2016; Scott, 2020). More recently, the HEA has committed to tackling race inequality within higher education in Ireland so as 'to create an inclusive culture and environment where individuals are able to thrive, irrespective of their ethnic background' (Kempny & Michael, 2022). In 2020–2021, the HEA commissioned a national survey to develop a 'picture of race equality' (HEA, 2022, p. 3) (and see Chapter 13 for detailed analysis). While the focus of this work was on staff and their perceptions and experience of race inequalities, there was little reference to students, and more specifically, students from refugee, international protection and migrant backgrounds. Within the report, there is one direct reference to the inclusion of Black and Ethnic Minority Students, the provision of scholarships, funding for anti-racism activities and the necessity of affirmative action policies. The categorisation of entitlements for differing groups of forced migrants to access higher education, based on 'legal

status', can mask racialised differences. The HEA's Anti-Racism Principles (2023) acknowledge race inequality as an issue in Irish higher education, as well as intersections of race with other statuses, such as immigration status (p. 7), nonetheless, it does not specifically identify issues pertaining to forced migrants and equity in access to, and support in, higher education. The requirement is on HEIs that adopted these principles in 2023 to highlight and address structural and institutional barriers that impact on race and racism. This offers the potential for forced migrants and other representative groups, inside and outside the HE sector, to emphasise the intersections of forced migrant status and the impacts of State law, policy and practice and policy on access to and State support in higher education. Migrants are mentioned in the survey report within the context of English language provision with efforts to provide this support being refused on grounds of equality; this cohort must nonetheless demonstrate the same learning outcomes and standards as native English speakers. The report goes on to suggest that 'white privilege is considered a given' with 'no desire to empower these students to be the best they can be' (Kempny & Michael, 2022, p. 51). It also extends this idea of white privilege and makes the point that while Ireland is increasingly diverse, the 'more prestigious, more well-remunerated, more erudite professions have not seen the same diversity trickle into their—particularly better-paid—ranks (p. 17).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

At the beginning of this chapter, we set ourselves the challenge of ascertaining whether the collective of Universities of Sanctuary is living up to its aim of transforming lives, institutions and society. Yet, transformation is difficult to measure, is unevenly paced, is slow and does not always reach everyone at the same time in equal ways. If transformation is on a continuum—where are we, the Universities of Sanctuary movement on it?

In Kinda's introduction, she claims that being a University of Sanctuary scholar 'changed [my] life', while others who participated in the UoSI survey describe a reclaiming of identity, separate to that of asylum seeker, through education. So certainly, transformation through education, and therefore through Sanctuary scholarship happens, but it is more likely in spaces where participants' socially situated knowledge can be validated, and where this knowledge, generated from lived experience,

is valued (Duckworth & Smith, 2018). The drive for higher education to achieve equality targets, is often at the expense of a critical, reflexive, inclusive and dialogic process, so how does UoSI stay committed to a strengths-based and people centred approach? What we might think of as indicators of commitment to formal equality, do not necessarily deliver equality of outcome, and may in fact maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within the HEI environment (Scott, 2020). Furthermore, the UoSI movement can feel like fighting a tide, in the face of government policies deliberately designed to limit inclusion of certain forced migrants from higher education. In such a landscape, how can the UoSI movement best leverage the resources and support to challenge such policy mandates, particularly when working within the State funded higher education system?

As has been described in this chapter, the UoSI movement came about from the grassroots initiative of HE staff and students to counter the exclusion from higher education of certain forced migrants deemed ‘undeserving’ of support by State policy, denied “the right to have rights” and to flourish. The very word ‘sanctuary’ connotes a kinder place, one of safety, welcome and support, and contrasts with the harsher terminologies, labels and stamps assigned to people who may be forced migrants. As Ireland witnesses a rise in anti-immigration protest (Laurence et al., 2024), the notion of sanctuary is even more precious. Kinda’s introduction highlights higher education as a route to empowerment for refugees, but it is one that is stymied by the deliberate barriers to access based on how law, policy and practice label some forced migrants as ‘undeserving’ (Sales, 2002).

In 2023, UoSI laid out its new strategic plan, and while there is no grant incentive in terms of receiving official UoSI designation, the application process is rigorous and robust, and designation is very much a celebrated achievement that has become embedded within universities’ EDI framework and connected with commitment towards race equality. In the last decade, Ireland has seen the impact of grassroots movements in creating systemic societal change in areas such as marriage equality and abortion rights (Enright et al., 2020; Harding, 2016; Mullally, 2018). The challenge facing UoSI is to put forward research and evidence-based arguments to ensure that EDI actions and practices, within and outside higher education, are meaningful and acknowledge societal and legally imposed barriers denying access to higher education for many forced migrants. This task will likely become more challenging in the face of

anti-immigration protests and political one-upmanship on limiting these rights, as well as the rise of disinformation via social media and other platforms (Boland, 2024; Fletcher, 2024; Gallagher, 2024).

The integrity of movements such as UoSI, even in the face of these challenges, concerns emphasising our duties of hospitality, our shared humanity and ensuring higher education genuinely becomes a place for all—regardless of migrant status—to fulfil their potential.

EPILOGUE BY KINDA NASSLI

I have just finished recording a podcast with a famous Irish fashion designer. It is September 2024 and it is a long time since I have felt proud, equal, and confident in an interview. Today, I am not only a former TV presenter, not only a refugee, but I am myself. Today, I am Kinda Nassli, a Masters graduate from the Adult and Community Education Department in Maynooth University.

‘Education is my high heels’ I say in the podcast. Education lifted me up again from the undervalued position I had been stuck in since becoming a refugee. Education changed the way I see the world around me and empowered me to change, for the better, how the world sees me.

I had always thought that graduating with a degree in English Literature and becoming a TV star in my country was all I needed to achieve to lead a stable and respectable life. My neighbours used to tell me that they knew the time in the morning from the sound of my high heels and from the scent of my perfume when heading downstairs every day to start my live morning show on TV.

I never expected to leave my home, Syria. But because of the war I moved to Turkey and living there for three and a half years was a huge shock for me. In Turkey, for the first time in my life, I stepped into a world I had never known before: the world of housewives, women who did not have mothers like mine, women who did not graduate or even work, just forgotten housewives with hidden undiscovered skills, with silent steps in this world.

Years passed, and before getting my education opportunity in Ireland, I also started to recognise the sound of other women’s high heels, leaving early in the morning to their work or colleagues and leaving all the bored, unqualified and unemployed housewives behind. I also started to recognise how I myself had become one of them.

Today, I wonder how many human beings are hiding in silence, waiting in the shadows for the hand to lift them up or to guide us down to hear them, where we can educate each other, to walk in confident, steady steps.

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