Education and New Scots integration

Chapter extract from ‘The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland’.

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# Terminology and list of abbreviations

In line with Scottish Government policy, this report uses the term ‘New Scots’ to refer to: individuals and family members who arrive in Scotland under various refugee resettlement schemes; people who are claiming asylum and resident in Scotland; individuals who receive refugee status or another form of leave such as Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary leave and their family members; people who arrive in Scotland to be reunited with a family member who is a refugee; young people who are claiming or have claimed asylum or have been trafficked into the UK. The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy is also relevant to other displaced groups such as survivors of human trafficking and people who are stateless.

BAME – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

COSLA – Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

LA – Local Authority

LtR – Leave to Remain

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NHS – National Health Service

NSRIDP – New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project

NSRIS 2 – New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (second iteration)

SRC – Scottish Refugee Council

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# Introduction

This publication is a chapter extract from ‘The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: A report on the local and international dimensions of integrating refugees in Scotland’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the main report, we provide interpretive frameworks through which integration can be understood, a comprehensive overview of research findings concerning refugee integration in Scotland, and a series of recommendations to inform the development of the third iteration of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. The findings and recommendations presented in this chapter are based on academic research conducted by the University of Glasgow as part of the New Scots Refugee Integration Delivery Project (NSRIDP), a partnership project led by the Scottish Government with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) and the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts (RILA) at the University of Glasgow. The project sought to expand good practice and innovation in the context of integration in Scotland, as well as conduct primary research on refugee integration in Scotland to support the development of the third iteration of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (NSRIS).

This chapter extract summarises findings and recommendations related to education as a key facilitator for the integration of New Scots. Education, in the context of New Scots integration, is more than just ESOL classes. It is one of the key markers of integration and is closely linked to people accessing work and employment once they have refugee status.[[2]](#footnote-2) Given that people seeking asylum are not allowed to work, education is also one of the few spheres of activity open to asylum seekers which can help secure future opportunities and increase a sense of purpose and integration.

The NSRIS 2 aimed to achieve the following outcomes concerning Education:

* Refugees and asylum seekers understand their rights, responsibilities and entitlements, and are able to exercise them to pursue full and independent lives.
* Refugees and asylum seekers are able to access well-coordinated services, which recognise and meet their rights and needs.
* Policy, strategic planning and legislation, which have an impact on refugees and asylum seekers, are informed by their rights, needs and aspirations.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The NSRIS 2 aims, outlined above, are in line with the Scottish Government statement whereby ‘It is the right of every child of school age to be provided with a school education […] including those who are refugees and asylum seekers.’[[4]](#footnote-4) Schools and classrooms are places which can provide a sense of connection, stability and community that is vital given the often-disruptive experiences of the UK asylum system. They are settings where integration happens when well supported and enabled, for example through ‘buddy’ or befriending schemes for *“welcoming that person within their* *meeting and within the environment, contacting and sitting beside that buddy person and* *telling about how long this meeting will be, some of the issues that may be raised about the* *school, about the food, about the costume, about the uniform, and different things.” (Assam,* *third sector).*

# Challenges and barriers preventing New Scots accessing education

*“Just sending a young boy from Eritrea to ESOL classes eight hours a week isn’t preparing him for the future and meeting all his educational needs. […] that person needs to learn a trade, or they need to learn maths and computing. They need to learn PE and they need to have social time to mix with other young people.”* (Alice, Local Authority)

While it is important to highlight positive and enabling factors in the context of New Scots

and education, it is not clear that the above aims of NSRIS 2 have been consistently met. In 2018, a study commissioned by UNICEF found that Scotland had not met the twenty-day

target aiming to place unaccompanied asylum minors into a school or college place within

twenty days.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Research conducted for this report also found a variety of challenges and barriers preventing New Scots from accessing education across all age groups. These include the hostile environment perpetuated by the UK asylum system; limitations of the Scottish Government’s Adult Learning Strategy; complexities and problems related to funding for further and higher education; different cultural expectations of education systems; trauma and disrupted education; problematic educational models or practices perpetuated by service providers.

Education is a remit devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but control over immigration policy rests with the UK Home Office. The UK’s ‘hostile environment’ policy exacerbates mental health difficulties among New Scots who are already at high risk of psychological distress due to the circumstances and experiences which caused them to seek refuge in the first place.[[6]](#footnote-6) Issues such as inadequate housing; short tenancies; living in an area where racism and violence is common; being forced to move housing; being placed in temporary or hotel accommodation – all of these impact on the ability of New Scots to access and benefit from education effectively.[[7]](#footnote-7)

However, not all problematic issues regarding New Scots and education are related to UK

government policy. Some are within the remit of the Scottish Parliament’s devolved powers,

and these in particular are where changes and improvements can happen within the framework of NSRIS 3. Concerns have emerged repeatedly about how both the framing and implementation of the Adult Learning Strategy (ALS) have led to confusion and extra work for Local Authorities and other education providers (see ESOL section). In particular, the lack of funding allocated to the ALS strategy has caused frustration and delays in delivery. Furthermore, the lack of funded scholarships for New Scots means that access

to higher education is severely restricted:

*“There’s increased demand and we’ve got a set budget, it’s very, very difficult. I would say at the minute- so what we had, we had 480/490 applications for the scholarships, and they were whittled down to 13.” (Meg, Higher Education sector)*

Related to this is a lack of flexibility in college bursary schemes - for example, if a New Scot uses 2 of 3 years of allocated bursary for ESOL then they don’t have enough left for college course. Academic language and requirements are another obstacle for New Scots accessing Higher Education, alongside a lack of awareness of opportunities and options.

Some barriers preventing New Scots from accessing education are related to intercultural

awareness and communication. Research by the Mental Health Foundation Scotland indicates that refugees need more information about school systems and curriculum content so that parents can better support their children to learn.[[8]](#footnote-8) At the same time, schools need more information about different cultural backgrounds, including cultural expectations and needs related to education, in order to best support New Scots. Increased intercultural communication can be achieved by schools through simple steps such as embedding an approach which encourages and supports parents who are New Scots to participate in Parent Council activities, thus fostering integration.

Other issues affecting access are specifically related to gender: for example, women who arrive as single mothers experience additional barriers to accessing education if they do not have a network of friends or family to help with childcare. This is an issue specifically identified as a barrier to accessing education by the Scottish Government.[[9]](#footnote-9) At the same time, childcare provision which would enable New Scots mothers to access education is uneven and often poorly funded.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Some New Scots arrive as unaccompanied minors, and are a group which presents a unique

complexity of needs and requires strong multiagency working:

*“We can’t just say ‘There’s your room in a house, just get on with it,’ it’s about the support for them getting into the country, getting them settled, and then support thereafter. What do they need? Do they need to go to school? Would college be a better idea? What about their language skills? It’s very, very complicated.” (Meg, Higher Education sector)*

Unaccompanied minors, as well as other groups of New Scots, may have long gaps in their educational history prior to arriving in Scotland. These may be due to not being able to access full-time education in their home country or as a result of time spent travelling, waiting to travel or in refugee camps before reaching the UK. Furthermore, New Scots may have difficulties proving their educational achievements or having their existing certifications recognised in Scotland. These issues all present significant barriers to accessing education in Scotland.

Pedagogical practices and educational models can also, in themselves, create problems for

New Scots. For example, while dividing educational stages by the age of learners is a standard accepted pedagogical practice, in the case of people who are refugees and asylum seekers this presents considerable complications. Firstly, age assessment in relation to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a contested practice which has raised serious ethical concerns.[[11]](#footnote-11) Secondly, as we have seen, many New Scots arrive having experienced years of displacement and disrupted schooling, meaning that in practical terms a child who is of P6 age may not easily be able to join a P6 classroom without additional support - that is aside from ESOL support needs.

In this educational context it is therefore important to note the problems associated with certain educational models and practices. Particularly problematic are models driven by competency assessments, such ESOL requirements geared only to the requirements of passing English exams;[[12]](#footnote-12) normative assumptions centred around linguistic competence which encode dynamics of power and status;[[13]](#footnote-13) and pedagogical practices based on a deficit-driven educational discourse.[[14]](#footnote-14) All these are damaging in that they risk placing New Scots in the position of having ‘less’ – less knowledge, less communicative power, less ability - because they do not fit easily into specific models of assessment and education.

Such pedagogical approaches reduce the agency and capacity of New Scots and limit the ways and contexts in which education and learning can occur. They furthermore present education as a one-way, linear process where New Scots learn and educators teach, rather than as a two-way process of mutual learning mirroring the two-way process of integration proposed by the NSRIS.

Finally, significant barriers to accessing education can be caused by the effects of trauma on

memory, concentration and motivation. New Scots have travelled to Scotland seeking safety

from dangerous and traumatic situations; often the journeys they undertake involve further

danger and pain. To this can be added the trauma inherent in experiencing the ‘hostile environment’ of the UK asylum and immigration system as it currently stands.[[15]](#footnote-15) Concerns for family members and friends abroad can also impact on the mental health of New Scots and affect their ability to study:

*“I wanted to stay with my parents and my brother in Iran, I always think about them and wish they are with me. I can’t study I always cry that they are not here.” (Kian, New Scot)*

Our research found that a lack of trauma informed support, practice and awareness was

apparent across many projects and services. This is a critical issue given the specific needs

of New Scots and is in turn linked to a lack of funding and training in this area.

# Recommendations

* A community development approach should be embedded into all educational practices related to New Scots and integration. This should include Intercultural communication skills to support the communication of expectations and norms around training and education.
* Practices which are based on intercultural learning, rather than purely on competency based / proficiency models of education, should be embedded into all educational settings related to New Scots integration. This will support programmes where education facilitates integration as well as - and as part of - learning.
* Approaches to funding allocation and distribution need to be consistent, long term and also informed by community development models of best practice. They must include considerations such as childcare and travel costs.
* Trauma – sensitive approaches to education should be embedded in all aspects of educational services related to New Scots.
* The Adult Learning Strategy for Scotland needs to be accompanied by funding if it is to support the delivery of meaningful educational services.
* Best practice needs to be more widely shared within and across sectors. The next iteration of NSRIS is an opportunity to facilitate and increase the sharing of best practice amongst educators in Scotland, with input from New Scots, in order to increase enabling factors as much as possible within the context of the current hostile environment. The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) has published resources for schools to use when they welcome refugees, as well as booklets for New Scots children and their families[[16]](#footnote-16). The City of Sanctuary pack for schools wishing to become Schools of Sanctuary also has a wealth of resources and information[[17]](#footnote-17).
* While ESOL is an educational aspect that has received much attention in the context of New Scots and integration, other aspects and types of education are less researched. NSRIS 3 should support this type of research to help widen the scope for delivery of education to New Scots.
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8. Available at <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/MHF-Scotland-Voices-and-Visibility-Report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Scottish Government (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the ESOL chapter of the main report. Available at: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_900243_smxx.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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