Enhancing access, participation and progression of refugee background students in English higher education

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Abstract This paper adds to the literature on refugee background students' (RBS) access to and widening participation in Higher Education (HE) in England. It briefly outlines who may be considered as a refugee background student and then highlights changes to the governing frameworks impacting access and widening participation policy in English HE. An outline of existing literature relating to access and participation of RBS in UK HE is provided, and a gap is identified in the debate around how institutions can move beyond 'access' to more holistically address 'access, participation and progression' (OFS, 2023). A deductive thematic analysis of four English university websites is then undertaken using Wilson-Strydom's 'pragmatic capabilities list for transition into university' and concepts of 'access with success' (2012; 2016a). Results are analysed in context to whether institutional provision enhances the capabilities of RBS to access, participate and progress in English HE, and recommendations for practice are suggested.

Key words Refugee; University; Access; Participation; Asylum; Capabilities

Background

The access and participation agenda in English universities has expanded significantly over the last 60 years (Greenbank, 2006). It began with a focus on social class, as highlighted in the 1963 Robbins Report, and later shifted towards addressing economic exclusion following the introduction of tuition fees after the 1997 Dearing Report (Greenbank, 2006). This was followed by a government drive to increase higher education (HE) participation to 50% among 18- to 30-year-olds (DfES, 2003), further expansion of target groups for inclusion, and the establishment of the Office for Students (OFS) in 2018.

Despite these developments, 'refugee background students' (RBS) were largely absent from access and participation policies until 2016, when, prompted by the crisis in Syria, those with 'refugee' status were formally recognised as a widening participation category (Lambrechts, 2020). However, not all categories of RBS are included in this definition, and there remain few regulatory requirements for universities to actively support their access and progression through HE. As a result, questions remain regarding how HE institutions currently support RBS and where further enhancements can be made.

Who are 'Refugee Background Students'?

In the UK, there is no singular category of 'refugee background students' (RBS). Rather, this definition encompasses multiple immigration statuses (see Détourbe and Goastellec (2018, p. 9) for a useful synopsis). For simplicity, a basic division is noted here between 'asylum seekers' (those who have claimed asylum and are awaiting a decision on leave to remain) and 'refugees' (those who have had leave to remain and associated rights granted).

As of 2023, the number of UK asylum applications equated to 13 per 10,000 of the population (Sturge, 2025, p. 29). The refusal rate of first-stage asylum claims stood at 53% in 2024 (Sturge, 2025, p. 6), and Détourbe and Goastellec note that less than a third of asylum claims result in a grant of refugee status (2018, p. 8) - thus highlighting the precarious situation of asylum-seeking students who may be removed from the UK despite undertaking university studies.

Asylum seekers are ineligible for UK government student loans and must pay significantly higher 'international student' tuition fees compared to 'home' students (UCAS, 2021). Furthermore, they are disqualified from most state support and have no right to work in the UK (UKCISA, 2021).

In contrast, students with 'refugee status' benefit from legal parity with UK 'home' students, and, thus, qualify for domestic tuition fees and access to a government student loan. They can also access some social and welfare benefits plus a legal route to gain British citizenship through the immigration system (Gov.uk, 2022). Thus, while both asylum seekers and refugees may be

considered as RBS, their rights, experiences and needs in HE will vary significantly.

Widening participation policy and Refugee Background Students

Access Agreements

The current access and participation system in English universities still reflects the Future of Higher Education paper (DfES, 2003) and the subsequent 2004 Education Act, which introduced higher fees of up to £3,000 in 2006 (DfES, 2003, p.76) and established the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to ensure these fees did not harm participation among underrepresented groups (OFFA, 2004).

Institutions raising fees were required to complete an 'Access Agreement' detailing how they would facilitate fair access for various underrepresented student groups in HE, including:

> 'low income backgrounds; lower socio-economic groups; minority ethnic groups or sub-groups that are under-represented in HE; disabled people'. (OFFA, 2004, p. 17)

At this stage, only 5% of 124 Access Agreements made specific reference to either refugees or asylum seekers (Stevenson and Willott, 2007, p.684), and refugees were only finally recognised as a widening participation category in Access Agreements in 2016 (Lambrechts, 2020, p. 806). However, though recognised as a widening participation category, refugees were still not listed as a specific target group and asylum seekers were not recognised at all.

Access and Participation Plans

Further change came in 2018 when OFFA was replaced in England by the more substantive Office for Students (OFS). Access Agreements were withdrawn, and Access and Participation Plans (APPs) were introduced. Though similar to Access Agreements (OFS, 2018, p.11), these enhanced regulatory and reporting requirements to:

> 'improve equality of opportunity in student access, success and progression for groups of students that are currently underrepresented in English higher education' (OFS, 2018, p. 4).

The OFS identifies multiple target groups currently underrepresented, including refugees (OFS, 2020a), and there is also a burgeoning recognition that the current positioning of refugees is insufficient:

> 'the legal definition of 'refugee' does not capture all those in need of support, which may also include a broad spectrum of people categorised as forced migrants and in particular unaccompanied asylum seeking children.' (OFS, 2020)

However, for RBS, the position remains ostensibly the same as in 2016. There is still no specific requirement to identify them within institutional data, no requirement to specifically provide support, only passing acknowledgement of the complexity of their circumstances, and the category of 'refugee' has not been extended to also include asylum-seeking students.

A further recent change introduced the 'Equality of Opportunity and Risk Register' (EORR), which guides data collection for access and participation by identifying twelve intersecting risks to 'access, participation and progression' (OFS, 2023). While this may help address some intersecting characteristics of RBS, acknowledgement of their specific circumstances is very limited in the guidance. Although applicants can now identify as being from a refugee background within the admissions process, there are still very limited requirements to collect data for any RBS, with the OFS acknowledging:

> 'Some groups of students are missed out of datasets (particularly in smaller providers) or are subsumed within broader categories of students that may 'mask' their experiences'. (OFS, 2023)

Thus, the widening participation regulatory framework still does not address the challenges 'access, participation and progression' (OFS, 2023) of RBS in English HE.

Access, participation and progression of Refugee Background Students

For RBS, Martin and Stulgaitis note barriers to entry across multiple countries, including host country restrictions, informational barriers, financial barriers, language requirements and proficiency, missing personal and educational credentials, psychological and newcomer challenges and physical and connectivity barriers (for example, transport) (2022, p.32-36).

These broadly echo the findings of a systematic review undertaken by Arar (2021) of refugees' pathways to higher education since 2010, UNESCO reports on HE for Refugees (Ferede, 2018), overarching reviews e.g. (Ramsay and Baker, 2019) and literature focusing on differing social, theoretical, and geographical contexts (for example, Ferede, 2012; Unangst, 2019).

For RBS in the UK, there have been a number of studies noting the challenges for RBS to access education (for example, Doyle and O'Toole, 2013; Bowen, 2014). These can include: a lack of recognition of existing qualifications (Morrice, 2009; Bloch, 2007); challenges of the English language (Salvo *et al.,* 2017; Doyle and O'Toole, 2013); legal position and immigration status (Da Lomba, 2010; Mayblin and James, 2019; Murray, 2022; Doyle, 2009); and economic restrictions to access (Murray, 2022).

Reflecting the above, Lambrechts describes RBS as 'super disadvantaged' when seeking to access HE in England. This term is derived from accumulation, inter-relation and exacerbation of barriers to access, which, when combined with the broad socio-economic position and lived experience of refugees, places them at an extensive disadvantage for HE opportunities (Lambrechts, 2020, p. 803).

To counter this, many authors suggest approaches to support access and participation in HE for RBS. For example, Ferede looks at a global 'holistic humanitarian response strategy' (2018, p. 50); Slaven (2018) suggests utilising and expanding institutional processes in the UK; and Lambrechts, who recognises the need for the voice of RBS to be heard and the importance of engaging with external experts (2020, p. 820). However, each of these authors also emphasises the need for more wide-ranging studies to develop solutions to challenges of RBS HE access and participation.

The need for further research into the type and effectiveness of interventions HE institutions use to support RBS is also emphasised within wider literature (for example, Arar, 2021; Streitweiser *et al*., 2019). It is, therefore, clear that universities can play a significant role in addressing 'the many challenges faced by people in displaced communities' (Slaven, 2018, p. 3). It

is, however, also recognised that there is 'no singular approach…[so] institutions need to identify their own strengths and focus on the areas where they can deliver most benefit' (Slaven, 2018, p. 28).

This paper, therefore, hopes to contribute to the gaps identified above and explores further how interventions from universities can support access, participation and progression of RBS in English HE.

It is worth clarifying that most of the literature focuses primarily on *access* to HE. However, this paper recognises that 'access alone does not tell us about the conditions of being educated' and 'does not equate to participation or recognition for marginalised and vulnerable communities' (Cin and Doğan, 2021, p. 301). Therefore, access and participation can be extended further as 'the terms 'equitable', 'access' and 'success' are intimately linked with the notion of social inclusion' (Gidley *et al.,* 2010, p. 124). Thus, broadly aligning with the policy aims of the OFS, this paper examines support targeted at RBS and whether these challenge barriers to access, participation and progression (OFS, 2023). Specifically, it draws on Wilson-Strydom's work, which challenges neoliberal conceptions of HE access by addressing social injustices through the capabilities approach. Her *pragmatic capabilities list for transition to university* (2012; 2016a) is used to evaluate 'access with success' (2016b), assessing factors beyond distributive economic support that may impact an individual's capability, not only to enter university but also to succeed in all aspects of their university life. Subsequent sections outline Wilson-Strydom's framework, the capabilities approach, and their application in evaluating provisions at four English universities as of April 2023.

Evaluative framework: the capabilities approach

Lenette suggests there is a lack of clear frameworks to evaluate institutional provision for RBS' access, which in turn impacts the ability of an institution to provide for the needs of RBS themselves (2016, p. 1311). This paper argues that the capabilities approach to evaluation may offer an effective tool to meet this need.

The capabilities approach is based on the work of Amartya Sen (1979; 1982; 1993; 2006). It is concerned with an individual's 'beings and doings' and subsequent ability to 'achieve various valuable functionings' (Sen, 1993, pp. 30-31). Functionings are 'the things that [a person] manages to do in leading a life', while capabilities are 'combinations of functionings the person can achieve' (Sen, 1993, p. 31). Thus, as an evaluation tool, the capabilities approach enables analysis of an individual's capability to achieve desired 'functionings' (Sen, 1993).

Robeyns adds some clarity to Sen's work and distils the capabilities approach down to 'a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society.' (Robeyns, 2005, p. 93). Robeyns highlights its use in evaluating multiple facets of wellbeing, policy analysis and other social contexts (2005, p. 94). She includes several example 'functionings' ('working, resting, being literate, being healthy, being part of a community') to highlight a core tenet of capability theory, that it is not simply about what may be achieved but also the freedom to be able to achieve it (Robeyns, 2005, p. 95). This brings together agency, which is central to the capabilities approach, but also the ability to 'convert' opportunities (conversion factors) into achievements (functionings).

The capabilities approach and Refugee Background Students

The capabilities approach and the work of Sen have already been utilised by some authors in relation to refugees and RBS. For example, noting the prevalence of 'assumptions...rooted in a discourse of vulnerability', Gateley suggests a way of avoiding problematisation and stereotyping of refugees would be to consider policy from the notions of freedom and agency presented by Sen (2015, p. 27). While Naidoo *et al.* suggest the capabilities approach may be used to examine the enabling and restraining factors faced by RBS and how this may impact their choices and transition to university (2018, p. 161), thus emphasising how this approach may be used to examine concepts of access and progression in more detail.

Focusing specifically on RBS access to HE, Molla emphasises the importance of agency and argues that capability expansion requires recognition of individual circumstances in addition to interventions and community enhancement opportunities (2020, p. 8). Thus, as a central concept to the underlying notions of freedom to live and achieve (Sen, 1979), this focus on agency provides a renewed emphasis on the position of the individual and allows a more granular consideration of how interventions from institutions may enhance RBS access, participation and progression in HE.

It is the capabilities approach which underpins Wilson-Strydom's conception of 'access with success' in HE. Wilson-Strydom asserts that it enables researchers in HE to uncover hidden injustices, as the focus on agency allows for an in-depth exploration of multiple factors which impact students' capabilities (Wilson-Strydom, 2014, pp. 151-152). Considering capabilities as 'skills and capacities that can be fostered' (Walker, 2005, p. 128 in Wilson-Strydom, 2012, p. 220), Wilson-Strydom presents a 'capabilities list for the transition to university [which] provides the basis for proposing a normative framework for what a successful transition requires' (Wilson-Strydom, 2012, p. 253).

This list is derived from extensive work within the capabilities field. It builds on the ideas of Sen (1979) but accepts Nussbaum's argument for defining a list of capabilities (2003) while also acknowledging the work of key theorists such as Robeyns (2005) and building on the ideas of Walker (2005). Wilson-Strydom notably develops Walker's theoretical list of HE capabilities (2005) and moves it into the transition space of HE to consider 'the capability to participate in higher education' (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, in Cin and Doğan, 2021, p. 301).

Therefore, to further develop the work of Wilson-Strydom in a novel context, this paper will first undertake a broad review of Access and Participation Plans (APPs). This will be used to identify a sample of English Universities from which to align access and participation interventions for RBS to Wilson-Strydom capabilities list for transition to university. This will be undertaken within the current policy context of 'access, participation and progression' (OFS, 2023) to determine if the interventions may support 'access with success' for RBS. (Wilson-Strydom, 2016b).

Data collection

Review of Access and Participation Plans

This project explored how interventions from English universities and groups located within a university setting may enhance the access, participation and progression of RBS.

It focused on institutions that explicitly offer provisions for RBS, beginning with an initial analysis to identify universities that explicitly included RBS support in their APPs.

A review of 108 APPs of English Universities and some University of London Colleges was undertaken for the 2021/22-2024/25 provision. To provide a comparative context, the 2014/15 Access Agreements of the same institutions were also considered.

In the 2014-15 Access Agreements, there were only four references to 'refugee(s)' and only one reference to 'asylum seeker(s)' out of 108 institutions; this compared to 53 and 28 mentions, respectively, in the 2021/22-2024/25 APPs.

There is clearly much greater representation of RBS in the 2021/22-2024/25 APPs. However, this still means 50% of institutions make no reference to either asylum or refugees (compared, for example, to 100% for representation for the target group of 'care leavers').

Those institutions that do mention RBS often amalgamate refugee and asylum seekers together, with only a few making specific delineations between the categories and the respective rights, opportunities or barriers they may face.

The APPs themselves demonstrate little information that may enhance the capabilities of RBS, but they do serve to highlight the challenge of the capability of 'Respect, dignity and recognition' (Wilson-Strydom 2012, 2016) given the vast majority of institutions, reflecting the OFS, either do not recognise them or simply include them as an 'other' categorisation.

As the APPs alone offered limited potential for analysis in this context, it was deemed that institutional websites offered a more detailed picture of the realities of how access and progression for RBS are implemented in practice.

Identifying institutions to include in the sample

A sample of institutions' APPs, which included references to support for RBS and corresponding website content, were compared. Even though there were significant inconsistencies between the APPs and websites, where an APP mentions 'asylum seeker(s)' and/or 'refugee(s)', the institutions all offered some form of targeted interventions for RBS and thus were deemed a suitable criterion for inclusion in the study.

To ensure a range of institutions were included, but reflecting the scale of the project, four institutions which included reference to RBS in their APPs and had dedicated provisions listed on their websites were selected. These were chosen at random from identified categories informed by the work of McCaig (2015), who recognises differences between 'post-92' and 'traditional' institutions, and the OFS (2020a), who note regional differences between urban centres such as London and some cities in the North of England.

The limitations of this sample size are acknowledged, but their inclusion is intended to provide examples which sit within the broader HE context in England and are subject to the same external policy environment. Though specific findings will relate to the institutions studied, identified themes may be applicable to the wider HE sector in England and provide a basis for further research in this area.

Identifying data for collection

Data included in this report refers to targeted institutional interventions aimed at supporting RBS access, participation, progression, and/or wellbeing. To ensure a comprehensive data range, interventions not solely for RBS but recognised as meeting their needs were also included (for example, a peer-mentor scheme listed under RBS support, even if it is open to all students). However, interventions not contextualised to RBS needs (for example, general personal tutoring) were excluded. Other bodies within the HE space, such as those in the Students' Union, were identified as overlapping but distinct from institutional provision.

To elicit the widest available spectrum of data, a search of institutional websites was undertaken using specific search terms

derived from literature on interventions to support RBS access, participation and progression in HE (for example, Streitwieser *et al*., 2019). The identified provisions were then categorised thematically against Wilson-Strydom's pragmatic capabilities list for transition into university. This is detailed in the analysis and findings sections below.

Data analysis

Wilson-Strydom's pragmatic capabilities list for transition into university was used as the thematic framework to map interventions supporting RBS access, participation, and progression (2012; 2016a). As noted, Wilson-Strydom emphasises 'the capability to participate in higher education' (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, in Cin and Doğan, 2021, p. 301).

While not specifically focused on RBS students, the list's broader applicability makes it useful here, as it enables an examination of the conditions necessary for student success and an assessment of how institutions foster these capabilities among RBS. Thus, using this list as an evaluative framework allows analysis to move beyond simply identifying service provision to systematically assess where interventions may enhance RBS capabilities to access and succeed in university. Full details of the capability list and applicability to the context of this study are incorporated into the findings section below.

To determine how an identified intervention may align with Wilson-Strydom's capability list, a deductive thematic analysis of the data was undertaken. A deductive approach is 'where the researcher brings to the data a series of concepts, ideas, or topics that they use to code and interpret the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 58) and may utilise an existing specific framework or theory to focus on identified aspects within the dataset (Kiger and Varpio, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method within qualitative research which supports the identification, evaluation, and analysis of themes within data sets (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

Wilson-Strydom's capability list provides the framework and thematic structure for aligning institutional provisions, offering a clear and transparent approach to analysing support for RBS students in developing essential capabilities for success in HE.

The interpretative nature of this analysis is acknowledged, with some provisions fitting multiple categories, and, while author judgment plays a role in aligning provisions with capabilities, the connections are intended to be clear to see.

Findings

Wilson-Strydom's capability list and definitions are presented below, with mapped institutional support alongside each capability (numbers in brackets indicate provisions by multiple institutions; some provisions span multiple capabilities). In the tables, 'capability' can be viewed as the real opportunity for RBS to achieve the associated functioning; 'application' outlines how the capability is manifested in HE, while 'institutional provision' maps the identified support. A synopsis of findings follows each capability.

Table 1 Capability of 'Practical Reason'

Capability	Application	Institutional Provision
1. Practical reason: *Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, and reflective choices about post-school study and career options.* (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155).	Interventions identified in this category relate to supporting RBS in navigating HE systems and making informed, reflective choices about their study.	• Dedicated web page outlining financial support options and/or access information [3] • Dedicated university contact [2] • Access/Taster Courses [3]

To support an informed choice, all four institutions made some effort to engage RBS before application. This ranged from basic web pages with access and financial information to personalised support. For instance, a 'designated member of staff (pre-entry), who can assist forced migrant students with all aspects of the application process' and access to a 'programme for Year 12 and 13 students' supporting HE transition.

Dedicated financial support pages are helpful but do not address the unique circumstances of RBS students and rely on students' existing language skills, technology access, and ability

to navigate the system, thus limiting their effectiveness in enhancing this capability.

A dedicated university contact offers institutions the opportunity to engage with RBS individually, providing a personalised approach that acknowledges and can adapt to their unique experiences and circumstances. This support can potentially enhance the practical reason capability by offering tailored guidance aligned with students' specific needs.

Table 2 Capability of 'Knowledge and Imagination'

Capability	Application	Institutional Provision
2. Knowledge and imagination: *Having the academic grounding needed to be able to gain knowledge of chosen university subjects and to develop methods of academic inquiry. Being able to use critical thinking and imagination to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives.* (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155).	RBS may come from a range of educational backgrounds, experiences and expectations. Identified interventions aim to support RBS in developing a strong academic foundation, critical thinking, and an ability to engage with multiple perspectives in their chosen subjects.	• RBS Access to a two-year widening participation programme to facilitate the transition to university if locally resident • Dedicated 12-week course and public resources for RBS to raise awareness and skills for university, e.g., access to free academic resources and journals • A university course run alongside a foundation programme to facilitate study skills • Funded places into university foundation courses for RBS (limited)

This capability was partially addressed by two of the four institutions. Support included an integrated 2-year transition programme to 'broaden students' knowledge and help them to feel comfortable with a new style of learning' and 'teach[ing] study skills throughout the two-year programme'. However, while

RBS access to this programme was prioritised, it was not guaranteed.

Other provision included an open 12-week course to 'introduce refugees and asylum seekers to Higher Education' and to 'find out what skills and knowledge are needed in order to apply for and succeed in Higher Education in the UK'. Enrolment on this course also granted 'access to online and open access resources' and entry to institutional facilities such as the library.

For those RBS able to access these courses, there is substantial potential to develop the Knowledge and Imagination capability and enhance university preparedness. However, barriers remain for the preparatory courses themselves, such as availability, navigating entry systems, dedicating time for attendance, and meeting language requirements.

Table 3 Capability of 'Learning Disposition'

Capability	Application	Institutional Provision
3. Learning disposition: *Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having the learning skills required for university study. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.* (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155).	Provisions in this category relate to helping RBS students build essential study skills, confidence in learning, and a proactive approach to enquiry – thus supporting them to thrive as engaged learners in the HE environment.	• Two year widening participation programme to facilitate the transition to university if locally resident • Dedicated 12-week course and public resources for RBS to raise awareness and skills for university, e.g., access to free academic resources and journals.

Learning Disposition was one of the least supported capabilities across the institutions. Institutional provisions for RBS access seemed to intersect closely with Knowledge and Imagination, but few initiatives directly targeted the development of Learning Disposition. Specifically, there were no interventions designed to enhance RBS students' 'confidence' or 'active inquiry' beyond those associated with general academic preparation.

This lack of targeted support suggests a gap in fostering proactive approaches to enquiry, learning and engagement - which are essential for developing a strong learning disposition. Without such initiatives, RBS may miss opportunities to develop the confidence needed to fully engage with and thrive in a university environment.

Table 4 Capability of 'Social Relations and Social Networks'

Capability	Application	Institutional Provision
4. Social relations and social networks: *Being able to participate in a group for learning and working with others to solve problems or tasks. Being able to form networks of friendships and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.* (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155).	Provision mapped here aims to help RBS establish supportive networks and a sense of belonging within the institution, facilitating both academic and social connections.	• Student Action for Refugees (STAR) group* [4] • Refugee sponsorship scheme – opportunity to sponsor a refugee and their family for a degree in the UK. • Buddy/mentor Scheme [2] • Additional orientation support Financial - facilitate social relations by reducing financial barriers to participation: • Sanctuary Scholarship (small number for Asylum Seekers) [3] • Post Grad Refugee Bursary (small number for Asylum Seekers) [2] • Priority access for refugees to undergraduate scholarship • Tuition fee concession pending the outcome of an asylum claim

A 'STAR' (Student Action for Refugees) network was present at all four institutions' Student Unions, aiming to 'build understanding and connections' and create a 'society where refugees are welcomed and can thrive as equal members of the community.' Though STAR operates outside institutional provision, it is included here as institutions referenced it on their websites, suggesting it is considered a part of RBS support. STAR networks, often led by RBS voices, provide valuable community and advocacy opportunities, thus greatly enhancing this capability, even if outside the formal institutional structure.

Substantive interventions also included mentor/buddy schemes that 'help incoming Widening Participation students form friendships and find communities by matching them up with experienced undergraduates' who 'guide [them] through University processes and life as a student.' These schemes can enhance the capability of Social Relations and Social Networks (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155), but their effectiveness may depend on the inclusivity of the schemes, support for participants, and whether RBS feel able to engage and value these relationships.

Additionally, financial support and scholarships were offered to a limited number of students. This indirectly supported this capability by enabling RBS students to participate more fully in the social and academic life of the institution.

Table 5 Capability of 'Respect Dignity and Recognition'

Capability	Application	Institutional Provision
5. Respect, dignity and recognition: *Being able to have respect for oneself and for others, as well as receiving respect from others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion or*	Provisions aim to foster a respectful, inclusive environment within HE institutions that values the unique experiences of RBS and ensures their dignity and recognition.	• Sanctuary Scholarship (small number for Asylum Seekers) and associated webpages [3] • Post Grad Refugee Bursary (small number for Asylum Seekers) [2] • Priority access for refugees to Undergraduate scholarship.

race. Valuing other languages, other religions, spiritual practices and human diversity. Being able to show empathy, compassion, fairness and generosity, listening to and considering other people's points of view in dialogue and debate. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning. (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155).		• Tuition fee concession pending the outcome of an asylum claim • Student Action for Refugees (STAR) group [4] • Contextual admissions based on personal circumstances [2] • Research portfolio focused on migration/challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers [3] • Immigration legal advice clinic [2] • Collaboration with a charity to reduce citizenship fees for children • Recognition of multiple categories of forced migration

This capability has the widest range of interventions mapped against it, highlighting the importance institutions place on fostering respect, dignity, and recognition for RBS students. However, a dichotomy is evident in how institutions recognise and engage with the complex legal identities of RBS students. One institution explicitly acknowledges the nuance within RBS legal identities, noting 'any legal background of involuntary immigration can have a significant impact on educational opportunities and outcomes… We use the term 'forced migrant' as an umbrella term'. This contrasted to another institution which defaulted to the basic legal categorisations used to determine rights of access and fee status: 'We provide specialist support to refugee *and* asylum seeker students' [emphasis added].

Other actions which support this capability included:

- 'research that impacts on the issues of refugees, migration and borders'
- a 'Refugee Community Sponsorship Scheme'

- 'ma[king] a commitment to welcome forced migrants into their institution and community'
- use of contextual admissions which 'if you are a forced migrant… admissions staff [can] take your circumstances into consideration'; and
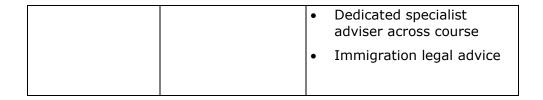- immigration legal advice clinics

What is less clear from the provision offered is the extent to which institutions consider the broader intersectional identities of RBS students that could impact their progression and overall experience within HE. This lack of focus on the multifaceted nature of RBS identities may limit the full conversion of this capability throughout their academic journey.

Financial support and scholarships were also available to a limited number of students, providing some degree of recognition but not fully addressing the wider dimensions of respect and dignity.

A less well-addressed area was 'having a voice to participate effectively in learning' (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155). Apart from the STAR networks, there were no examples of RBS' voices being included in the interventions offered.

Table 6 Capability of 'Emotional Health and Reflexivity'

Capability	Application	Institutional Provision
6. Emotional health and reflexivity: *Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn*. (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155).	Provisions in this category address the unique personal circumstances of RBS students, fostering a sense of belonging, reducing anxiety, and supporting emotional well-being to build confidence in their learning journey.	- Sanctuary Scholarship (small number for Asylum Seekers) [3] - Post Grad Refugee Bursary (small number for Asylum Seekers) [2] - Priority access for refugees to undergraduate scholarships - Tuition fee concession pending the outcome of an asylum claim - Dedicated web page outlining university support for RBS/forced migrant students [3]

		• Dedicated specialist adviser across course • Immigration legal advice

A broad range of support is available that could enhance this capability; however, specific counselling or wellbeing services for RBS students are limited, with little recognition of their ongoing support needs beyond the point of entry. Only one institution acknowledged 'the challenges faced by forced migrant students' and provided a link to the general pastoral support services at the university.

Immigration legal advice is also included in this category due to the significant emotional anxiety that decisions around immigration status can have on RBS. This included advisers who 'can give support and advice for any issue connected to your asylum or refugee status'.

Financial support and scholarships were also available to a limited number of students, offering some indirect support for emotional wellbeing through addressing financial worries.

Table 7 Capability of 'Language Competence and Confidence'

Capability	Application	Institutional Provision
7. Language competence and confidence: *Being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction.* (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155).	Proficiency in the language of study is essential for this capability to function effectively; provisions here focus on developing language skills and building confidence for RBS in using English within an academic context.	• Refugee and Asylum Seeker Conversation Club • 12-week preparatory course and public resources for RBS to raise awareness and skills for university, including - dedicated resources to support the learning of English and access to collated resources from across the web

Despite being widely recognised as a barrier to education (Lambrechts, 2020; Stevenson and Willott, 2007; Ferde, 2018),

this was one of the less well-supported capabilities across the four institutions. One institution offers 'The Refugee and Asylum Seeker Conversation Club [which] provides a safe and supportive environment for sanctuary seekers to practice their English-speaking skills through friendly conversation'; however, this appears to be offered through a student group rather than the institution itself. Another institution 'aim[ed] to bring together resources for the teaching of English Language courses for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers' but offers no specific English Language classes. Engagement in these activities supports RBS Language Competence and Confidence but only to a limited extent. More comprehensive, tailored language support would significantly enhance this capability.

Analysis and recommendations

The mapping exercise reveals various institutional initiatives aligning with Wilson-Strydom's identified capabilities. However, it is clear that this provision is patchy and does not address these capabilities equally. While a full evaluation of each intervention is beyond this paper's scope, the findings highlight pockets of good practice and clear areas for improvement.

The current interventions fit within the broad policy of 'access, participation and progression (OFS, 2023) but lean towards supporting 'entry' to HE rather than 'access with success' (Wilson-Strydom, 2016b). For example, advice services, websites and information provision offered by the institutions appear to enhance the capabilities of 'Practical reason' and 'Respect, dignity and recognition' (Wilson-Strydom, 2016a, p. 155). However, without a broader recognition that RBS should not be 'universalised' as each experience is 'unique' (Morrice, 2013, p. 666), these interventions may only offer a superficial level of support up to the point of entry and fail to address 'multiple enabling and inhibiting factors' (Lambrechts, 2020, p. 820), which RBS may face across their studies.

When looking at other interventions offered by the institutions studied, it can also be argued that there is only superficial alignment with Wilson-Strydom's capabilities, as interventions lack engagement with core tenets of agency and wellbeing demanded by the capabilities approach. For example, the

promotion of scholarships can clearly facilitate entry into the institution but do little to address the myriad of other issues RBS may face across the duration of the programme. This position is supported by Cin and Doğan, who note that distributive interventions, such as scholarships, hide inequity which may persist across a course of study and thus limit the capability of RBS (2021, p. 301). Some commentators argue against this position, for example, Harrison *et al*. disagree and argue that scholarships have the capacity to enhance the Wilson-Strydom's capabilities of Social Relations and Social Networks, Respect, Dignity and Recognition, and Emotional Health and Reflexivity (2018). However, in context with the examined institutions, this argument is limited, as while benefiting the few students who receive a scholarship, this equates only to a limited redistribution rather than enhancing the capabilities for the majority of RBS.

Although many of the interventions from institutions were focused on 'entry', there were some examples, such as the buddying and mentoring schemes, which went beyond this and offered ongoing support to RBS across their studies. This can be argued to support the Social Relations and Social Networks' capability of RBS, though only within internal institutional networks. Networks for refugees have the possibility to enhance accessible social capital (Wells, 2011), impact identity and positionality around learning (Karam *et al.*, 2019), and allow access to socio-economic opportunities such as employment and housing (Hanley *et al*., 2018). However, to enhance this capability outside of the institution, linking to the external communities to which RBS may belong is also needed.

A further finding indicated that, despite several actions which aligned with Respect, Dignity and Recognition capability, '*Having a voice to participate effectively in learning'* (which is included under this capability) was not addressed by any of the institutions. This runs counter to multiple authors who cite recommendations to overcome barriers to access and participation as requiring input from RBS themselves (for example, Lambrechts, 2020; Ferde, 2018; Slaven, 2018) and is diametrically opposed to the capabilities approach in which recognition of individual agency and wellbeing of participants is key.

Finally, one of the most significant findings was the inconsistent provision of those capabilities aligning to support learning. Even those institutions which offered substantive pre-entry support that enhanced the Knowledge and Imagination and Learning Disposition capabilities did not link to ongoing support for RBS once enrolled. The clearest example of this was the failure of all four institutions to support the Language Competence and Confidence capability in a meaningful way. The importance of refugees being able to speak the host language is well established (for example, Nawyn *et al*., 2012; Hsieh, 2021; Boyd and Cao, 2009) and from within the sample data collected, it is clear this need is not being met.

The analysis leads to the following recommendations for institutions to consider regarding the access, success, and progression of RBS in HE:

- Include RBS explicitly within access and participation plans, recognising the differing circumstances of refugees and asylum seekers and wider categories of forced migration.

- Provide pre-entry and in-sessional English language support, ensuring RBS are 'given a voice in decision making about what linguistic capabilities are appropriate for them to effectively function in their new environment' (Thondhlana and Madziva, 2017, p. 69).

- Engage directly with RBS across their course to 'help universities understand the multiple enabling and inhibiting factors which affect them' (Lambrechts, 2020, p. 820).

- Expand ongoing support that recognises the agency and unique position of RBS beyond entry through to completion of their degree (Molla, 2020).

- Foster networks between the university, community groups, organisations, and RBS to enhance accessible social capital (Wells, 2011) and to positively impact identity and positionality in learning (Karam *et al.*, 2019).

- Offer scholarships where possible, complemented by broader institutional interventions to address hidden inequities across the course (Cin and Doğan, 2021, p. 301).

Conclusions

This paper contributes to the literature on widening participation and HE access for RBS. Applying Wilson-Strydom's concept of 'access with success' (2016b) and pragmatic capabilities list for transition into university in a novel way, it evaluates interventions supporting RBS' capability to 'access, participate and progress' (OFS, 2023) at four English universities that recognise RBS in their Access and Participation Plans. This approach has provided a useful starting point to examine interventions, showing that while there are pockets of good practice, current provision in the sample leans more towards 'entry' than 'access with success'.

However, it is also recognised that using Wilson-Strydom's list only as a basic 'normative framework for what a successful transition requires' (Wilson-Strydom, 2012, p. 253) can limit the depth of analysis. A more detailed application of the capabilities approach that further explores Wilson-Strydom's conversion factors (Wilson-Strydom, 2012)*,* and their relevance to RBS, could strengthen this methodology. Limitations to the methodology, which only focused on information available via institutional websites, is also acknowledged and further research which actively engages with RBS and participants from institutions could prove a useful extension to this study.

Finally, the study offers recommendations for institutions to enhance RBS capabilities to access, participate, and progress in HE in England.

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