



# Lessons learned through the Equal funded Asylum Seeker Project

Andrew Oatridge  
May 2005



The UK Asylum Seekers Development Partnership – ASSET UK is part funded by the European Social Fund  
under the Equal Community Initiative Programme

# Contents Page

<u>INTRODUCTION</u> .....	3
<u>ISSUES FACING ASYLUM SEEKERS</u> .....	4
<u>1. ACCESS TO THE COLLEGE</u> .....	4
<u>2. FILLING IN FORMS</u> .....	4
<u>3. ATTENDANCE</u> .....	4
<u>4. ADVERTISING</u> .....	5
<u>APPROPRIATE COURSES</u> .....	6
<u>5. LOCATION OF COURSES</u> .....	6
<u>6. INITIAL PLACEMENT</u> .....	6
<u>7. COURSE MATERIALS</u> .....	7
<u>SUPPORT &amp; EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES</u> .....	8
<u>8. COLLEGE SUPPORT</u> .....	8
<u>9. REFUGEE/ASYLUM SEEKER UNIT</u> .....	8
<u>10. ENRICHING THE COLLEGE / ASYLUM SEEKER STEERING GROUP</u> .....	8
<u>11. REFUGEE WEEK</u> .....	9
<u>12. FINANCIAL SUPPORT</u> .....	9
<u>13. STAFF TRAINING</u> .....	10
<u>CONCLUSION</u> .....	12

## **Introduction**

Over 800 asylum seekers have taken courses at The Sheffield College during the 2004-5 academic year. They have come from over 80 different countries for varying reasons; mainly fleeing war or direct persecution. Many have had to leave family and friends behind and wish that, if circumstances were different, they could return to their homeland. With them they have brought memories, hopes, ambitions and dreams and provide a valuable resource of diversity and experience to the college.

The Sheffield College has been able, through the Equal ASSET UK development partnership, to develop its existing provision for asylum seekers. The Equal funded project which has lasted for three years starting in May 2002 has had three aims. Firstly, to provide support for the existing structure at the college with particular attention to asylum seekers. Secondly, to evaluate current courses, develop new courses and review curriculum procedures. The final aim was to provide training and awareness for existing staff at the college.

What follows is some of the lessons learned through the project regarding the issues FE colleges face when working with asylum seekers. The document has been divided into three main areas:

- Issues facing asylum seekers
- Appropriate Courses
- Support & Extra Curricular Activities

# **Issues facing Asylum Seekers**

## **1. Access to the college**

- 1.1. Of first importance is the question of attracting asylum seekers to the local college. Many asylum seekers will be signposted to education providers through the varied agencies that provide housing and support. Others are influenced by word of mouth from friends and family. Clear established links are required with these agencies providing them with the relevant information pertaining to the courses on offer, timetables and availability of classes, childcare and other support.
- 1.2. A large percentage, around 85%, of asylum seekers initially require some degree of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) training. Therefore information regarding the courses and college need to be made available in other languages.

## **2. Filling in forms**

- 2.1. Filling in forms can provide a barrier to learning for some asylum seekers. Some asylum seekers are apprehensive towards forms thinking that they may be used against their asylum case. Alternatively the forms may be too complicated to complete and as such the students leave before they start. One aid is a simple sheet explaining the form and the terms used. Translating the form or an explanation of the form is ideal, but has a cost implication.

## **3. Attendance**

- 3.1. Asylum seekers bring with them a whole host of issues and difficulties associated with fleeing a country. This, in some cases can have an adverse effect on their attendance. Colleges need to be firm in establishing the commitment required in undertaking a course of study, whilst being sensitive to some of the additional difficulties. There are a number of valid reasons why an asylum seeker would not be able to attend college, but it is important for them to realise the need to contact the college informing them of their absence.
- 3.2. Reasons for not attending can include depression and anxiety due to past experiences; mandatory court hearings and meetings with officials and solicitors. A lack of finance can also affect their ability to pay for travel.

## **4. Advertising**

- 4.1. Many asylum seekers will become aware of available courses through word of mouth and being signposted by other agencies. However, advertising is required which needs to be appropriate to the diverse backgrounds of asylum seekers and, where possible, translated into the major languages spoken.
- 4.2. Marketing literature can be produced in the major languages spoken by asylum seekers and distributed to the relevant agencies in the locality. Asylum Seekers often link with their own community and hence community centres are often a place where marketing works effectively.

## Appropriate Courses

### **5. Location of courses**

- 5.1. In Sheffield the asylum seekers are largely situated in a small number of geographical locations around the city. Therefore, these areas are ideal for some of the ESOL provision to run.
- 5.2. At The Sheffield College maps have been produced showing students the location of the community centres. Accompanying the map is an introductory letter stating an appointment time which has all been translated into the 5 major languages spoken by asylum seekers
- 5.3. Another reason for considering the locality of courses is financial. The large majority of asylum seekers do not possess their own means of transport and as such have to rely on walking or taking public transport. Transport costs can be a barrier to attendance, even with reduced weekly student tickets. Hence where possible the college has sought to provide ESOL classes in community centres at the heart of where the asylum seekers are residing.

### **6. Initial placement**

- 6.1. ESOL: Many asylum seekers in the first instance require some degree of language courses. Consideration needs to be given in initial placement to students having similar levels of English but differing academic abilities. Ideally academic ESOL learners, i.e. those with a level 3 qualification or above need to be in separate classes.
- 6.2. Mainstream Courses: Often asylum seekers are wanting to access mainstream courses, but do not have the necessary vocationally specific command of English. Vocational ESOL courses and additional support are of primary importance in these cases. Through the project The Sheffield College has developed ESOL for hairdressing, doctors & nurses, business, health & social care and potential teachers.
- 6.3. In the development of vocational ESOL courses it is essential to involve someone from the curriculum to work alongside an ESOL tutor.

## **7. Course materials**

- 7.1. Many of the traditional English teaching books were focused on EFL teaching and as such are usually Eurocentric. The DfES Skills for Life materials which have been produced are tailored for the ESOL student and as such are appropriate for asylum seekers and students from other countries.
- 7.2. The Skills for Life material needs to be supplemented with additional material as required. These need to be carefully chosen reflecting the diversity of the students in mind and relevant to those who are either settled, or wanting to settle in the UK.
- 7.3. Issues such as family often occur in ESOL classes and talking about other countries. These can be sensitive issues to asylum seekers, but should not be ignored completely. Again sensitivity is required.

# **Support & Extra Curricular Activities**

## **8. College support**

- 8.1. Asylum seekers studying at a college usually require more support than other students. Some particular issues which affect asylum seekers include:
- (i) having left family and friends and therefore lack the usual family support that other students may have
  - (ii) being illiterate in their mother tongue making language acquisition or other learning more difficult
  - (iii) some asylum seekers have experienced hardship, serious threats and torture which can lead to difficulty in concentration, sleeping and studying.
  - (iv) asylum seekers are under great stress regarding their asylum case and anxiety and depression make it difficult to focus on academic study
  - (v) Financially - Asylum seekers are not eligible to receive money from the LSF (Learning Support Fund). This is often used to cover costs for childcare and exam costs or equipment required.

## **9. Refugee/Asylum Seeker Unit**

- 9.1. The college has developed a Refugee & ESOL unit at one of the main sites to serve the college as a whole. The purpose of the unit was to relieve the main college student services from the high number of specific queries relating to asylum seekers and refugees.
- 9.2. Purpose & Role of the Unit: The main purpose of such a unit is to act as the first point of contact for asylum seekers, refugees and other ESOL students. The unit deals with queries ranging from accessing courses to finding out information about other refugee community organisations. Having a focal point for refugees and asylum seekers also helps them to feel a part of the college and have easy access to a member of staff who more readily understands their specific needs.
- 9.3. A refugee / Asylum Seeker Unit can also serve to signpost students to other relevant local agencies as well as be the point of referral. Training can be targeted to a core number of staff working in the unit who can then disseminate lessons learned to staff across the college.

## **10. Enriching the College / Asylum Seeker Steering Group**

- 10.1. Asylum seekers bring with them a vast breadth in culture and experience. Some of them will have held prominent places in their home countries and can

bring a valuable contribution to the college.

- 10.2. Often the most useful resource in understanding the issues faced by asylum seekers studying at an FE college is the asylum seekers themselves. Through the project an asylum seeker steering group was established. The purpose of the group was to monitor the activities of the project and to provide a point of contact for other students in the college. Ideally a member of the group would also have a position on the *College Student Forum*. This would enrich the student forum and the variety of events or activities on offer.
- 10.3. Exhibitions about other countries and cultures are another positive way of raising the profile about the asylum issue. They can provide an appropriate means of educating others about cultures and countries and liven up a reception area.

## **11. Refugee Week**

- 11.1. Refugee Week which always falls around the 21<sup>st</sup> June is an ideal time to celebrate the diversity and range of cultures studying at the college. Cultural celebrations, food from different countries and exhibitions can provide positive ways of educating other students and staff.

## **12. Financial support**

- 12.1. Asylum seekers are supported by the British Government through NASS (National Asylum Support Service). NASS provides support, accommodation and financial help for asylum seekers which normally amounts to 70% of the standard income support.
- 12.2. The LSC (Learning & Skills Council) allows asylum seekers to access Basic Skills classes without charge. All that is required is the necessary proof of status (usually a photocopy of their ARC (Asylum Registration Card)). The LSC also permits asylum seekers to take mainstream courses subject to a letter from NASS confirming that they are in receipt of NASS support.
- 12.3. Asylum seekers over 19 are not allowed to access the LSF fund for travel costs, help with exam fees and course requirements and more importantly childcare provision. Asylum seekers aged 16-19 are eligible for support from the LSF fund. Colleges have sometimes been in a position to support a limited number of asylum seekers through time-bound specific projects.
- 12.4. The Sheffield College, through the asylum seeker project and other sources of funding, provided childcare for a number of asylum seekers where space was available. Some travel costs for individually considered cases and provided books and items of equipment for a number of asylum seekers on

mainstream courses was also covered. *Basic Skill Packs* were provided for all Basic Skills students which included a high number of asylum seekers.

### **13. Staff Training**

- 13.1. Colleges employ a large number of workers, many of whom will have had little or no contact with asylum seekers and refugees. The vast majority will have had their views shaped by the media, which often does not present all sides of any story. Staff awareness and training is essential if one wishes to promote a positive attitude in a college.
- 13.2. Training can be provided through outside agencies such as the Refugee Council. The Refugee Council offers a number of training programmes to educated front-line staff and tutors regarding the asylum & refugee issue. Training is also readily available to help ESOL tutors in understanding issues in asylum. Alternatively in-house training can be used during development days, to share lessons learned.

### **14. Summer School**

- 14.1. For many asylum seekers the college life provides their main stimulus and the hub of their social life. As such a cessation of classes from the end of June until mid-September can often cause difficulties such as boredom, lack of worth and purpose. The Sheffield College was asked by the Sheffield Council Asylum Team and other Refugee Community Organisations to ensure that ESOL classes would run throughout the summer months.
- 14.2. Summer school provision has been running for a number of years and is usually on a much smaller scale than the normal provision. It provides ideal opportunities to include extra-curricular activities in the afternoon including sport, discussion groups and trips to places of interest. All of this can be used to enhance student's experience.



## **Conclusion**

The ASSET UK project has aided The Sheffield College in examining and improving its service to asylum seekers. The college has always welcomed asylum seekers and where possible has sought to make their experience of education in the UK as positive as possible. As the project comes to an end much of the work has been embedded into the mainstream college life and the service to asylum seekers will continue. In particular the *Refugee & ESOL Unit* and the *Asylum Seeker Steering Group* will continue to function as part of the college.

Many lessons have been learned through teaching and listening to asylum seekers. As we have sought to better understand their situation it has enabled the college to reflect on its service provided and seek to make improvements where required.

---

The UK Asylum Seekers Development Partnership – ASSET UK is part funded by the European Social Fund under the EQUAL Community Initiative Programme.

