

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **‘This is two different worlds, you have the asylum world and you have the study world’: an exploration of refugee participation in online Irish higher education**

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This qualitative study explores the transition experiences of refugees to study online in Dublin City University (DCU). Asylum seekers face financial, structural, cultural and digital equity barriers to access higher education (HE). In response to these barriers to access, DCU became a ‘University of Sanctuary’ in 2017, offering scholarships to refugees. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Four themes were constructed in the data-led thematic analysis: asylum world, belonging to the DCU community, the personal impact of studying and study world. Overall, this study strengthens the idea that access programmes such as the University of Sanctuary scholarships can facilitate participation in HE for refugees, provided that the necessary support to address the financial, structural, cultural and digital equity barriers is in place.

**Keywords:** refugees; online learning; student success; asylum seeking; higher education

### **Introduction**

Access and successful participation in higher education (HE) are key challenges facing refugees living in Ireland. The Irish direct provision system was set up in 2000 as an emergency measure to accommodate people seeking asylum, two decades later it remains the only system for people seeking asylum (O’Reilly 2018). In 2018, there were 33 direct provision centres accommodating 5370 refugees (Reception and Integration Agency [RIA] 2018). Living conditions in direct provision centres are cramped with residents having limited access to cooking, social and transport facilities and limited or no access to the Internet or computers (O’Reilly 2018). Those seeking asylum experience prolonged waiting periods of up to 3 years and have a very limited right to work which impacts their physical and mental wellbeing, restricted access to HE (NíRaghallaigh, Foreman, and Feeley 2016; RIA 2018). If they are granted refugee status, they can access Irish state financial support for further and higher education. Asylum seekers, however, are not entitled to these supports (RIA 2018). It should also

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be noted that the Irish state does not provide financial support for learners designated as part-time, online learners (Delaney and Farren 2016) and so asylum seekers and refugees studying in that mode have no state support to access regardless of their status.

The Universities of Sanctuary's (2019) initiative comprises a network of universities that commit to welcoming sanctuary seekers into their communities and to providing a safe place to enable them to pursue their right to education. Since 2016, 23 refugees have been awarded University of Sanctuary scholarships to study in DCU. Sixteen of these scholarships have been provided through online programmes which are flexible, open access and designed for adult students.

Refugees face financial, structural, cultural and digital equity barriers to accessing HE. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2015), 'around 1% of refugee students are enrolled in tertiary education'. This article examines the experiences of seven scholarship recipients in their transition into Irish HE and their first year of study through online programmes. In the next section, the literature related to refugees and online student experiences in HE are explored.

### Contexts from the literature

Refugees and asylum seekers face significant challenges in accessing HE (Crea and Sparnon 2017; Traxler 2018). Yet the evidence indicates a range of benefits for refugees gained through participation in HE such as empowerment, expanded worldview, critical skills and an improved ability to cope with waiting for decisions on their cases (Crea and McFarland 2015). While refugees are recognised as generally having high educational aspirations (UNHCR 2015), there are many factors that cause them to experience difficulty in realising those aspirations. Refugees in HE often suffer from post-traumatic stress (Hannah 1999). Additionally, many are cognisant of difficult home situations and are concerned for family members left behind (Harris and Marlow 2011). Refugees often have difficulty adjusting to new customs and practices (Townsend 2008) and sometimes face social exclusion (Sawrikar and Katz 2008). Almost inevitably they face financial barriers with accessing HE (Castaño-Muñoz, Colucci, and Smidt 2018).

However, for those who overcome above obstacles and manage to access university, there are further challenges. Refugees often experience a lack of recognition for their prior learning (Hannah 1999). They can also experience a lack of staff awareness of their situation coupled with limited university support (Earnest *et al.* 2010a). Even for those with a good grasp over local language, academic language could present an additional challenge (Kong *et al.* 2016). Socio-cultural issues infiltrate the university space also, refugees regularly experiencing problems connecting with staff and other students, working in groups and observing academic regulations more generally (Kong *et al.* 2016). According to Baker *et al.* (2018), students from refugee backgrounds face challenges availing of formal university support or 'cold supports' such as lecturers, learning and support services and favoured drawing on 'warm supports' such as family and friends to help with coursework.

Persistent financial and digital skills barriers could also plague the participation experience of students from a refugee background (Castaño-Muñoz, Colucci, and Smidt 2018). These students often feel that they are treated as inferior, leading to experiences of isolation and perceptions of racism (Onsando and Billett 2009). Such

students can feel that they simply do not belong to university (Harris, Ngu Chi, and Spark 2013). For others, the pressure to be successful could be overwhelming (Earnest *et al.* 2010b). Besides the practical implications of finding it hard to have a place to study, refugee can feel alienated from their friends and families while studying (Harris, Spark, and Ngum Chi 2015).

In relation to HE institutions, their response in opening pathways for refugees in many countries has been overwhelmingly positive (Grove 2015). However, number of refugees in HE remains small and there is little incentive to change existing structures and practices to accommodate this cohort. This means that for some refugees, HE is experienced as invalidating rather than validating (Winter *et al.* 2016), with many of them failing to successfully complete HE.

Efforts to widen HE participation are hampered by the fact that online students are a potentially vulnerable population with lower rates of completion (Woodley and Simpson 2014). Low completion rates are especially concerning for groups that are under-represented in HE, such as refugees. Since a complex set of factors influence student engagement and success, it is difficult to state definitively the reasons underlying online learner non-completion rates (Brunton and Brown *et al.* 2020). Online learners tend to have many demands on their time; the very reasons which cause them to choose this study mode could in turn cause them to withdraw (Simpson 2004). Issues with time-management could stem from the unrealistic expectations of online learning experience (Brown *et al.* 2015). Retention of students could be facilitated by a strong sense of belonging to the community (Brunton *et al.* 2018; Stone and O'Shea 2019), but such a sense of belonging could be negatively affected by the sense of isolation that is a pervasive issue in online learning (Nichols 2011), and also by the fact that HE institutions often seem like alien cultures to adult learners, often perceived as being negative or obstructive entities (Mallman and Lee 2016).

Online students are more vulnerable to attrition, as are students from refugee backgrounds who face significant challenges with regard to socio-cultural, technology, family and health issues when transitioning to university (Al Mansouri and Lawrence 2016; Kong *et al.* 2016). It is therefore crucial that the needs of students who are refugees and studying online are understood in order to facilitate their success in HE.

## Methodology

This exploratory study is qualitative in nature and grounded in the constructivist paradigm; it is focused on understanding and exploring meaning (Bryman 2008). The study was designed to seek a greater understanding of University of Sanctuary scholars' experiences in the early stages of the study lifecycle. The rationale for a qualitative methodological approach was that we sought a rich and in-depth exploration of the experiences of a small group of individuals, leading to powerful data (Braun and Clarke 2013; Lichtman 2014). Following a review of relevant literature we formulated the following overarching research question:

### ***What are the University of Sanctuary scholars' experiences of starting to study in the online learning context?***

The setting for this research is DCU connected with DCU, Ireland, which delivers flexible undergraduate and postgraduate online programmes.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the institutional Research Ethics Committee. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling, with all 10 of the University of Sanctuary online scholars in 2017–2018 invited to participate. The first cohort of participants recruited comprised six students: four males and two females. Participants were distributed geographically around Ireland and were primarily living in direct provision centres, see Table 1.

A semi-structured interview approach was adopted as an appropriate data generation method for this study as they are suited to experience type research questions, and the exploration and understanding of participants’ perceptions (Bryman 2008; Braun and Clarke 2013). The semi-structured recorded interviews were conducted online by the research team. Interviews were conducted in real time online using a private Adobe Connect classroom. An interview schedule was created which contained 16 open-ended questions, which were shaped from the research questions. The interview schedule had questions around starting to study, community and social integration, supports and services, experiences of studying online, expectations and goals (see Appendix 1).

The data were analysed following the Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, an analytical approach which is a flexible and rich method for reporting patterns in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2013). The data-led analytical process involved the transcription and coding of interviews using Nvivo. Then, candidate themes were refined and reviewed through an iterative process for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun and Clarke 2006). After a number of cycles of reviewing and refining, a thematic diagram was created and each theme defined and named.

Quality was ensured in the analytical process by applying Braun and Clarke’s (2006, p. 96) 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis to the study, see Table 2.

## Findings

Four themes were constructed during the data-led analytical process; they were: asylum world, belonging to the DCU community, the personal impact of studying, and study world (see Figure 1).

### *Belonging to the DCU Community*

Strong feelings of belonging to the DCU community are articulated in this theme and the prestige of being part of the university community was strongly identified

Table 1. Participants’ demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (years)	Course level	Previous education
Tongai	M	45–54	Undergraduate	Further education
Ozias	M	25–34	Undergraduate	Further education
Garai	M	35–44	Undergraduate	Further education
Abebi	F	35–44	Undergraduate	Higher education
Benite	F	35–44	Postgraduate	Higher education
Itai	M	25–34	Undergraduate	Further education

Table 2. Braun and Clarke (2006) checklist applied to this study.

<b>Process</b>	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Applied to this research study</b>
1. Transcription	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for ‘accuracy’.	Yes, the transcripts were checked against the original recordings during the data preparation phase.
2. Coding	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.	Yes, through multiple cycles of coding and recoding.
3. Coding	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.	No, the themes that were generated from a large number of supporting data chunks.
4. Coding	All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.	Yes, this was done and checked during the review and refine processes.
5. Coding	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.	Yes, during the review process.
6. Coding	Themes are internally coherent, consistent and distinctive.	Yes.
7. Analysis	Data have been analysed/interpreted, made sense of/rather than just paraphrased or described.	Yes, this is demonstrated in the findings section of the article.
8. Analysis	Analysis and data match each other/the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.	Yes, analysis and data are consistent.
9. Analysis	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.	Yes, a good balance was achieved.
10. Analysis	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.	We think there is a consistent and organised narrative.
11. Overall	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over lightly.	Each phase was carefully carried out and the research process was documented.
12. Written report	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.	It was clearly stated that this study was following the Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach to TA.
13. Written report	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent.	There is consistency.
14. Written report	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.	Yes.
15. Written report	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just ‘emerge’.	The researchers were active in the analysis process.

Themes constructed through the analytical process are presented in the Findings section.

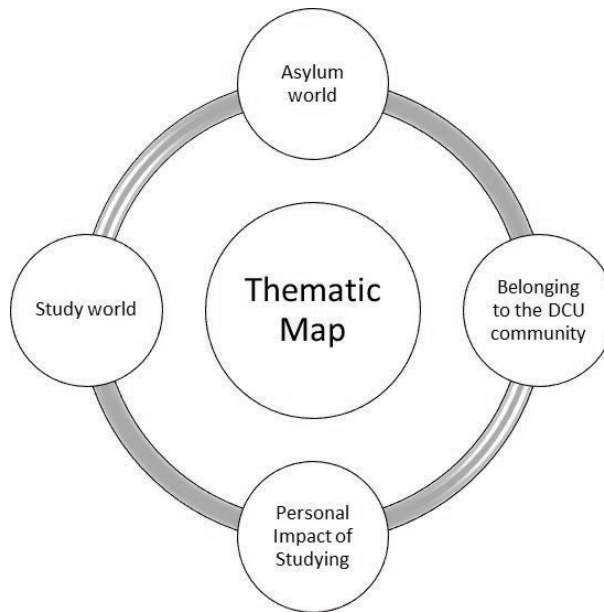


Figure 1. Final thematic map.

by participants. The majority of participants felt a strong sense of belonging to the DCU community. This sense of belonging to DCU in participants was fostered by the following four interrelated factors: orientation, interactions with staff and students, peer support groups, and coming to the university campus.

DCU connected hold an annual Orientation/Welcome Day for new students. Participating in the orientation welcome day held on campus was described by participants as engendering feelings of belonging. The opportunity to socialise with peers and academic staff reduced their fears and made participants feel welcome:

The welcome day was very helpful because when you get to meet different people and that interaction and seeing that you're all on the same boat and probably many people as well with going through the same situation as you, coming back to study after maybe some time and some people haven't even really gone for like a degree before and it really helped us, it helped me particularly because I realised that there is a lot of people like me and it makes it easy you know to know that there is some people that might have almost the same challenges as you have. (Itai)

Participants report that interacting with classmates and academic staff online and face-to-face contributed to their identification as part of the university community:

I think, you know, I think it's, you know, it's a network, it's a network of everything, you know, online classroom is a good contact on, you know, on the DCU [Dublin City University] campus, contacts with the DCU staff, you know. I think all that, it just makes me feel so good. You wake up and you get a mail from, you

know, from [name] or from yourself, you know, this or from [name] or [name], you know, it just feels good, you know You feel like you're part of, you know, a wealth, educational community. (Ozias)

Although distance education at DCU is primarily delivered online, coming to the university campus engendered strong feelings of belonging among participants, a greater sense of being part of the university. When asked what in particular engendered feeling of being part of the DCU community, Garai responded as follows:

I think the services that are offered by DCU. Like it's like the community within a community that I belong to my own community but then I have the DCU community. Everybody's welcoming, you are at home, you go to the library and any help that you need, DCU offer services like counselling, they have their own doctor. All of these things, I mean you know that okay I'm home, everything is there for me. (Garai)

In contrast with the majority of participants, Abebi felt isolated and removed from the DCU community, and did not express a sense of belonging:

If I was a day student it would be different, you know, I would be part of the community, I would be more involved in the university work, but being an online student, you know I am not on the school campus all the time. (Abebi)

The strength of some participants' sense of belonging to the DCU community is evident in the descriptions of the university such as 'home', 'my DCU family': 'You know, we felt much more, we felt like, you know, we're part, we're part of the DCU family' (Ozias). This use of language could be due to the contrast with life in direct provision.

In their narratives, participants articulated a strong identification with the prestige of being DCU students. The university is described by participants as 'top class', 'world class', and 'one of the biggest universities in the country'. Participants reported that they valued being associated with the positive prestige of the university, in contrast with the negative associations of being a refugee:

I: That's great, and so do you feel like you are a DCU student?

P: Yes 100%, absolutely. Yes.

I: You don't feel different because you're an online student or...?

P: No, not at all. No, I feel always I tell people, I identify myself as a DCU student whenever I go, because with the prestige of the name as well, DCU, it's something that I'm happy to flash my DCU student card out. (Garai)

### *Asylum world*

This theme encapsulates the participants' experiences of living in direct provision and its effect on their studies. In the data, participants described their stressful and depressing experiences of direct provision as well as their challenges and the role of chance in accessing education.



In their narratives, participants articulated the stifling atmosphere of living in direct provision with nothing to do and no sense of purpose:

I used to be idle in the hostel. I didn't have anything to do as we are not allowed to work, not allowed to study. So when I got the scholarship and I started to study, it was a big achievement. It helped me to come out of my loneliness mood. I was always lonely, I was always idle, feeling depressed all the time, but I now am feeling like I can see the future. (Benite)

The emotional impact of life in direct provision is, at times, expressed in the language used by participants to describe asylum world as 'stressful', 'depressing', 'lonely', and 'anxious'. In the following statement, direct provision is described as a 'war zone':

And each time I slept in my bed and felt like ohh, I'm depressed, I'm like no, why are you depressed, yeah you're in a war zone. (Ozias)

Being a DCU student was articulated by participants as an escape from the chaotic and stressful life in direct provision; this is evident in the following statement:

This is two different worlds, you know, you have the asylum world and you have, you know, you have the study world... The asylum world is very, very depressing, you know, you're constantly anxious, you're constantly in limbo and then back to the study world it's where you need, you know, you need to put in that 100% concentration, especially when it comes to third level education you need to put your head down. (Ozias)

Accessing HE was a significant challenge for participants who were asylum seekers. They experienced financial, legal and social barriers to studying due to their status:

We've been waiting for this moment to be allowed to go for further studies and we're, an asylum seeker, we were not allowed until last year. People were studying up to high school only. I mean, what is it called? Leaving Cert. (Benite)

The ad hoc nature of access to HE for participants was evident in the role chance played in participants finding, accessing and applying for the University of Sanctuary scholarships. Abebi outlines how she had to constantly hound the authorities for information about HE:

They didn't really have anything really for asylum seekers except you have your status ready, so I was all over them and they said, 'Oh look, girl you have been all over us, we know you want to go to college. So, we have something coming up, we are still waiting on approval but we think it comes up for you'. (Abebi)

Inadequate facilities in direct provision centres, such as lack of broadband and quiet study space, had a negative effect on participants' learning experiences:

I have a very, very small desk but you know I stay with someone else as well and well sometimes it's a bit noisy and all that but I think with time you get to ask yourself you know you force yourself through those situations, now you'd have to create



that environment that is going to allow you to study, if you focus on what the centre is like and what the environment is like, sometimes you won't be able to put in your work you know so sometimes I don't really focus on that. Well the centre is doesn't really have the kind of facilities that are well for studying you know even the social rooms, it's just two social rooms that have TV, so you'd find that where you want to study in that social room, some other people want to watch maybe football and it's not really good. (Itai)

### ***Personal impact of studying***

This theme captures the personal impact of studying on participants, the extent to which studying gives them a sense of hope for their futures, a way out of the asylum system. Further, the data revealed the desire by participants to give back to the community.

The University of Sanctuary scholarships were reported by participants as having a significant personal impact by enabling them to fulfil their long-term educational and career goals:

I always wanted to go to India to study networking, IT networking. And it wasn't feasible for me because my, you know, my parents, each time, and dad wanted me, I remember the time when dad was going to go and take a loan which wasn't possible. I said, you know, I don't want that, I wish I could send you to India to go study IT... So for me it's an accomplishment of, it's on the way, accomplishment of my dreams. And, you know, it's a golden, it's golden opportunity in life, a golden opportunity for me, I call it, I call it the golden lotto. (Ozias)

Experiencing success in their studies was reported by participants to have positively affected their perceived confidence, self-esteem and social interactions:

Like now during the holidays, I went to one introduction to design foundation where I'm doing short courses online as well. And what I studied with DCU is helping me to get through those short courses. Because when I started doing those short courses, I've actually passed it, like I've done three short courses already and I passed the three, one with a distinction, just while I'm on my holidays. So, I have learnt a lot and that has impacted me. My studies through the DCU has actually impacted me in a positive direction. (Tongai)

In their narratives, participants articulated a strong sense of hope for the future and for life after direct provision as a result of the access to HE provided by the University of Sanctuary scholarship scheme:

I didn't see myself paying for the school fees or getting a job that can afford me to have another master's. So when I got the scholarship I felt so good. It gave me a hope. (Benite)

The data revealed that participants expressed a desire to give back to their communities and to society as a whole, to pass on their knowledge and experiences to help others:

Then for me also the study at DCU, I'm trying to do something that is very important to my life as well, and also I would want to contribute and you can't like

... after this, look, I'm not just going to sit around in the thing, like in a study, I'm going to look for a job and start contributing, paying taxes and things like that. (Tongai)

This desire to give back is further evident in participant narratives about inspiring, mentoring and encouraging other refugees to apply for the University of Sanctuary scholarships.

Even this morning when I went to the cafeteria to get some groceries for my kids, I met the woman and she has applied for DCU and she is waiting for the reply and she is so excited. I said: 'Well I am just so happy for you', you know. In my own little way, I have been able to help you. (Abebi)

### ***Study world***

This theme captures participants' experiences of studying online, including the role of institutional and peer support, and the importance of organisational and time management skills.

Participant narratives about transitioning to learning online emphasised the importance of becoming familiar with Loop, the university's virtual learning environment. This, together with the library's online resources, were identified as key resources for successful study:

I think really, the thing, the DCU online, the loop is very very helpful. It has almost everything that you need, the only challenge is knowing how to navigate around the loop. Once you have the knowledge of the loop, it's very much so helpful. (Garai)

Learning online was perceived positively by participants who valued the flexibility, module organisation, tutor support and interaction afforded by the mode of study:

Well, I found the studying to be, it's quite good, it's quite interesting for me you know because I think the fact that I can go back to like to classes sometimes and go over the material on my own whereas if I was in a classroom environment I can't really do that because you know the notes aren't really recorded, the sessions are not recorded but then with online study I found this very helpful, especially when I was preparing for my exams that I can easily go back to a class, an online class that we had and I can easily, you know, understand more of the things that we said and what we discussed you know it's helpful. (Itai)

Staff support from DCU connected, programme teams, and the Orientation/Welcome Day were identified by participants as the most valued institutional supports during their transition to DCU. Participants demonstrated some awareness of the wider university supports, but preferred dealing with the local programme teams. The DCU connected programme team was described as approachable, helpful and willing to answer queries by participants:

What I know is that whatever problem that was present that we were always coming to XXX who was always finding a way to solve them. He was being a supportive person really and his team. (Benite)

The Orientation/Welcome Day held on campus positively affected participants' transition to HE by reducing their fears and anxieties through interactions with peers and academic staff. Additionally, the clear explanations of the course structures and management of expectations at the Welcome Day was positively perceived by participants:

That calmed down nerves you know because when I haven't been, I have been to an institute before but I have not been to a big university like that you know when you get to meet like different people and the welcome day was very helpful because when you get to meet different people and that interaction and seeing that you're all on the same boat. (Itai)

Participants placed a high value on the peer communities they had formed over the course of academic year. Three types of overlapping peer communities were formed: student-generated class WhatsApp groups, smaller student-formed study groups, and groups formed through group work assignment activities. These peer communities were perceived by participants as important sources of support and interaction, which positively affected their learning experiences:

What is very, very important, form a study group as, you know, you can't get along with DCU Connected on your own, there is no way, there is practically no way. You have to network with friends, you have to network outside the DCU family. Like for me, I had, I was networking with guys from India, I had a huge network with guys from India who they actually helped me, explained, you know, things for me and my friends as well. We created small groups where we had, you know, maybe on weekends a video conference and chats on, you know, on codes and on different things so it's very, very important because without that, you can't achieve that on your own, it's practically impossible. (Ozias)

Organisational and time management skills were identified by participants as crucial to being successful in study world. As the majority of participants' learning was self-directed, they placed a strong emphasis on planning study, setting up a study routine and the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning in their narratives.

Online at first it was a challenge, but I'm loving it now, because it has taught me to be self motivated and I make my own study time, it has taught me not only to be organised around my studies but around everything else. Because I know that, okay I need to study and I need to organise everything else, I accommodate it so that I can have the time to study. (Garai)

In the next section, the findings are discussed in relation to the literature and the research question of the study.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore University of Sanctuary scholars' experiences of starting to study in the context of online learning HE context. The findings of this study indicate that University of Sanctuary scholars shared similar profile to

new online HE students such as fitting in, balancing study and life commitments, forming support networks, and becoming familiar with the virtual learning environment (Brunton *et al.* 2018). However, this cohort had identifiable differences in terms of the stark contrast between their refugee identity and their new student identity.

The findings of this study indicate that University of Sanctuary scholars found that living in direct provision had a negative impact on them personally and on their studies, in particular the lack of quiet study space and poor Internet access. These findings are generally compatible with previous research, which identified the logistical and digital barriers that refugee students face while studying (Harris, Spark, and Ngum Chi 2015; O'Reilly 2018). The data revealed the difficulties experienced by refugees accessing HE in Ireland. While this finding is supported by international studies such as Castaño-Muñoz, Colucci, and Smidt (2018), this finding adds new knowledge about refugees accessing HE in the Irish context.

Findings indicate that participants feel a strong sense of belonging to the university community, in opposition to their lives as refugees. They identified 'two separate worlds': the 'study world', to which they belonged and the 'asylum world', a place they did not want to be. However, these findings on belonging are in contrast with those from the literature on refugees in HE, for example studies by Harris, Ngu Chi, and Spark (2013) and Sawrikar and Katz (2008) have found that refugees experienced social exclusion and feeling that they didn't belong to university. This difference could indicate that being a student of DCU offered participants an escape from life in direct provision which strengthened their sense of belonging, a positive source of self-reference.

The findings of this study indicated that being a student gave participants a sense of hope for their futures, a way out of the direct provision system and a desire to contribute to the wider society. This finding is consistent with those of Crea and McFarland (2015), who found that refugee students benefited from participation in HE in terms of empowerment, expanded worldview and an improved ability to cope with waiting for decisions on their cases.

Institutional and peer support played a key role in participants' learning experiences. Organisational and time management skills were also found to be central to successful online study. The findings of this study further reinforce the importance of strategic structured socialisation for online learners starting HE study (Farrell and Seery 2019; Brunton and Brown 2020).

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore University of Sanctuary scholars' experiences of starting to study in the context of online learning HE. In the Irish context, access to HE can have a positive impact on refugees' quality of life and their sense of themselves and their ability to realise their future goals. An implication arising from this study is that existing barriers for refugees in gaining access to HE should be removed due to the benefits for refugees personally and to wider Irish society. This study concludes that a strategic approach to supporting the transition of refugees into online HE can positively affect new University of Sanctuary scholars' experiences of online HE.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that access programmes such as the University of Sanctuary scholarships can facilitate participation in HE for refugees, provided

that the necessary supports to address financial, structural, cultural and digital equity barriers are in place. A limitation of this study is its design as a small in-depth qualitative study; however, its findings provide insights into how HE institutions can develop effective policies, practices and procedures to assist refugees integrating into HE and online learning. The future research could examine the experiences of refugees in online HE after the transition phase, across the entire study life cycle.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview schedule**

1. Can you tell me the story of how you got here, how you came to be studying in DCU?
2. What made starting to study at DCU easier for you? Prompts: Any people or services in DCU?
3. What challenges did you encounter at the start of your study journey? (a) Have you overcome those challenges? (b) How did you overcome those challenges?
4. Have you made friends in your course? (a) Do you feel like part of the DCU community?
5. How have you found studying with DCU so far? When, where, how do you study/organise study?
6. Were there any key milestones in your first year that impacted on your experiences?
7. Has studying with DCU had a big impact on any other parts of your life?
8. Has your experience of DCU matched the expectations you had before you started?
9. Do you feel that DCU is helping you move towards your goals for the future?
10. Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important thing that makes it easier for someone to start in DCU and have a great first year?
11. Please feel free to make any other comments that you think illustrate your first year experience that do not come under any of the questions above.