

**#WeAreInternational**  
**Grants scheme 2022–24**  
**Research**

**Supporting international  
students fleeing  
humanitarian crises:  
untangling the experiences  
of students from Ukraine  
and Syria**

Keele University

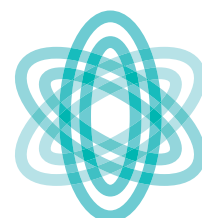
**Dr Filippo Nereo**, Curriculum Design, Global Banking School

**Dr Alison Long**, Senior Lecturer in Languages, Keele University

**Tetiana Tsapenko**, Keele University (Student Intern) and Loughborough University (PhD student)

**UK Council  
for International  
Student Affairs**

**UKCISA**



**#WeAre  
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## Acknowledgements

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This report was produced by Dr Filippo Nereo, Dr Alison Long and Tetiana Tsapenko at Keele University.

It was supported by the **#WeAreInternational Grants scheme** from the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA). UKCISA gratefully acknowledges the financial support it receives from the Department for Education, the Scottish Government, and British Council.

UKCISA is a membership organisation that works to support international students and the institutions, students' unions and organisations who work closely with them.

The **#WeAreInternational Grants scheme** focuses on integrating the principles of the **#WeAreInternational Student Charter** in higher and further education institutions in the UK, to deliver a world-class international student experience, from pre-arrival to post-graduation.



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## 1. Introduction

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Educational research often explores international students as a homogenous group, and this framing can be unhelpful as it risks missing the nuance and variety of their experiences. In migration research there is a pervasive but unhelpful dichotomy between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration. International students are typically seen to fall within the latter group, as the mobility of international students is unquestioningly seen as driven by choice rather than compulsion. The concept of ‘conflict-induced student migration’ is rarely explored, poorly theorised and empirically under-researched.

Our project aimed to provide further understanding of the needs of students experiencing ‘conflict-induced migration’, with particular reference to the experiences of students from Ukraine and Syria. Our findings suggest a number of actions universities can take in order to improve the situations of these students.

The needs of the project were initially formulated by Dr Nereo, who was concerned for our recent intake of Ukrainian students and the difficulties they were facing, and further crystallised in collaboration with Dr Long, who is a Slavicist by training. We were fortunate to have the experience and insight of Tetiana Tsapenko in our team, as she was on a study-abroad semester at Keele when the Russian invasion of Ukraine took place.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Keele University had over 20 Ukrainian students working towards undergraduate or postgraduate degrees or taking part in study abroad for a year or semester. The situation presented a challenge: How could we best support students whose friends and families were in a dangerous situation, and who were unlikely to be able to return home? Further, could we learn from Syrian students who had already experienced this? Our close working ties with local refugee/asylum-seeker charities were useful but could not help in terms of academic support and what the students needed from the university.

## 2. Research aims

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Our aims in this project were the following:

- To understand the needs and experiences of students from Ukraine and Syria studying in the UK
- To share with staff and institutions the things that these students wanted them to consider
- To improve the UK university experience for international students fleeing conflict

### 3. Summary of research outcomes

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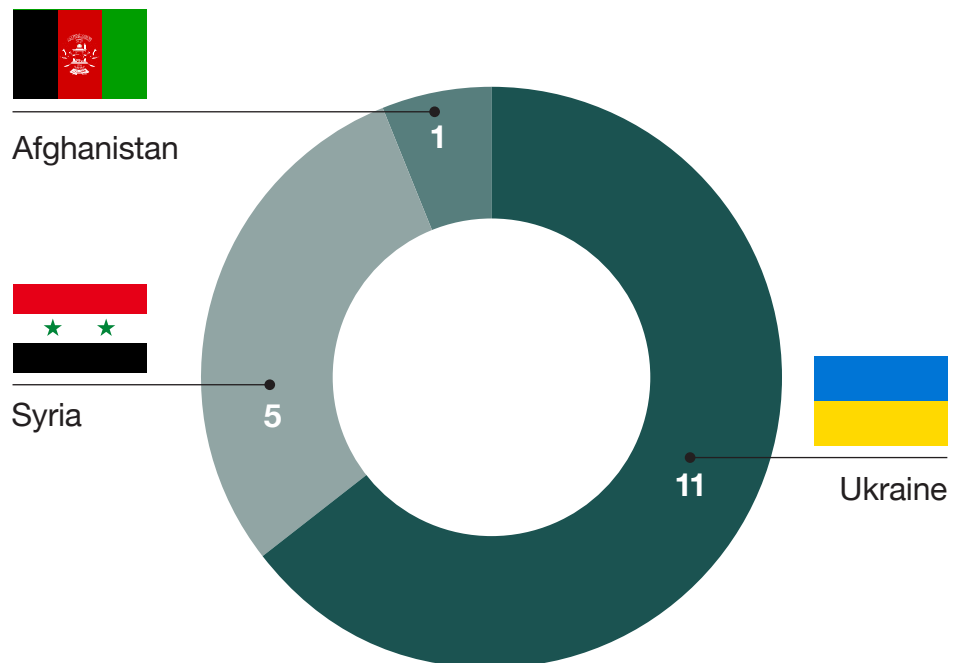
Our research shows clearly that students who have fled their home countries and are now studying in the UK, or have recently completed their studies in the UK, are a highly heterogeneous group, each with diverse needs and aspirations. Whilst our data point to key university systems and processes which could be enhanced to better support these students, we have also learned that some widespread terminology in higher education (HE), such as the label ‘international student’ is problematic in the context of forced migration.

### 4. Methodology

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We interviewed 17 students – 11 from Ukraine, five from Syria and one from Afghanistan. These students have studied/are studying at various institutions across the UK and have experienced the HE system from foundation year to PhD level. Although the initial focus was to be on Ukraine and Syria, we decided to broaden the scope as we received more questions from university colleagues and students alike. We used a semi-structured interview method, covering aspects of both university support and experiences outside the university (for example, obtaining visas), with the aim of providing more qualitative information about these students.

**Figure 1. Number of interviewees by country of origin**



## 5. Key findings

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We found that experiences varied not only within and across nationalities, but also depending on the course of study itself. Our main findings are listed below:

1. To understand the needs and experiences of students from Ukraine and Syria studying in the UK
  - a. The primary concerns were in relation to communication of resources for both study and funding. Students felt that there should be a central repository of information about funding and study opportunities. Many reported only finding this information through social media posts from friends.

“First and foremost, I would advise to do research and not make migrants search for opportunities themselves. If a university can provide some help to a migrant, it must give all the information about that.”

**Iryna, Ukraine**

- b. Doctoral students have a particularly difficult time both in finding supervisors in the UK for half-finished research and in obtaining the three-year Graduate route visa once completed. One doctoral student had to give up her studies and complete an additional Master’s degree in order to be able to stay at the university. Another could not obtain the three-year graduate visa after completing his PhD as the research was sponsored by a company; therefore he was listed as an employee.



“I want to single out PhD students. I think we are [the] most under-represented and ignored class of Ukrainian students. The situation in which I happened to be was stupid, because I was in the most insecure group when the war began. There were funded scholarships and students’ loans available for BA and MA students. There were academic places for displaced academics, but only for those who already got a PhD and defended their thesis. There were some short-term programmes for those PhD students who wanted a temporary shelter in the UK university.”

**Yelyzaveta, Ukraine**

2. To share with staff and institutions the things that these students wanted them to consider
  - a. Ongoing support is necessary long after the initial ‘crisis’. It appears that the longer a crisis continues, the more some institutions feel that either it has been ‘addressed’ or that these students can simply access the support available to all students, without their differing needs being considered. Differing needs can include visa and language support for Syrian students, and funding and scholarship opportunities for Ukrainian students.

“I said I need six months extension and my supervisor said I understand this situation and I will support you... but because I’m now on student visa, I need to get that support from the Student Visa Office which they rejected... they will not give me six months visa because they say your corrections can be done online outside the UK.”

**Syrian PhD student**

- b. Respondents felt there was a difference in ‘sympathy’, depending on where the student was from. This was felt particularly keenly by some Syrian students, which may be linked to the length of time of the conflict in that country, or the fact that Ukraine was getting more attention in the media.
  - c. There are different levels of support for students in different parts of the UK, and depends on funding available from (and to) institutions. Scotland generally offers a higher level of support than other nations, particularly for funding such as hardship funds. Many students that interviewed did not have to pay undergraduate tuition fees when attending an institution in Scotland.

Our findings suggest student funding opportunities, hostility towards refugees, language support and targeted communication as key areas for development, so that the HE journey can be a more welcoming one for students fleeing humanitarian crises. The results therefore serve to relativise some of the proclamations that universities, as complementary pathway providers, make about their commitments to inclusivity and equality. Moreover, our findings aim to support evidence-based policy making at institutional and cross-institutional levels in HE.

One of our further findings was that, while some students are happy to group together to offer each other mutual support, others are not. Depending on the country and situation from which they are escaping, some students do not want



to share experiences with others from their country for fear of exposure or potential recriminations for families still at home. This was the case for both sharing experiences with each other in networks they set up themselves, often on social media channels such as Facebook or Telegram, and in sharing with wider audiences.

Ukrainian students were far more likely to come forward for interview (as shown in the numbers given in Section 4, above) than Syrian students, and were not afraid to voice their opinions, either of the situation in their own country or the difficulties they had faced in the UK. They also reported that there had been institutional support in the form of regular group meetings organised by support staff to check on their progress and welfare.

In contrast, Syrian students only started to come forward for interview much later in the project, and others have come forward through word of mouth from their friends, as they learned that the interview process was non-judgmental and that the researchers genuinely wanted to hear their stories to improve the situation for future students in the same position. It has been noticed that similar to Syrian students, other groups of students from countries that are facing or have faced crisis such as Hong Kong-Chinese students, fearing retaliation against their families that were still in their home country. We will be interviewing these students over the summer. Therefore, although we can only compare two groups from unevenly weighted cohorts, it is clear that institutions must not assume that the needs of all refugee/ asylum-seeking students are the same, even by country, or that they can be dealt with in the same manner.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

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This project has aimed to explore the measures that HE institutions can take to ease the path of students fleeing humanitarian crises. However, other issues have been relayed to us. For example, while **Article 26 Universities of Sanctuary scholarships** are now available at many institutions, these are only effective if students are not summarily removed from the locality by the Home Office (as happened to one potential student in Stoke-on-Trent). These issues are, of course, outside the control of the institutions themselves, but point to a need for collaboration between institutions and the Home Office with regards to supporting potential students making every effort to improve their own situation.

Within institutions, it has become apparent that these students need a point of contact to whom they can speak and from whom they can gain advice without having to go from one office to another. Further, this person must understand the particular issues these students face with visas, funding, accommodation and the emotional impact of their situation.

Students in this situation often do not have the networks available to them to allow them to find scholarships and funding; therefore, a centrally-organised database of these opportunities – a 'one-stop shop' – would allow them to more easily find what is available.



## 7. Further work

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We have presented our findings at the ‘Inclusive Education’ conference at Keele (10 May), and to the Dean of Education and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee at the same institution. Dr Long is now working with colleagues at Keele to create guidelines for the specific needs of these students with regards to curriculum design. We will also be presenting, as invited speakers, at ‘Inclusive Higher Education for People Forced from their Homes: An International Webinar’ on 17 June 2024, and the International Migration Research Network (IMISCOE) Conference (2–5 July).

Furthermore, we are excited to be working towards an exhibition to amplify the voices of forced migrant students and showcase their positive contributions to university life, which will be shown in Manchester and Keele and, potentially, other venues around the UK. In addition, as the project continues, we aim to build a webpage with resources available to colleagues throughout the sector and, potentially, expand this to include the funding and study information that students asked to be available in one place.

Although the UKCISA WeAreInternational Grants scheme funding time is now finished, we have decided to continue with support from our respective institutions as a number of students have recently come forward to participate. In particular, we aim to explore the findings regarding student nationality networks and how these may be best utilised. In addition, we hope to explore how a similar framework might be developed for students who would not be comfortable – or even feel safe – within such a network. We have also recently received enquiries from various local charities for refugees and asylum seekers, regarding furthering our work to include specific preparation for students known to them, who wish to enter university in the UK. Thus, our project continues in the form of capacity building and discussions with colleagues across the HE and charitable sectors.

## 8. Appendix – questions for the semi-structured interviews

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1. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. Why did you decide to participate?
2. How do you think this could make a difference to future positive experiences for students?
3. Tell me about your study background.
4. What guided your choice of university in the UK?
5. Tell me about the application/interview process.
6. What was your experience of Admissions from application to arrival on campus?
7. How were your studies financed?
8. Have you studied overseas before? How did it differ?
9. How were you treated by professors and fellow students at university?
10. Did you experience problems with modules and/or assessments? If so, what happened? How were they solved?
11. Did you feel that the university (administration and academic staff) understood your situation? If not, why?
12. What could the university have done/provided to make your experience better?
13. Do you think there are any issues related specifically to Ukrainians/Syrians that were not considered at any point? (This can be in relation to any part of the process).
14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**UKCISA**

Woburn House  
20–24 Tavistock Square  
London WC1H 9HQ  
ukcisa.org.uk  
@ukcisa

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