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## Introduction to Special Edition: Students from Refugee and Asylum Seeker Backgrounds and Meaningful Participation in Higher Education

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## Introduction to this Special Edition

John Butcher, Managing Editor, The Open University

Email: [john.butcher@open.ac.uk](mailto:john.butcher@open.ac.uk)

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### Station to station (Bowie, D, 1976)

I am delighted to frame this special edition of *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* with a brief introduction.

When the guest editors approached us 18 months ago with an enthusiastic idea for a special edition devoted to the participation of refugees and asylum seekers in higher education (HE), the editorial board were receptive, and supportive, but I remained mildly sceptical: would there be enough articles to justify a full special edition? This perhaps revealed an Anglocentric bias and a shameful lack of awareness of the excellent work going on around the world. I am very pleased to have been proved wrong, and to publish an exciting and packed special edition that demonstrates the high quality of research and practice going on in the area. I sincerely believe this collection of research articles and reports of innovative practice will stimulate greater attention to refugee and asylum seeker engagement across the HE sector. I hope this special edition will encourage more authors to research and publish, and thus challenge prevailing myths about the relationship (or lack of) between universities and those potential learners forced to migrate.

I am very grateful to the guest editors of this special edition for their hard work and sustained commitment. Their diligent persistence has enabled a wide range of perspectives to be gathered together in a single edition, resulting in a diverse collection of 12 articles that have all been through extensive critical scrutiny. I am also grateful to the numerous authors who have responded generously to suggestions from the editors, which have, in all cases, enhanced the articles and enabled the voices of refugees and asylum seekers to emerge. The latter is a particularly important and critical aspect of this special edition. Too often, the voices of refugees and asylum seekers are absent from educational research – these articles offer a timely corrective to that imbalance.

As Managing Editor, I am proud that *WPLL* is publishing a truly international special edition. The discourses around widening participation and lifelong learning can occasionally default to deficit models, but this collection espouses an openness and awareness of the lived complexities of social justice that stimulate us all to do more. I will leave the editors to introduce each article in their excellent and stimulating editorial, but here I simply wish to encourage readers to engage with the full range of nine research articles and three innovative practice reports included, each representing considerable scholarship, and each, in their different ways, exploring creative and collaborative solutions to ongoing challenges in refugee and asylum seeker education.

The editors have elected to commence the special edition with articles highlighting the personal stories of refugees and asylum seekers, allowing positive stories of striving and thriving to be presented. It is in this context that we have included a personal preface from one of my colleagues at The Open University in the UK, a Professor and Executive Dean reflecting on his own origins in an Indian refugee camp. Authentic first-hand voices follow, first from a Sudanese–Australian teacher and former refugee, and then an Australian PhD student who was a Rwandan refugee in Uganda.

These are followed by a number of more institutional perspectives, including provision for non-EU refugee students aspiring to study at German universities and taking preparatory courses at ‘*Studienkollegs*’, and Australian approaches to working with refugees through an innovative research ethic. The special edition goes on to feature a study of Chaldean women from Iraq addressing cultural expectations in Australia, and Zimbabwean marginalised migrants in South Africa seeking to engage with HE via open and distance learning.

The importance of collaboration is signalled in an article on Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia trying to study in private universities, an article on partnerships between a German public university, local government and non-profit organisations offering refugee study-orientation programme, and an example of an Australian collaboration to open up HE to asylum seekers.

The special edition is completed with three examples of innovative practice. First, support for English language proficiency among adults is described in an EAL (English as an additional language) programme aiming at the social inclusion of asylum seekers. Second is a report on the provision of short courses (including ESOL) (English as a Second Language) to asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. Finally, a Brazilian university’s effort to

support Portuguese language teaching and intercultural dialogue offers a model for efforts at enhancing assimilation.

If you enjoy these articles and are interested in similar issues, please consider publishing your research with us.

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