***Humanity in a time of political hostility***

*Phoebe Cox is an OU Psychology Student who volunteers with Care4Calais, a charity supporting refugees in the UK, France, and Belgium. On International Migrants Day 2021, she argues that it has never been more important to find the humanity inside each of us and stand alongside refugees with compassion and solidarity, as they start trying to rebuild their lives here in the UK. She also offers suggestions as to how OU students can get involved.*

*.*

**Refugees are the ‘champions of resilience when times are tough’**

As the UN’s annual International Migrants Day approaches this year, on the 18th of December 2021, I reflect on my past year; the chaos of COVID, moving to a new country with a new language, starting my degree and joining a charity I hadn’t worked with before. There has been so much change, so much uncertainty; yet despite this, I have been so lucky. No one questioned my status as I was waiting for my French residency. I’ve never gone without a roof over my head, warm food, and a cosy bed to fall into after a long day. This is not the reality for the 44,000 asylum seekers who have sought safety in the UK over the past 12 months (Home Office, 2021).

Through my work at Care4Calais, I have seen first-hand the hardships that asylum seekers face on a daily basis. Lack of information, lack of finances, lack of language ability and lack of support systems, all contribute to a frightening and exhausting new life. In spite of this, the asylum seekers I’ve worked with have been some of the most humble, interesting, open-minded, and determined people I’ve ever met. As described so aptly by the IOM General Director, António Vitorino, on International Migrants Day 2019, they are the ‘champions of resilience when times are tough’ (UN, 2019).

This year, amongst all the uncertainty, I have had the privilege of becoming part of a beautiful network of passionate, selfless people – volunteers and asylum seekers alike – who support each other wholeheartedly, for no reason other than the fact that we are all human.

When you’re thrown into the middle of the ‘migrant crisis’, you realise that catchphrase is so ill-fitting. Migrants are not thre cause of the crisis. They are an effect of a failure in migration policy. They’re human souls, not just ‘migrants’. Yet they are frequently objectified and grouped together as statistics by political and media actors. They’re people; just like you and me. Given the current climate of ‘Hostile Environment’ migration policies and ‘Anti-Refugee’ bills, it has never been more important to find the humanity inside each of us and stand alongside refugees with compassion and solidarity, as they start trying to rebuild their lives here in the UK.

**The OU as a University of Sanctuary**

*They tell us to eat and sleep and wait, but we are not animals. We are people, we can think. And if they teach us, then we can help others [instead of] people helping us*.

These were the words spoken to me by a young asylum seeker just the other day. Due to backlogs in the Home Office’s processing of paperwork, many asylum seekers are being housed in just a single hotel room or overcrowded ex-army barracks, sometimes for over a year, whilst waiting to hear whether their traumas will be believed and if they will be given sanctuary. Although much of our work at Care4Calais is dedicated to providing basic necessities such as warm clothes and medical aid, one of the most common requests we get from people is to help them sign up for college.

*Education is their passport to a new life, to opportunities, employment, and friendships. It can provide an escape from the monotony of your own thoughts and create a sense of belonging to your community.*

As well as having an important impact on the individual, access to education and its related support networks have a huge impact on people’s lives worldwide. Whilst 37% of young people attend university globally, only 3% of young refugees make it to higher education (UNHCR, 2019). Yet, when given the opportunity, initiatives such as the DAFI programme – which sponsors refugees to attend University – have shown that access to higher education results in long-term positive impacts on peace and stability in the places from which their students have been displaced (UNHCR, 2016).

The OU’s core mission statement to ‘promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions’ (Open University, 2021),

*The OU’s application to become a University of Sanctuary is an exciting opportunity for all of us right here at the OU to come together and foster the creation of a more tolerant, welcoming and safe society. Students and staff can stand alongside those from unstable migration backgrounds and support each other in achieving our hopes and dreams, career goals and make long-lasting friendships – all whilst having an important impact on peace and equality in the wider world*.

As well as my work at Care4Calais, I am also an OU Psychology student with a keen interest in intercultural relations and mental health care. Studies have suggested that asylum seekers are five times more likely to struggle with their mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2016) and this is something I have seen reflected in the people I have supported this past year.

A large part of our work at Care4Calais is signposting people to the appropriate support whether that be their GPs, psychiatrists, counsellors, or social workers and supporting them through their appointments, as often language can be a barrier to accessing care in the UK. When the OU becomes a City of Sanctuary, students will have the unique opportunity to become another layer of peer support for forced migrants, able to lend a listening ear, signpost to the right support and give friendly reassurance that somebody is there, someone cares and that their stories and lives are important.

**What you can do as an OU student to help**

Despite the Hostile Environment migration policies and the ‘Anti-Refugee’ bill that seem all consuming in the media at the moment, there are so many positive charities, groups and initiatives that you can get involved in, to let refugees know that they *are* welcome here.

Firstly, and closest to home, there is the OU’s Student Action for Refugees, or ‘STAR’ group. We are a group of students and staff who campaign for a more understanding and welcoming society, where refugees can not only survive, but thrive. We stand together in solidarity to support everyone in accessing opportunities for growth and enrichment. If you would like to find out more, or join us, please visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OUSTAR/> and <https://star-network.org.uk/about-star/>

If you would like to find out more about the University of Sanctuary scheme, in partnership with the City of Sanctuary charity, please visit <https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/>

Finally, as Care4Calais is a volunteer-run organisation, we rely on the generosity of our volunteers and donations to keep doing what we do. My work with them has been a valuable insight into the lives of forced migrants, as well as the inner workings of a non-profit organisation, and has given a rich context to my Psychology studies with the OU. Our volunteers do a huge range of jobs which can help give insights into your area of interest. For example, understanding the mental health issues pre- and post-migration has supported my psychology studies, however students from a legal background may be interested in joining our Legal Access team, business or finance students may be interested in fundraising and admin and teaching students may be able to support our English lessons. If you would like to find out more about the work we do and how you could get involved, please visit: [www.care4calais.org](http://www.care4calais.org) or email me at [phoebe@care4calais.org](mailto:phoebe@care4calais.org).

**References:**

Home Office (2021) *National Statistics: How many people do we grant asylum or protection to?* Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2021/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to#:~:text=There%20were%2037%2C562%20asylum%20applications,ending%20June%202016%20(36%2C546)> (Accessed: 8 December 2021)

Mental Health Foundation (2016) *Mental health statistics: refugees and asylum seekers.* Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-refugees-and-asylum-seekers> (Accessed: 9 December 2021)

The Open University (2021) *Strategy and policies: Mission.* Available at: [www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/mission](http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/mission) (Accessed: 8 December 2021)

UNHCR (2016) *Education Report 2016: Aiming Higher – The other one percent.* Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/57bfe7d84> (Accessed: 8 December 2021)

UNHCR (2019) *Education Report 2019: Stepping up: Refugee education in crisis*. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/steppingup/wp-content/uploads/sites/76/2019/09/Education-Report-2019-Final-web-6.pdf> (Accessed: 8 December 2021)

United Nations (2020) *International Migrants Day: Messages.* Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/observances/migrants-day/messages> (Accessed: 9 December 2021)