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## **CAN YOU GIVE ME SANCTUARY? EXPLORING THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS TO ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING**

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### **Summary**

Dublin City University (DCU) was granted the status of “University of Sanctuary” in December 2016. Fifteen scholarships were granted to refugees and asylum seekers; one provided by each of the five DCU faculties and the remaining ten provided by DCU’s online education platform, DCU Connected. This paper will report on the journey undertaken by a team within DCU’s National Institute for Digital Learning as they put in place the framework needed to support these scholars and the related research study which explores the nature of the transition experiences of University of Sanctuary Scholars to online distance learning. A longitudinal qualitative study is designed to seek a greater understanding of these learners’ experiences in the early stages of the study lifecycle, and of how their transition into higher education can be facilitated to enhance student success. The data collection technique is semi-structured online interviews conducted annually, and the first round of interviews has recently been conducted. The data-led analytical approach for this study is Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. The next phase of the research project involves the analysis of the first phase of interview data and the generation of preliminary findings.



Figure 1. Universities of Sanctuary Logo

### **Introduction**

This paper reports on the journey undertaken by a team within DCU’s National Institute for Digital Learning as they put in place the framework needed to create the University of Sanctuary scholarships and the related research activity exploring the nature of the transition experiences of University of Sanctuary Scholars to online distance learning.



Figure 2. Universities of Sanctuary Launch DCU 2016

In order to support and retain the University of Sanctuary Scholars as DCU Connected students it is necessary to gain a greater understanding of these learners' experiences in the early stages of their higher education journey, in order to facilitate and enhance their success as online distance students. The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of the transition experiences of university of sanctuary scholars to online distance learning. This research project aims to generate new knowledge about the transition experiences of University of Sanctuary scholars to online distance learning and to then harness this new knowledge to effectively support this cohort of students.

## **Contexts from the Literature**

Online distance learning can enable access to higher education for underrepresented groups such as asylum seekers and refugees (Castaño-Muñoz, Colucci, & Smidt, 2018). These groups face structural, financial and digital skills barriers to accessing higher education (Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Traxler, 2018) and hence “learning is seen as critical for migrant inclusion” (Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2018; p.2). In order to support the integration and inclusion of migrants in society, access to higher education is crucial (European Commission, 2016).

A number of high-level reports have emphasised the importance of opening up access to higher education for more adult learners through more flexible study options (European Commission, 2014; HEA, 2015; Hunt, 2011; OECD, 2015). These efforts are hampered by the fact that online distance learners are a potentially vulnerable student population with lower completion rates than traditional students (Levy, 2007; Tello, 2007; Stone, 2017; Woodley & Simpson, 2014). Attrition of learners in online and distance learning (ODL) in the United Kingdom (UK) may be as high as 80% (Gallie, 2005). Woodley and Simpson (2014) put the international graduation figure for ODL students as often “around 10% or less”.

Given that many students who withdraw from higher education do not return, this fact emphasises the importance of targeted supports in the early stages of the study lifecycle to enhance student success and retention (Stone, 2012).

As outlined above, online distance learning students are more vulnerable to attrition, similarly students from refugee or asylum seeking backgrounds face significant challenges with regard

to socio-cultural, technology, family, and health issues when transitioning to university (Streitwieser, Brueck, Moody, & Taylor, 2017; Baker, Ramsay, Irwin, & Miles, 2018; Kong, Harmsworth, Rajaeian, Parkes, Bishop, AlMansouri, & Lawrence, 2016). According to research carried out by Baker et al. (2018) students from refugee backgrounds face challenges availing of the formal university supports 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. In addition, a study carried out by Salvo and de C Williams (2017) highlighted the positive impact of providing adequate supports for the psychological well-being of refugee and asylum seeker students on their learning as well as empowering their learning agency through involvement in the planning and delivery of the course.

In summary, the literature presented above highlights that it is important that the needs of the University of Sanctuary scholars who are both asylum seekers/refugees and online distance students are understood and supported to facilitate their success at higher education.

## **Methodology**

A longitudinal, qualitative 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 this methodological approach was that we were concerned about introducing an unequal power relationship which was more likely with a method that captured this data in real time as they experience their study week by week.

Following from a review of the literature we formulated the following overarching research question:

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

The setting for this research is DCU Connected at Dublin City University (DCU) Ireland. DCU Connected delivers flexible, part-time undergraduate and postgraduate programmes through the mode of online distance learning.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the DCU Research Ethics Committee. Participants who are asylum seekers may be more psychologically vulnerable than other students due to the fact that they live in direct provision, which is a controlled, sometimes stressful environment where they have limited control over aspects of their daily lives. Although not the specific focus of the research study where aspects of their experience of direct provision, or their personal journey to becoming asylum seekers come up during discussion of their transition to studying at higher education level, there is a possibility of participants experiencing a level of distress.

Risk management procedures for this study include: designing an interview schedule that focuses on their educational experiences rather than experiences of seeking asylum etc.; utilising appropriate interview technique whereby if a participant begins to show distress the

interviewer will offer to pause the process, and/or move to another part of the interview schedule, and/or halt the interview; following up with any participant who shows distress to facilitate connection with DCU Counselling Services or the DCU Chaplaincy as appropriate. The DCU Chaplaincy has maintained a pastoral support role in the University of Sanctuary Scholarship process. In the plain language statement and informed consent form participants are encouraged to contact the DCU Counselling service if, following participation in the study, they later experience distress.

Participants were selected based on convenience sampling and are asylum seekers and/or refugees based in Ireland, who have been awarded a scholarship to study with DCU Connected. Participants are registered as part time students on DCU Connected programmes. The first cohort of participants recruited is comprised of seven students of which five are male and two are female. Participants are geographically distributed around Ireland and are primarily living in government direct provision centres. Additional participant cohorts will be recruited annually.

The data collection technique is semi-structured recorded interviews conducted online annually by the research team, once per year for three years. Interviews are conducted in real time online using a private Adobe Connect classroom. An interview schedule was created which contained sixteen open-ended questions which were shaped by the research questions. The interview schedule contained questions about starting to study, community and social integration, supports and services, experiences of studying online, expectation and goals.

The first phase of interviews is being transcribed and prepared for analysis at the time of writing this paper. Then, the data will be analysed following the Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases of thematic analysis analytical approach. The rationale for this approach is that thematic analysis is a flexible and rich method for reporting patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Following a circular model of collection and analysis of data, the preliminary findings will shape the second phase of data collection (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Being insider researchers can cause ethical dilemmas and concerns around the objectivity, validity and reliability of a research study. Research from the inside can be both scholarly and rigorous provided the researcher is aware of their potential influence and awareness of potential bias (Sikes & Potts, 2008). This issue was dealt with by maintaining a distance from the participant cohort, the research team conducted interviews with participants that they did not directly teach and institutional and programme level gatekeepers to access and interaction with the cohort were used, so as not to exert undue influence.

## **Next Steps**

The next phase of the research project involves the analysis of the first phase of interview data and then the drawing of the preliminary findings of the first cohort of interviews. Following an iterative model of collection and analysis of data, the preliminary findings will shape the

second phase of data collection (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This new knowledge will then be harnessed to effectively support further groups of University of Sanctuary scholars during their transition to higher education.

Building on the success of the University of Sanctuary scholarships with DCU Connected, DCU, in conjunction with FutureLearn, will offer 30 Scholarships refugees and asylum seekers living in Ireland to undertake online study on the FutureLearn platform.

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