Strategies against Everyday Bordering in Universities
The Open Learning Initiatives

AURA LOUNASMAA, ERICA MASSERANO,
MICHELLE HAREWOOD AND JESSICA ODDY

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In 2012, as Home Secretary of the UK, Theresa May announced her plan to create 'a hostile environment' in the UK in order to deter further migration and encourage voluntary departures (Kirkup 2012). The consequences of this have been far-reaching and involved a shift in responsibility to institutions, including universities, to check and report on the immigration status of people affiliated with them. Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2017, 2019) call the effects of these latter policies 'everyday bordering'. In some cases, this leads to discriminating against anyone who may be deemed a 'risk' – anyone who may look or sound 'foreign' (Nava 2015). These policies of everyday bordering also create further barriers for forced migrants to access higher education.

This chapter will discuss the way in which processes of bordering are imported into the space of the university in the United Kingdom, how this affects displaced students, and how these processes may be resisted and challenged (for a breakdown of the history and structure of the neoliberal and neocolonial university in the UK, see Ivancheva, this volume). We discuss these issues in reference to the Open Learning Initiative, a pre-sessional programme for forced migrant students, offered by the University of East London, Central European University, Bard College Berlin, the University of Vienna and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki since 2017. It will also argue that political positioning is necessary and inevitable in projects such as this, even if the main focus is on education.

UK Higher Education and the 'Hostile Environment'

Migration of all types, including forced, has always been a deep, integral part of European culture and society. A total of 0.6 per cent of current UK citizens, or an estimated 361,000 people, were once refugees. While a third of them have lived in the UK for fifteen years or more, there are also many newer arrivals. At least 35,099 people submitted an application for asylum to the UK Home Office in 2020 (UK Government 2020). Fifty per cent of asylum seekers wait more than six months, and many for several years, for the initial decision about their legal status to be granted, during which time they are prevented from working (Bulman 2019). Starting or continuing university education during this time of limbo is an attractive option for many, but one that comes with multiple barriers.

Asylum seekers usually have the right to study, but there are different temporary humanitarian protection visas providing limited or no access to public funds, which means that those who have received asylum may still be effectively prevented from accessing education (Article 26 Network and Coram Children's Legal Centre 2016). Those who have been granted temporary protection statuses usually only have the right to study for the duration of their temporary leave, which may not cover the duration of their studies. Asylum seekers are often charged international fees and have no access to public funds to cover these. Some universities have opted to charge them Home Fees, which are significantly lower, but still out of reach for most asylum seekers. Only those who have been granted refugee leave to remain have the right to study and access to public funds, including student finance. Even if on paper the support appears to be there, it isn't always the case. While seventy-five universities in the UK are providing scholarships for asylum seekers and refugees, due to poor planning and lack of understanding of the barriers forced migrants face in accessing universities, a proportion of these scholarships remain vacant every year (Murray 2017).

Those asylum seekers and refugees who do succeed in accessing universities often struggle to understand the requirements of the system and are faced with the structural racism and inequalities endemic in the hierarchical education sector (Ivancheva, Lynch and Keating 2019). A student with an asylum seeker background states:

> Although some opportunities are available (including generous scholarships for asylum seekers), information about services, funding opportunities, policies and practices regarding higher education is difficult to access. Some of us have been offered places in universities

and invited to come and enrol, only to be told on arrival that we cannot start as our status does not permit access to student finance. (Lounasmaa and Esenowo, with OLIve students 2019: 42)

Those who succeed are seen as extraordinary individuals, who persevere and succeed due to individual talents. The 'ordinary' refugee has no chance of success in a system so severely stacked against them.

In addition to lack of clarity around the right to study, lack of access to funding and structurally high tuition fees, other barriers for entry experienced by forced migrant students are lack of information about opportunities; language requirements, often to be proven exclusively through expensive certificates such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS); hostile culture and environment in HE institutions; lack of recognition of previous learning; lack of support for meeting application requirements and to develop necessary skills; lack of psychosocial support for those dealing with trauma and more (Lounasmaa and Esenowo, with OLIve students 2019). Some of these barriers are unique to their situation as refugees and asylum seekers, while others are shared with other populations in the UK.

Some of the barriers that are unique to legal status are a direct result of implementation by Theresa May as Home Secretary of her 'hostile environment' policies from 2012 onwards. Deportation was made easier to carry out before appeals were heard (UK Parliament 2013); vans with anti-immigration messages drove the streets (UK Home Office 2013); checks on thousands of elderly former migrants, especially from Caribbean countries, resulted in Commonwealth citizens who had spent their lives in the UK being deported, in many cases illegally (Agerholm 2018). Moreover, this period saw the implementation of the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 (UK Home Office) which have shifted the responsibility for checking immigration status to landlords, healthcare professionals, employers and educational institutions. Moreover, universities have become border institutions. They are required to check the eligibility of each student to study in the UK throughout their programmes, and face fines and risk losing their licence to support international students' visa applications in the future if found in breach of the current policies. In 2012, London Metropolitan University received a ban on sponsoring international student visas for failing to comply with immigration policies (Meikle 2012). While asylum seekers do not require study visas and hence do not fall into this category, a failed asylum claim or a study ban once a student has already enrolled could put a university at risk of non-compliance.

In 2017, the Home Office began issuing study bans as part of the bail conditions for asylum seekers without providing adequate rationale and guidelines. Many individuals have been able to challenge these conditions, but this requires a legal inquiry and the assistance of an immigration lawyer. While all universities have compliance teams to manage student visa issues, not all have expertise in forced migration, and hence many forced migrant students are turned away from universities even after they have managed to secure a place on a programme. Some seventy-five universities now offer scholarships for asylum seeker students,[1] but the same universities may struggle to support the scholarship holders when it comes to defending their right to study. The hostile environment and how it transcends university is reflected upon by another OLIve student:

> ever-changing policies make it even harder to know our rights regarding education and mean that many educational institutions are reluctant to support us. In 2017 some of us were banned from studying by a randomly applied immigration bail condition. Although the decisions were later overturned, this took several months, further increasing the gap since we last studied and further damaging our confidence. (Lounasmaa and Esenowo, with OLIve students 2019: 42)

Borders, Bordering and Barriers

Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2017, 2019) define the effects of these policies as 'everyday bordering'. They argue that the policies have shifted state borders away from airports and ports to citizens' private lives, workplaces and service-providing institutions. Instead of trained immigration officers, private landlords, school administrators, hospital receptionists and employers are now charged with understanding and applying immigration legislation. Misinterpreting or wrongly applying current legislation can incur personal fines of up to £10,000 or loss of an institutional licence to operate. Those without access to legal expertise often err on the side of caution and refuse to serve or recruit anyone whose status they are in doubt of. This distinguishes the UK from other countries such as Italy where students from a refugee and asylum seeker background may access higher education through unofficial channels and be already more present within it, though invisibilised (see Gallo et al., this volume). In some cases, this leads to discrimination against anyone who may be deemed a risk – anyone who may look or sound 'foreign' (Nava 2015). Together, these practices form a 'performance of borders', which means that 'borders are invoked and

materially enforced in new ways' (Gilmartin, Wood and O'Callaghan 2018: 11). Of course, these performances and policies affect migrants differently based on ethnicity, gender, religion and class (Yuval-Davis 2011). This is also true in UK universities, which are effectively weaponised for purposes of border control (Candappa 2019).

These barriers, related to the legal immigration status of individuals, do not exist independently of Britain's colonial history and the racial politics that stem from it, and hence, as El-Enany states, 'cannot be corrected through the doling out of legal status to a select few' (2020: 222). When we look at the British educational system, it is impossible to separate it from its imperialist past and the continued shadows it casts. Many early funders of UK universities were implicated in the slave trade and supported apartheid policies. Students and staff in UK universities have been campaigning for removal of such emblems from campuses for several years, with the most notable example being Oxford University's refusal to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes despite the global reach of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, which began in Cape Town in 2015. The statue was finally removed in 2020 and Oriel College, where it was placed, has called a further inquiry into how to support Black and minority ethnic students and staff (Mohdin, Adams and Quinn 2020).

Another aspect relevant to the barriers that forced migrants face in higher education is their perceived ethnicity. The most common nationalities of asylum seekers in the UK are of Middle Eastern and African states (Walsh 2019), meaning they are more often than not people of colour. Black and minority students are proven to be at a disadvantage in the UK educational system. This culminates in the UK's 25.3 per cent degree attainment gap, meaning that upon completing a degree, 25.3 per cent more white students than Black and minority ethnic students are awarded the two higher grades; many jobs require those grades for entry (Advance HE n.d.). Reasons for this gap range from straight racism and bias to educational approaches being too homogenous to lack of acknowledgement and encouragement (Stevenson 2018). Unsurprisingly, then, professors who are Black or minority ethnic are 0.6 per cent of the total, with only twenty-five Black British female professors in the whole of the UK (Advanced HE 2017). Attainment gaps start at primary school levels and increase at secondary and tertiary level education, placing Black and minority ethnic students at a disadvantage (Smith 2017; Strand 2011). Research and praxis have centred on supporting access to primary and secondary education (Skjerven and Chao Jr. 2018). While ensuring all children have access to this is vital, it has meant that those wishing to advance to university level studies are often left behind.

In short, Black and minority ethnic students, even when they are not asylum seekers, begin their educational journey in a system which has a history of racism, continue it in an environment which at best does not cater to them and at worst is directly against them, and when they complete their degrees, they do not stay in it. Since they are Black and minority ethnic, it is reasonable to think that the same biases and barriers are experienced by the majority of asylum seekers as well, and if anything, are compounded by stereotypes related to their legal status.

Finally, UK universities and their relationship with students, staff and applicants cannot be separated from the intense marketisation the sector has undergone in the last twenty years, as discussed by Ivancheva in this volume. Since the introduction of student fees in 1998, students have increasingly been treated as paying customers and education as a marketable product. Priority in recruitment is given to fee-paying students. University rankings, or 'prestige' as Cook calls it (in this volume), measure graduate employability and other metrics, where white, middle-class students are likely to perform well due to their existing social and cultural capital, hence making them more attractive applicants for universities. Barriers such as high tuition fees also affect access to universities for many UK working-class applicants and applicants who have grown up in social care. To alleviate this widening access gap, initiatives such as Widening Participation have been introduced in a bid to increase support for applicants and students who do not fit this profile, but often these initiatives are harnessed for further marketing purposes rather than designed with long-term change in mind (Lounasmaa 2020). This neoliberalisation of the sector, together with the systemic racism discussed above, creates the myriad barriers displaced students face in accessing university education.

Evidently, even after accessing higher education, forced migrant students, Black and minority ethnic students and working-class students (which may or may not be one and the same) face ongoing discrimination and lack of adequate support to successfully navigate the university system. It is in this context that the Open Learning Initiative (OLIve) at the University of East London, a study programme targeted at forced migrants who wish to enter or re-enter higher education, was born and operates.

Refugee Education Initiatives and Open Learning Initiatives

The University of East London (UEL) is a former polytechnic which gained university status in 1992. In the UK, such universities are known

as 'post-1992' or 'new' universities, in opposition to older, more established institutions. Approximately 70 per cent of UEL students are from ethnic minorities; more than 40 per cent of UEL students are from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, and many are the first in their family to go to university (University of East London 2020). All UEL campuses are in the borough of Newham, which has the highest incidence of poverty in London as well as very high rates of child poverty, homelessness and low pay (Trust for London 2020). The university has also been caught in disputes about how it deals with its links to colonialism and the slave trade, as the statue of John Cass, a key culprit in the establishment of the Atlantic slave trade, was only removed from UEL's Cass School of Education and Communities building in May 2020 after the Black Lives Matter protests questioned his legacy as a philanthropist. More recently, the university has moved to make a number of social sciences professors, including trade union activists and one of Britain's leading Black professors working on the intersections of race and capitalism, Gargi Bhattacharyya, redundant. UEL is therefore a prime example of an educational institution where students from forced migrant backgrounds and home students will be facing intersectionally linked challenges.

UEL has been home to Refugee Studies programmes since 1998. The programmes have always employed a refugee-centred approach, working in close collaboration with practitioner and policy organisations. Consequently, in 2015 UEL started teaching a short university course in the Calais 'Jungle', the largest unofficial refugee camp in Northern France. The course, Life Stories, was loosely based in social sciences, with a learner-centred focus. Learners compared their own life stories and personal experiences to those of public figures such as Malala Yousafzai, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X and others. This supported them in making sense of the political, social, psychosocial and cultural context in which they now found themselves (Squire and Zaman 2020).

In 2016, a team of academics at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, Hungary, put together a proposal to start education programmes for displaced students across Europe, called Open Learning Initiative (OLIve). These programmes recognised the role of quality education in protecting refugees and promote sustainable solutions to the challenges they face in their adopted environments (UNHCR 2015). Hence, in response to the rising number of refugees arriving in Europe at the time, it aimed to extend access to university education. This would be achieved through offering pre-sessional courses to refugee learners aspiring to study in Budapest, Vienna and London in 2016–18

and Vienna, London, Berlin, Budapest and Thessaloniki in 2018–20. Many universities in Europe extended their offers at the same time; the University of Lille offered forty fully funded places for refugee students who were made homeless when the 'Jungle' refugee camp in Calais was dismantled; the Article 26 scholarship network offered funding for asylum seeker students across the UK; numerous universities began offering language tuition through voluntary student schemes, summer schools and extending existing student services to refugee learners. However, it is worth noting that these universities' responses also coincided with a rise in right-wing political discourse, tougher immigration control and new bordering regimes throughout Europe (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

The main purpose of the programme is to foster social and economic inclusion of refugees and their integration into higher education through responding to existing barriers. Entry into higher education is achieved through assessing and validating previous learning and promoting inclusive learning practices. Additionally, the project aims at providing refugees with tools for durable social integration. This is facilitated through language learning, advocacy training and creative pedagogies which aim to build learners' confidence. A further objective is to disseminate and scale up good practice beyond the immediate consortium.

UEL started their own OLIve programme in 2017. As discussed previously, in the UK those with refugee status have the right to study and to access student loans. The rate of refugees accessing higher education is believed to remain low, but as refugees are identified in the systems as Home (UK) students, the number of refugees in universities is difficult to ascertain (Stevenson and Baker 2018). Those with refugee status may still struggle to access relevant information about the higher education system. They may also lack vital skills and knowledge required to choose programmes and institutions, apply and succeed in their studies. While waiting for a decision on their legal status, most asylum seekers have the right to study and, based on our experience working with OLIve students and applicants, many seek opportunities to gain different skills during the waiting period. However, they can only rely on scarce scholarship programmes that offer payment of the high international tuition fees most universities charge asylum seekers, and possibly a maintenance grant. Because of this, UEL included students at various stages of their asylum applications in the OLIve Weekend Programme, one of the aims of which is to point students towards scholarship schemes and assist with applications.

UEL offers foundation programmes in many subject areas; the OLIve UP programme was designed to be linked to a specific one. Instead of designing a separate programme, refugee learners were given tuition fee waivers to attend alongside other students who required an intensive foundation course: school leavers, care leavers, international students, mature students, students with additional learning needs and those who have struggled in previous educational institutions. This was a cost-effective way to deliver the programme and has also been found to offer supportive and suitable skills training and immersion into UK academic culture. One of the students noted while on the programme: 'This is the only place where I don't feel like an asylum seeker'.

UEL OLIve has two intakes a year. Each cohort differs from the next, with individual experiences and differing group dynamics. It is important to be able to respond to these differences in an effective way. Thus, the learning experience is reliant on the quality of the team, their experience and attitudes (Musa and Kurawa 2018). However, it also relies on the production of a reciprocal relationship, one in which the voice of the learner is promoted and utilised (Freire 1970). In this way, the programme becomes flexible but robust, and is able to adapt to the needs of each group. Within this framework, evaluations provide part of the required communication. Feedback is therefore solicited throughout the course in an attempt to respond to needs in real time. Although individual experiences are varied, learners highlight common themes regarding challenges in accessing their required level of education. OLIve students have cited issues with various agencies whose role it is to support them. Concerns include receiving misinformation or a lack of information and support, leading to despondency and self-doubt. Students consistently question whether the immigration system is set up to 'waste time' or 'hold us back in our education'.

This was discussed during a conference planning meeting with three students of the Winter 2020 OLIve Weekend Programme: Pearlgin Lindiwe Goba, Landiswa Jessica Phantsi and Fridoon Pouyaa. The students were part of the OLIve conference group and had all expressed interest in presenting their own words in academic and non-academic contexts, instead of having their words presented by others. Goba commented: 'I come from an English-speaking country. Why do I have to start by doing entry level English, functional skills? I'm sure they do that just so that you waste time and then give up'. Moreover, she had experienced that 'whenever I say I want to do a degree in prosthetics I am asked why and told I won't be able to do that'. Phantsi explains: 'We are always being told to do health and social care like that is all

they think we are capable of doing. Several women I know keep being told to do this. Whereas many have simply said "I gave up"'. In this way, the 2019–20 cohort likened accessing higher education to 'a game of snakes and ladders', with a feeling of going in a cycle back to where they started. They highlight the impact of this on their self-esteem and mental health. According to them, they live in limbo and a state of contradiction. They express wishes to contribute to their own independence and the society in which they now find themselves. However, they feel blocked from doing so and in turn feel stereotyped as being lazy freeloaders, even to the point of asking: 'Why do they hate us so much? What have we done?' (For an analysis of exclusion in education from the perspective of learners from a refugee background, see Jasani et al., this volume).

The role of the project therefore becomes to empower, protect and encourage students (UNHCR 2020). The meeting itself came after these students presented their creative work at a UEL conference on borders, and was meant to discuss their participation in a Refugee Education Initiatives (REIs) conference in Budapest where they would present on refugee education, which would have been long-distance due to the movement restrictions they are subject to and ultimately was postponed due to COVID-19. These instances both addressed the question of including OLIve students into the wider context of the university, and showed some of the barriers they encountered. Thus, OLIve also becomes a response to bordering practices and a way of developing methodologies which adapt to and challenge existing limitations. The only way to provide real access to the 'ordinary' refugees to access universities at anywhere near the national average level of those achieving higher education is to reconsider universities and the higher education sector itself.

Politics of Education

There are multiple human rights arguments to support better access to higher education for refugees (United Nations 1948, art. 26; Stevenson and Baker 2018). There are also clear economic arguments, and arguments based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to support access to higher education for refugees (UNHCR 2016). Yet a project such as OLIve cannot remain outside of the current political events and discourses. Further thinking is required regarding the type of education needed to equip learners to survive this new climate and ultimately to thrive.

The University of East London's work in the Calais 'Jungle', teaching a university course and enrolling students from an unofficial refugee camp outside of Britain, doubled as an act of political defiance in the face of the hostile environment (Hall, Lounasmaa and Squire 2019). With only thirty-seven enrolled students, the course received national recognition and the Guardian University Award for widening participation in 2017. But in order to build further political resistance, it is not enough to merely continue to teach the skills to access a broken system. In March 2019, OLIve partners gathered in Budapest with other radical educators and students of diverse backgrounds to think about what the role of universities is in our current societies and how learning and pedagogy can contribute to a politics of resistance. Recurrent themes in the discussions were validating students' experiences, moving towards more inclusive and participatory practices and finding ways to resist the neoliberal tendencies to marketise education.

The Open Learning Initiative has aimed to do this by including refugee support organisations and refugee-led organisations into the planning, delivery and student support in all countries it operates in. By offering creative content alongside academic skills and topics, the programmes aim to bring a life story approach to learning and to show learners the importance of their own experiences and knowledge in the learning process. A diverse team of instructors putting the validation of student feedback and voice at the forefront follows a Freirean approach to dialogic learning, where students are invited to critique the systems that they are part of, including the systems that are providing them access and support (this is only one of many approaches used across OLIve and other refugee education initiatives to bring to the forefront the role of experts by experience; see Jasani et al., this volume, for methodological reflections on research by a group of learners). For example, post-course evaluations highlighted limitations of the programme, including lack of funds for travel. Yet overwhelmingly, students' feedback did not contradict the expectation of gratefulness which they may have felt was placed upon them (Nayeri 2019). Throughout OLIve, we believe only an open and honest conversation truly valuing students' needs can provide the radical platform for change that can help students to continue resisting the politics of hostility. This resonates with the positions of critical pedagogical theorists such as Giroux (2004), Freire (1970) and McLaren, Macrine and Hill (2010), who argue that transformative 'sites of learning' must build on the histories and struggles of excluded and marginalised groups. Such sites can serve as powerful lenses focusing on the unequal distribution of power, potentially leading to political,

economic and educational impacts (Boronski and Hassan 2015: 76; for the importance of locality in the establishment of sites of learning, see Gallo et al., this volume).

While it is important to provide forced migrant students with key skills, critical pedagogies and creative practices in which the students are involved with their own learning in active ways and reflect upon their life story, identity, positionality and experience rather than only focusing on skill-building have proven particularly fruitful. Decoloniality and antiracism also become powerful and indispensable tools with which all OLIve teaching must reckon to build methodologies and curricula which support students to empower themselves. Therefore, the consortium and access programmes necessarily must keep challenging the nature of teaching and the role of universities more widely.

UEL's cross-border Calais 'Jungle' university-accredited course and the multiple universities across Europe offering OLIve programmes provide examples of critical sites of learning challenging 'bordering'. They contribute to a wider call that has gained traction in recent years around decolonising the 'ivory tower' of academia through opening traditionally privileged sites of knowledge production towards a 'plurality of perspectives, ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies in which scholarly enquiry and political praxis take place' (Bhambra, Gebreil and Nişancıoğlu 2018: 2). Aparna and Kramsch (2018: 98) argue that dialogue around decolonisation of universities must engage with concepts of debordering, presenting the 'asylum university lens' as an example and framework to resituate the university as a space that joins social activism, knowledge production and academia in mutually reinforcing and productive ways. Borne out by an initiative in the Netherlands to open universities to asylum seekers and refugees, they posit that by making spaces on and off campuses, connecting multiple border localities, creating social networks between and across groups and bringing together actors who are 'proactively responsive to transformative moments in the geopolitical landscape of our borderlands', universities can provide a space to resist and counteract powerful bordering forces (104).

Conclusion

The OLIve programmes have faced many challenges since they began in 2016. While some of these have been institutional, the main challenges have been political. The aim of the project was initially to pro-

vide access to higher education and thus enhance the social inclusion of refugees into European societies. The barriers encountered by forced migrant students who face structural oppression within the context of the neoliberal university are no doubt significant all over Europe. In the United Kingdom, some of these barriers, such as exorbitant fees and lack of financial support, are shared with students who have citizen status and are holders of marginalised identities, such as working-class, Black and ethnic minority students. These are topics that OLIve at UEL attempts to address through practical support to access financial and academic resources and spaces. While the barriers remain daunting and hard to defy, in some of these spaces, solidarity can arise and the students can be empowered to come forth with their grievances and try new practices that build towards inclusion.

The current issues in refugee education, however, are exacerbated by rising right-wing resistance to migration. The OLIve programmes continue to provide access courses in five countries despite rising animosity towards refugees and those who act in solidarity with them. These aims are in themselves political, and an act of resistance in an environment growing ever more hostile all over Europe. The conditions under which OLIve operates in the United Kingdom may not be uniquely challenging, but they are uniquely marked by Brexit. Ultimately, anti-migrant sentiments and policies have led Britain to a political standstill where leaving the European Union is seen as the only way to progress past the current political division and climate of hostility, not only against migrants but indeed between disagreeing Brits. Brexit has made the future of European collaboration uncertain and made the REIs consortium cautious about the inclusion of British partners in further projects. Restrictions on movement already impact OLIve students' opportunities in higher education as well as their private lives. When it comes to the future of freedom of movement, it is clear that those people whose rights are most precarious, such as OLIve students, stand to lose the most.

As universities struggle to comply with new anti-immigrant legislation, they simultaneously continue to operate as humanitarian institutions. The same university may be policing the immigration status of its students and staff and providing support for those caught in the immigration system. This complexity can help projects like OLIve strive in the short term, but in order to support the sustainable inclusion of refugees in Europe, a more thorough overhaul of our universities is needed.

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Aura Lounasmaa is a lecturer in social sciences at the University of East London, and the director of its Erasmus + funded Open Learning Initiative (OLIve). OLIve started at UEL in 2017 and since then has been introducing forced migrant students to the UK higher education system. Dr Lounasmaa also worked on the award-winning Life Stories course in the Calais unofficial refugee camp 'the Jungle' and co-edited a book by students of the course. Her PhD is in women's studies, and her research currently focuses on ethics and decoloniality in education and refugee studies. She is a research fellow at the Centre for Narrative Research.

Erica Masserano is a PhD researcher at the University of East London and member of the Centre for Cultural Studies and Centre for Narrative Research. Her research is based on life writing by marginalised Londoners and its relationship to their experience of place and identity, in collaboration with CityLife. Erica is a creative writing tutor on the OLIve course. She has been working as an editor and translator in journalism and multimedia for fifteen years.

Michelle Harewood is a PhD researcher at the University of East London, at the Centre for Narrative Research. Her research focuses on the experiences of migrant communities and their use of creative and cultural resources in an international development and human rights context. Michelle works as an academic tutor on the OLIve course. She has fifteen years of experience working globally in the fields of international development and human rights with non-governmental organisations.

Jessica Oddy is a PhD researcher at the University of East London, at the Centre for Refugees, Migration and Belonging. Her research focuses on displaced adolescents' experiences of education in humanitarian and resettlement contexts. Jessica works as an academic tutor on the OLIve course; she is a qualified teacher with ten years of experience.

Note

1. For a full list of universities offering Sanctuary scholarships in the UK, see https://star-network.org.uk/access-to-university/scholarships/ (accessed 21 September 2021).

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