

Crafting agency in a host community: Accessing and participating in the English higher education sector by Ukrainian refugees

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Abstract

Following Russia's launch of a full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, scholarship has not yet addressed how Ukrainian refugees in England have been navigating the challenges of developing their agency in pursuing opportunities to participate in the higher education (HE) sector. To address this gap, this paper thematically analyses 11 oral history interviews with Ukrainian refugees. The findings demonstrate that accessing and participating in the HE sector in a host community is a significantly complicated process not just for the (prospective) student population of Ukrainian refugees, as other studies about refugees highlight, but for academics too, despite special support measures. Unlike previous studies that emphasise the passive position of refugees, stripped of their agency, our findings highlight the active nature of Ukrainian refugees' limited agency. Pursuing participation in the HE sector becomes an active agency-seeking process, prompting refugees to craft ways to pull all available resources and connections far beyond the HE sector in the effort to overcome the constraints of their marginalised position with regard to access and effective participation in the HE sector. These findings are significant not only for addressing existing gaps in the literature on refugee agency and refugees in HE in general, as well as Ukrainian refugees in particular, but also for informing policymaking at the national and institutional levels in England and beyond. These findings highlight the effectiveness of current support measures for

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Ukrainian refugees in England and point to specific challenges related to the HE environment which require further policy interventions: recognition of prior qualifications, building social networks, utilising technology, enhanced English language support and financial assistance.

KEYWORDS

England, higher education, refugees, Ukraine

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

The paper addresses the challenges Ukrainian refugees in England face in developing their agency to access and participate in the higher education sector.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper highlights the active agency of Ukrainian refugees in overcoming barriers to higher education, emphasising the need for policy interventions in qualification recognition, social networks, technology use, English support and financial assistance.

INTRODUCTION

Asylum seekers and refugees are often a marginalised group, lacking in agency in a host country (Tazzioli, 2023). Their lack of agency—restricted freedom to choose valuable forms of being (Alkire, 2005)—has become a status quo (Hunt, 2008; Ullrich, 2022), despite countries offering some support (Morrice, 2022). The higher education (HE) sector in host communities is no exception (De Haene et al., 2018; Lambrechts, 2020).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had far-reaching devastating effects in all areas of life in Ukraine (Kushnir et al., 2023). One immediate consequence of this has been serious disruption to the work of Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs), and the number of these damaged and destroyed educational establishments is growing (KSE report, 2025). Media coverage of the events demonstrates that numerous Ukrainian academics and students are amongst those fleeing the country, seeking safety (BBC, 2023). As of mid-December 2024, the United Kingdom had accepted 267,200 Ukrainians fleeing the war through available government schemes, with no further need to claim asylum (Gov.uk, 2025a), which suggests that the individuals who arrive under these schemes are treated not as asylum seekers but already as refugees in the United Kingdom.

The originality of this paper lies in addressing a few overlapping gaps in the existing literature on refugees' lack of agency—refugees in HE in general as well as Ukrainian refugees in particular. This literature, detailed further below, places no emphasis on how refugees' lack of agency is overcome, or on academics with regard to their access and participation

in the area of HE in host communities and opportunities in the area of HE for both students and academics. We also have a fragmented knowledge specifically on Ukrainian refugees in HE, whereby we have some information about support structures in different countries with a missing account of the challenges they experience. The absence of a focus on the English HE sector with regard to Ukrainian refugees, and the application of the oral history (OH) interview method, is evident too.

This paper relies on a thematic analysis of 11 OH in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees who are either attempting to access the English HE sector as students or academics, or have already done so and have been trying to navigate the challenges that the new environment has presented. The paper argues that accessing and participating in the HE sector in a host community is a significantly complicated process not just for the (prospective) student population but also for academics too, despite special support measures that may have been put in place by the host community for this particular group of refugees, as exemplified by the case of Ukrainian refugees in England. Pursuing being part of the HE sector in such a context turns into an agency-seeking process, which prompts many refugees to craft ways to pull all the resources and connections that they may have far beyond the HE sector in an effort to overcome the constraints of their marginalised position with regard to access and effective participation in the area of HE.

Revealing these trends not only has scholarly significance in addressing prior gaps in the literature. The new knowledge about Ukrainian refugees in the area of HE in England is significant for informing policymaking at the national and institutional levels in England and beyond, by highlighting what works in the existing support, what does not and what else could help.

To unpack the complexity of this argument, the paper proceeds by outlining the theoretical considerations about human agency and HE's role in it, which inform our thinking in this paper. The paper also contextualises the focus on Ukrainian refugees in UK HE by reviewing relevant literature on the opportunities and challenges that refugees face in the HE sector, what we know specifically about Ukrainian refugees in relation to the area of HE in general, as well as specifically in the UK context. Following this, the methodological decisions that inform this empirical enquiry are presented, before our key findings are explained and discussed.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: AGENCY AND REFUGEES

This section presents the theoretical ideas which inform our analysis in this paper: around the concept of agency, the idea of refugees' lack of agency and the bounded nature of the liberation potential of HE for refugees.

Conceptualising agency

Agency is often understood as inherent to any given human being. Theoretical perspectives related to agency are versatile (Gately, 2015), yet an explicit and uniform definition of its core meaning is absent (Sharov & Tønnessen, 2022). However, the main consensual idea around human agency in sociology revolves around a human's ability to exercise power (Frediani, 2010; Renkens et al., 2022), as well as freedom and capability (Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 1995; Zagor, 2015). Twentieth-century sociologists such as Giddens, Sen and Bourdieu have played a key role in crystallising our understanding of human agency.

In particular, Giddens (1994) highlighted the importance of power and freedom to exercise agency. Accordingly, agency refers 'not only to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place' (Giddens, 1994, p. 9).

The idea of agency as capability was further developed by Sen's (1995) capability approach, which focuses on a person's ability to achieve what they value (Frediani, 2010). Acknowledging the goals people have in life grants them agency because, with enough freedom, they have the potential to imagine and act towards new ways of being that are in line with their aspirations (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Stewart and Deneulin (2002) argue that the core concept of Sen's capability approach is that development is about providing conditions which facilitate people's ability to live flourishing lives. One of Sen's crucial examples of development that provides freedom is access to education (Streitwieser et al., 2020), as education institutions can be (or not) opportunity structures that facilitate the exercise of human agency through the ability to learn, socialise and take part in one's community (Frediani, 2010; Gately, 2015).

Bourdieu recognised the role of agency in challenging social structures as a person with agency can make conscious decisions that can go against dominant social norms (Joseph, 2020). However, agency does not depend solely on the individual as it works in cooperation with others (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Disadvantaged groups with limited agency will not have the luxury of acting against dominant social norms because 'choices are deeply shaped by the structure of opportunities available to us so that a disadvantaged group comes to accept its status within the hierarchy as correct even when it involves a denial of opportunities' (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 6).

Building on these theoretical ideas, we view agency in this paper as the ability to find or create ways to build enough power and freedom to choose what could reasonably be desired in the constraining context of the surrounding social structures.

Refugees' lack of agency

Internationally, refugees often struggle in host communities because of numerous obstacles that limit or deny their freedom altogether (Tazzioli, 2023). The lack of refugees' agency in host communities has been covered extensively in relevant international literature, however refugees' overcoming this lack of agency remains an under-researched area. Refugees' rights to accommodation, employment and citizenship are often limited (Hunt, 2008; Shapiro & Jorgensen, 2021).

Female refugees' agency is restricted further, as patriarchy still limits their political rights and democratic inclusion in their host society (Benslama-Dabdoub, 2024; Kapelner, 2024). Paid employment is a major path towards agency and freedom for refugees (Yalim & Critelli, 2023); however, societal barriers such as language and discrimination can affect their ability to find work (Hunt, 2008; Sapanski, 2021). Furthermore, non-recognition of qualifications from their home countries forces refugees to apply for lower-skilled roles, where they are still often unsuccessful and/or inhibited (Scheibelhofer, 2019). If refugees can find paid work, they are often subjected to poor working and living conditions with limited opportunity for social mobility (Rabby, 2024; Renkens et al., 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2019). Refugees' agency tends to be further obstructed by government measures to limit support for refugees (Gately, 2015; Renkens et al., 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2019). Far-right populists in different countries have added a disfavour to refugees' situation by spreading anti-refugee rhetoric, referring to refugees as 'victims' and 'security threats', to dehumanise them and deter the public from giving sympathy and opportunities to settle (Culcasi, 2024, p. 2; Yalim & Critelli, 2023, p. 2). Separating refugee families against their will when they arrive in a host country further reduces their social agency, as this diminishes their established support

structures (Hunt, 2008). This increases the risk of refugees living precariously (Rabby, 2024) as they can become forced into forms of exploitation labour (Bello, 2022; Shapiro & Jorgensen, 2021; Tazzioli, 2023), human trafficking (Durrheim et al., 2018), homelessness, sex work and prostitution (Bello, 2022; Hunt, 2008).

Recent far-right political gains and the rise of xenophobia in Western contexts (Ganesh, 2025) has contributed to sustaining and further reproducing inequitable structures of host societies. These structures arguably, in turn, reproduce the exclusionary nature of these host societies, ultimately maintaining their ethos as a 'hostile environment' for refugees (Kilkey & Ryan, 2021, p. 227). This is despite any sporadic measures for supporting refugees. Thus, refugees' agency is limited and much sought after.

HE as a liberation instrument and its 'bounded' nature

The idea of HE's potential to serve as a liberation instrument can be traced back to Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), where he theorises two key types of mutually shaping relationship between education and trends in wider society. The first is the banking concept of education, shaped by an oppressive society, which reinforces the existence of this oppressive society. The second is the liberation of education in a free society, as they then reinforce each other. Supporters of liberating education view education as an act of emancipation. However, it is not easy to achieve this desired emancipation through education, as Freire (1970, p. 79) himself acknowledges that a completely free society is a utopia and those who want to promote liberation are often constrained by the environment, which is full of injustice even in an aspiring free society: 'paradoxically, then, they utilise this same instrument of alienation in what they consider an effort to liberate'. Some of Freire's critics, such as Allman (2001), have also noted other difficulties in implementing the liberation of ideas in practice. Nevertheless, such ideas about the liberating potential of (higher) education stand their ground, for instance, in the history of the liberation of women and black learners in the nineteenth century, whereby HE had a central role in the process (Logan, 2008).

Freire's work on education in general is, arguably, applicable to our interest specifically in HE. In fact, similar ideas of HE's liberating potential have been voiced in recent literature. In particular, one of the functions of HE is that it can be a practice of freedom, liberating minds and lives (Naiman, 2012). Over the past couple of decades, key players in global education governance, such as the United Nations or the European Higher Education Area, have been calling for turning HE into a site for both empowerment and inclusion (Kushnir, 2020; Kushnir & Nunes, 2022) as it aims to provide all, regardless of background, with an opportunity to achieve the qualifications that improve long-term life opportunities, economic status and social mobility (Arar, 2021; Zgaga, 2020). However, the liberation potential of HE has its limits, rooted in the established societal structures that reproduce unjust practices and keep the marginalised in their socially disadvantaged positions (Abamosa, 2021).

REFUGEES AND THE HE SECTOR

Following key theoretical ideas around (refugees' limited) agency, this section maps the available literature on refugees in the HE sector, focusing specifically on what prior research tells us about the opportunities and challenges that refugees face in the HE sector and what we know specifically about Ukrainian refugees in relation to the area of HE in general, as well as specifically in the UK context. It is important to point out an inherent tension in the discussion below between identifying structural barriers and highlighting the agency

of refugee students and academics. While the deficit perspective is inadvertent in acknowledging the barriers that refugees face in the HE sector, the empowerment perspective is inherent in refugees' active position in searching for ways to overcome these barriers. This line of argument is based on Margaret Archer's ideas, analysed in Brock et al. (2016), on how social structures both constrain and enable individual agency, highlighting the dynamic interplay between the two.

Opportunities (and challenges) that refugees face in the HE sector

International case studies in the scholarship emphasising the challenges experienced by refugees in HE in a host community are significantly outbalanced by examples of the opportunities that the area of HE presents to refugees. The focus in these debates on opportunities and challenges is predominantly on students, as analysed below.

A limited body of literature showcases how a HE environment can become a safe space for refugees, where they can integrate into their host society (Bello, 2022; Hannah, 2008), recreate social identities (Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Molla, 2021; Streitwieser et al., 2020) and gain dignity and autonomy (Arar, 2021). Evidently, these examples demonstrate how 'educational policies and practices could operate as spaces of hospitality' (De Haene et al., 2018, p. 211).

Despite HE's potential to act as a liberation instrument for refugees, the nature of the HE sector in host communities still often operates as a vehicle for excluding and deskilling many refugees (De Haene, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2020). HE is a particularly difficult domain in terms of access for refugee students. Only 7% of world refugees have access to HE in host states, which is a lot lower than the average of 40% amongst the local population (UNHCR, 2024). Their low participation rates in HE is not helped by the many barriers they face in accessing HE (Clifton & Kushnir, 2023), as they encounter 'obstacles at every step' (UNHCR, 2019, p. 16), whether structural and personal (Campion, 2018) or institutional and situational (Lambrechts, 2020).

Examples of these barriers include: informational barriers (Bajwa et al., 2017); language barriers (Arar, 2021)—especially if refugees come from non-English-speaking countries to countries in Europe where English is the native or at least the second language (Yilmazel & Atay, 2022); traumas resulting from the fleeing experience (Newman et al., 2018); cost of HE; lack of relevant prior schooling experience/interrupted schooling; missing documents (Lambrechts, 2020); limited sanctuary scholarships (Murray & Baker, 2024; Murray & Gray, 2023); being homeless or experiencing poor living conditions (Evans, 2024; Witthaus, 2023); financial pressures (Morrice, 2013); and so on. It is important to distinguish that not all refugees experience the same barriers, as additional factors such as race, gender, culture and family responsibilities can aggravate these barriers, whilst creating unique obstacles that these refugees must overcome (Chadderton & Wischmann, 2023; Evans, 2024; Hunt et al., 2023; Morrice, 2013). Refugees are 'the super-disadvantaged' in HE because their 'different barriers to access not only accumulate, but also inter-relate and exacerbate each other, leading to what can be described as a super-disadvantage' (Lambrechts, 2020, p. 1).

An example of the super-disadvantages that refugees face, particularly in the United Kingdom when accessing HE, is isolation and negative labelling. Refugees have felt 'othered' due to lecturers' and students' stereotyping refugees as victims who solely benefit from the system and do not contribute back to their host society (Gately, 2015; Morrice, 2013). This creates an environment in HE where being a refugee is something to be ashamed of; multiple refugees admitted hiding their status to be seen as a so-called normal student by their peers (Morrice, 2013). Negative perceptions of refugees

make it harder for them to make friends in HE, and deny them the opportunity to gain support from home-grown students. Such help would have been useful considering that refugees in the United Kingdom are ineligible for the same support that international students receive, despite experiencing similar problems (Morrice, 2013; Sheridan, 2023). Even the advantages that some refugees receive, such as ‘sanctuary scholarships’, can create bitterness amongst British students who still must pay for their education (Murray & Gray, 2023). Animosity was fuelled further by the previous Conservative British government that portrayed refugees as a threat to the native population by taking advantage of British generosity (Chadderton & Wischmann, 2023). As a result of this negative portrayal by the government, UK universities felt under pressure to limit their ‘sanctuary scholarship’ offers to refugees to preserve their positive relationship with the Home Office (Murray & Gray, 2023). Refugees experience these barriers solely based on how refugees are perceived in the United Kingdom, without considering how variables outside HE—such as having caring responsibilities, language barriers, accommodation and financial pressures—can create further disadvantage in HE amongst this group.

The literature review above reveals a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges within the HE sector internationally for refugee students, academics and prospective members of these groups. While HE can offer a safe space for integration, identity formation and autonomy, significant barriers do persist. For students and prospective students, these include informational and language obstacles, trauma, financial pressures and negative perceptions, which collectively hinder their participation and success. Academics and would-be academics face similar challenges, compounded by institutional biases and limited support structures. The intersectionality of race, gender and family responsibilities further exacerbates these issues, creating unique obstacles. Despite some support mechanisms like sanctuary scholarships, these are often insufficient and can generate resentment amongst local students and academics. Additionally, negative portrayals by the government and societal stereotypes contribute to an environment of exclusion and deskilling. To foster a more inclusive HE sector, it is crucial to address these multifaceted barriers and enhance support for all individuals involved.

Ukrainian refugees and the HE sector internationally

In response to the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, ‘European and other western countries have taken measures to support students and scholars both at the level of countries and associations/organisations as well as individual universities’ to help Ukrainian refugees (Kalenyuk & Djakon, 2022, p. 6). The literature on the topic is, of course, new and growing. It is thus still quite limited and fragmented, with the main focus currently being on Ukrainian refugee students in host countries, with only a few mentions of fellow refugee academics. Governments across the European region have announced their commitment to financially support Ukrainian students who have been displaced due to war. Finland has committed to covering the expenses of approximately 2000 Ukrainian students; Austria has waived tuition fees for Ukrainian students whilst also fast-tracking applications for the recognition of Ukrainian qualifications to support rapid integration into education; Romania has increased the number of tuition-fee-free places to support Ukrainian students; whilst Sweden and Italy separately have grants to fund researchers, teachers and student refugees entering their countries (Kalenyuk & Djakon, 2022; Morrice, 2022). Intergovernmental initiatives such as the European Higher Education Area have also condemned the invasion and called on the support of members for the Ukrainian HE community (Kushnir, 2023). While different contextual backgrounds are covered in these studies, the studies on Poland and Germany prevail, perhaps predominantly because of the large numbers of Ukrainian arrivals and the impact on the local HE systems.

The UN Refugee Agency highlighted Germany as a destination for Ukrainian refugees. As of mid-February 2024, 1.13 million Ukrainian refugees were living there (Kinkartz, 2024). Brucker et al. (2023) found that the level of education of Ukrainian refugees living in Germany was above average, with 72% of refugees having tertiary educational qualifications. Their potential long-term plans to stay highlight the strong need for adequate support. The German government has supported Ukrainian refugees financially through welfare payments (Kinkartz, 2024) but individual universities have also tried to support arriving Ukrainians by providing educational opportunities to them. One method was by building partnerships with universities in Ukraine. For example, medical refugee students from the Kharkiv National Medical University and Bogomolets National Medical University were offered cost-free living in Germany, along with a German language course, with their lectures and medical internships financed by the Carl-Thiem-Klinikum in Cottbus (Brucher, 2022).

Poland has also become one of the largest recipients of Ukrainians since the war began, receiving 33.6% of Ukrainian refugees, due to its size and easy accessibility to the country (Muchova et al., 2024). The Ministry of Education and Science in Poland has commissioned initiatives to support Ukrainian refugees in HE (e.g., the National Agency for Academic Exchange enabling Ukrainian students to continue studying through the 'Solidarity with Ukraine programme') (NAWA, 2024), and HEIs like the University of Warsaw have launched emergency programmes to provide assistance and education to Ukrainian HE refugees by offering mental health and translation support whilst also providing opportunities for local students to donate items to help their Ukrainian counterparts (Herrera & Byndas, 2023). HEIs in Poland also receive government and private grants to help Ukrainian students adapt to studying at their universities. For example, the University of Lodz received PLN 600,000 to support the education of students in Polish language courses as well as Ukrainian doctoral students (University of Lodz, 2022). Despite governments and HEIs offering these opportunities, Ukrainian refugees still struggled due to language barriers affecting their ability to apply to university or access the programmes put in place to support them (Herrera & Byndas, 2023).

There are a handful of studies that touch on the position of Ukrainian refugee academics. The most popular countries for Science for Ukraine—an initiative to support Ukrainian academics after their science 'bases' have been destroyed—are Germany, France and Poland (Rose et al., 2022). Despite the vital importance of initiatives offering temporary or permanent positions, they target opportunities for only a fraction of the scientists who have fled Ukraine or are trying to leave (Chhughani et al., 2022).

Ukrainian refugees in the UK HE context

The literature on the UK context reviewed in this section demonstrates that its focus has been on support measures of Ukrainian refugees, lacking emphasis on any challenges that Ukrainian refugees have been experiencing in the UK HE context. Similar to the literature on Ukrainian refugees in the HE sector in other countries, there is a strong emphasis here on student refugees, with an added focus on cross-university partnerships and some mention of refugee academics.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UK government introduced different schemes providing routes for Ukrainian nationals to stay in the United Kingdom, initially for up to 3 years, to work, study and claim benefits (Sedacca, 2024). The two most popular schemes for entry were the Homes for Ukraine scheme and the Ukraine Family scheme (Machin, 2023). However, from 19 February 2024, the Homes for Ukraine scheme became the only pathway to enter the United Kingdom for Ukrainian refugees, as the Ukraine Family scheme was suddenly closed to new applicants. The Ukraine Family

scheme successfully issued 72,400 visas to Ukrainian refugees since its inception, as of 19 December 2024—the cutoff point for Ukraine visa statistics publication (Gov.uk, 2025b). Nevertheless, Homes for Ukraine has always been the most common route of entry (Bejan et al., 2023). As of 19 December 2024, 194,800 visas were accepted through the scheme, many of whom stayed (Gov.uk, 2025a).

The UK government has implemented some measures to remove the barriers that refugees would usually face in entering UK universities, to support Ukrainian refugees (Stevenson & Baker, 2024). For example, in England, Ukrainian refugee students have their international fees downgraded to home fees (Machin, 2023), and have access to student loans if they study an approved course at an approved HEI (Stevenson & Baker, 2024). Meanwhile, the Scottish government decided to waive university fees for all displaced Ukrainian students in Scotland (Bobak et al., 2022).

A few funded collaboration opportunities have also been launched to support Ukrainian universities and refugee members of the UK HE community. In particular, the Council of At-Risk Academics (CARA), which is a collaboration of UK universities that provide opportunities and scholarships for fleeing scientists from any at-risk country (Wolfsberger et al., 2023), has been supporting Ukrainian researchers in the United Kingdom (Kushnir et al., 2023; Mbah et al., 2025). A range of UK universities have also collaborated to be part of the Science for Ukraine initiative, mentioned earlier, which provides job opportunities, career planning, research funding and mentoring support for academics who have been affected by the Russian invasion (Rose et al., 2022). The UK–Ukraine Twinning initiative was also launched in 2022 to create partnerships between UK and Ukrainian universities (Wolfsberger et al., 2023; Kushnir et al., 2023).

Many universities across the United Kingdom have also created their own ways to provide support for the members of the Ukrainian HE community in the United Kingdom. For instance, both best ranked universities in England—the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge—have offered many stipends and much educational support to encourage Ukrainian students to study there (Bobak et al., 2022). Many UK universities have also assisted with the provision of mental health support, language courses, accommodation and so on to refugee members of the Ukrainian HE community in the United Kingdom (Brooks & Rensimer, 2024; Kushnir et al., 2023).

The literature reviewed in this section has demonstrated a few overlapping gaps, such as a lack of emphasis on academics with regard to their access and participation in the area of HE in host communities, and opportunities for both students and academics; we also have a fragmented knowledge specifically of Ukrainian refugees in HE, whereby we have some information about support structures with a missing account of the challenges they experience. The absence of a focus on the English HE sector with regard to Ukrainian refugees is evident too.

METHODOLOGY

The aforementioned gaps in scholarship inspired the focus of this paper, seeking to answer the following important question: *How have Ukrainian refugees in England been navigating the challenges they encounter in crafting their limited agency while pursuing the opportunities to get involved and participate in the HE sector?*

The overarching research design of the project that inspired this paper was informed by BERA's (2018, 2024) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, following a favourable ethics decision from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University. We relied on online in-depth OH interviews with an opportunistic/snowball sample of Ukrainian refugees across England

($n = 11$, see Data Availability Statement). The interviewees were individuals who had been seeking to access and/or effectively participate in the HE sector specifically in England (i.e., not Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland) as students in any level, mode or type of provision and members of academic staff. The interviews were conducted in late spring 2023.

Given that the project, the findings of which this paper reports, focuses on refugees who are a marginalised social group, these refugees' search for agency in—or better to say out of—their disadvantaged social situation was of central importance to us. The choice of methodology to research this topic was, therefore, guided by the need to boost these refugees' agency, starting from their participation in the project. The OH methodological approach, termed a 'research methodology for social activism' (Rafael, 1997, p. 32) a few decades ago, was chosen as it is the methodology which places concern for human agency at the centre of its essence. It promotes the empowerment of marginalised groups through granting them voice as research participants, thus with knowledge creation about their situation for others (Atkinson, 2004). Moreover, it is an 'empowering methodology' in this respect (Bell & Sengupta, 2021, p. 1) due to the 'transformation of agency' (Isola, 2024, p. 1) which happens during an OH interview in which the interviewer's silence amplifies the weight of what the marginalised person chooses to share. Researchers' silence for most of the interview, and the opportunity for participants to let their voice and story develop and flow as they would like, is a core feature that makes OH interviews distinct from the conventional interview method, and so empowering. Previous research on refugees maintains that the OH methodology is helpful in facilitating respect for them and their agency (Dudman, 2019). OH provides refugees with the freedom to share their own stories whilst retaining ownership rights over them (Woods, 2020).

Following the transcription of the interviews and their translation into English, a manual thematic analysis was conducted on the refugees' narratives, following Williams and Moser's (2019) open, axial and selective coding process framework. During the open analysis phase, we discovered numerous thematic fragments in the transcripts about a variety of experiences that Ukrainian refugees had faced in their journey towards entering the English HE sector, which were labelled as pre-subthemes.

This enabled us to identify the distinct codes in preparation for the categorisation process of the axial coding phase, where the 120 codes that were established from open coding (e.g., language difficulties, escaping Ukraine and support from hosts or sponsors) were regrouped to 24 codes. The codes are reduced through axial coding, so the data can become more coherent and hierarchically structured into categories and subcategories (Noble & Mitchell, 2016). When carrying out the axial analysis, we used an inductive approach to group together previously discovered codes to create the categories for the emerging sub-theme. For example, the codes 'cost of living', 'university fees' and 'fines' became grouped under the subtheme 'financial issues'. After creating a mind map with all the reduced categorisation codes, we analysed the transcripts again to start the process of selective coding, where the codes were regrouped and refined further into eight key themes: (1) abandonment, (2) gender, (3) support, (4) obstacles, (5) moving process, (6) education, (7) children and (8) recommendations. These key themes are supported by the quotations from the interviews, illustrative extracts from which are provided later.

In conducting this research, we acknowledge our two distinct, yet complementary, positions and how they shape our research approach. The corresponding author of this paper is a highly skilled female migrant of Ukrainian origin who relocated to the United Kingdom well before the full-scale war in Ukraine. Her Ukrainian cultural background and her personal experiences with pursuing agency in the HE sector in a new country, both offering a partly insider insight into the issues at stake in this research, and her expertise in the area of education sociology and migration inform her commitment to social justice and aided in her interactions with the research participants during interviewee recruitment and interviews.

The co-author of this paper is a male research assistant of colour with a background in sociology and politics and a strong interest in education and migration, who has secured a PhD position at a UK university. His outsider position to the cultural background of the interviewees, combined with his academic expertise and interest in the topic of this research, provide a complementary perspective to our research, particularly in pointing out aspects for clarification for an audience not familiar with the context of Ukrainian culture and refugee experiences. As co-authors, we continuously practice reflexivity during our research, acknowledging that our varied backgrounds and experiences shape our comprehension and analysis of the data. We are dedicated to leveraging our positionalities to enrich, rather than skew, our findings. To this end, we maintain an ongoing dialogue to critically examine our roles as researchers.

UKRAINIAN REFUGEES' SEARCH FOR AGENCY IN THE ENGLISH HE SECTOR

The thematic analysis of the refugees' narratives led us to consider the following three key themes: (1) the English HE sector being an opportunity structure for Ukrainian refugees; (2) persisting and interlocking challenges that Ukrainian refugees face when accessing and participating in the English HE sector; and (3) the agency-seeking journey of Ukrainian refugees in the English HE sector, which involves going to great lengths to gather the necessary resources and build capacity.

This section will present our findings using illustrative quotations from the interviews and discuss these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and literature review presented earlier. This section will showcase how these findings address the overlapping gaps in the literature explained elsewhere.

HE sector as an opportunity structure

Most of the literature on refugees in HE focuses on students (e.g., Evans, 2024; Witthaus, 2023) and the challenges they experience (e.g., Campion, 2018; Lambrechts, 2020), with the exception of a handful of recent studies that mention some support mechanisms in place for Ukrainian refugees in the United Kingdom (e.g., Kalenyuk & Djakon, 2022; Kushnir et al., 2023). This subsection not only provides some information about Ukrainian (prospective) students and the opportunities they see in the English HE sector, which resonates with the above cited literature and provides additional details, it also adds new knowledge about Ukrainian professionals continuing their practice in the HE sector and uncovers the nuances of this, particularly in the English HE sector. This subsection also contributes a focus on refugees' opportunities in host HE systems to the wider scholarship on refugees, as this has mainly focused on challenges to date.

Gately (2015, p. 32) identified that 'institutions are the opportunity structure that can constrain or facilitate people's ability to exercise agency'. We have found that the English HE sector provides opportunities for Ukrainian refugees through sanctuary schemes, free language classes and support services within the HE sector, available for Ukrainian students and academics.

Students admitted that sanctuary scholarships provided opportunities for them to enter UK HEIs. UK universities offered support to Ukrainian refugee students by providing opportunities for students to study for free. Previous literature highlighted that the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge had made extra efforts to enrol Ukrainian refugees (Bobak et al., 2022; Kushnir et al., 2023) and this was confirmed by some of our

participants, to a point where they believed that the institutions were competing against each other to take on more students.

I am one of 26 scholars [students] that were accepted to Oxford this year. So, it was a scholarship that was launched by Oxford University as a response to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

(Yaroslava)

Furthermore, UK universities exercised their capacity to financially support students through fellowships. One interviewee (Maryna) admitted receiving a one-off payment from their university to support her living expenses.

Such schemes were also extended to Ukrainian academics looking for sanctuary while working at UK HEIs. According to Sergii and Tetiana, schemes provided by CARA and 'Scientists at risk' were avenues into the United Kingdom, where financial support is provided whilst working at UK HEIs. This confirmed the studies of Beany (2024) and Wolfsberger et al. (2023), suggesting that scholarships are popular routes of entry for Ukrainian academics. By providing job openings and financial support specifically for Ukrainian refugees, this demonstrates the attempts that independent schemes and UK HEIs have made to provide opportunities for Ukrainian academics to enter the sector.

I appreciate that the CARA fund finances my ability to pay the rent for an apartment and my family is safe here.

(Sergii)

Our data supports Bejan et al.'s (2023) findings that the Homes for Ukraine scheme was the most popular form of entry into the United Kingdom, as most of our participants claimed to enter England through this scheme. Ukrainian refugees were grateful for the support received from their hosts in the form of cultural exchange, accommodation, mentoring, language and financial support, which helped them navigate the language, informational and financial barriers that refugees would previously have experienced on entering a new host country (Bajwa et al., 2017; Evans, 2024; Watkins et al., 2012; Witthaus, 2023).

Thank God, there was a family who was ready to host us ... We are very happy about this, because I think this is a lifelong acquaintance. The key one, the one that turned our lives around. I came with my children, and my children are almost adults. We settled in very well, they provided us with full support in absolutely everything, such as accommodation and children's education.

(Oleksandra)

Our participants highlighted how HEIs can be what Gately (2015, p. 32) termed 'opportunity structures', as they were able to exercise human agency through their ability to learn, socialise and be heard in their communities via these institutions.

In previous literature, HEIs were criticised for neglecting the language barriers and psychological traumas that refugee students face when studying in their new host countries (Abamosa, 2021; Hannah, 2008; Molla, 2021; Zgaga, 2020). However, our participants admitted that universities were providing support to help them integrate into their new communities. Free English classes and other skills-based courses are offered to both Ukrainian staff and students to help them adapt to the UK HE sector and overcome potential language barriers. Providing free language classes is not a new tactic, as this has also been offered to Ukrainian students in Germany (Brucker et al., 2023) and Poland (University of Lodz, 2022),

but our data highlights that HEI language support is not only exclusive to Ukrainian students in England, as it is also available for academics to access.

I don't study here, but I still get to learn, because firstly, there are free courses for students, Master's students or PhDs who write projects or dissertations. English classes are free and it's really interesting, just amazing.

(Maryna)

Existing literature highlights HEIs' potential to be an opportunity structure, as it showcases their capacity to be places of freedom, empowerment and autonomy for their students (Arar, 2021; Naiman, 2012; Zgaga, 2020). Our data emphasises the freedom Ukrainian refugee students have in English HEIs because they have platforms such as Ukrainian societies that provide Ukrainians with a safe space to connect with one another, share their experiences and control their own narratives by raising awareness to native students of the current situation.

I'm head of Ukrainian society here, so were trying to do some events and try and show Ukraine from different sides to the local audience.

(Yaroslava)

Our data also recognises that this freedom can be applied to Ukrainian academics in the English HE sector. Previous literature highlights the ability of CARA-funded schemes like the British Academy to provide financial support (Bobak et al., 2022; Wolfsberger et al., 2023). However, it does not share how the scheme empowers Ukrainian academics and scientists by conducting a variety of events nationally to help them adapt to the writing and publication procedures in the English HE sector. Furthermore, the British Academy scheme provides a platform for Ukrainian academics to exercise autonomy in their HEIs by allowing them to share their experiences as scientists in the United Kingdom and voice what improvements could be made to benefit the group.

It is amazing, because scientists, who are here, they are no longer silent here, and they already take part in various surveys, and in various written comments, and what do they want to change, and how do they want to change. Now we have a new head in the [Ukrainian] Ministry of Education, we have plans and ideas.

(Inesa)

Persistent challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in the English HE sector

This subsection presents and discusses the next key theme, dedicated to persistent and interlocking challenges that Ukrainian refugees face when accessing and participating in the English HE sector. The most common challenges they experience are the language barrier, problems with qualification recognition and the cost of living. Similar to the previous subsection, this one also adds a focus on refugee academics, in addition to the well-established focus on students in the refugee literature (e.g., Evans, 2024; Witthaus, 2023). The ideas discussed here resonate with the plethora of international studies on the challenges that refugees experience in HE (e.g., Campion, 2018; Lambrechts, 2020), with the added value of contributing the under-researched focus on Ukrainian refugees in England, as well as the challenges that they experience, as the literature on Ukrainian refugees in the United

Kingdom has so far looked more at the support that has been put in place for them (e.g., Kalenyuk & Djakon, 2022; Kushnir et al., 2023).

One of the main obstacles to a smooth transition into the English HE sector for refugees was the language barrier. Yilmazel and Atay (2022) found that the language barriers experienced by refugees in education affected their communication with lecturers and students. In England, Ukrainian refugee students related to this experience as our data found that students felt they could not connect with their lecturers for support as well as they could back home because of the language barrier.

There may be a question of a language barrier or a feeling of being in this environment. I feel that in Ukraine somehow, I had some closer contact with the teachers, they were more interested in us and how we learn the material.

(Taisia)

Our data also highlighted that a language barrier created a sense of inferiority amongst Ukrainian staff in English HE. Qualified academics admitted having applied to lower-rank roles or being afraid to attempt to take advantage of teaching and research opportunities that were advertised, solely due to the fear of their level of academic English not being good enough.

I thought that I should go to work at school, because I understood that my level of English did not correspond to the academic level of English with which it is possible to go to university and try out for a job.

(Tetiana)

Language classes have been offered by universities to help overcome this obstacle; however, they are not always effective (Arar, 2021). Abamosa (2021) found that the English classes provided by universities for refugee students may not be beneficial for them academically. Our data highlighted how this would affect both students and academics, as interviewees admitted that the English courses provided by their universities were inadequate for refugees to build their English proficiency. Inesa identified the practical issues that reduced Ukrainian refugees' ability to attend classes, such as poor travel links and work or family commitments, alongside classes not being as effective, due to being online or not teaching the level of English required to gain employment in the English HE sector.

Many universities do introduce some [English] courses, initial Academy courses and so on, but they do not work. It is clear to everyone that they do not work in practice.

(Inesa)

Another challenge to participation in the English HE sector for refugee students is their previous qualifications. Lambrechts (2020) highlighted how refugee students would be affected by missing documents, whereas Scheibelhofer (2019) found that non-recognition of refugees' qualifications from their home countries can affect refugees' job prospects after migrating. Our student participants supported this, as they found that they had to retake courses at English colleges because universities would not see their Ukrainian qualifications at the same level for admission. Completing college courses in England created more difficulty for students, particularly if they were not confident in using the English language. It also required additional time.

As for Ukrainians, not everyone immediately understands how to apply, and not all universities want to admit, for example, based on Ukrainian school grades or university grades ... they want to see English documents on education, and it turns out that you have to go back to a college and study all the stuff you already know.

(Zhenia)

Our data expanded on Scheibelhofer's (2019) study, as we found that a lack of qualification recognition also affects Ukrainian refugee staff as well as students in England. Despite reaching the highest level of qualification in Ukraine, participants found that even if their PhD diploma documents were translated, they were often not comparable to local qualifications, causing academics to feel demoralised and take lower roles or requalify in England to work within the English HE or even further education sector.

My career in Ukraine seems to have reached almost the highest level. I mean, if you look at the scientific field, it is a doctor, a professor. Whereas in England, it has dropped to a lower level, and now I need to build it back up to a higher one.

(Oleksandra)

Existing literature states that the cost of living whilst studying in HE is often an obstacle for refugee students (Abamosa, 2021). Lambrechts (2020, p. 813) stated that 'financial concerns hinder HE access for many refugee background students' due to a lack of information on how to receive financial support or costs of housing (Lambrechts, 2020). Students from our interviews shared their struggles with the inflated costs of transport, food and housing in England, especially in London. These financial pressures pushed them to find part-time work or live outside of the city they study in. Our interviewees also uncovered an information barrier amongst Ukrainian refugee students as they found it was not straightforward to receive financial support for their accommodation fees.

I definitely would have to take a student loan. I'm not sure about the accommodation. I don't know if people live on campus or I'm not really sure how it works ... it's complicated.

(Taisia Korolova)

Refugee rights to accommodation are often limited in their new host countries (Shapiro & Jorgensen, 2021). The academics interviewed acknowledged the issues they had faced in finding affordable housing too. This added financial pressure on Ukrainian academics who came through the Homes for Ukraine scheme as they worried about finding accommodation after their sponsorship tenure, causing them to give up waiting for a HE opportunity in favour of any quicker employment opportunities. If the Homes for Ukraine scheme continues to be the most popular scheme for Ukrainian refugees to enter the United Kingdom, like Bejan et al. (2023) suggests, our data identifies potential challenges Ukrainian academics may face when entering this scheme whilst trying to navigate the HE sector.

Every day I have to think if I am able to survive in this situation ... I need to feed myself, think about whether I will be able to pay the rent. Because I'm currently living with a host, and it won't be forever ... then I have to look for a new accommodation, I have to pay for it, and I don't have much time to think about choosing where to work.

(Liudmyla)

Furthermore, the cost of accommodation for interns who live on or near the campus created financial pressure for academics as they revealed their struggles to afford the rent whilst not earning enough to move elsewhere.

The only thing that really bothers me is that my dormitory fees are very high. The price is the only problem ... I realise that even now I cannot afford to relocate.
(Maryna)

The agency-seeking journey in the English HE sector

This subsection uncovers ways in which our participants have been looking to exercise their agency to achieve their goals in the HE sector. Our findings demonstrate that this process involves a wide range of contexts and resources, spanning far beyond the actual area of HE to overcome the (arguably) default state of refugees' lack of agency in host countries, discussed widely in the literature (e.g., Rabby, 2024; Tazzioli, 2023; Ullrich, 2022). They have developed a range of approaches to access and participate in the HE sector by consolidating the essential aspects of agency, namely power (Frediani, 2010; Renkens et al., 2022), freedom and capability (Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 1995; Zagor, 2015). These approaches include discovering extra language support and additional courses to gain UK qualifications, using external support effectively to boost university career and enrolment prospects, and seeking ways to expand their networks to discover new opportunities.

Previous literature found that refugees in most countries are disadvantaged by societal barriers such as language, which affects their ability to find work (Hunt, 2008; Sapanski, 2021), creating a language and financial barrier for refugees to overcome (Bajwa et al., 2017; Watkins et al., 2012). And with some of our participants confirming Abamosa's (2021) study that English classes provided by universities for refugee students may not be beneficial for them academically, Ukrainian refugees' solution to break these barriers and improve their job prospects was to use a variety of methods to develop their English skills outside of the HE sector. Both students and academics practiced their English by attending English courses held within their own communities, online or at college, communicating with British students in classes and practicing with their hosts or sponsor if they came through the Homes for Ukraine scheme. This showcases their agency because they have the human ability to exercise freedom and capability (Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 1995; Zagor, 2015), by identifying a variety of independent methods outside of HE to learn English, which can help them achieve their goals and boost their career prospects. Liudmyla, who already had a PhD, attended both English and teaching courses at a local college to improve her chances of gaining employment in the English HE sector.

My path is such that I want to improve myself in both ways, language and professionally. That is why I found professional development courses for teachers. They provide an international qualification, and most importantly, it will be an internationally recognised certificate. These are very solid funds for teachers.
(Liudmyla)

Previous studies have found that refugees entering the United Kingdom are reliant on agencies or job centres for opportunities yet these are often ineffective, especially for higher-qualified refugees aiming for professional roles (Kone et al., 2019; Mackenzie Davey & Jones, 2020). Our data found that job centres and independent agencies were still

inconsistent in guaranteeing the provision of necessary support, however, our participants admitted taking the risk to use them as an alternative way to access support in entering the English HE sector. Zhenia expressed her ability to exercise freedom of choice by exploring different agencies that would provide extra help for Ukrainian students to enrol for undergraduate study in England.

Agencies ... The first agency I was familiar with was an agency that helps Ukrainian students enrol. They are in touch with some partner universities that provide slightly easier conditions for admission ... they advise on how to write, for example, a motivation letter. Of course, it is important to write it without plagiarism and to include some facts from the university.

(Zhenia)

Ukrainian academics used job websites, chat groups and extra sessions at job centres to get assistance in adapting their CVs to become more suitable for finding work in England.

There were also tips from the Job Centre. I went there periodically, because we had meetings and there was a person who helped me put together my CV and told me how best to create it, that there are different types of CVs and what and how would it be better if I was more of such a sought-after candidate. Then I also communicate with educators who are in Ukrainian chat groups.

(Liudmyla)

Our findings also shared the importance of having a network to access opportunities. Hunt (2008) expressed the importance of refugees having access to familiarity because their social agency becomes removed when they are distanced from their families in their new host countries. This study was further supported by Yilmazel and Atay's (2022) findings on Syrian refugees in Türkiye and Renkens et al. (2022), who found that refugees in Holland lacked agency if they didn't have the social capital to access support. Our data discovered that Ukrainian refugees' mobility could be limited in England if they did not have local access to family, friends or Ukrainian communities that they could use as a support system. Taisia Korolova highlighted how losing her social agency restricted her capability to access support and find employment in her new host country.

I'm not enjoying life here honestly ... it's complicated being alone in a different country in a different city with no one, having no support ... there are not so many Ukrainians here ... you just do not socialise properly. I find it really difficult to find a job here.

(Taisia Korolova)

Our interviewees emphasised the importance of building Ukrainian networks in England as they would become vital to find study and work opportunities in HE. They would build links with fellow Ukrainian academics through meeting groups, language lessons and social media.

In every locality, where Ukrainians gather ... And there are such places, I am sure, in every county, when all Ukrainians know that, for example, on Saturdays they gather in such a church, and on Thursdays they gather for language courses there. And that is, it is necessary to give advertisements and announcements through these chats, through some pages on Facebook.

(Liudmyla)

Furthermore, previous literature that focuses on refugees' lack of social agency and access to information (Bajwa et al., 2017; Hunt, 2008; Renkens et al., 2022) appears not to acknowledge the positive impact that technology can have to help refugees adapt to their new communities. The capabilities that ICT can give to refugee populations are widely ignored in most empirical studies of the group (Anderson & Daniel, 2020). Anderson and Daniel (2020) discovered that social media increased the capabilities of young refugees in Norway. Our data has found that, alongside social media, internet browsing, online English classes and AI have enabled both Ukrainian refugee students and academics to communicate effectively and stay informed in England. Highlighting that refugees can use these tools to exercise their social agency to build connections in their new host countries whilst showcasing their agency through the human ability to exercise their power (Frediani, 2010; Renkens et al., 2022) by using technology to improve their opportunities and capabilities, Taisia admitted to using Facebook to find opportunities that she would otherwise be unaware of.

I went to Facebook, and I saw a posting about scholarships for Ukrainians in Oxford ... Therefore, I applied because there was a full scholarship, and I was very interested in this direction.

(Taisia)

Academics also shared their experiences of using the internet to find opportunities and build networks. Tetiana used Google Scholar as a method to identify fellow Ukrainian academics before finding their contact information to gain advice and discover how they got the opportunity to work within the English HE sector.

I opened a list of everyone through Google Scholar, searched by publication request, by keywords, who does what. Then I narrowed it down, because I understood that my children and I came under the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme ... now I understand from talking to the scientists who are here, they applied from Ukraine, and they were already settled somewhere near the organisation of the institute, which was ready to support.

(Tetiana)

The data and its analysis above reveal that both Ukrainian refugee (prospective) students and academics face significant structural barriers in accessing and participating in the English HE sector. However, they exercise agency through various strategies to overcome these challenges. Students often enhance their English skills through community courses, online resources and interactions with local students, while academics attend professional development courses and adapt their CVs with the help of job centres and online networks. Both groups leverage social media and community networks to find opportunities and support. Despite these efforts, the lack of social capital and institutional support remains a significant hurdle, highlighting the need for more inclusive policies and practices in the HE sector.

CONCLUSION

This paper has relied on a thematic analysis of 11 OH in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees who are either attempting to access the English HE sector as students or academics, or have already done so and have been trying to navigate through the challenges that the new environment has presented. In doing so, this paper aimed to illustrate that accessing and participating in the HE sector is a quest for agency in a host community for Ukrainian refugees as a marginalised group.

Based on the findings generated, the paper has argued that accessing and participating in the HE sector in a host community is a significantly complicated process not just for students but also for academics, even though some support measures have been arranged for them—as exemplified by the case of Ukrainian refugees in England. This case has demonstrated that involvement in the area of HE in such a context becomes a process and symbolic tool for seeking agency, which is significantly diminished when fleeing wars and ending up in a host country. To begin to establish this agency, albeit limited, prompts many refugees to be creative with inventing ways to pull all the resources and connections that they may have from beyond the HE sector in an effort to overcome the constraints of their marginalised position. These findings are significant not only for assessing relevant scholarly gaps, as explained earlier in the paper, but also for informing relevant policymaking at the national and institutional levels in England and beyond by highlighting what works in the existing support for refugees, such as those from Ukraine, and what does not, and what else could help.

The existing literature on refugees highlights their lack of agency in their efforts to settle into new host countries, both inside (Arar, 2021; Bello, 2022; Hannah, 2008; Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Molla, 2021; Streitwieser et al., 2020) and outside the HE sector (Benslama-Dabdoub, 2024; Kapelner, 2024; Sapanski, 2021; Scheibelhofer, 2019; Yalim & Critelli, 2023). Our participants were able to share their own experiences of their agency being restricted. Despite the English HE sector's aims to provide them with agency through sanctuary scholarships, language classes and support networks within their institutions, it became clear that those efforts are not enough to reduce the disadvantages Ukrainian students and academics experience. Abamosa's (2021) study identified that HEIs across Europe introduce initiatives but need to focus more on long-term inclusive programmes; our findings indicate that these initiatives are needed for Ukrainian refugees currently in the English HE sector. Language classes provided by HEIs were not enough to instil confidence into some of our academics to find work within the HE sector. The financial support students and academics would receive from the HE sector, or from schemes provided by the government (e.g., 'Homes for Ukraine'), still created anxiety amongst some of our students and academics due to the support's struggle to compete with the cost of living in England. Additional challenges they faced—such as the lack of recognition of previous qualifications that our participants had achieved in Ukraine—increased the difficulty for students and academics to access the English HE sector. HEIs may be 'opportunity structures', as Gately (2015, p. 32) suggests, but their limitations towards refugees are evident and the HE sector can reduce their ability to exercise human agency.

Even though our findings acknowledged that Ukrainian students and academics had their agency restricted, our interviewees were able to demonstrate that external tools outside the HE sector could be used to enable refugees to exercise their agency. When exploring the current literature, a lot of studies covered the lack of agency refugees have (Rabby, 2024; Tazzioli, 2023; Ullrich, 2022). However, our findings expressed the importance of technology and support networks within their communities, as we found that these gave students and academics the human ability to exercise their power and freedom to increase their capabilities, which we established were the key aspects necessary to have human agency (Frediani, 2010; Renkens et al., 2022; Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 1995; Zagor, 2015).

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for targeted policies and practices to support Ukrainian refugees in accessing and thriving within the English HE sector. To address the significant barriers identified, several practical steps can be taken:

1. *Enhanced language support.* Institutions should work with the government and other funding donors to offer tailored English language programmes that go beyond basic proficiency, focusing on academic language skills necessary for success in HE. These programmes should be accessible both within and outside the university setting to accommodate diverse needs.

2. *Comprehensive support services.* Universities should build on the successful support system established for their general student and academic population by developing dedicated branches of the available support services specifically for refugee students and academics, including academic advising, mental health services and career counselling. These services should be culturally sensitive and aware of the unique challenges faced specifically by refugees.
3. *Financial assistance.* Expanding the availability of sanctuary scholarships and other financial aid options is crucial. Policies should ensure that such support is sufficient to cover not only tuition but also living expenses, reducing the financial burden on refugee students.
4. *Recognition of prior qualifications.* Streamlining the process for recognising and accrediting prior qualifications and professional experiences of refugee academics can facilitate their integration into the HE sector. This includes providing clear guidelines and support for credential evaluation.
5. *Building social networks.* Universities should actively foster the creation of social networks for refugee students and academics. This can be achieved through mentorship programmes, peer support groups and community-building activities that connect refugees with local students and faculty.
6. *Utilising technology.* Leveraging technology, such as online learning platforms and social media, can enhance access to educational resources and support networks. Institutions should provide training and resources to help refugees effectively use these tools.

By implementing these practical measures, the HE sector can better support Ukrainian refugees, helping them to overcome barriers and achieve their educational and professional goals.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there exist no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset with interview transcripts, generated and analysed during the current study, is available at Kushnir and Kuksa (2024).

ETHICS STATEMENT

The overarching research design of the project that inspired this paper was informed by BERA's (2018, 2024) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, following a favourable

ethics decision from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University.

INFORMED CONSENT

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

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