

# The University as a Place of Sanctuary: Advocating for Inclusion and Equality for Refugees and Migrants

Clíodhna Murphy

## Introduction

For Kurdish novelist and journalist Behrouz Boochani, writing is an ‘act of resistance’.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, he fled persecution in Iran due to cultural activities but on arriving to the Australian territory of Christmas Island, he was exiled to an offshore immigration detention on Manus Island, where he remained for six years under brutal conditions. The novel he wrote there, sent out to a journalist via WhatsApp messages, was awarded one of Australia’s most prestigious literary prizes.<sup>2</sup> Accepting the prize from Manus Island, Boochani described it as ‘a victory for humanity’; a recognition of his art even as the system sought to obliterate the individual identities of the Manus Island detainees. He was formally recognised as a refugee in New Zealand in 2020.

As much as Boochani’s journey and work has parallels with that of Ken Saro-Wiwa, it prompts us to think about the treatment of those seeking sanctuary in our own country, including within public institutions such as universities. Although applicants for international protection in Ireland (asylum seekers) are not subjected to the extreme forms of degradation outlined by Boochani in his writing, they are systematically excluded from many aspects of Irish society. They are disqualified from the mainstream social welfare system and are accommodated in ‘direct provision’ centres (which provide accommodation and food), receiving an allowance of €38.10 per week. While many human rights deficiencies have been identified through multiple studies of the system<sup>3</sup> (which the current Government has committed to ending), the situation has been particularly acute during the COVID-19 pandemic. One direct provision resident explained the situation as follows in response to an Irish Refugee Council survey:

“We live in a much crowded place, we have to share rooms (minimum three people) and toilets, we have a small shop downstairs that is too small, in the corridors there’s like a thousand doors you have to open before reaching your room. There’s no way you can stay in the room without going out, the cooking stations are far away from the rooms and you have to go outside to get to the toilet. It’s very hard to lock kids aged (3-11) in these small rooms.”<sup>4</sup>

Another stated: “We are powerless, just sitting ducks waiting to die.”<sup>5</sup>

Wider exclusions, outside of the accommodation system, also exist. Until 2017, asylum seekers were not permitted to work while awaiting the outcome of their application (even if this took many years). Despite now being allowed to work after 9 months, in the ongoing public health

---

<sup>1</sup> Behrouz Boochani, “Writing is an act of resistance” (TedXSydney, 30 July 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Behrouz Boochani (translated by Omid Tofighian), *No Friend But the Mountains* (Picador, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Claire Breen, “The Policy of Direct Provision in Ireland: A Violation of Asylum Seekers’ Right to an Adequate Standard of Housing” (2008) 20(4) *International Journal of Refugee Law* 611-636; Liam Thornton, “The Rights of Others: Asylum Seekers and Direct Provision in Ireland” (2014) 3(2) *Irish Community Development Law Journal* 22-42; “Direct Division Children’s views and experiences of living in Direct Provision: A report by the Ombudsman for Children’s Office 2020” (Ombudsman for Children’s Office, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Irish Refugee Council, “Powerless: Experiences of Direct Provision During the Covid-19 Pandemic August 2020” (IRC, 2020), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Irish Refugee Council, p.14.

crisis, those who lost their jobs were excluded from the ‘pandemic unemployment payment’, until outbreaks in factories and direct provision centres forced a change in policy. Asylum seekers remain ineligible for Irish drivers’ licences. In the higher education context, while those with refugee status may access free higher university education and student grants, asylum seekers are subject to international fees and are not eligible for the main state student support grant (although there are some exceptions for those who can access a specialised support scheme).

### **The Sanctuary Movement**

It is in this global context of a hostile environment for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants that the City of Sanctuary and University of Sanctuary movements grew up in the UK. City of Sanctuary UK was founded in 2005 as a network of community organisations and is a mainstream grassroots movement working towards the vision that the nations of the UK “will be welcoming places of safety for all and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution”.<sup>6</sup> Ireland’s Places of Sanctuary movement is closely affiliated to City of Sanctuary UK. Universities and Colleges of Sanctuary Ireland (UoSI) emerged as an initiative to encourage and celebrate the good practice of universities, colleges and institutes welcoming refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants into their university communities and to foster a culture of welcome and inclusion for all those seeking sanctuary. The aim of the network is to spread this culture of welcome across the institutions of higher education all over the island.<sup>7</sup>

Universities and colleges can apply to be designated as sanctuary institutions and almost all the Irish universities now have this status. The sanctuary movement is based on broad principles of inclusion and universities of sanctuary are free to develop their own activities. However, they are required to demonstrate how their institutions follow three key principles:

- **Learn** about what it means to be seeking sanctuary in general, and in higher education institutions in particular.
- **Take positive action** to establish a sustainable culture of welcome.
- **Share** what they have learned and good practice with other education institutions, the local community and beyond.

In practice, because of the structural barriers to accessing university education already mentioned, the provision of scholarships by individual institutions has been a central focus of Irish universities of sanctuary to date. Maynooth University is starting with three scholarships for the academic year 2020/21. For this pilot year, it is planned that one of these scholarships will go to a postgraduate student, and two to undergraduates (one in the field of Science and Engineering; and one in Arts, Humanities or Social Sciences). The scholarships are funded by the University and cover the students’ fees, laptop, transport costs, and subsidised food, as well as a range of academic and other student supports through the Maynooth Access Programme. The spectre of borders looms large over the process: in a number of Irish universities, sanctuary students have been notified of an intention to deport and some sanctuary students have had to abandon their studies because they have been directed to move accommodation centres.

### **What is a university of sanctuary? The Maynooth experience**

Maynooth University began the groundwork to become a university of sanctuary in 2018 and

---

<sup>6</sup> Information available at <https://cityofsanctuary.org/about/> (last accessed 10 August 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Information available at <https://ireland.cityofsanctuary.org/universities-and-colleges-of-sanctuary>.

received the designation in 2020. A number of key aims were pursued during this initial period: to establish a steering committee with representatives from across the university (including students), NGOs and members of the migrant community; to record the type of work happening in this space at Maynooth; to set up a scholarship scheme; and to consolidate links with local direct provision centres. A university-wide call for information demonstrated that extensive sanctuary-related teaching, research and volunteer activities is already taking place in the University. The topic of migration is deeply embedded in the curriculum: it is taught in 36 separate lecture courses and is the central focus of 15 modules.

The pilot scheme of sanctuary scholarships, open to asylum seekers and refugees without access to state support for their studies, revealed an appetite for university education among this group and there were many more suitably qualified candidates for the scholarships than scholarships available (itself an important finding for the project going forward). The process has also shown us the complexity of the issue of access to and progression through third-level education for asylum seekers in Ireland. Participants at the launch of the scheme identified significant barriers to pursuing university education, including childcare, mental health issues, and accessing expensive books. The scholarship application and selection process threw up further problems relating to the accessibility of direct provision centres in places such as rural Kerry and Leitrim, as well as obstacles to asylum seekers applying to part-time courses and problems with registering for courses due to documentation issues. More broadly, the COVID-19 landscape of remote teaching has opened questions about digital disadvantage and difficulties in accessing online taught material.

In terms of immediate future plans, we hope to conduct a participatory action research-based local needs assessment with the county Kildare direct provision centres to establish how Maynooth University might support access to third-level education and play a role more generally in community integration. We will also conduct a thorough analysis of potential administrative or internal systemic barriers to accessing MU courses. The scope of the project will be kept under review: for example, one of the NGO representatives on the sanctuary committee has suggested that it should be expanded to specifically encompass undocumented migrants who face significant obstacles to accessing university education.

### **Difficult questions**

As a University community, through the Sanctuary process we have agreed to the goal of inclusion and welcome for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants within our institution. However, the experience so far has shown that the devil is in the detail: how do we actually achieve these goals? How do we adequately support students in relation to the complex issues of access to childcare and mental health supports? Do the scholarships serve to relieve pressure on the Government to radically reform its policy on university access, thereby becoming counter-productive? Should the national Universities and Colleges of Sanctuary network advocate for a sectoral commitment to charging this relatively small cohort of students EU fees (rather than the much higher international fees)? How does the sanctuary movement interact with a commitment to race equity and broader issues of inclusion and belonging on campus? As quickly realised by the sanctuary committee at Maynooth, there must be an ongoing process of reflection on what it means to be a university of sanctuary.

From a personal perspective as an academic working in the field of migration law and human rights, it will be interesting to see how the goals of inclusion and welcome fit with the more politically-charged aims of justice and equality and to think about the appropriate role for academic institutions in pursuing these objectives. For now, the University of Sanctuary

process has opened up a space to explore these conversations in a more structured way across the university and in dialogue with students and the community.