
The Rwanda deterrent or a Nation of Sanctuary?

Mike Chick

Government rhetoric and ideology towards some of the most vulnerable sectors of the community, sanctuary seekers, varies considerably within the four nations of the UK. Wanting to appear 'tough' on migration, the UK Westminster Government has, since 2013, introduced numerous pieces of legislation, which have come to be known as the Hostile Environment, in an attempt to deter people from choosing to seek sanctuary in the UK. In addition to these laws, which are designed to make life as uncomfortable as possible for asylum seekers, is the nonsensical and odious attempt to now send sanctuary seekers to Rwanda. The result of this ideological stance is that thousands of individuals are left in limbo each year, forced to subsist on under six pounds a day and unable to develop their talents fully or begin integrating in their local community.

To give this some context, in the year ending September 2022, over 70,000 people claimed asylum in the UK. While this is a significant number, it is far smaller than the number of people provided with sanctuary in other (EU) countries. For instance, between 2017 and 2022, the number of asylum applicants in Germany, France and Spain regularly surpassed 100,000.

In contrast to the UK government's hostile treatment of those people seeking sanctuary, the aspiration of the Welsh Government is to make Wales a Nation of Sanctuary, and to encourage all sectors of society, through a 'Team Wales' approach, to play a role in achieving that ambition. The Welsh Government has no power over the UK's Asylum Policy nor over how many sanctuary seekers are dispersed across Wales. However, it does have complete control over matters such as health, education, housing, employment and agriculture - sectors that can directly affect the wellbeing of forced migrants attempting to build new lives. In recognising that much needed to be done to support their inclusion, wellbeing and integration, in 2019 the Welsh Government drew up a Nation of Sanctuary Plan, which aimed to utilise the devolved powers it has to improve the welfare of sanctuary seekers.

This year, 2024, the Welsh Government is reviewing and renewing that Nation of Sanctuary plan. In addition, and of interest to language tutors based in colleges, following a commissioned review of its performance in 2023 and in consultation with learners,

language education professionals and other stakeholders, it is renewing its policy on language education for migrants (the only one of the four nations to have a policy on this). However, having a policy on language education is one thing, radically improving the language learning experience of migrants and professionalising the field of language educators based in FE is quite another.

At present, the way formal language education for migrants is organised at colleges across Wales means that teachers, despite heroic efforts, are often unable to maximise the potential of the ESOL classroom to ensure that recently arrived forced migrants feel respected, supported and welcome in their new society. Rigorous assessment schedules, which teachers are obliged to follow in order to evidence learning, along with the brokering of a mandated citizenship curriculum, frequently result in classes being focused more on preparing for examinations than on exploring how ESOL classrooms can be a site for engaging in activities which validate learners' identities as equal citizens.

At present, opportunities to provide holistic, person-centred language education to people seeking refuge in the UK are frequently being missed because of the overly bureaucratic and exam-focused system that prevails. Fast track courses, vocationally-focused courses and non-assessed participatory approaches to the classroom do not yet form a standard component of a language education syllabus. Moreover, language teachers are not being equipped with the classroom tools or pedagogic preparation required to fully meet the needs of forced migrant learners. For example, the teaching of basic literacy, trauma-informed approaches, multi-lingual perspectives or an understanding of participatory pedagogy are all absent from the qualifications needed to teach language at an FE college.

The 2023 review of the Welsh Government's language policy recognised these omissions. The hope now is that an updated policy may lead the way in providing an inclusive, people-centred approach to migrant language education. This is not just another academic subject, it is the most important action a government can put in place to promote integration; and a fully trained, professional workforce is key to its success.
