

DIRECT PROVISION

“It’s unfair to hold someone’s life down”

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Access to education is difficult for those within the direct provision system, as one former asylum seeker tells **LOUISE BROWNE**

“I KNOW THE reason they give behind it is ‘Why bother spending money on an asylum seeker when you’re not even sure if they will remain in the country?’ But at the same time, an asylum seeker who has been here for a long time deserves a life. It cannot be said or stressed enough that it is unfair to hold someone’s life down until whenever you choose to release them, because there is no going forward.”

These words from Susan (not her real name) are strong, heart-felt and weighted with sheer frustration at the lack of access to real and free education for Ireland’s adult asylum seekers.

“I spent three years in the system,” she says. “Most people, when they come here, some would have English as their first language. But the only provision they make for education is for people to speak English. Other than that, you’re on your own.”

Undeterred, the Nigerian native took matters into her own hands, despite the potential pitfalls of losing her weekly allowance of €19.10.

“I did a post-grad course in Business Studies with one of the colleges, it was private and I had to pay as a foreign national. I probably paid three times above what a normal EU national would pay. I still owe the college a lot because I wasn’t able to keep up with my payments.

“However, if they ever got to know that you were in school, and wonder how you got the money, a lot of times the social welfare will stop your payment.

“As small as it may seem, for asylum seekers it is a lot of money because you need some change, money for transportation, support and the food you get at the hostel and accommodation. And although we complain seriously about it, at the end of the day it is also a huge support, so when I was in school I had to hide it until I finished my course.”

She adds: “The managers in the hostel kept asking me ‘Where do you go all the time?’ And I’d say I just go to an internet café to do an online course. I just told them something that would not give them a lead as to what I was doing. Because if they ever heard that I was doing that, they would be the first to report you. The managers are not supportive in any way. As a matter of fact I think they’re employed there to make sure you stay at the very bottom of the chain.

“There were so many other things I would have loved to do but I didn’t have the funds or the qualifications, because of my status as an asylum seeker, to receive education, and that is the case of many other asylum seekers.”

Susan's initial joy at receiving her status has somewhat waned. "It was like magic, wave a wand and it's there. But the funny thing is, since I came out of the system, having applied to different companies for jobs, they tell me even with all the experience I have, I'm not qualified enough.

"So those three years in the system had tied me down, and now I've been programmed to depend on social welfare. Why? Because I'm not qualified to do the job I would like to do.

"I want to move forward in my life but I'm unable to get it right now. Thanks to social welfare I'm back [looking for education] and it's supporting me. I'm not happy about it, but I don't have a choice."

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