

Overcoming Culture Shock: Journal reflection

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MELLIE participant and former resident of Mosney Direct Provision Centre

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Introduction

From Syria via Turkey and Greece to ultimately Ireland, it has been a very long journey full of ups and downs, tears of frustration and dismay, the odd glimmer of hope. Eleven months on roads and cross country, living in tents and the odd night under a proper roof, it was a long and tortuous road that finally took me and 129 other Syrians to Dublin. It was December 2016 when we landed at Dublin airport, cheerful and hopeful and greatly relieved. It was the beginning of the honeymoon phase in Ireland as new arrivals - or at least it was for me.

I had an idea about “Ireland”, but not much. I was dispatched to Mosney Accommodation Centre which had been used as a vacation resort in the 1980s. Arriving there, I remember not just my own happiness but also the smiles on all the faces of the other Syrians who had been on that plane with me. Mosney is a very nice accommodation centre, well provided for with advanced facilities for everyday living and located by the sea in county Meath. Its remote location was not a concern at first because all we cared about was proper accommodation to restart a fresh beginning. However, a few months later, the honeymoon was over and a crisis phase of pointless existence of a life without purpose started to “get in” on us. The need to be productive and for meaningful engagement with society was frustrated by inactivity. I started to question things: why am I here? What is next? The life back then was monotonous and lacked motivation, disappointment occupied the mind with no anticipation for how long.

In March 2017, word spread in the camp about a visit of Dublin City University to Mosney. Nobody knew why. Then we were told there was a project and the university would take some of us to the university. I was delighted to hear that. "Maybe it is an opportunity to obtain information how to practise my profession in Ireland or I may even get assistance in that regard", I thought.

On the day of their arrival, it was not just I who was excited, as 45 residents gathered in the big hall waiting for the university people to arrive. Over 40 students came to meet Prof Veronica Crosbie and Philip McKinley from DCU.

They demonstrated their proposed project to us and we got to know each other a little bit. However, there was an query in my mind. The ad had said that “up to 25 residents” would participate in the project. But we were forty, so how were they going to select those twenty-five, I asked Dr. Veronica, and she said that they would take us all. And they did.

The main reason that made me volunteer to be part of this project was my interest to explore the Irish university system and I would say it was the best experience I have had in

Ireland. As a result, it gave me the first opportunity to engage with Irish people in a meaningful way and it significantly reduced my sense of isolation while I was living in Mosney.

In addition, the English language classes which were provided in the centre for the asylum seekers were for beginners and my level was higher. Consequently, I was not enrolled in any course apart from one class at the weekends run by a volunteer. Therefore, the MELLIE project helped a lot to improve my skills in the English language, including listening, comprehending, speaking and, most importantly, writing.

Moreover, the principal consequence was that each of us shared our story with the others – and these were not just stories but personal details, unique to each person. This gave me back the feeling of being a multi-faceted human being, not just “a refugee”. In fact, it was such a feeling of welcome and support and fostering when someone listened to your poor English and spent efforts not just to understand but also to talk in simple language to communicate with you. It brought great satisfaction and comfort and reduced the frustration to a minimum.

Furthermore, the fact that the stories between me and the DCU students went both ways was particularly fulfilling. This exchange assisted me in acquiring a greater understanding of Irish society. As a result, it has been extremely helpful for my integration and gave me a push to reach the adjustment phase where everything becomes more familiar and the gap between two cultures shrinks.

The Mellie Project is meant to support asylum seekers in their integration. It is a wonderful goal. But for any asylum seeker or refugee, the journey of integration into Irish life is going to be long. In other words, I believe that the best way for refugees to integrate is to be able to continue further education or to work.

For example, In Syria, before I was made a refugee, I studied and qualified and then worked as a dentist. It is my deepest ambition to resume my career here in Ireland because it will help me to really integrate. It will allow me to contribute to Irish society and give me a reason to wake up in the morning, practising the profession for which I trained and qualified. The displacement of life as a refugee has robbed me of control over so many aspects of my life. To be able to resume my profession as a dentist would restore a lot of that control.

Inevitably, any new person arriving in a strange country will have no knowledge of its unique system and structures. Thus I spent many months trying to find information and guidance to have my degree in dentistry recognised here in Ireland and I believe that DCU and the university sector generally can provide invaluable assistance by using their expertise, their knowledge and networking capability to help people like me resume our careers.

I mean that the universities can create a bridge to connect refugees with other institutions or professional bodies related to their careers. Consequently we can not only obtain valuable information, but also practical support and assistance in order to recognise professional qualifications. For instance, I have been made aware of a project in Glasgow by NHS Scotland, which provides magnificent support to Syrian doctors to help them get their British medical registration and after that, they will work with NHS in return.

Nevertheless, I want to acknowledge the great efforts that DCU as University of Sanctuary in Ireland and other universities (UCC,UCD, UL and AIT) have made to facilitate asylum seekers by offering precious opportunities to complete third level education, blazing the trail in that regard and providing so much support.

That scholarships provided by universities of sanctuary to asylum seekers are vital and so valuable, and that they are highly appreciated, is true. However, there are still difficulties

facing those who are already graduated and looking for opportunities to prove themselves and work in their fields like anybody else.

The Mellie Project, for the six weeks I was involved, was a great opportunity to feel that I am not some generic refugee but someone else – the same person I used to be. It would be nice to feel like that more permanently. And, you know, now I am daring to hope that it will happen.

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Fidaa is from Syria, having arrived in Ireland in late 2016. He is currently working at a Dental Clinic in Dublin as a Dental Assistant. He studied Dentistry in Syria and graduated in 2012. He worked there as a dentist for a few years before leaving in late 2015. Fidaa is a member of the steering committee of University of Sanctuary Ireland.