

Breaking New Ground – Let Us Learn Story

If things had worked out as I had planned and expected when I was studying for my A-levels, I would now have finished university, and on my way to becoming a criminologist.

Instead, I am 24 at Let us Learn, and have just finished a stint at the office of the London Mayor, where I met Deputy Mayor, Matthew Ryder, and did some amazing things, such as hold GLA first ever young Londoners' forum . I've been to New York and Cape Town on learning exchanges and met amazing young campaigners from America and South Africa. I've helped organise an event in parliament and demonstrated outside the Supreme Court and Downing Street.

I have learned and experienced so many things that I never imagined I would. All of these will be invaluable for me whatever I end up doing for my future career. I don't regret any of them - how could I? - but I do regret the reasons why I was not able to follow the path that I had dreamed about so long and chosen for myself.

You see, I am a migrant. Until I reached 18, I didn't really appreciate what that meant, but then it was brought home to me very forcibly that in the eyes of some people, including our government, I was seen as different and did not deserve to be treated in the same way or have the same opportunities as my school friends.

In 2011, the UK government changed the law to tighten up the eligibility criteria for granting student finance for people who had been born outside the UK. I was 17 at the time, and even if I'd known about the change, I don't think I would have paid much attention as I didn't really think of myself as anything but British, as I had lived in this country for 9 years by that point.

What I didn't realise was that the new law meant people like me who had lived in the UK most of our lives and been through the British education system, from primary or secondary school age, were no longer eligible for a student loan, unless we had "settled" immigration status. The difficulty was that the government had also been making it harder and more expensive to get settled status: it now takes a minimum of 10 years of repeat applications to the Home Office for 'limited leave to remain', and costs many thousands of pounds.

Like many of my fellow Let us Learn campaigners who have also grown up here, I am on this 10-year journey to being eligible for British citizenship. Only then will my official, immigration status reflect the way I have thought about myself for as long as I can remember.

Limited leave to remain is a form of temporary status, which can be granted to a child when they have lived in the UK for seven years, or to a young person age 18 - 24 if they have lived at least half of their lives in the UK, without leaving the country. It has to be renewed every 2 ½ years and allows people to work and travel, but they are often denied access to benefits, and have to go through additional hoops in order to qualify for student loans.

When the rules around student loans were first changed in 2011, they put a blanket ban on anyone with limited leave to remain from receiving student finance. This had

a terrible impact on thousands of ambitious young migrants, who suddenly found their career ambitions in tatters, because they could no longer take up university places. However, it was an injustice which could not go unchallenged, and it led directly to the formation of the Let us Learn campaign, which was set up with the support of the award winning children's rights charity Just for Kids Law. I became involved soon after its launch and our main aim has been to fight for all young people in the UK to have equal access to attend university.

One of our first tasks was to challenge the student finance issue. With our support, Just for Kids became involved in a Supreme Court legal challenge being brought by Beaurish Tigere, a 19 year old who had been head girl and star student at her school, who found herself blocked from higher education. As interveners in the case, we were able to ensure the judges understood that Beaurish's situation was affecting many more students, and we were able to present our stories to the court in evidence. We knew what we were arguing was right and fair, and, amazingly, the Supreme Court agreed with us. They ruled that the law change was discriminatory towards people who had already established a life here in the UK and therefore, the department for Business, Innovation and Skills should revise their student finance rules. A few months later, new rules were introduced which mean more long term migrants could access student finance, but the changes did not solve the problem for all of us, as there were still additional hurdles put in place. These were the need to have had limited leave to remain for at least three years (which many of us could not meet) and living at least half your life in the UK. The new regulations can be found under the "Long residence" criteria on www.gov.uk

Nevertheless, this was an incredible win and a pivotal moment in the life of Let Us Learn. Many more young people could now access student finance. They could now pursue their dreams of going to university and making a life for themselves. For many, they would be the first in their family to achieve this milestone.

Since the Supreme Court case, Let Us Learn has continued to champion the voice of the young migrants. From the Young Gifted and Blocked campaign, where Let Us Learners asked university Vice Chancellors to provide more scholarships for people in our situation, to our most recent #PleaseFreezeOurFees campaign. We are now asking Home Office secretary Amber Rudd to call a halt to punitive increases in immigration application fees (up from £601 in 2014 to £2,033 in 2018) and conduct a review into the impact that spiralling costs are having on young people who have grown up in the UK and are eligible for lawful status.

The stakes for us if we lose our status because it is unaffordable are very high. We would become subject to the full force of the government's hostile environment which means:

- No bank account;
- No access to NHS;
- No right to rent;
- Unable to work;
- Potentially being blocked from studying, as part of an 'immigration bail' condition;
- Unable to travel abroad;
- Immigration detention

- Removal back to a country we don't remember or have any links with.

Although Let Us Learn started as an educational campaign in 2014, it has since recognised that the hurdles young migrants face go beyond education. We have also started to voice our concerns about the impact of the hostile environment more generally, and have been vocal in our support for the Windrush generation. We see ourselves as their proud heirs: just as the Windrush migrants should be celebrated for making a vital contribution to this country's past; so we - as Britain's future doctors, teachers, scientists and Lawyers want to play a vital part in creating its future.

CASE STUDY

Freeze our Fees campaign

Let us Learn's latest campaign is calling for a freeze on Home Office and other fees, which have risen dramatically in recent years, putting them out of reach of ordinary families. One of our campaigners, Michelle, explains the impact these have had on her.

'I am studying law at a London University, and have many aspirations, including wanting to be a human rights lawyer and writer.

I am the oldest of four and was born in Nigeria. I came to the UK age 9, and have lived in this country for 12 years now.

I was always told by my mum and my teachers that if I worked hard, I would be able to achieve all my dreams. It is only as I have got older, I have discovered this isn't always the case. Not when you are a migrant.

When you're a migrant you realise that hard work may not save you, not when there are policies in place to make it as difficult as possible for you to survive, for you to regularise your status and live a normal life. Rising Home Office application fees are having a detrimental effect on young migrants like me, who have been in the UK for a long time, completed their primary and secondary schooling here and are simply trying to maintain our lawful status.

In March 2016, my mum, my younger sister and me applied for our renewals. This cost over £4,000 pounds, excluding legal fees (no legal aid is available). My application by itself cost £1,311 (based on the fees at that time). My mum is a carer and earns less than £25k and thus by the time the bills are paid and she has provided for four kids there is barely any money left. My mother's application was granted while mine and my sisters were rejected as a result of bad advice from our lawyer.

We had to apply again, and pay the fees again. Having spent so much on our initial applications my mum struggled to raise the money to make this new application. She had to choose between me and my sister because she could only afford to pay for one application. I took no part in the decision because it was too painful. Ultimately it came down to a matter of urgency, I needed my status renewed as soon as possible so I could progress to higher education whereas my sister was at college and her status did not affect her ability to carry on with her A-levels. To

begin with, my sister did not know she had now fallen out of status. I carried this information with me for a month and it was heart-breaking knowing that my sister was unaware.

Eventually I had to tell her. She was silent to begin with, She cried later after a successful job interview when she realised she would not be able to take it up, because she no longer had immigration status. I feel like I have failed my sister. I work part-time while I am studying and my mum and me have opened a bank account and pay in every penny we can to save for her fees.

The high fees mean my mum had to choose, choose between my sister and me, and my family now has mixed statuses. The fees go up every year and it's incredibly worrying. I work hard but I am anxious that the prohibitive costs will cause me to lose everything I have worked for.