

FETI Project IO5

Podcast Transcript for interview with Martin Irwin, practitioner, University of Glasgow

Paula I am delighted to have with me one of our colleagues from our partner institution, who work closely with SWAPWest. Martin.

Martin Good morning. My name is Martin Irwin and I work at the University of Glasgow where I am one of the named contacts for forced migrants.

Paula And how long have you been working there, Martin, and working in that particular field around forced migration?

Martin OK, so I've been there... I've been at the university since August 2017 and working in this kind of area of forced migration since, I think, at some point in 2019.

Paula I wonder, how do you engage with this particular group, our target group?

Martin It's quite varied or it can be. I would say the bulk of folk who I work with get in touch with me initially...either because they've heard from their friends or because they see my name on the website or whatever else, or it is or through an event, I suppose, as well. Yeah, so people will really, kind of get in touch with me asking for progression routes really, into different courses at the university so whether that is undergraduate or postgraduate or even just things like wanting to know about finance options and support... that kind of thing.

Paula When you meet an individual, whether they approach you, whether that's out in the community, or if you are signposting on to a course or onto funding streams, I think you mentioned, I wonder, what activities do you conduct in terms of a base assessment or orientation for that individual?

Martin It's difficult because this work isn't my full role. I would actually say that I have got three full time roles. I don't know whether you know, but you probably do know, that Glasgow, I think, over the past 20-odd years has taken in more asylum seekers of any local authority in the UK so we have quite a substantial asylum-seeking population and obviously people with other statuses that have come out of the other end of that. With the kind of pre-entry programme I mentioned, we have got plans for a more formal induction/orientation sort of process planned. We've got the student group STAR (Student Action for Refugees), we're going to get those guys to come along and introduce the cohort to themselves, to their organization and tell them all the different things that they can do, things they can support with. We've got a more formal kind of welcome to the university sort of event planned.

Paula Have you had any training in this regard, Martin, to prepare you for the role or is there any on-going training as part of your role?

Martin No, I've not had any formal training with the Connex General Organization. I believe that we are going to do the Scottish Refugee Council online training that Marta's developed...but currently I've not had any formal training. I did have quite a long bedding-in period, I suppose, you would call it, I would say. Yeah, but since I've been doing it, I've been training but I've not had any 'formal' training.

Paula Part of this FETI project is actually looking at a whole system approach and we are looking to publish a best practice guide as well, as part of the project. Would a tool like that be useful to you, Martin? Where there would be a collection of various applications or tools or activities

to help you work with ...eh...the target group on initial meeting and through their orientation?

Martin I think so – not for the day to day queries that we get, I think, there's just too, just too many people, but for more kind of targeted interventions in smaller cohorts, I think, something like that could be really great actually. So, yeah, some kind of formal toolkit, I suppose, of the kind of things that could be done would be quite useful actually, yes.

Paula And how did you come to hear about the FETI project? I know we've been working together for a long time and we know each other, but how did you first come to hear about the FETI project, Martin?

Martin I can't actually remember the exact time but I think I first heard about it in , like a workshop, seminar or something like that. Then I saw the initials, FETI, coming up in an advert for a workshop, I think you were giving, Paula – I think it was in your signature or something like that...eh...so, yeah, that's how I first heard about it... in an informal way. And then that led me on to coming to your actual your formal workshop where you ran through the history of the project and what it was all about and stuff, so, yeah, that was my introduction to it.

Paula And working with this target group, forced migration, refugees, asylum seekers, what are the biggest challenges for you, Martin, in this work?

Martin So it's tough. Yeah, it's very challenging work. It's often quite depressing work. I'd say for me, coming from quite a privileged position being the one who's comfortable, you try to help other people who are in a difficult situation. There's no, there's very often little commonality between different sorts of cases so it's often the case that everybody that you deal with has their own sort of particular challenges and difficulties...and that makes it extremely time consuming...if you're trying to help them achieve a particular outcome. But, I suppose, one commonality for people in the UK asylum seeking system, at the asylum seeking stage, well the challenges they face and the conditions they are forced to live in are really bad. They're not great at all and still, to this day, with the changes that are intended for the asylum system, I think, it's fair to say that the 'hostile environment' as it was called, is still sort of in play. That's still the sort of baseline situation, so, yeah, there's no centralized support system really. It's just people like...so obviously Glasgow's a dispersal city...and there are people doing fantastic work all over the city in different ways, in their own sort of particular fields. And so, you bump into these people as you go through and go about your kind of daily business...and you go 'Oh, right, so they're doing over at this part of the city, doing this particular work'. That was even more challenging, I think, during the pandemic as you can't get out and about and you're just relying on people that you talk to passing your name to other people. So, yeah, it's very disjointed, I think, and for a long time I thought that was a significant flaw, in the city. But maybe it's also a strength in that it can be very, very flexible and yeah, if there's a shortage of capacity in one particular place and for one particular thing, then somebody else, some other part of the city can sort of pick up the slack. So, yeah, I do think we need to have a more sort of joined up approach but maybe try and keep the sort of grassroots flexibility if that makes sense.

Paula And in terms of working with this group, what are the biggest successes? What are the biggest rewards for working with this group?

Martin I think, yeah, just if you can help. If you help people to get their lives back on track, even in such a small way - obviously they are still going to have other stuff going on - but if you can kind of help them achieve their goals in the education sphere...it can be quite rewarding. And a powerful thing, you know, because even if their circumstances, their material circumstances haven't changed, if they're seeking asylum and they're still not allowed to work and all the rest of it, but then their situation's still challenging, but if you've helped them on a degree, onto a degree, and even if they've completed that degree, you know, it's yeah, it's such a nice feeling. They appreciate being able to continue their studies and all that sort of stuff. So, when it does work and you do get positive stories, then it does, yeah, it does make a difference. Yeah, there's one guy recently that I've been working with for eighteen months, so all the way through from pre-application, all the way to completion of his Masters...em...and, yeah, he's about to graduate soon and it's great, you know. And he's loving it so, aye, that stuff is good actually.

Paula Wow! Yeah, that definitely is a big reward and a very visible reward when you're working with this group. And just finally, do you think the FETI project will be able to have a positive impact on the work that you do as you move forward?

Martin I think so, in the wider sort of sector, I think we need to change things so I think it needs to be more formal so if it does get formalized in that way, then I think the FETI project and things like that, can be a really useful and coming at a really good moment - a good point in the development, certainly in our case. So, yeah, if we can at the same time as formalizing our approach to this stuff, if we can be leaning on and learning from projects like FETI, then I think it's all to the good, you know. I think it could have a wider impact.

Paula Thanks so much, Martin, that's really good to hear and I very much appreciate you having taken the time today to chat with us and give us insights into your work as a practitioner with this particular target group. Thank you very much, Martin.

Martin No problem. Cheers.