

Universities of Sanctuary Strategic Plan



Delegates at the Universities of Sanctuary conference in Edinburgh, 2023 [photo by Hannah Green]



Introduction

City of Sanctuary is building a movement of welcome for people seeking sanctuary across the UK - city by city, community by community, building a more welcoming, inclusive and compassionate society.

As part of its movement building activities, City of Sanctuary UK supports a variety of 'Streams' of Sanctuary within their work. Examples of streams include schools, colleges, universities, local authorities, libraries, faith groups, gardens and shops¹. Universities of Sanctuary one of the key streams led by the charity City of Sanctuary UK.

City of Sanctuary UK believes that a UK that truly welcomes people who have been forced from their homes in search of a better life is possible - by bringing people together, celebrating our shared humanity and encouraging people to put their compassion into action, we can build strong, welcoming, cohesive communities.

Launched in 2016 Universities of Sanctuary (UoS) is a network and accreditation scheme designed to encourage, enable and embolden universities to be more welcoming places for people who have been affected by forced migration. To be recognised as a University of Sanctuary, universities must meet minimum criteria as evidenced through an application process, with renewal every three years.

As of December 2025, we had made 55 awards² (including 12 reaccreditations) and received applications from an additional 15 universities and are aware of many more either working towards their first award or applying for (re)accreditation. In 2026 there were an estimated 170 universities in the UK³.

Purpose of the Strategic Plan

Universities of Sanctuary has grown rapidly and during a time of turbulence in the higher education (HE) sector both in the UK and internationally. UK universities are generally keen to support students who are affected by forced displacement and we have seen significant interest in joining the network and becoming recognised as a university of sanctuary.

¹ <https://cityofsanctuary.org/streams-and-group-activities/>

² This includes two awards to colleges of the University of Oxford, Somerville college and Mansfield college.

³ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/everything-you-need-know-about-studying-uk>

Furthermore, despite many Universities' keenness to participate, we are acutely aware that Higher Education continues to marginalise and exclude people who have been forced to migrate, that their struggles often remain invisible, and that much more can be done within UK universities to extend them a meaningful welcome and address the structural causes of the difficulties they face.

Alongside the growth of the network, issues relating to immigration, and specifically the issue of people arriving in the UK by small boats has climbed the political agenda, it has also dominated the focus of the far right. As we increasingly see divisive rhetoric and narratives relating to people seeking sanctuary we are keen to explore the role that universities can play in supporting communities and amplifying a positive narrative of sanctuary, raising awareness and shifting public attitudes through mobilising people to speak up for sanctuary.

Responding to these challenges we have conducted a consultation of our network (see methodology below), identifying

- 1) the key *focus* and *aim* of Universities of Sanctuary
- 2) the *remit* of our activities
- 3) the *activities* required to achieve our aim and
- 4) the *conditions* we need to meet to be successful in our work

Audience of this Report

This report is written for the Universities of Sanctuary network, which consists of

- students past and present who have been affected by forced displacement and other experts by experience
- university staff including a wide range of personnel from admissions and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion officers to Vice Chancellors and academic staff
- charities and other Third Sector organisations ranging from international actors to local groups
- other interested individuals and groups.

Structure of this Report

In the first part we set out the context of Universities of Sanctuary as a stream of City of Sanctuary UK. In the second part we describe what Universities of Sanctuary is in more detail. In the third part we describe the consultation process underpinning this report and our methodology. And in the Fourth part we outline our strategic plan according to the points above: *Focus, Aim, Remit, Activities and Conditions*.

Part One: City of Sanctuary UK

City of Sanctuary UK is a registered charity and an umbrella organisation which plays a significant and varied role in working towards its mission of building a movement of welcome across the UK to achieve the City of Sanctuary vision. Established in 2005, City of Sanctuary UK is guided by the vision that the UK can and should be a place of welcome for all - and committed to justice and solidarity for people seeking sanctuary. It is expected that members of the City of Sanctuary network, including affiliated universities and other HE institutions, will speak up for sanctuary, promote understanding and recognise and celebrate the ways in which people seeking sanctuary enrich society.

City of Sanctuary UK maintains that a culmination of building a strong and widespread movement for change alongside mobilisation efforts to encourage everyone within the movement to 'Speak up for Sanctuary', will shift the public narrative leading to widespread public support for sanctuary. The realisation of this vision will occur when the following impacts occur:-

- Shift in narrative and public attitudes leading to widespread public support for sanctuary
- People seeking sanctuary have opportunities and are supported to thrive in safe, connected and welcoming communities
- Changes in policy and legislation improving welcome for all, but particularly for people seeking sanctuary

In pursuing this vision, City of Sanctuary UK puts the following values at the heart of their work: centring lived experience, working collaboratively, aiming to inspire, committing to social and racial justice, and acting with integrity⁴. Universities of Sanctuary adheres to these core values of City of Sanctuary UK, alongside the below network principles set out in the City of Sanctuary UK Charter.

Principles for City of Sanctuary Networks

These principles reflect the components a movement must have to be successful - as evidenced in various academic studies (Masters and Osborn, 2011). These

⁴ Put interests of people seeking sanctuary first.

principles outline the ways in which City of Sanctuary UK encourages networks to work towards their principles.

1. **Communicate a positive vision of welcome** for all, speak up for sanctuary and celebrate the contribution of people seeking sanctuary, as well as the welcome offered in local communities;
2. **Promote understanding of migration and racial justice issues**, especially enabling the voices of people with lived experience to be heard directly;
3. **Ensure people seeking sanctuary are at the centre of everything we do**, including in decision making, co-production processes and leadership;
4. **Create opportunities for connections**, friendships and solidarity with people seeking sanctuary
5. **Commit to collaborative working** and network development across the City of Sanctuary movement, and with other social justice movements where possible

Part Two: Universities of Sanctuary

Universities of Sanctuary responds to the marginalisation and exclusion of people who have been affected by forced migration by recognising, sharing and encouraging good practices in Higher Education. Together we are working to make universities places of safety, solidarity and empowerment for people seeking sanctuary. The principles of learn, embed and share, which are common to all of City of Sanctuary's streams, recognise the unique role universities can play in creating and promoting a culture of welcome in their institutions and more widely. Our approach is structured around these principles, and is set out in more detail in our [Handbook](#) and on our [website](#).

The work of Universities of Sanctuary is guided by the Universities of Sanctuary Steering Group, which is made up of university professionals, practitioners, academics, students and those with lived experience of the asylum system and Higher Education. The aim of the group is to support the development of a network that nurtures and promotes a culture and a practice of welcome for people seeking sanctuary within Higher Education and in the wider community⁵.

Achievements of the Universities of Sanctuary Network to Date

As the network has grown it has encouraged many universities to develop scholarships and other forms of support (including fee waivers and in-kind support) for students from forced migration backgrounds in the UK. Each applicant university must meet a set of minimum criteria, and submit an application in which they must show they have learnt and taught about forced migration, embedded a culture of welcome to those forced to migrate across their institutions and shared their endeavours such as via pledges, websites and involvement in the activities of the national Universities of Sanctuary network. They must also submit a plan to which they are accountable after three years.

The network itself holds an annual conference and five have been held to date – York St. John, two online, Edinburgh in January 2023 and York in 2024. The busy jiscmail list (sanctuary@jiscmail.ac.uk) and a popular website with regular updates from the network and beyond have improved the visibility of the barriers people who have been forced to migrate face in accessing HE nationally. Led by experts by experience, we have established a national benchmark of good practice in responding to the needs of students affected by forced migration at UK universities and generated a

⁵ <https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/home/about-2/steering-group>

growing national voice in support of the access of people who are affected by forced migration to higher education. Additionally, a series of networks of collaboration amongst universities have been created, such as in the North-East, Scotland, South-West and in London where regular regional conferences and events have taken place. There has been wide international interest in emulating the UoS model, for example in Germany, Australia, Canada and the USA. Perhaps above all, we have created a well-known 'brand' in the UK HE sector upon which we can build in the years ahead.

Part Three: Consultation and Methodology Underpinning this Report

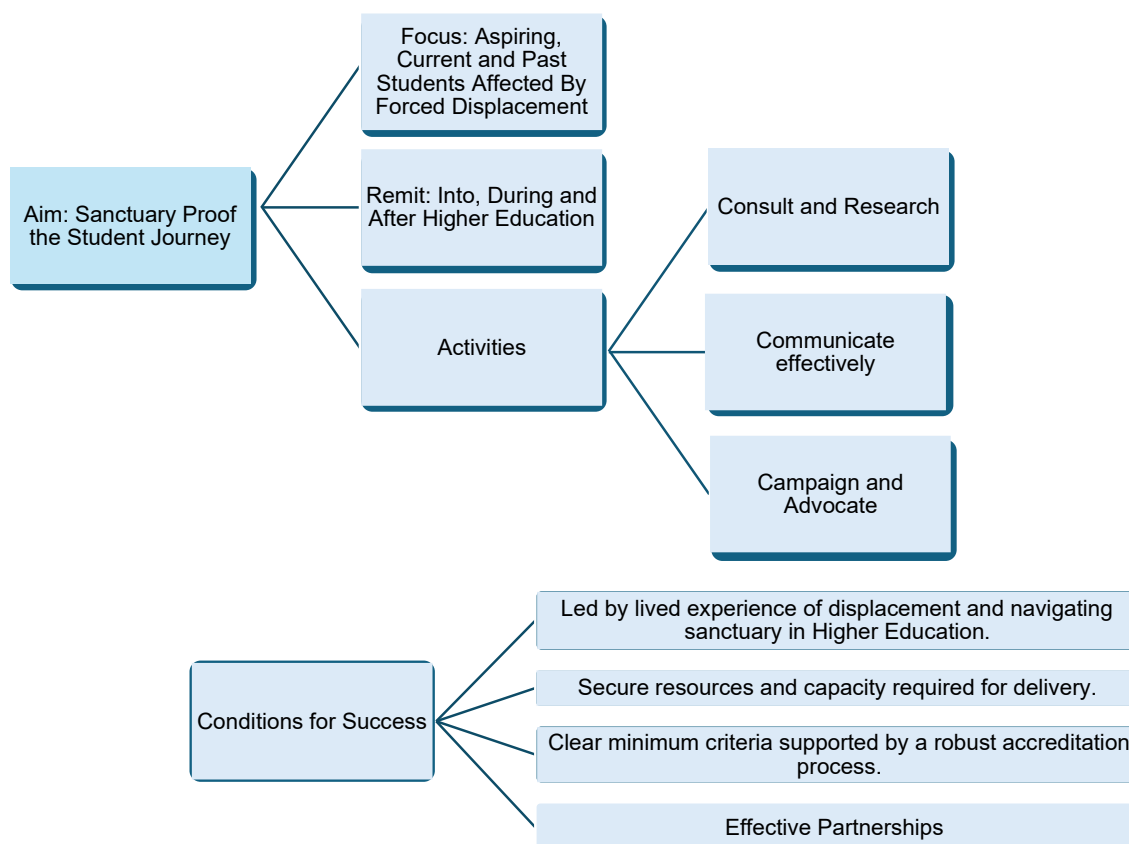
We began our analysis by running a focus group session at the Universities of Sanctuary annual conference at the University of Edinburgh in January 2023. The more-than 160 participants were asked to rank a series of priorities for the future of the network by order of importance. They were then given large sheets of paper and pens, to write down why they had chosen the priority areas that they had, and to detail specific areas of activity under each priority that they thought were particularly important to address. We are very grateful to Martha Harding for helping to run the focus group, and to Kinan Noah for analyzing the focus group responses using a Reflective Thematic analysis approach⁶ to identify the most important issues.

The second stage of our analysis involved a survey that was issued to the sanctuary network in Summer 2023 via the sanctuary@jiscmail.ac.uk mailing list. The survey was live in June and July 2023. We received 17 responses, and are grateful for the time respondents took to fill in the survey, usually providing detailed qualitative responses alongside the quantitative answers they gave. The survey was anonymous. We asked respondents to tell us what their involvement or interest in Universities of Sanctuary was, and of the 17 respondents 14 told us they were staff (both academic and professional service staff), while 2 recorded that they were students and/or experts by experience and 1 reported simply being interested in the network. As part of the survey, we asked respondents to rank the issues that had been highlighted by the focus group during the conference in Edinburgh. We are grateful to Abdul Ghani Amin for his careful analysis of the survey data collected.

The third element of our methodology involved interviews with the existing steering group of Universities of Sanctuary. We supplemented these with an additional interview with the Chief Operating Officer of City of Sanctuary UK. There were ten members of the steering group at the time (summer to autumn 2023), five of whom had lived experience. Interviews were generally around an hour long, and were conducted and transcribed by Kinan Noah. These interviews, along with the survey and focus group, inform the overall structure of this plan and will also continue to inform our work over the coming years as we refresh the Universities of Sanctuary handbook and update the minimum criteria for recognition as a University of Sanctuary.

⁶ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 11(4), 589-597.

Part Four: Strategic Priorities



Summary

The diagram synthesises the priorities identified by respondents, central to which is the experience of students affected by forced displacement.

A student's higher education journey refers to the complete experience of higher education, from learning about and accessing university, to studying and gaining qualifications, to finding employment and becoming an alumnus.

The **aim** of Universities of Sanctuary is to 'sanctuary proof' student journeys, meaning to make each part of the student journey a welcoming experience for people who have been affected by forced displacement. Hence the **focus** of our work is on potential, current and past students who have been affected by forced displacement.

Whilst we are clear on our aim and focus we are also clear that 'sanctuary proofing' the student journey cannot, and should not exist in isolation.

Alongside this we will encourage and inspire universities to think beyond their students and campuses in order to ensure that all those seeking

sanctuary are welcomed and that positive narratives of sanctuary are amplified.

Aim and Focus: Sanctuary Proofing the Student Journey

There are two parts to sanctuary-proofing the student journey:

- Ensure that the wide range of contributions students affected by forced migration make to university communities and beyond are recognised and valued.

Students affected by forced displacement bring their own life experiences, linguistic abilities, cultural knowledge, skills and personalities to the universities they join. An important part of being a University of Sanctuary is recognising these contributions, and nurturing opportunities for students affected by forced migration to contribute to university life in the ways they would like. **We will promote ways universities can recognise and celebrate the valuable contribution of students affected by forced migration to communities in higher education and beyond.**

- Prioritise the development of comprehensive evidence-informed support systems for any students affected by forced displacement who need support.

It is also imperative that any students affected by forced displacement who need additional support to thrive in HE can receive it. It is important to tailor support services for marginalised and traditionally under-represented groups. This includes ESOL programmes, essential skills, wellbeing, legal, employability and advisory support. Adopting a holistic approach to the support available to any students affected by forced migration who may need it is crucial. **We will encourage universities to prioritise the provision of comprehensive support services that are capable of addressing any emotional, social, legal, economic and psychological needs that students affected by forced migration may have.** Wherever possible universities should broaden out this support to those within their local and regional communities, contributing to the ecosystem of support and welcome in local areas.

Remit: Into, During and After Higher Education

Each student journey is unique but can be thought about in terms of 'into', 'during' and 'after' higher education.

INTO: Journeys frequently begin with challenges in acquiring new or receiving recognition of existing skills and qualification, to meet academic eligibility criteria. Access to a degree programme / accredited qualification,

is typically predicated upon securing a sanctuary scholarship⁷ (or some form of alternate financial support) that will sustain the student for the duration of their degree programme. **We will work alongside our partners like STAR and REUK to support aspiring students to navigate the barriers of access to higher education by raising awareness of opportunities, nurturing aspirations, researching the barriers to HE and communicating these, and campaigning to open HE to more people who have been affected by forced migration.**

DURING: students affected by forced displacement can face additional challenges such as financial and legal pressures, mental health problems associated with previous trauma, worries about family members, racism, and cultural barriers to learning. **We will work across our network to research and consult to understand these challenges, and disseminate our findings widely. We will encourage universities to deepen their sanctuary activities and encourage them to be willing to challenge not only the symptoms but also the structural causes of marginalisation of students who have been forced to migrate in higher education.**

AFTER: If a sanctuary student successfully negotiates access and is successful on their degree programme, the next and final stage is either continuing on a higher education pathway or leaving the university to start on the next chapter of their lives. Many sanctuary students face additional obstacles when seeking employment due to factors such as fluency in language, limited work permissions and unfamiliarity with local job markets. UoS can play a vital role in nurturing targeted employability programmes, mentorship opportunities and support career services to equip sanctuary students with the necessary skills and resources for successful transitions from studies to employment. This support enhances their prospects for long-term economic independence and integration. **We will support universities, employers and Third Sector organisations to appreciate the diverse skills and value of students who have been affected by forced displacement, become more aware of the barriers they can face after university, make consequent adjustments, and provide tailored, informed support services, dissemination techniques and opportunities to reduce these barriers.**

⁷ We expect Universities of Sanctuary to offer Sanctuary Scholarships to UK-based sanctuary-seeking students who are ineligible for student finance. The scholarships must be underpinned by the Article 26 Guiding Principles. See our minimum criteria for more information.

Activities Needed to Make Change Happen

The key **activities** we need to make change happen are

i) consulting and researching to understand the experiences of students affected by forced migration

- **We will support and conduct research to understand the experiences of students affected by forced displacement.**
- **We will support research led by current or former students affected by forced migration, which is particularly effective.**
- **We will explore ways we can strengthen our research, for example via a seedcorn fund for projects, via a journal, academic conferences and a member of the steering group with exclusive responsibility for research.**

ii) effectively communicating our findings and their implications to universities and national bodies

- **We will work closely with academics, university press offices and the Third Sector to disseminate our key messages, to raise awareness of both the unique value of students affected by forced migration to university communities and beyond, and the barriers they face in accessing and thriving in higher education.**
- **We will develop a robust communication strategy for our activities that ensures that we utilise diverse communication channels that reach a broad audience.**

iii) undertaking advocacy and campaigning where necessary to ensure that we are listened to.

- **We will engage in national level advocacy work to address the structural barriers thwarting the access of people affected by forced migration to Higher Education, working with partner organisations where possible.**
- **We will encourage Universities of Sanctuary, as well as all of those in the HE sector to 'Speak up for Sanctuary'.** Particular attention will be paid to access to student finance and home fees for asylum seeking students.

Conditions for success

Our experience has taught us that there are four key conditions we need to fulfil to successfully pursue our objectives.

i) We need to be led by people with lived experience of displacement and navigating sanctuary in Higher Education.

- This can take various forms, from outright leadership to consulting with and co-managing alongside experts by experience. **We will continue to give careful thought to the best ways we can be led by experts by experience in everything that we do.** This ensures that people who have experiences of forced migration are empowered within our network, fosters their sense of ownership of our work, enhances the credibility of Universities of Sanctuary, and contributes to dismantling stereotypes and challenging misconceptions.

ii) We need to secure the resources and capacity required for delivery.

- At the time of writing this strategic plan it is clear that Universities of Sanctuary needs more capacity. This was a very prominent theme in the data we collected and discussions of the Steering Group highlighted the importance of making sure neither the paid Programme Manager nor the volunteer Steering Group members are overloaded. **We will support City of Sanctuary UK to seek financial support via donors and sponsorship, explore options related to the award fee model, explore opportunities to draw on the resources of member universities where appropriate, and recruit more expertise in fundraising and finance onto our steering group.**
- As part of attracting funding we need to improve at measuring our own impact so as to be able to demonstrate this to funders and stakeholders. **We will support City of Sanctuary UK in its development of a policy for measuring and evaluating the impact of the Universities of Sanctuary work.**

iii) Maintain effective partnerships

- We need to continue to work with our range of fantastic partners. **We will explore a position on the Steering Group with responsibility for partnerships.**

iii) Keep our minimum criteria up to date and relevant

- Our current minimum criteria were devised as part of the first revision of the Universities of Sanctuary handbook, which was drafted in 2018. Much has changed since then, and both the handbook and the minimum criteria need updating. **We will research and write a new handbook for Universities of Sanctuary, with input from our network.**

- As part of this **we will issue new minimum criteria for being a University of Sanctuary (and thus securing an award).**

City of Sanctuary UK is a registered charity, no. 1184613

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