

The student initiatives financially supporting refugees in higher education



Epigram / Sanctuary Shop

For students who are refugees, higher education can be immensely taxing

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For most students, the opportunity for citizenship and study abroad are rare, passing thoughts, or non-existent concerns. However, the same cannot be said for students of asylum seeker or refugee status in the UK. As defined by UCAS, refugees are those who have been granted permission to stay in the UK under an official 'refugee' status, whereas asylum seekers have applied for this status and are still awaiting a decision. While put simply, these statuses can have complex side effects in complicating a student's ability to stay in university education.

In most cases, students of asylum seeker status are not eligible for the 'home' rate of tuition fees or student finance. The financial pressure on the shoulders of refugee or asylum seeker students becomes a heavier

burden when they are faced with study bans from the Home Office or ongoing asylum claims – all of which have associated legal fees. To many, higher education in the UK is inaccessible at the worst and a financial struggle at best. The real cost is both financially and emotionally taxing.

There are many national organisations who support refugee and asylum seeker students by alleviating their financial struggles. The STAR (Student Action for Refugees) group, registered with Bristol SU, is part of a national charity of over 34,000 students comprised of over 50 groups who are welcoming refugees to the UK. The University of Bristol Amnesty Group is affiliated with STAR.

The Sanctuary Scholarship disqualifies students from applying for legal aid

Both groups campaign to improve the lives of refugees and those seeking asylum through educating others about refugee and UK asylum seeker experiences, as well as organising fundraisers and volunteering for local refugee projects.

The University of Bristol also offers financial aid for students of refugee and asylum seeker status through its Sanctuary Scholarship; students of either of these statuses are also re-

ferred to as 'Sanctuary Scholars' because of their studies taking place in a safer place compared to their home country. The average living cost for a student in Bristol is up to £14,500 per year, with the Scholarship meeting this figure.

But in most cases, the Sanctuary Scholarship also disqualifies students from applying for legal aid. While the support from the University is good, the threat of being faced with large legal fees in order to continue studying still looms over many Sanctuary Scholars.

For the academic year 2020/21, the University of Bristol Amnesty Group and STAR have teamed up with Bristol SU to set up a new Sanctuary Scholar Legal Fund of £25,000, accessible to 'Sanctuary Scholars' who do not qualify for legal aid. The fundraising target for 2020/21 is £12,500, and can be donated to via their crowdfunder.

To help both societies reach their fundraising target, the Sanctuary Scholar Shop, also known on Instagram as @sanctuarysshop, was set up just over a month ago by Polly Rumley, Ellie Lamb, Martha Lloyd and Alice Clarke. As members of both STAR and the Bristol Amnesty Group, the Sanctuary Shop was

a coincidental creation, combining the interests and hobbies of its team members with fundraising. While each term members of both societies are divided into fundraising groups and have undergone more traditional ways of fundraising such as sponsored runs, the Sanctuary Shop offers something uniquely creative to the fundraising scene.

Despite being a relatively hidden gem on social media, the Sanctuary Shop has been a success

The Sanctuary Shop raises money by selling handmade, DIY jewellery, crafted and packaged with care by the team members themselves, with all profit being donated directly to the Sanctuary Scholars Legal Fund. 'It was just a bit of a coincidence really!' said Polly Rumley, when asked how the Shop was formed, 'Our original idea was to set up a Depop

shop to sell second-hand things that people had donated, but Ellie suggested making and selling clay jewellery and the idea took off from there.'

Despite being a relatively hidden gem on social media, the Sanctuary Shop has already gained significant success in the short time it has been open, with Polly noting that it has already attracted students with various creative talents willing to offer their services. 'We've had a few more people recently messaging us saying they're interested in helping – there's someone who makes lots of crochet things! And we've got a few more items ready to post so keep an eye out for that!'

While the Sanctuary Shop team transformed their creative hobby into a fundraising side-hustle, the same can be achieved from your own personal interests, whether that be swapping your daily workout for a sponsored run or turning your gaming addiction into a 24-hour live-stream for charity.

'If you've got an idea or the motivation to do it, there's always going to be people who will buy what

you're selling or be really willing to help you.' Polly pointed out, 'Do message the STAR and Amnesty committees; they're all so lovely and willing to help. Don't let anything stop you from fundraising! There's so much out there and students are very willing to support causes like these.'

Both the Bristol Amnesty Group and STAR

also run events to get involved with beyond fundraising to support the refugee and asylum seeker community, most of which have been made more accessible online due to the pandemic. These range from the STAR Conversation Club in collaboration with Bristol City Council, in which volunteers help those with refugee and asylum seeker status practice their

English, to the Bristol STAR Homework Club in which students help children of refugee backgrounds with their homework.

Often, these children may have parents who speak little English or have not had formal education, and the Homework Club offers them a chance to overcome this boundary to learning.

While getting involved in SU events and fundraising are both integral to helping refugee and asylum seeker students stay in education, the importance of raising awareness should not be overlooked.

Both the Bristol Amnesty Group and STAR Bristol Facebook pages also post relevant articles

to educate students on supporting the refugee and asylum seeker community, as well as sharing fundraisers and petitions.

On a greater scale, the STAR national website also posts up-to-date information and shares the campaigns it's currently running.

'Raising awareness is the most important thing and that in itself will inspire people to do more to help.'

