

Summary of University of Oxford Sanctuary Fair, of 24th April

Background

In May 2023, the University launched the first-ever sanctuary fair in collaboration with Asylum Welcome and Oxford City Council. The inaugural Fair was a free, all-day drop-in event connecting refugees, asylum seekers, students, and the local community of Oxford around the theme of celebrating our shared efforts around ensuring sanctuary. At the Fair, the University announced that it was awarded **University of Sanctuary Status** by City of Sanctuary UK in recognition of its commitment to creating a space of welcome and inclusion for people from displacement backgrounds. This built upon collaborative efforts across different sectors of the university including our two Oxford Colleges of Sanctuary, Somerville, and Mansfield, which paved the way for the central university to apply on behalf of the entire Collegiate University.

The academic year 2022-2023 was a landmark year for Sanctuary at the University of Oxford, especially regarding our scholarship commitments for displaced scholars. The groundwork started in 2022 when the University embarked on a mission to support graduate students from displacement backgrounds as a part of its broader Academic Futures program. The Refugee Academic Futures scheme was initiated during the 2022-23 academic year, offering dedicated support to students with displacement backgrounds. A key part of this was the creation of the **Oxford Sanctuary Community**, with a designated contact person and cohort support program, available to all students within the collegiate University who self-identify as having a displacement background. As of the 2023-24 year, the cohort comprises 62 postgraduate students on full scholarships -- 7 Refugee Academic Futures scholarship holders, 21 Ukrainian Graduate Scholarship holders, and 31 have other graduate scholarships (such as college or departmental specific, AfOx supported by the Mastercard Foundation, Clarendon, Rhodes, Weidenfeld-Hoffmann Trust, among others) and 3 CARA researchers.

The Event

To recognize and reflect on our first anniversary as a University of Sanctuary, we held our second Sanctuary Fair on **24th April 2024** at **Worcester College**. This was the first of two lined Sanctuary Fairs, with the second planned for **June 13th** at the **Oxford Town Hall** from 1:30-6:30 pm. The Worcester event was intended to be an opportunity for internal reflection on our role as a University of Sanctuary, what it means and how we can look forward to the future, strengthening our sanctuary work. It involved colleges, departments, and relevant offices exploring what it means to be a university of sanctuary and how we can have a more collaborative effort in steering forward our commitment to being a diverse and inclusive university of sanctuary. We involved sanctuary scholars and local organisations to enable critical reflection on how we can strengthen our culture of sanctuary across the Collegiate University.

The event also included stalls, panel conversations, and a reception at the end. The stalls showcased existing student-led initiatives, local charities, and organisations that support and engage with sanctuary seekers, while the panel conversations brought together different representatives from across the university and city to reflect on set themes.

The first panel was on “what being a university of sanctuary means for a collegiate university”, the second panel on “building an inclusive culture across the university”, and the third panel on “how the university is acting and engaging with the community”. The first panel showed the importance of more open forums of discussions between students, faculty, and staff across colleges and departments to encourage collective ambition and action in ensuring sanctuary is a reality across the collegiate university. The second panel highlighted the importance of ensuring an inclusive space and culture across the university by offering human-centered and individualised support that allows people to feel valued and to thrive. The last panel offered a chance to celebrate amazing work being done by local charities, organisations, university students, university colleges, and departments in engaging with sanctuary seekers across Oxford’s wider community. It also offered a chance to envision more ways of collaborative engagement for more positive impact such as ensuring transparent access for sanctuary seekers to university resources.

Key Insights for the University

Given our main aim was to reflect on what the Collegiate University can do to strengthen our culture of sanctuary, several ideas and themes emerged from our panel discussions:

- Individual and human-centered support makes a difference. Several examples were given of the difference that kindness and compassion make when students first arrive in Oxford. Experiences and interactions during the first 2 weeks were seen as shaping people’s ability to thrive in Oxford.
- One of the key signs of inclusion is whether people ‘feel free to be themselves’. Are people able to feel accepted for who they are, including their differences?
- People need to have a choice in what they share and do not share about their backgrounds. People from displacement backgrounds need the freedom to be able to foreground whichever aspects of their identity are important to them, and not feel compelled to publicly identify as ‘refugees’ or ‘displaced’, for example.
- Joint forums for discussion, involving students, faculty, and community are encouraged. There was excitement about more regular discussion events, including those relating to current world events and forced displacement.
- Refugees and asylum seekers in Oxford need a physical space in the city. It was discussed whether the city, county, and key institutions such as the University can offer spaces or a hub for connection and inclusion with people from displacement backgrounds.
- There is significant enthusiasm for building a College of Sanctuary model that enables more colleges to commit to sanctuary principles including scholarships, with status conferred by the University of Sanctuary Committee.

- Many attendees raised the question of whether and how the University and Colleges can support inclusive recruitment or even housing opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers, and how university research might support local policy change.
- There is a need to connect the University of Sanctuary work more closely to the university's EDI strategy.

To strengthen our role as a university of sanctuary, it is paramount that colleges, departments, student support offices, and central university collectively combine efforts to achieve our commitment to ensuring sanctuary is a reality across the collegiate university. Several ways of doing this include creating scholarships specific for displaced students to increase access, ensuring cultures of welcome and inclusion across colleges and departments, engaging with community initiatives, propelling research and advocacy on related topics, increasing awareness of Oxford's Sanctuary Community and ways to be involved through websites and communication channels among others.

Therefore, the goal is to have more colleges become **Colleges of Sanctuary**, and now the **University of Sanctuary Committee** (a sub-committee of the education committee), will be able to confer College of Sanctuary status to interested colleges. More details on the application process will be shared in due course. Mansfield and Somerville are thriving as Colleges of Sanctuary and continue to offer scholarships and a supportive and inclusive environment to sanctuary scholars, as well as hosting important events, and being well connected to the community.

There will also be a **newsletter for Oxford's Sanctuary Community** launched next academic year to capture news and information around themes of sanctuary, community engagement, research and advocacy, celebrating student achievements and ways to engage locally and globally. If you have any questions or would like to be added to the mailing list for the newsletter, please send an email to sanctuary@ox.ac.uk.

Our Next Event

Save the date for the second part of the Sanctuary Fair on **June 13th** at the **Oxford Town Hall** from 1:30-6:30 pm (the week before Refugee Week) bringing together the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes, City Council, County Council, local organisations, and private sectors and wider Oxford community members to celebrate and share best practices around ensuring sanctuary. All are welcome to attend. More details on registration and the event flow will be shared on communication channels.

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