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Mary Stiasny OBE

University of London, UK

Tim Gore OBE

University of London, UK

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# From sanctuary in health to university of sanctuary

*William Lee Mitchell and  
Melanie Haith-Cooper*

## Introduction

The shocking pictures of a drowned Syrian boy in September 2015 spurred European governments and organisations into taking action to address the growing refugee crisis. The University of Bradford was no different and the senior management team began to look at ways of responding. Consultation was carried out with local organisations at a Bradford City of Sanctuary event and with other UK universities. This suggested that the university should:

- Recognise how the concept of sanctuary fits with its traditional values and the strategic plan (which includes inclusivity, diversity, internationalisation and sustainability);
- See this as a long-term issue. ‘Responses need to be long-term. The refugee crisis will be here for years to come.’;
- Recognise this as an issue that is wider than Syrian refugees. There are substantial numbers of asylum seekers and refugees escaping conflict in other countries such as Eritrea, Afghanistan and Iraq;
- Align with the civic and community response. The city of Bradford has a proud history of welcoming and including newcomers from all corners of the world and has responded positively to the current crisis. The City of Sanctuary initiative plays a major role in this response.

The university response would follow three main principles:

- to build on and scale up the excellent work previously carried out at faculty level in being awarded Sanctuary in Health to then apply for a University of Sanctuary award;
- to develop a holistic response across the university, involving faculties, professional services and students. This should be inclusive to generate commitment, ownership and awareness across the whole university;

- to take a broad, inclusive definition of sanctuary, embracing academics at risk as well as student refugees and asylum seekers.

## The city of Bradford and City of Sanctuary

Bradford made headlines in September 2015 when it was revealed that half of the Syrian refugees re-homed so far in the United Kingdom had been resettled in Bradford. In addition, Bradford participates in the UNHCR gateway protection programme whereby 750 refugees are brought over to the United Kingdom each year. Horton Housing Association was the first organisation in the country to sign up for the government's Vulnerable Person's Relocation Scheme (VPRS) and had resettled 106 of the 216 refugees through VPRS. Bradford had become home to 52 adults and 54 children who had come via Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan, fleeing persecution in Syria. Approximately 600 people are in Home Office-supported accommodation in the city. It is harder to estimate the number of people who have been granted leave to remain and are settled in the city.

City of Sanctuary is a UK movement committed to building a culture of hospitality and welcome, especially for asylum seekers and refugees seeking sanctuary from war and persecution (Darling *et al.*, 2010). In November 2010 Bradford became only the third UK city to be recognised as a City of Sanctuary.

The City of Sanctuary movement developed the Sanctuary Award for groups or organisations to measure and celebrate achievement and impact. Groups are required to show how they meet the three core principles of the Sanctuary Award:

- **Learn** about what it means to be seeking sanctuary; and be actively involved in awareness raising;
- **Embed** – take positive action to make welcome and inclusion part of the values of your organisation or community, to support sanctuary seekers and refugees and to include them in your activities;
- **Share** your vision and achievements; let others know about the positive contribution refugees make to our society and the benefits of a welcoming culture to everyone.

The University's Faculty of Health Studies received a Sanctuary in Health award in June 2015, the first UK university department to receive such an award. The application for the Sanctuary in Health award had to evidence activity under the three Sanctuary core principles. The application was particularly commended for being comprehensively evidenced and providing

a model for others to follow in terms of meaningful engagement with and support for asylum seekers and refugees.

## **Sanctuary in Health**

To achieve the Sanctuary in Health award, the Faculty of Health Studies engaged with many different teaching and learning and research-related activities. The faculty has taken a long-term and inclusive approach, starting work in 2012 when a number of refugee and asylum-seeking women joined the service user group and began to participate in the interviewing of prospective health care students.

Asylum seekers and refugees have been involved with the patient and public involvement aspect of projects – the active participation of patients, users, carers, community representatives and the public in the development of health services. Asylum-seeking and refugee women have also been engaged with the ‘expert by experience’ agenda – for example by sitting on interview panels for undergraduate health care student recruitment. They have been invited into the faculty to assess students’ communication skills in an exam situation (e.g. role-playing breaking bad news to women for whom English is a second language) and to share their stories within teaching sessions.

Refugee and asylum seeker issues have informed changes in the curriculum. A model used with undergraduate midwifery students provides a framework of factors for students to consider so that they treat each pregnant woman as an individual with her own particular issues. A film with interviews with refugee and asylum-seeking women has been produced to bring this to life. This prepares students to treat refugees as individuals while being aware of particular issues they might need to consider such as female genital mutilation. All undergraduate midwifery students receive a teaching session in each year of their programme on asylum seekers and refugees. Asylum-seeker and refugee issues will be embedded in a new faculty-wide inter-professional education programme. The faculty is looking at ways of embedding asylum issues into all undergraduate curricula through shared learning opportunities.

Staff have developed asylum-related topics as research priorities and undertake and publish refugee-related research. Asylum seekers and refugees have assisted and joined teams of researchers undertaking grant applications for refugee-related projects. An example is a team currently undertaking a funded project with a refugee woman as a co-applicant, studying exercise as a way of improving mental health in asylum seekers.

The faculty engages with refugee-related organisations in hosting conferences and other events. These included hosting conferences such as the first Sanctuary in Health national conference in 2013, then the following year the first maternity conference of its kind. The faculty has secured funding to develop two films around asylum issues. These involved working across faculties and with asylum seekers and refugees who told their stories of seeking asylum to highlight learning points for health professionals and also their peers. More than 100 faculty staff have received training around asylum issues. There is also a system in place for collecting and passing on donations to asylum seekers who have just arrived in the United Kingdom.

## University of Bradford response

The University of Bradford response comprises seven elements:

- Introducing a Sanctuary scholarship scheme for asylum seekers and refugees, working to guidelines issued by the Helena Kennedy Foundation Article 26 project;
- Hosting academics at risk in their own countries by working with the UK organisation CARA (Council for At Risk Academics);
- Establishing a University of Sanctuary working group involving academics, professional services and students and empowering it to develop a University of Sanctuary application;
- Involving the student body;
- Academic development informing curriculum development and research agendas;
- Opening up services to the refugee and asylum seeker community in the city;
- Advocacy both within the university through awareness-raising events and externally, providing a platform for issues.

## Sanctuary scholarships

The term ‘refugee’ is used by the public and in the media in a very broad sense to mean anyone fleeing their country. Legally, in a UK context, an **asylum seeker** is a person applying to the government to be recognised as a refugee by the United Kingdom and allowed to stay in the country. Asylum seekers have limited leave to remain in the United Kingdom; they are charged tuition fees at international student levels and are not entitled to student finance. In reality they receive between 50–64 per cent of equivalent welfare support. They are not normally entitled to work and can wait several years for a decision. If asylum seekers are granted asylum during

their course and given permanent leave to remain they then become eligible for student finance. However, if granted three years' leave to remain they are not entitled to access student finance. In addition, asylum-seeking children who have been through the UK school system while their families wait for a decision are not entitled to student finance and on leaving school are left in limbo, being unable to secure employment or afford to study.

Refugee status is granted after a claim for asylum has been successful after meeting criteria under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. Leave to remain for three to five years will be granted, during which time indefinite leave to remain must be applied for. Refugees may be able to access student finance at undergraduate level but will come under the same rules as home students. So, for example, if a student already has an undergraduate degree they will not be able to get funding for studying in the UK at the same level, despite the fact that the degree achieved in their home country may not be recognised for professional practice in the United Kingdom.

Prior to the current crisis several universities had begun to offer 'Article 26' scholarships open to asylum seekers, as promoted by the Helena Kennedy Foundation. This is a national scheme that has developed in response to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which covers access to educational opportunities (Murray *et al.*, 2014).

There could potentially be issues of equity if the university were to offer scholarships to refugee students granted permanent leave to remain but not to disadvantaged home students. However, in focusing support on asylum seeker students the university is supporting a category of students that are clearly being disadvantaged, who cannot apply to existing university schemes and who will not be in a position to pay back fees retrospectively once earning above a certain threshold, unlike home students. As reported by the UNHCR (2016) only one per cent of refugee youth go to university (against 34 per cent of youth around the world).

The language barrier to higher education has been identified by many as one of the most pressing needs. The university is well suited to providing pre-sessional English courses to refugees and asylum seekers. It is proposed that some places be made available on existing provision (30-, 20-, and 10-week pre-sessional courses).

The university offers a Sanctuary Scholarship scheme as follows:

- up to ten scholarships per year at undergraduate or postgraduate (taught) level;
- offered by fee waiver and a small bursary. Subject to capacity within existing courses and agreement by the faculty;

- in line with Article 26 criteria – open to those seeking asylum, or those given temporary leave to remain while seeking asylum, or a dependent or partner of someone seeking asylum who does not have access to student finance;
- open to those within the local area (to support the civic response of the city of Bradford) or easily commutable distance;
- applicants must be able to support themselves without recourse to university hardship funds;
- English language support will be provided at an appropriate level to successful candidates.

The Sanctuary scholarship scheme was launched in June 2016. The criteria focused on the urgency of need and the opportunity an award would provide as well as financial and practical issues (assessing whether retention would be an issue). A challenge is how to maintain objectivity and consistency given the difficult circumstances presented by applicants.

### **CARA and academics at risk**

The City of Sanctuary movement focuses on asylum seekers and refugees living in the United Kingdom, but another important element of supporting sanctuary is about providing temporary respite to academics at risk in their own countries. This is something a university is uniquely positioned to offer.

The most significant UK organisation for academics at risk is the Council for At Risk Academics (CARA) (Shabi, 2015). CARA was founded in 1933 by British academics in response to Hitler's decision to expel hundreds of leading scholars from German universities on racial grounds. More recently the organisation has renamed itself (from the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics) to reflect its changing agenda. There are now 108 UK universities signed up for CARA's Scholars At Risk UK Universities network.

The University of Bradford joined the CARA network in November 2015 following a period of providing ad hoc support for academics, through agreements with individual schools or individuals. Network membership was an institutional commitment and was decided through the university's senior management with the endorsement of the vice chancellor.

The university has committed to considering hosting an at-risk academic depending on the point in their career an academic may be seeking to come onto a course of study or as a post-doctoral researcher. The university also agreed to provide support through waivers of tuition

fees (or bench fees). The university also made a voluntary membership contribution to CARA.

The University of Sanctuary approach provides two important things:

- commitment to CARA at an institutional level;
- an institutional policy framework for faculties to operate within, rather than making decisions individually or in an ad hoc way

## **University of Sanctuary**

The Faculty of Health Studies showed the value of a holistic, inclusive response. Activities are inclusive and of different types, allowing a range of staff to participate. The faculty's excellent work would be used as the basis for scaling up to a university-wide approach.

Central to this would be a university application for a University of Sanctuary award. The criteria for this award are still being developed by City of Sanctuary, but criteria are likely to be similar to those for the Sanctuary of Health award which the faculty successfully achieved in 2015. An application will need to demonstrate progress against the Sanctuary principles of 'learn, embed and share'. As criteria are in development there is the opportunity for the university to shape what a University of Sanctuary is, in the same way the Faculty of Health Studies helped to shape the criteria and expectations of the Sanctuary in Health award.

One lesson learned from the Faculty of Health Studies was the importance of identifying champions. There had been previous attempts by Faculty of Health Studies and the Faculty of Social Sciences (who were in regular contact with local refugee organisations and had conducted some placement-related activity) to disseminate best practice across the university and involve other faculties in a university-wide response. However, these had had limited success.

Endorsement from the university's senior management for a Sanctuary Working Group allowed a formal approach to be made for representatives from across the university. A University of Sanctuary working group was formed that includes academics, administrators (professional services) and students from across the university. The working group provides the opportunity to develop a University of Sanctuary application and was empowered by senior management to do so.

It was important that faculty champions had the experience and authority to enable change and embed asylum and refugee issues within academic developments in their faculty in learning and teaching and research practice.

Professional services also have a role to play as a university provides a range of services that could be very beneficial to asylum seekers and refugees. This would require further work with the local refugee community in order to establish their needs and how the university can help to meet these through their services. Some could tie in well with the university's health and well-being agenda. Examples of services include:

- gym and sport facilities. Bradford's Sikh community (through the Guru Nanak Gurdwara) makes its gym available to refugee and asylum seeker groups;
- the estates team plans to open the campus to the community;
- library access could facilitate reading for learning or for leisure;
- accommodation policy makes it difficult to open accommodation to asylum seekers and refugees, but there is potential for making introductions to student landlords;
- Arts on Campus and Theatre in The Mill develop work on the migrant and refugee experience.

It was felt that the university should work with the students' union and include them in the University of Sanctuary application. The student body's aim was to rejuvenate the student refugee action society. STAR (Student Action for Refugees) is a national charity of 12,000 students that enables students to volunteer at local refugee projects, campaign to improve the lives of refugees, educate people about refugees and asylum and fundraise to welcome refugees. STAR is made up of over thirty students' union societies affiliated to the charity.

## **Advocacy**

Advocacy is taking place both internally and externally. A university-wide event launched the University of Sanctuary initiative during the university's 2016 Diversity Festival. This attracted more than 80 participants. The event in itself helps to fulfil the 'Learn' core principle needed for a University of Sanctuary award. It aimed to:

- raise awareness among university staff of issues of sanctuary, asylum seekers and refugees;
- share information about the university response, including Sanctuary scholarships;
- introduce the Sanctuary in Health to a wider audience;
- introduce the concept of a University of Sanctuary;

- encourage ideas and encourage people to come forward as faculty/professional services champions to join the University Working Group.

The students' union organised a refugee festival as part of the 2016 Refugee Week (an annual UK-wide programme of activities held around World Refugee Day).

Sanctuary has been included at the university strategic level. Internationalisation and equality and diversity are two of the university's four strategic objectives. The university's internationalisation strategy includes a commitment to achieving a University of Sanctuary award and was approved in May 2016.

Externally, issues have been promoted through presentations at conferences such as Going Global 2016, and EAIE (European Association for International Education) 2016 (Matthews, 2016) and articles, e.g. in *University World News* (O'Malley, 2016). Students and staff have also become involved, for example, one CARA Fellow has blogged on his experiences (Yemane, 2015). This meets the City of Sanctuary core principle of 'Share'.

The university's work is also seeking to influence the agenda for other organisations. CARA had been focusing on academics who would come to the United Kingdom to study on a course or for a teaching or research role. This differed from the City of Sanctuary agenda which has focused on refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. The university's concept of Sanctuary involved identifying the commonalities of these two groups while still respecting differences (such as immigration status under UK legislation).

## **What we have learnt**

We are seeing impact being made at three main levels:

- the local level, within asylum-seeking and refugee communities (scholarships and services);
- the institutional level (through advocacy and awareness raising and curriculum change);
- the wider city level (through advocacy)

The Sanctuary work is strengthening ties with organisations in the city. Previously, this had mainly been achieved through the Faculty of Health Studies (e.g. faculty sponsorship of the Sanctuary in Schools project awards). The activities at university level (particularly the scholarship scheme) are

demonstrating commitment at institutional level and a clearer role regarding sanctuary within the city.

An institutional approach brings several benefits:

- clear senior buy-in and support with decisions and policy changes;
- quick replication of policy changes across the university;
- joining up of efforts of individuals, groups, and faculties so energies are focused;
- mobilising and achieving momentum across the institution.

In summary, we suggest ten pointers for designing and scaling up an initiative to institutional level:

- Have a senior owner. In Bradford's case it is one of the deputy vice chancellors.
- Build on the grassroots activity within the university. The working group provides a means of co-ordinating operational activity. The group provides the skills to develop the University of Sanctuary application and has been empowered by senior management to do so.
- Have a co-ordinating institutional manager to bridge the senior and operational levels.
- Find a framework to provide institutional focus. In our case the University of Sanctuary application provides such a framework.
- Act within institutional capability. In deciding on a university response it is important to do so within the competencies of the university. For example, for a university to consider delivering education in a refugee camp (Cremonini, 2016) it would need appropriate expertise in delivering distance or blended learning solutions at scale, but the University of Bradford felt its strength was in what could be done within the city.
- Consider how the university fits with other responses and align accordingly, be they local within the city, regional, national or wider.
- Think widely about types of support. This does not have to be only academic. A university can respond in different ways beyond the courses it offers or research it conducts. It can open up university services to refugee groups (e.g. access to libraries, sports facilities, English language). This provides some stability and a nurturing environment and a semblance of normality.
- Consider issues of equity. Some students might perceive it to be unfair to offer scholarships or preferential access to services to asylum seekers. It was pointed out that this group does not currently have access to

support schemes provided for home or international students. In fact an asylum seeker would be expected to pay international student fees and would not have access to student loan systems.

- Ensure continuity of student involvement given the fact that a student representative may only serve a one-year term.
- Get something going. Being an academic institution it may be tempting to be too theoretical; instead recognise the need to be pragmatic and practical.

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