

## Sanctuary Scholarship Legal Fund

Proposer: Jessie Yeung

Seconder: Natasha Worthington Zapata

### Background:

1. University of Bristol is a University of Sanctuary and runs a Sanctuary Scholarship program. Our Sanctuary Scholarship students come from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Ukraine and more. They've been forcibly displaced from their home countries and many have been separated from their family and friends. Those with asylum-seeking status are unable to work or access student funding, which makes higher education financially impossible without the scholarship. In addition to the financial difficulties that they are facing, some of them are at the risk of receiving Study Bans or other immigration limitation too.
2. In most cases, the Sanctuary Scholarship disqualifies students from applying for legal aid, which requires the individual to meet the following criteria:
  - a. A person should not have a disposable income exceeding £733 per month.
  - b. They cannot have a gross income exceeding £2657 per month.
  - c. They cannot have assets exceeding £8000.

This puts the scholars in a uniquely vulnerable position.

*“With no access to employment and limited access to welfare benefits, this means that the only means students have in challenging the study bans is either to spend the scholarship money which is provided to pay for rent, books and food, or to raise money via external fund raising.”* - Katie Bales (Lecturer in law at the University of Bristol, a trustee of the City of Sanctuary charity and a founding member of the Sanctuary Scholarship Working Group at the University)

3. In 2018, two of our sanctuary scholars received study bans a week before exams. If they did sit them, this action would be considered a breach of their ‘bail conditions’ which could potentially result in a fine, or criminal proceedings, including up to six months imprisonment. They were forced to rely on a Go Fund Me page to collect funds to appeal this decision, an experience that was extremely stressful and dramatically affected their ability to study. This is highlighted in the following quote:
  - *“I am a Sanctuary Scholar at the University of Bristol, undertaking the first year of my undergraduate. The study ban was placed on me a few days before I was due to sit my first exam. As a result, I was not allowed to study or sit my exams. If I had breached this condition, it would have been classified as a criminal offence which could result in criminal proceedings, a fine and/or six-month imprisonment. I am devastated and shattered that I wasn’t able to sit the exams I worked so hard towards. In order to challenge the study ban, I needed to be able to pay the legal costs. Because I have a scholarship, I could not access legal aid but this money*

*should be spent on books, accommodation, transport and student living. I cannot afford to spend this money on legal fees and complete my studies.” - Sanctuary Scholar at Bristol who experienced a study ban.*

- *“A study ban is one of the most horrifying experience for anyone who has desire for education. It makes one feel neglected, not wanted, lost of hope and dreams which of course can cause emotional and psychological effect.” - Another Sanctuary Scholar at Bristol who experienced a study ban*

4. There were also multiple cases when students faced costs due to ongoing asylum claims. These costs caused huge amounts of stress to the individuals which affected their ability to focus on their studies. Failure to pay these costs and get proper legal advice could also have led to their appeal getting rejected, making them appeal-rights exhausted and liable for a study ban, terminating their schooling altogether. Additionally, this uncertainty can have extremely negative effects on a student’s mental health.

- *“I am a sanctuary scholar and an asylum seeker in my second year at the university. Last year, one of my appeals was dismissed and I was told to get an expert statement to help my case to be carried forward. The expert statement would have cost me £1000 and I had no means of obtaining that amount. The University suggested that I might be eligible to claim a short-term loan from the finance department, but being in such a volatile position as I am in right now, made me realise that I can not take a loan that I may not be able to pay back if the wind changed its course. To elaborate on that, had I received a study ban because of my appeal being dismissed, I would have had to suspend my studies, not receive the scholarship instalment and hence not being able to repay the loan. Fortunately, I was able to find a case-specific loophole and that is only because of my case being linked to my family who are also asylum seekers living in the UK. Therefore, I no longer needed the expert statement, however, someone in a similar position might have found that expert statement crucial in order to continue receiving the right to study.” - Sanctuary Scholar at Bristol*

5. In 2019, a motion passed so the SU legal aid fund was set up to support those students. Having a fund specifically to support legal fees would have helped in all of the above cases:

- *“In terms of the fund, that seems like a great idea. It is certainly very nerve wracking for students to embark on legal cases when there is a possibility of costs orders being made against them, and not knowing exactly how much it will cost. In terms of scholarship recipients, the issue arises that as they have been in receipt of the scholarship, they are often not eligible for legal aid.” - Helen Baron, solicitor for Duncan Lewis*
- *“Not knowing if I wouldn’t have the money to pay the lawyers for their legal service was tormenting. It felt like having one problem at that given time wasn’t enough, but then seeing the uncertainty; in terms of money for the services I had already used,*

*“I felt awful. I had amazing people supporting me along the way but having some surety of getting that money at that time would have saved me from a lot of stress and would have helped me concentrate on the situation at hand.”* - Sanctuary Scholar at Bristol who experienced a Study Ban

- *“A legal fund would help consolidate the right of our Sanctuary Scholars to study at Bristol. It’s essential in ensuring they receive the legal representation they deserve to have an undisrupted university experience - it would help alleviate both the mental and financial burden of legal costs.”* - Jason Palmer (Previous ‘Equality, Liberation and Access Officer’ and trustee board member)

6. Last year (2025), we received a claim and it has brought the fund down to a critical amount. We predict with the existing amount of money left in there, we would only be able to support one more claim.

**Purpose:**

1. Continue to provide financial support to Sanctuary Scholars who don’t qualify for legal aid for any legal costs that they incur relating to their Immigration Status. This could be related to:
  - Study bans
  - Solicitors in ongoing asylum claims
  - Expert witness statements
  - Translators
  - Court Hearings
2. Ensuring equality and accessibility for Sanctuary Scholars at our university, bringing it in line with the experience of other students at Bristol.
3. Provide Sanctuary Scholars the security they need in their studies to reach their full potential.
4. Alleviate the financial and emotional pressure of legal costs, which has adverse effects on the Sanctuary Scholars, to allow them to reach their full academic potential at Bristol.
5. Re-evaluate the criteria of the Legal Aid fund with various stakeholder, and prioritize those with lived experience of being a sanctuary scholar.

**Action:**

1. The SU will commit to fully supporting any fundraising event or efforts for the fund. This includes working in partnership with Amnesty, STAR and any other interested societies.
2. Donors can put money into the fund at any time.

3. To withdraw money from the fund, law firms representing Sanctuary Scholars will invoice the fund directly.
4. Specific procedure on how the money will be allocated and how the fund will operate not mentioned in this motion will be decided on in meetings between the SU, STAR, Amnesty, the Sanctuary Scholars and any other interested parties.