

## Aspire - supporting sanctuary seekers

Dr Anna Varadi, Widening Participation Manager, Cardiff University

Dr Sara Jones, Co-ordinating Lecturer, Lifelong Learning, Cardiff University

### Context and Aspire overview

Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants face specific inequalities and are often an under-represented group in higher education (HE). The Equality and Human Rights Commission published a report in 2016 which highlighted that migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are some of the most disadvantaged groups in England.<sup>1</sup> The barriers they face are specific to this group and include gaps in knowledge in navigating the UK HE system (UCAS application, personal statement, contextual admission policy, flexibility towards GCSE and A-level requirements) and financial support.

As part of our commitment as a University of Sanctuary,<sup>2</sup> Cardiff University's Aspire programme provides bespoke services and opportunities for sanctuary seekers and develops their sense of belonging.

The Aspire programme includes a bespoke open day and summer school, to support and facilitate progression to UK HE. Additionally, through the Aspire initiative, the University offers scholarships for its Pathways to a Degree programme or IELTS course, to ultimately support sanctuary seekers' enrolment in undergraduate or postgraduate study.

### Aspire Open Day

Every year Cardiff University offers a bespoke open day for sanctuary seekers. The Aspire Open Day offers refugees, asylum seekers and forced migrants a welcoming and informative space to learn about HE study options. The event includes exhibitors and key organisations such as the Welsh Refugee Council, Refugee Education UK, STAR – Student Action for Refugees, Cardiff and Vale College, and Glitter Cymru. University departments and schools also play a vital role in the day's success.

In 2025, with 18 exhibitors, we welcomed over 70 sanctuary seekers from more than 21 countries at our Aspire Open Day. This presented a 304% increase in guest numbers from the previous year. 100% of guests said they felt welcome at Cardiff University and that they would recommend the University to other sanctuary seekers.



---

<sup>1</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016) [Is England Fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2016](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Universities of Sanctuary](#) is a national network of university staff and students working to make HE institutions places of safety, solidarity and empowerment for people seeking sanctuary.

“Thanks so much for inviting us to come, and for all of the hard work you clearly put into bringing the event to life.”  
Huw Hides, Lead Practitioner,  
Refugee Education UK

“The Aspire day was helpful, educative and all the staff were helpful as they gave first-hand information about university and what to do.”  
Aspire Open Day Guest

## Aspire Summer School

The Aspire Summer School, which recruits partly at the Aspire Open Day, welcomes up to 40 refugees and asylum seekers onto campus for eight days of free English language classes, delivered by the English Language Programmes team, and short courses delivered by the University's Division of Lifelong Learning. A highlight every year is the Graduation Ceremony we organise for participants, using the same graduation gowns and hats as Cardiff University's standard graduation events, donated to us for the day by the University's provider, Marston Events.




In 2023-24, 33 sanctuary seekers from 18 different countries participated in the Summer School, creating a diverse international community. The students experienced university life and built a supportive community. The proportion of participants who could envision themselves studying at a UK university increased during the programme to 92%. Participants' confidence in using English language skills in an academic environment increased from 76% to 88%, with all participants indicating improved English language confidence by the end of the course.




Many of the 2024-25 participants have since moved forward with their education journey: five received Aspire Pathway Scholarships to study on a Cardiff University Pathways to a Degree programme, with several others also enrolled on the Pathways programme, and at least two 2023-24 summer school alumni have enrolled on Cardiff University undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The latter two students have both received the Cardiff University Together at Cardiff Award (formerly, Opportunity Award), a full scholarship for asylum seekers.

In 2024-25, we have welcomed approximately 35 students from 12 countries of origin. More than 50% of enrolments came from our Aspire Open Day 2025, with further applications through Cardiff University Pathways to a Degree and Adult Learning community courses. The current Aspire Summer School cohort will graduate in late June 2025, after which we will be able to track their progress toward HE and to Cardiff University, in particular.




‘This course was incredibly important and useful for me. After each lesson, I felt strength and confidence. I’m incredibly grateful to everyone involved for this opportunity.’  
Aspire Summer School participant



‘If you’ve been confused or uncertain of what the future holds for you here, the Aspire Summer School is the best place to be. With Aspire you’ll find your track in life!’  
Aspire Summer School participant

### Aspire Pathways Scholarships

Some sanctuary seekers need to demonstrate English language competence and meet the entry requirements for their chosen HE course and are not eligible for student finance. Additionally, digital poverty and digital exclusion are often witnessed in sanctuary seeking communities. Cardiff University’s Division of Lifelong Learning (LEARN) provides Pathways to Degrees (see accompanying case study) to facilitate access to HE. Successfully passing Pathways modules provides proof of English competence which is essential for asylum seekers who do not have the financial means to pay for alternative English language courses, such as IELTS. We now also provide six Aspire Pathways Scholarships each academic year for asylum seekers. Each scholarship includes fully funded tuition fees for the Pathway and a laptop. In 2024-25, five of the Aspire scholarship holders have offers to progress their study at Cardiff University (two at undergraduate level and three for postgraduate study).



‘At Cardiff University, it has been as if everything about me has come alive all over again. I can live. I can focus and know where I’m going. It has been amazing. Making friends, sharing experiences and empowering each other.’  
Aspire Pathway Scholarship holder



‘I’m looking forward to reaching my goals and being able to create lots of memories in my university life.’  
Aspire IELTS Scholarship recipient 2023/24

### Aspire IELTS Scholarships

Across 2023-24 and 2024-25 we supported 20 refugees and asylum seekers with IELTS Scholarships. The 2023-24 scholarship provided a laptop, essential textbooks, and the IELTS exam fee, whilst the 2024-25 scholarship included access to a year-long Academic English course, a laptop, essential textbooks, the IELTS exam fee and support with other additional costs (such as transport, etc.).

As part of the Aspire IELTS Scholarship, students are supported with the final IELTS exam through the completion of five Academic English for Adults classes. These courses develop students’ English for academic purposes including reading, writing, listening and speaking skills as well as strengthening their grammar, academic vocabulary, understanding of

academic conventions, research and independent study skills. The course is aimed at students who need to improve their academic English in a short period of time in preparation to pursue academic study in an English-medium environment in the near future.

The 2024-25 scholarship recipients, several of whom were Aspire Summer School alumni, also received individual support with personal statements and university applications and are all working to progress into further HE study.

### **Concluding comment**

The Aspire programme is a critical component of our University of Sanctuary certification and provides a strong outreach opportunity aligned with the University's civic mission. The Aspire activities work together holistically, in ways that foster transition from one element to the next, developing learners' confidence and sense of belonging to their peers and the University, in turn facilitating their next steps into higher education.

This case study has been produced and shared as part of the Medr-funded QAA Cymru project: Enabling learner progression into and within higher education.

Find out more about the project on the QAA Cymru [website](#).

