Researching transitions to distance higher education with students from refugee backgrounds: A case from the Sanctuary programme at the Open University

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The Open University

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Forward

At the time of writing this report we are experiencing a critical moment in the world's history with global conflicts on the rise, violent acts and divisions that seem beyond reconciliation, human rights violations, and alarming numbers of forcibly displaced people. We therefore ask 'What part can we, as universities, play to transform our world in ways that can mitigate against these major societal challenges we are facing? What is the role of education and academia "to better understand the amplification of difference, the othering of beings and perspectives, and the learning associated with these processes?" (ICLS, 2023). Can we develop partnerships, processes, and learning environments that are welcoming and that engender abilities to care and to promote compassion? Through our scholarly work, we address that growing urgency in HEIs to continue developing theory and practice that strives towards addressing these objectives.

We would like to acknowledge the invaluable support and insights provided by our Sanctuary Students at The Open University. We would also like to thank the Pan-university, Cross-faculty Scholarship scheme at the OU who funded this research[1].

We dedicate this research to displaced people everywhere who have a passion for lifelong learning.

Executive Summary

Scope of the report

The research project investigated the transition processes of students from refugee backgrounds as they enter higher education (HE). The aim of the project was to expand our understanding of the concept of educational transition: firstly, in relation to transitions to distance and online higher education among students from diverse educational backgrounds and experiences, and secondly, in relation to the nature of socio-cultural transitions involved for students with 'lived experience' of displacement, and precarious migration statuses (i.e. refugees, asylum seekers). The project explored the concept of transitions from these angles in order to assess its importance in creating inclusive institutional policies and educational practices. The research was conducted as part of a major initiative within the Open University UK - the Open Futures Sanctuary Scholarships[2]. In doing so, this project contributes to the growing body of research examining the challenges of transition to higher education for diverse groups, and pre-requisites for promoting and enhancing access and participation to HE for displaced students. As such, we hope to co-produce useful knowledge with our Sanctuary students in order to identify problems and make a success of the Sanctuary Scholarships. We also intend to share our analyses more widely as the challenges of distance and blended learning become more pronounced in HE.

Key findings

The Open Futures Sanctuary programme set-up a mechanism for UK-based forcibly displaced people to access a distance learning university in the UK. The programme included various stakeholders in the university, while several members of staff and a wide-range of services were mobilised to support sanctuary students to access and participate in their studies. The key findings from the project are summarised below:

1. **The sanctuary programme extends the OU's widening access and participation commitment and aligns with the OU's social justice mission**. It also serves other wider institutional initiatives such as the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). This opportunity enabled a cohort of forcibly displaced people with various backgrounds (i.e. ethnicity, gender, country of origin) to pursue studies at HE level and provided a sense of purpose, identity, and achievement. It

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[2] https://www.open.ac.uk/courses/fees-and-funding/sanctuary-scholarship

enabled refugees and people seeking asylum to further carry on with their lifelong learning trajectory, invest in their future and make active contributions to the society in which they would like to settle and make their new homes. However, evidence points to a concern whether the programme indeed serves the most disadvantaged people in the asylum system. Further considerations on supporting pathways to undergraduate studies and post-UG studies for existing sanctuary students are needed.

2. **The sanctuary programme receives high-level of appreciation from students, staff and other stakeholders**. Evidence generated suggests that students were highly appreciative of networks of support and services offered to them to support their studies. They reported making choices and decisions that were meaningful to them; improving language skills and responding better to existing work needs; and developing confidence and engaging with people who are embedded in a British institution. They also viewed their studies as offering them better prospects for work and employability in the future and enhancing their understanding of studying and living in the UK. Importantly, their studies also offered a sense of hope, achievement, and purpose, and a feeling that they 'mattered'. Many students were able to develop strong and trusted relationships, primarily with their tutors. Evidence is limited regarding developing relationships with peers and wider OU student community. Similarly, staff viewed the sanctuary programme as being strongly aligned to their values and appeared highly motivated and prepared to work with sanctuary students. Tutors reported benefits from their work with sanctuary students, such as professional satisfaction and feelings of gratitude for supporting others; developing expertise on a topic that matters to them; reflecting on various dominant narratives in relation to forcibly displaced students; and becoming more aware of their students' realities and everyday situations. However, the programme did not have much visibility beyond people already involved in this, hence many members of staff across the institution were unaware of its existence.

3. **Sanctuary students were positioned as learners in a way that was inextricably tied with their experience of displacement.** Students in their majority appeared to be performing well in their studies, but their experience of displacement posed additional vulnerabilities on them. Other than being new to distance education, many of the students were also newly arrived in the UK (e.g. Ukrainian students). Evidence points to students experiencing high levels of uncertainty and dependencies in their lives, which were not directly linked to their studies (e.g. housing, financial struggles, concerns about family in home countries). This

required careful considerations on behalf of tutors and advisors, where for example they had to grant extensions or extend their support to cover personal issues and connect students to their local networks. Evidence shows that the pace of our students' learning lives does not synchronise with the set time frames offered to them. For example, their arrival in the UK may not match the scholarship application times. Their pending / lack of documentation may prohibit students from applying to the university. Evolving situations in their lives (e.g. status, housing) may affect how they get on with their studies, how they formulate priorities and make decisions (and ultimately whether they remain in the country or not). When the university experience is framed in terms of firm boundaries, rigid processes, and fixed points this may pose additional challenges to students from refugee backgrounds. As a result, maintaining porous and flexible boundaries in relation to this cohort is deemed important. Equally important is to place more emphasis on flexible, 'unsettled' and open-ended movements throughout a learning life and recognising that this may be meaningful for students.

4. **The Sanctuary programme builds on existing OU systems and services, with the addition of a few sanctuary-related elements** (e.g. Sanctuary champion). Existing communication mechanisms were used by various teams to support the delivery of the sanctuary programme (e.g. use of phone calls, Adobe Connect). Many elements of the programme 'sit', and are 'owned' by, different units or stakeholders in the university. Evidence points to bureaucratic processes, that students and tutors related to the sanctuary programme had to go through (e.g. finance support / equipment, EAP bookings). Evidence also suggests that there are distributed levels of support across many individuals / teams. Although support networks were viewed very positively by students, some evidence also points to additional challenges for them, including complex liaison with units/staff, changing contact points, having to figure out 'who to contact when', and not having access to information at appropriate times (e.g. support for equipment). Distributed systems further pose challenges in terms of monitoring risks and maintaining a holistic view of the provision. Finally, there were rigid processes and fixed responsibilities as to what a member of staff could do in specific situations, leading to interventions from other units or individuals, who may affect how a situation is being dealt with (e.g. delays, weakened trust, telling and re-telling stories). A key element to consider is to support students to build 'trusted relationships' with individuals and the institution itself. Whereas key contact points (i.e. SST champions) existed in the programme, ensuring that a

specific role / person is in place with a primary responsibility to oversee the sanctuary programme is paramount. Such a role / person will provide stability and support for students, take them through the whole process, maintain a strong understanding of the programme's strategic direction, and can also act as a liaison (i.e. a broker) between students and other people / services in the institution.

5. **Relational work and existing forms of expertise among members of staff underpinned the implementation of the Sanctuary programme**. The evidence emphasises the relational aspects of studying in HE - the importance of establishing relationships and being able to reach out to a trusted individual / team, including one's tutor, appeared critical to this cohort. Relational work and expertise help to recognise and respond to student needs, develop strategies in response to those needs, and anticipate issues that may arise. Supporting displaced students to have interactions with people whom they see as well embedded in a British organization was important, as they often lack such opportunities. Evidence regarding relationships established between sanctuary students with other students in the OU wider community was limited in the study. In addition to this, evidence highlights how motivated the tutors and advisors were to work and support students from refugee backgrounds and how highly they valued the responsibility that was allocated to them. Nearly everyone shared some relevant professional experience they had in the past of working with refugee and asylum seekers. Having members of staff with relevant expertise to work with people from different backgrounds is an important asset for the sanctuary programme itself. Our study points to incidents, which required advanced forms of expertise (e.g. PTSD, mental health). Many members of staff already have such expertise, but a few tutors expressed that more opportunities are needed to develop expertise relevant to one's role (also see Finding 6).

6. **Participation in the sanctuary programme provided a form of professional development for staff. Further development opportunities are needed by creating informal spaces and supporting inter-professional conversations.** Evidence generated suggests that tutors and advisors benefitted from their participation in the sanctuary programme (see Finding 1). They reported feeling well prepared and supported in undertaking their role in the sanctuary programme and expressed confidence in the institution and colleagues to support them as and when needed. The analysis points to a single online training event organised by the access programme. The evidence suggests that there is a need to strengthen capacity among staff / teams whose roles are associated

with the sanctuary provision to support development of expertise. For example, training on legal issues may be relevant to staff in SST, whereas training on trauma-informed practice may be relevant to everyone. Also, the evidence points to lack of dedicated 'safe' spaces within an institution where tutors can draw on one another to develop further skills and good practice but also supported in dealing with the emotional labour of working with vulnerable students. Elements such as in-person participation, peer-peer communication, and expert-practitioner communication seem to be highly valued and could be considered within future iterations of CPD. When it comes to professional development opportunities, these should be relevant to one's role, offered in different modalities, and be offered on an on-going basis, so staff could participate as they see appropriate. Such provision will be beneficial not only in terms of working with students from refugee backgrounds but for the wider OU student community.

There is evidence to suggest that support is needed around use of English language for academic practice. Similarly, evidence suggests that a lack of understanding of the culture associated with the English language can influence the way the students navigate and participate in their studies (e.g. relationship building). This is related to a set of skills the students should be developing as part of their studies in a UK HE context. Feedback shared with us (and with tutors) following the monthly EAP sessions point to benefits to students from such tailored provision. Students come from a variety of educational backgrounds, each with different norms when it comes to academic practice. However, a displaced student that just arrived in the UK is likely to not have developed a strong awareness of EAP or the culture associated with English language. A refugee / asylum seeker who is based in the UK for a longer period, may be able to manage this better. Support around English language was an additional service offered to students as and when needed, but their tutor had to put a request in (up to 2 sessions). For a few tutors, EAP referral processes were not always a known procedure. Sanctuary students - and arguably other student groups - need more support in terms of familiarising themselves with forms of cultural learning to be able to participate in UK HE.

7. **Students viewed distance learning and flexible provision positively, but there is some evidence to suggest that students were not feeling part of a community.** Students understood flexibility through the freedom to learn and study as one chooses or is able. At the same time, the analysis points to some

students feeling isolated, despite stating that they were still able to study and perform well in her studies. Tutorials were seen as helping with feelings of isolation. Suggestions were also made to being able to visit the OU campus and meeting other students in-person. For a few students, having access to other local groups, activities and networks seemed to have a strong influence on perceptions of, and performance in their studies. There is scope to provide learners with hybrid choices between in-person and online learning or with choice in modalities better suited to student needs and preferences. What the evidence generated further suggests is that individual students may need different spaces and (smaller) group formations to enable participation. This aspect is not exclusive to sanctuary students – indeed other groups of students at the OU may have similar needs, but what the evidence suggests is that for displaced students the need to feel part of a community might be heightened.

8. **Greater openness, flexibility and tailored provision are needed in working with students from refugee backgrounds.** As a university, and a sanctuary programme, there is a need to have structures and processes in place. At the same time, our approaches should reflect the pace that a displaced person's life may have and their needs. Refugee students are in flux; educational provision should mirror this and work around this. Offering tailored provision (e.g. EAP - see also Finding 7) will serve the notion of equitable provision to certain groups. Offering flexibility (also see Finding 8) will benefit life-long learning and support decisions made by students based on social, political and personal constraints that they may face at certain times. Evidence suggests that transitioning to university is not only about academic studies, but is also about connections, relations, and skills (also see Finding 7). Thus, viewing this as a holistic and on-going experience where a student may be moving in and out of studies is critical.

Key recommendations

Key recommendations have been identified to guide future work in subsequent phases of the Sanctuary programme. The recommendations draw on the components that were discussed previously as part of the data analysis. They aim to promote an approach to strengthening capacity for individuals and teams involved in the programme and creating an enabling and welcoming environment for students from refugee backgrounds to support their transitions to higher education.

1. **Ensure the programme prioritises and serves the most underserved / most in-need in the asylum system.** The sanctuary programme illustrates how university provision could be supporting displaced people. Many of the students in the existing cohort have strong educational qualification and previous academic studies. Approximately half students were in the UK under 'Home for Ukraine' visa scheme. To support displaced people who may be in greater need in terms of lack of opportunities to access education, the scholarships should set criteria that prioritise the most underserved in the UK asylum system. Ensure that the Sanctuary programme does not make divisions within the cohort itself (students on UG pathways Vs students on the access programme). Consider expanding the programme to refugees based overseas, given the majority of refugees (83%) are hosted in low- and middle-income countries.

2. **Establish a key Sanctuary contact across the cohort and maintain high levels of dedicated support through individuals and teams.** The role of the Sanctuary champion is a positive development at the OU. This role should be further supported with additional dedicated sanctuary related roles/structures that will be more visible within the institution and with clearly delineated responsibilities. This person should be a liaison / broker between the student and other services / teams in the institution and maintain an overview of programme's direction and provision.

3. **Offer enhanced support to students at the point of application and module enrolment, and post-programme support.** Consider offering tailored support towards the end of academic year, especially for students on the access programme. The university offered a wide range of support to sanctuary students. However, more support is needed in key stages such as the application process and enrolments on modules to help students make informed decisions. Many applicants rejected the access fee waiver, which may indicate a lack of awareness of how the access programme could benefit them. This could be offered for example through drop-in information sessions, collaborative awareness events with key charities in the field, scholarship sessions, raising awareness of online and distance learning and the access programme, induction events for specific qualifications, other OU resources for preparation.

4. **Review and simplify existing processes in the institution to support access to resources and mechanisms of support. Provide appropriate information to tutors at relevant times –** e.g. access to finance support, equipment, EAP bookings, flagging system. Some tutors were not aware of the sanctuary

programme, despite having sanctuary students. Consider the timing where information about the programme and students is distributed to tutors / faculties. Ensure the student / tutor system includes information about sanctuary programme.

5. **Foster relationships among students and create spaces to enhance a sense of belonging among students -** e.g. create opportunities for students to connect with other students in their cohort and the institution; offer more support in the early stages of studies through virtual or f2f meetings in specific locations; offer induction events for students on the sanctuary programme; pair sanctuary students of the previous cohort with students on the new cohort.

6. **Consider the provision of EAP as a core offer within the sanctuary programme.** This can be achieved by establishing a dedicated EAP provision as part of the Access programme or continue with the provision of bi-weekly / monthly EAP sessions to sanctuary students. Opportunities for communication back with the tutor should be sought. EAP person / facilitator to be seen as part of the Sanctuary programme.

7. **Encourage greater flexibility in provision, including tools used for communication purposes**. This can be achieved by offering in-person meetings and encouraging video calls between tutors and students (e.g. in early stages of studies), SST teams and students, or being able to use different tools with students.

8. **Encourage sanctuary team / APD teams to organize professional development events based on the programme's needs.** Through a series of professional development opportunities (formal and informal) the programme will explore and respond to layered responsibility for tutor care and development through activities tailored to needs of specific groups of staff and recognition of emotional labour in workload. For example, academic services and SST - signposting, basic migration status understanding; tutors – trauma informed practice and mental health provision.

9. **Consider creating opportunities for student-centred and refugee-led activities at the OU** - e.g. in design of courses, in implementation of activities, adapting curriculum, different forms of assessment, events organized with students, events offering bespoke support to sanctuary students.

10. **Raise awareness of the sanctuary programme at the OU and strengthen its evidence-informed provision.** This could be achieved with dedicated promotional materials featuring students in the programme, events organized where students are invited / organisers. The sanctuary team could be working closely with academics to support monitoring and evaluation of the programme but also consider partnerships with local and national refugee organisations and other sanctuary universities to inform our provision.

Keywords:
Displaced students, refugees, higher education, distance learning, online education, transitions

1. Introduction

The project '*Researching transitions to distance and online higher education with students from refugee backgrounds*' took place in 2022-2023. It was situated within a major institutional initiative at the Open University (OU), the Open Futures Sanctuary Scholarships, and was linked to students from precarious migration statuses (e.g. asylum seekers, refugees) based in the UK (henceforth Sanctuary students).

2. Aims and objectives

The project aimed to examine the transition processes of the OU's first cohort of Sanctuary students (n=44) who enrolled in the university in October 2022. Students were either awarded a scholarship for undergraduate studies (n=12) or offered a fee waiver to study on a pre- university Access programme (n=32). The project focused on students' first year of studies at the OU to examine enablers and barriers they have in their academic journeys, strategies they developed or adopted, how they organise their studies at a distance, and the value that the learning activities bring to their educational trajectories. The project also focused on tutors and staff in the student support teams (SST) with direct responsibility to work with/support those students. This was deemed important as tutors often have regular communication with students hence their insights were critical to meet the objectives of the project.

Specifically, the project objectives were as following:
- to engage the Sanctuary students actively in their learning and offer support as and when necessary (e.g. through EAP sessions);
- to support the Sanctuary students to plan, review and reflect on the value of the learning activities with which they are involved in Year 1 of their studies and in this way help them in achieving their study goals;
- to evaluate their Year 1 journey through the OU from pre-enrolment to completions to identify enablers and barriers and propose recommendations for resolving them;
- to better understand tutors and SST's experiences in working with Sanctuary students;
- to liaise with key partners in EDI, APS, SST and Scholarships team, Development Office, Academic services and offer emerging findings to assist the teams in planning for the resources required to set up for success for present and future cohorts of sanctuary students.

The project directly addressed institutional priorities including the critical evaluation of early retention activities at Level 1 and the experiences of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as the intersection between these. Of note, although students with refugee backgrounds are not a standalone group explicitly named in HEIs Access Participation and Success (APS) targets, they share all those characteristics with groups that are named (i.e. BAME, disabilities, socio-economic and/or gender). For example, students with refugee backgrounds are likely to have experienced multiple trauma and to experience mental health issues. There is a strong argument in favour of understanding the needs and experiences of our sanctuary students from an intersectional perspective – in other words, in terms of the multiple, overlapping but distinctive forms of disadvantage they confront, and which our OU provision needs to take into account. Further to this, the project supported key commitments within the APS strategy and key goals within the proposed University Strategy 2022–2027 in relation to greater reach, success for our students, societal impact, equity, and social sustainability.

3. Background

Access to Higher Education for forcibly displaced students

Despite some progress made in improving access and participation in HE for forcibly displaced people (UNHCR, 2021), there remain multiple complex and interconnected barriers (Bauer & Gallagher, 2020; Halcic & Arnold, 2019; Colucci et al., 2017) that impede access to quality education, as laid out by the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4. These range from lack of accreditation and recognition of previous learning to low or limited English proficiency and access to scholarships - to name a few. At the end of 2022, over 100 million people are estimated to have been forcibly displaced worldwide - the highest ever recorded (UNHCR, 2022). The average length of displacement is now estimated to be over 25 years (UNHCR, 2016). For tens of millions of people their education journeys are disrupted and only 6% of refugees participate in HE (UNHCR, 2021). The response to this challenge is more important than ever and the role of HE institutions (HEIs) and the academic community is critical.

Digital and online education are growing and appealing forms of HE provision in contexts that constitute forced displacement - in emergency settings, and in resettlement and asylum contexts. They offer displaced people an appealing offer "accessible in refugee camps, during migrant itineraries or while settling down in host

countries" (Halcic & Arnold, 2019: 346). Previous research shows that access and participation in HE may offer a sense of purpose and a possibility to participate in society (Dryden-Peterson, 2016) as well as pathways to employment, a higher income, and ways to overcome poverty and to support families in the host country and in the countries of origin (Gruttner et al., 2018). While admittedly all students entering and participating in HE may experience challenges, for students who are forcibly displaced, these are compounded by their linguistic and cultural diversity, instability, possible trauma and disrupted schooling (Baker et al., 2019). There is a limited, although growing body of research (e.g. Halcick & Arnold, 2019; Brunton et al., 2019; Witthaus, 2022) that examines the experiences of forcibly displaced people when studying and learning online and at a distance. Their needs can differ greatly from the needs of other groups of students and many additional challenges have been identified that are specific to digital education. These include access to the necessary digital infrastructure (e.g. access to devices), and cultural and linguistic barriers (UNESCO 2018; Colucci et al., 2017), difficulties in navigating online higher education (Halcick & Arnold, 2019); persistent barriers relating to financial status or digital skills (Brunton et al., 2019); and social isolation (Witthaus, 2022) as students are regularly experiencing difficulties connecting with other students and staff in the institution. In a UK context, only a few studies are published that examine provision for students from refugee backgrounds at an online and distance HE (e.g. Witthaus, 2022). The study presented in this report is timely and contributes to this limited body of research.

4. Conceptual framework

Transitions to Higher Education

The concept of transition has substantial influence on policy and practice in HE, often driven by a need to better understand students' experiences in response to economic and moral imperatives (Baker & Irwin, 2021). In other words, central to education policies among higher education institutions (HEIs) is the successful management of transitions into and through HE as a means of increasing the competitiveness of their institutions and generate income. Ecclestone (2006) attributes this increasing interest to progression from one educational stage to another to factors such as the proliferation of pathways for young people, the drive to retain them in education, the increasing individualisation of social lives and economically driven imperatives for lifelong learning.

When one speaks of transition, what is usually meant is a process connecting an 'unyielding' past (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999: 4) to a 'pre-given' future (ibid): this could for example be the movements young people make between educational levels, and into higher education in particular, or into the workplace, and so on. Transitions are thus usually depicted as linear, fixed processes and turning points in one's life over time. Quinn (2009) challenges such a fixed notion of transition and argues that it is not simply inadequate, but that it also causes significant problems for students, particularly if associated with a 'failed transition to HE' for many young people, which may mirror multiple other 'failed' transitions in their lives.

Transition is a concern for everyone involved in educational institutions, leading to a dominant view of transition as a risk that needs to be carefully managed within HEIs. Therefore, much research on transitions highlights the challenges that students are facing, irrespective of backgrounds. Although transitions into and through higher education can be challenging for all learners (Palmer et al., 2009), students from refugee backgrounds "face particular difficulties due to their culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and pre-settlement experiences of instability, insecurity, likely trauma and interrupted education" (Baker & Irwin, 2021: 75). What is more, students from refugee backgrounds are going through multiple pivotal moments of change as a permanent state of being rather than a periodic occurrence. That said, and paradoxically, they also often find their lives being 'stalled' and in a state of 'immobility'. As such, and although the main narrative associated with HE entry is one that signifies change, for these students "it may best signify stasis" (Quinn, 2009: 120). So, despite entering HE (distance and online HE in our study), they will most likely continue to have the same 'status' from the Home Office; they stay in the same town; often living at home with their families and socialising with the same groups as before; and for many of them different housing arrangements, exiting and re-entering the host country, or even returning to their home countries is simply not an option. As such, entering and going through HE for students from refugee backgrounds is not a single, neat, prescribed road that one pursues in certain age and importantly, it cannot be seen in isolation from other social, cultural and political contexts. To borrow an expression used by Burawoy and Verdery in their 1999 edited volume, this is 'an uncertain process' that is "reworked continuously" (Ecclestone et al., 2005: 2) in ways that:

> *"take into account the forward and backward motions of life and the closures and openings of opportunities to learn (Colley 2007; cited in Quinn, 2009: 122) that occur because of the material dilemmas and constraints produced by economic, social and political forces" (ibid).*

The findings of our research are to be framed in relation to such a 'flawed' commitment to narrow notions of transitions as fixed turning points. The research to which we refer to in this report concerns a particular group: displaced people, with or without a refugee status, living across the UK, and new to the Open University (in their Year 1). They had all attended previous universities in their countries of origin outside the UK. The majority had additional experiences within HE through participation in other short informal learning courses and so on. More information about the cohort is included in the methodology section that follows. Here we recognise that a limitation of our research is that we examined transitions through stories that students and educators shared in various points of their Year 1. However, the linking of story and transition is also questionable, because, as Zembylas and Fendler argue - "[t]here are some stories that cannot be told, and some emotions that cannot be expressed" (2007: 328; cited in Quinn, 2009: 121).

In the study, we adopted a dynamic conception of transition that moves away from a fixation on fixed moments of change and instead normalises multiple movements into and out of university. In many respects this view is a direct response to our participants own 'lived experience' – for students from refugee backgrounds this is their 'normality' and being in a state of 'flux' might be a perpetual feature of their lives and may characterise the interactions and relationship they developed with HE itself over time. At the same time, it is important to note that in the micro world of day-to-day life ("as determined or being an expression of structures, policies, and ideologies of a macro character" (Buraway & Verdery 1999: 2)), students from refugee backgrounds may welcome 'fixed spaces', 'boundaries' 'structures', 'rules', 'fixed points of contact' as a form of reassurance and resistance to the 'flux' condition they find themselves in. These may well shape the course of action which they may pursue as part of their daily routines and practices as they enter and go through a HE context (and may in turn have unexpected influence over the structures that have been emerging at macro level). It is precisely the importance of the micro practices and processes lodged as part of those students HE experiences that privileges attention and may lead to local improvisations and innovation when it comes to HE provision for students from refugee backgrounds. There is further a need to attend much more to how the unfolding practices, policies and uncertainties of our institutions at macro-level affect practices within micro worlds, thus the ways students and educators absorb, manipulate, resist, of reject what is offered / designed for them / intended course of action. Such attention may provide rich insights into how the process of transition is made-up as a continual interaction between past and future, between institutional policy and reaction to this,

and how 'transition' to HE may be produced and framed, often in opposition to wider political and economic imperatives.

5. Methodological framework

5.1 The Value Analysis Model

The study drew on the Value Analysis Model (VAM) - adapted by the Cultural Value Model (CVM)[3] (Gillespie et al., 2018) – that allowed a range of stakeholders in the study (e.g. students, senior management, tutors – see section 'Stakeholders' below) to explore, reflect and assess how well the Open Futures Scholarships programme met their goals over time. This model supports reflection on the values and goals, procedures, and perceptions of success from diverse perspectives, which is critical in examining transitions and change, both at personal and institutional levels. The model enabled the key stakeholders to participate in the process of evaluation (i.e. assessing the alignment of goals among stakeholders, and what issues helped or impeded success, and what strategies are required for subsequent cohorts of students). The approach followed is multi-stakeholder and collaborative, putting students and their needs at the centre of the research, an essential approach in research with learners who may be vulnerable.

The Value Analysis process is, in brief, as follows:
- The key stakeholders – people or organisations who fund, manage, deliver or benefit from the Sanctuary Scholarships – are identified and grouped into 'Segments';
- For each segment, we establish what the stakeholders would expect to see happening and/or gain from the Scholarships programme, if it is successful – these are summarised as 'Components of Value', which are related to the objectives of the scholarships and entail descriptions of what success would look like from the point of view of the stakeholders;
- The component definitions are used to frame questions to be used in the research;

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[3] See resources on Cultural Value Model: https://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/cvp/cultural-value-framework

- The results of research are used to assess the progress of the Scholarships initiative by reference to the expectations as set out in the component definitions;
- In the analysis and reporting of the research, the results of a range of research methodologies (in this case qualitative), are summarised using a scoring system based on a comparison of performance with expectations; these scores are brought together in a diagram, known as a 'constellation'. The component scores and constellation will be presented as part of the analysis in Section 6.1.

5.2   Stakeholders

We have identified three broad groups of stakeholders ('segments') as presented below.

We began with a broad grouping of stakeholders into i. students and ii. the various teams / units in the institution with an interest and/or active involvement in the Sanctuary scholarships programme. We then considered that within our organisation there are different perspectives and priorities: some oriented more towards strategy, some towards teaching, some towards delivery of the programme (e.g. recruitment of students, support) and others towards wider sectoral initiatives (e.g. EDI, widening participation, response to Ukraine war). These were captured as we moved from the two-way split to a model with three segments, labelled 'Senior management', 'Operational / Delivery teams' and 'Students'. At that point, we faced a dilemma with regards to the role of the Development Office (DO). The DO is leading fundraising activity of the scholarships' programme and we were hence inclined to place the DO as part of strategic management. Based on feedback we received in an early draft of the CVM (see 5.4 Methods below) by a colleague in the DO, they felt that they were not fitting well neither in 'Senior Management' nor in 'Operational / Delivery teams' segments. Due to their critical role in generating income that is used towards the delivery of the programme though, we made a decision to place the DO in Group 2, but we refined the term used as 'Operational / Delivery teams and Fundraising'. We recognise however that there are certain elements in the components associated with senior management in which the DO maintains an interest (e.g. promotion). With these in mind, we developed a model with three segments: i. Senior (strategic) Management, ii. Operational / Delivery teams and Fundraising and iii. Students.

1. **Senior (Strategic) Management, including**

- Vice Chancellor Executive (VCE)
- Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)
- Access, Participation and Success (APS)

2. **Operational/Delivery teams and Fundraising, including**

- Associate Lecturers (ALs) / Tutors
- Student Support Teams (SST) (in each nation where students are located)
- APS teams (in nations where students are located)
- Scholarships team (Policy and Controls, Academic Services)
- Personal Learning Advisors (PLAs)
- Module teams / Access programme team
- Development Office (fundraising)

3. **Sanctuary students**

- Sanctuary students on the degree pathway (full scholarships) studying one / two modules at a time.
- Sanctuary students studying on the four Access modules (fee-waivers) (pre-university; non accredited).

5.3   Components of Value

Below we set out the Components of Value for each of the segments identified (see Section 5.2). Descriptions are provided against each component to lay out what success would look like from the point of view of the stakeholders in that segment.

Setting out and defining these components was a process that started in October 2022, initially through several team meetings (led by Colin Wilding, Lidia Dancu, Marie Gillespie and Koula Charitonos). These components were first drafted by the project team based on a wealth of previous research experience us as team members had, projects (both at the OU and beyond) we were involved, experience with VAM, but also considering relevant literature on this matter. Based on this information, the team identified a preliminary set of value themes, which we call components. These formed the basis of a core strand of activity we engaged throughout the project, where these components were re-worked and reflected upon by involving the key stakeholders (see Methods below) and considering the data that were generated. The process continued

during the analysis of the data to come to agreement about issues and tasks which are of common interest to all stakeholders, as well as elements of value which were of importance to our organisation. What is presented below is the outcome of this process as of October 2023.

5.3.1 Senior Management

Participation / Reach – The project demonstrates that the OU is an institution which extends its widening access and participation initiatives to a wide group of cohorts, including the most disadvantaged.

Effectiveness – The Sanctuary Scholarships are effective at lowering barriers to higher education and improving access, that is, they are cost effective and accessible.

Ethics and social responsibility – The Sanctuary Scholarships project demonstrates the OU's ethical credentials and reflects its social mission.

Promotion – The Sanctuary Scholarships are promoted well, including work with donors and with external organisations who support students from a forced migrant background, to reach relevant organisations and a wide number of potential sanctuary applicants.

5.3.2 Operational/Delivery teams and Fundraising

Quality - The OU provides quality teaching and learning-related resources which sanctuary students are able to fully engage with and are accessible. Resources may include informal courses but also referral services, counselling and so on.

Collaboration - The delivery teams in the OU work together effectively to make the best use of resources and avoid duplication of effort. DO, Academic services, tutors / ALs, PLAs and the SST work together effectively to support students through registration to the completion of their modules (in Year 1).

Communication - There is effective collaboration and communication between Senior Management, Strategic management and Operational teams. The sanctuary programme forges links and processes of feeding back between senior / strategic management, operations and delivery (including administrative and academic staff; fundraising) and the students themselves.

Professionalism - Adequate training, support and resources are provided to staff working with Sanctuary students. Staff are well informed about issues relevant to, and challenges faced by, students, such as legal, housing and financial. Work with Sanctuary students is well integrated into the overall workload for the staff involved. The project provides opportunities for staff to find the best ways to support students to succeed. Those working directly with students are able to provide appropriate language and study skills support to ensure that students are set-up for success, or to redirect students to relevant resources and relevant support, when required. The support provided to Sanctuary Students takes a trauma-informed approach to adequately support students.

5.3.3   Students

Accessibility - Sanctuary Students are able to find their module content easily. They are able to engage with the various formats of the content (written, audio, video) and with tutorials. Students know where to access additional study skills resources, such as referencing guides and essay writing techniques and these are accessible and easy to understand. When unable to do so, they are able to contact their tutor for help and help is provided in a timely manner.

Relevance – The students study at a level which is appropriate to them, given their prior learning, English language skills and study skills. The content of their modules is relevant. Their studies are relevant to their own career and life aspirations.

Support - Sanctuary Students are adequately supported financially to ensure they are set up to succeed in their modules, including provision of equipment. Students are adequately guided to relevant university services and groups, but also organisations, and spaces in their locality, when necessary. Students receive adequate mental health support which is trauma informed. Support also includes recognising and responding to students' needs for additional flexibility, when necessary.

Integration - Students are integrated into the OU students' community and are able to learn in an environment which is inclusive, values their diversity and which treats them equally. Sanctuary Students are encouraged and can develop relations with peers, tutors, teams and units at the organisation and share their views on the module content, study support they receive and their needs without fear and in a constructive way, where they expect staff to engage with their suggestions in a timely manner

(whether through direct action or discussion of issues raised and closing the feedback loop).

5.4   Methods and Participants

In order to implement the Value Analysis Model, the study drew on ethnographic approaches, with a focus on exploration of students from refugee backgrounds as they move, for example, into the OU from different contexts and educational pathways (i.e. full scholarships, fee waivers).

The study maintained a primary focus on the following three groups:
1. Students on full scholarships registered on OU qualifications (n=12)
2. Students on a fee waiver registered on OU ACCESS modules (n=32)
3. Tutors with allocated responsibility to teach students on the Open Futures Sanctuary programme (n=48 tbc)

Qualitative research methods were used to generate the data needed to conduct monitoring and assessment in a way that is supportive to students and aid in populating the Value Model. Interview schedule was organised around key components from the VAM. Interviews were conducted as following:
- Repeated semi-structured interviews with students (Groups 1+2) (first round - n=8; second round -n=7).
- Single semi-structured interviews with tutors (Group 3) (n=11).

In addition to interviews, a multi-stakeholder workshop with the Operational / Delivery team (n=9) and a meeting with three members of the Senior Management team (n=3) took place in May 2023 and June 2023 respectively. A professional development session with ALs was also organised in May 2023 (n=7). These sessions served to align goals, identify strengths and weaknesses, gather views on VAM, and make recommendations based on collective evaluation of the Sanctuary Scholarships project at the OU. All the sessions were recorded.

Further to these, several meetings took place throughout the year and additional informal spaces were created, which were used to generate insights about the scholarships' programme, in line with ethnographic approaches:
1) The team run three virtual coffee drop-in sessions with students (in November 2022, December 2022 and January 2023).

2) The team organised monthly 'Academic support and skills' online sessions (led by Olwyn O'Malley; total of 6 sessions, 1.5h long - see Table 1 below). Reflection upon those events took place during bi-weekly team meetings and notes were taken as team minutes.

3) The project team organised and attended one-to-one online meetings with:
    a) Director of APS, Prof John Butcher (October 2022);
    b) Fundraiser manager in the Development Office, Mrs Tracy Grunwell (January 2023); and
    c) Dean of EDI, Prof Marcia Wilson (February 2023).

Notes were taken by the PI during and following these meetings.

1) Attendance of the bi-weekly meetings run by the Sanctuary Advisory Network (SAN) at the OU (led by Dr Neil Graffin).

2) The PI and SAN network organised an event as part of Refugee Week 2023 on 'Pathways to Education for displaced learners (20 June 2023), where two of the sanctuary students were invited as speakers.

3) Engagement in communication with units and colleagues at the OU (e.g. ALs, PLAs, academic services, Development Office, SST) throughout the year in response to invitations to events and distribution of information relevant to the students (e.g. reviewed a survey to sanctuary students by SST, emails by ALs).

Table 1 Academic support and skills sessions

Session offere	Dates	Attendance*
What does it mean to be a student at a distance and online?	24 January 2023	15
Assignment preparation	21 February 2023	8
Writing in your own words	21 March 2023	10
Argument building	25 April 2023	9
Tools to help you organise your writing	23 May 2023	9
Academic English	20June 2023	8

Attendance figures include members of the project team

Such an engagement at several levels supported the team in establishing relationships and maintaining a strong view of the programme itself that in turn aid in populating the Value Model. Of note, colleagues in the Development office (i.e. Head of Philanthropy & Events), EDI team (i.e. Dean of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion) and Academic Services (i.e. Senior Manager Policy & Controls) reviewed and offered feedback on an earlier version of the VAM in January 2023.

Table 2 that follows shows information about the participants who had responded positively to an email invitation to take part in interviews. The students were studying a

variety of modules and were based across the university. In Appendix, Table 1 and Table 2 include further information about the participants in the interviews.

The first set of interviews (n=8) were conducted online from mid-February to mid-March 2023 (average time: 32' minutes) and the second set of interviews (n=7) were conducted in June 2023 (both led by Ahmad Al-Rashid). One student (Student 7) opted out from the second interview. In terms of the tutors, their interviews took place between March and April 2023 (average time: 46') (led by Shannon Martin and Koula Charitonos). A voucher of £30 was offered to students who took part in both interviews (£20 if only in one) as compensation for their time. The interview protocols used are provided in the appendix.

All the interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions were transferred to QSR NVivo 13 qualitative coding software for analysis. As thematic analysis is an iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), NVivo 12 was employed to systematically organize the themes emerging through the analysis and also assign to the components identified in the VAM.

Table 2: Participants in interviews

Students	Tutors and Support teams
3x male; 5x female	4x male; 7x female
2x on full scholarships (STEM, WELS);	9x tutors; 2x SST
6x on fee waivers for the Access programme (3x YO32 module; 3x YO31 module)	7x supporting students on access modules; 4x on scholarships.
7 started in October 2022; 1 started in February 2023.	5x working with 1 student; 3x working with 2 students; 3x working with 3 or 4 students.

Ethical approval of the study was overseen by the OU Human Research Ethics committee (HREC/4515/Charitonos) and followed the University's ethical guidelines. Approval was also granted by SRPP as OU students were involved in data collection activities (SRPP: 2022/2286).

6   Key findings

This section will present an analysis of the data generated in the project and the project's key findings. The section will first present the component scores, which has been part of the development of the Value Analysis Model (VAM). It will then draw on a major part of the analysis – the VAM as a descriptive tool – where we used data generated from the interviews to illustrate how specific activities delivered value at different levels for the various components as part of the Sanctuary Scholarships programme. Finally, this section also draws on the VAM as a planning tool to discuss implications and offer several recommendations.

In offering this analysis below, we recognise certain limitations in our approach. For example, some stakeholders (e.g. students, tutors) participated in the development of the VAM to a greater extent than others. Furthermore, in the 'classic' VAM approach (see Gillespie et al., 2018) the value components are used to frame interview questions. Stakeholders are asked to score performance against expectations for those questions and to explain why they gave that score. That gives quantitative results and qualitative rationale. For this project, the interview questions were partly informed by the components, but the respondents were not asked to give scores. Instead, the scores were produced by the research team on the basis of the information given in interviews and group discussions. The component scores are averages of these question scores. What this means is that the component scores (see Section 6.2) serve to summarize the qualitative data, rather than having any meaning in themselves.

That said, we believe the model still serves as a good way to structure the analysis and offer insights on how well the project is working and to note and highlight the areas where there might be room for improvement. The attention should be on the quotes from respondents rather than the numerical scores, which are in some cases based on very limited information. The sections that follow will illustrate this approach taken.

6.1   Component Scores

One of the main functions of the Value Model is to set in train a process of learning, monitoring and evaluation over time and that offers a view of whether and to what degree the project's objective have been met from diverse stakeholder perspectives. For this reason. The focus is on what each set of stakeholders value in terms of meeting objectives. To this end we devised the components of value for each stakeholder groups in liaison with those groups and/or documents outlining their stated objectives. To offer an evaluation of a specific component we used all available evidence (see

Section 5.4 Methods and Participants) to assess its performance. This performance was thus expressed as a score which two team members assigned independently before getting together to negotiate and agree on a score. Scores can range from 1 to 7, and generally any score above 4 indicated that performance exceeded expectations as set out in the components' description (see Section 5.3). Scores below 3 indicate weak links between performance and expectations. The scores in and of themselves are of less importance that the process of generating them which enables in depth discussion of the data gathered and the extent to which success was achieved.

Due to the focus of the study on students and educators and thus availability of rich evidence against those segments, scoring for Groups 2 and 3 was feasible. For some components (e.g. professionalism) the scoring was easier, while for others it was a matter of discussion and negotiation (e.g. integration). Despite developing a holistic model, including how components of success would look like for the Senior (strategic) management (Group 1), the evidence gathered against this segment were limited and this inhibited scoring process. This was also due to availability and knowledge of the project among senior management team. We reflected on this as a team and we came to a realisation that assessing performance for Group 1 required additional strands of work (e.g. comparison with other scholarship programmes, assessing students' progression, assessing cost-effectiveness, interviews with senior management), which were beyond the scope of our study. For these reasons, scoring for Senior Management segment is not provided and, in the constellation formed, the segment is blank (see Figure 1).

Moving from the individual scores into forming a constellation, we were guided by Gillespie et al. (2018):

> "to display the scores, we arrange the components like spokes on a wheel diagram, arranged according to their grouping into segments. The 'population' of the wheel is achieved by plotting the scores as points on the spokes – the higher the score, the greater the distance from the centre. The overall pattern of the scores is achieved when we join the points with lines to form a 'constellation'" (p. 16-17)

The illustration below (Figure 1) is a constellation developed as part of the project.

We describe below the construction and interpretation of a constellation such as this:

There are three elements to the diagram: components – represented as radial spokes-; segments – the grouping of the spokes, in this case into four quadrants; and

component scores – shown as circles plotted on the spokes and joined with lines to form a polygon. The outcome is unique to this programme reflecting the nature, purpose and needs[4] and provides a strong basis for reflection and further developments in the sanctuary scholarships' programme.
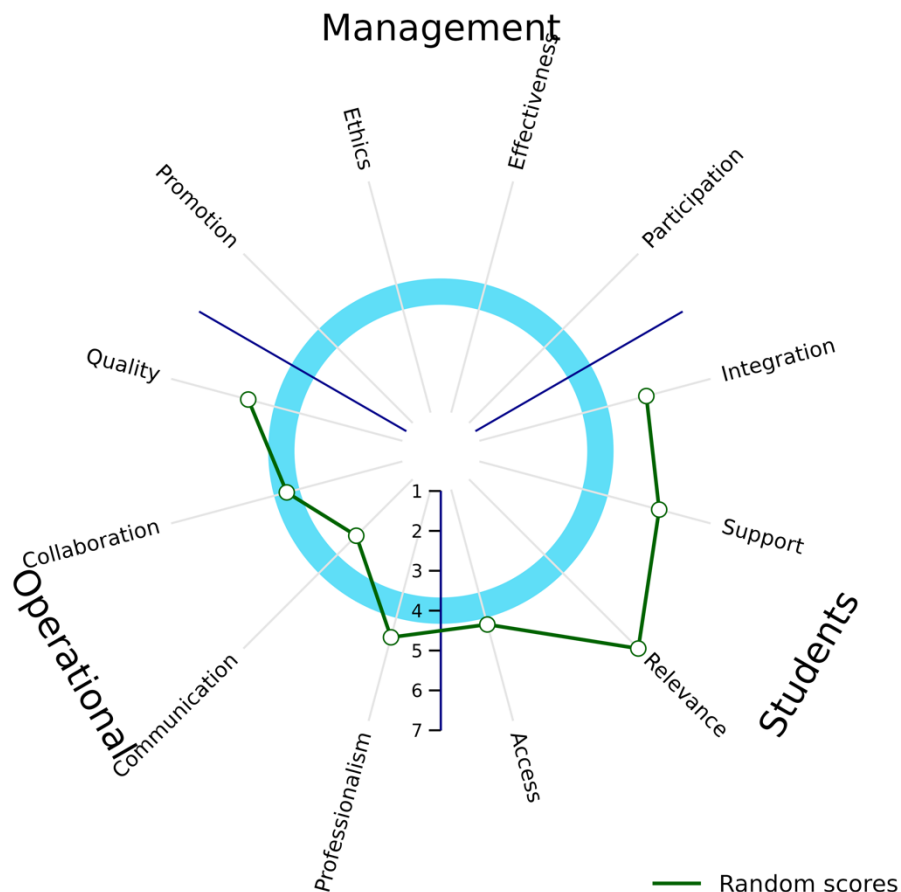

Figure 1: Illustrative Value Analysis Model Constellation for the Transitions project

As with any tool developed, crucial to the interpretation of this is an understanding of what constitutes good performance but also reflecting on the limitations of this process. Performing way better than expectations in one component but having low scores in others, is not necessarily a positive outcome. In the constellation above we

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[4] Of note, the original model by Gillespie et al. (2018) also included a fourth element - Band of Equilibrium - which however is not an element included in our analysis.

can see that the scores vary markedly between components, with 'Relevance' scoring highest for students and 'Communication' lowest for operational staff. The scores elicited from students are reveal a high level of appreciation on all four components. In contrast, it would appear that operational staff faced more challenges. Our task will be to understand the reasons behind scores and reflect these in our findings and recommendations.

In the following section, and as a step towards explaining and offering deeper insights into the student experience, we present core concepts alongside a central aspect of the analysis, which places students' and educators' voice at the centre of this work.

6.2   Boundaries and Transitions

In this section we will draw on evidence generated through interviews with students, tutors and members of SST, which offered insights in relation to both the components and the wider aims of the study to examine transitions to HE. Importantly, in this section we share what we learnt from our students in terms of how they viewed and organised their studies, how they used resources available to them, how they navigated uncertainties and how they envision their future. We learnt from tutors and colleagues in student support teams how they taught, how they supported students and created spaces for dialogue and trust, and how they prepared students to choose the path that may be more appropriate for them. We make a note of their ways of thinking and acting "to envision and build newly imagined and welcoming communities" (Drysen-Peterson & Mariën, 2023: 1) in the university.

The analysis highlights the concept of 'boundaries' through which to view students' transitions into, through or out of higher education, and what impacts upon, facilitates or constrains these transitions. The way the entry to an institution and participation to studies are organised are dependent on boundaries, which although in the case of the OU as a distance HE is not marked by gates and walls in the physical sense, boundaries exist in the form of only accepting certain number of students in the scholarship programme, rigid application processes and assessment processes, curricula divided into subjects and levels, categorisation of students into groups with access to different services (full scholarships Vs access fee waivers; different statuses i.e. 'Home for Ukraine' visa, refugees; asylum seekers; access to PLA service or not; and so on).

Space and time are key in understanding educational boundaries (Erstad & Silseth, 2023). Time could be in relation to what an institution designs, namely academic year, semesters, registration periods, tutorial hours, tutor contact time, assessment periods, progression to other levels and so on. It also relates to other less formal timescales. Space could be related to physical or virtual spaces; spaces that were created by the institution but also other spaces that students inhabit in their everyday lives. Interview data verify the importance of these spaces and timescales in relation to their transitions. The analysis shows that boundaries frame what students could and could not do in specific situations and the ways they perform different roles in and across different settings, i.e. as a student at the OU, as a family person at home, as a worker in a workplace or a member of a community in the UK or overseas.

We are drawing on the concept of boundaries to frame the components of value that have been developed as part of the VAM model (see Section 5.3).

6.3.1 Key findings from interviews with students

Student Vignettes

Below we present four short vignettes of participants in the study. These vignettes were created from data generated in the first interviews and support in gaining an understanding of who these students are. These vignettes are unique for the individual students, but they are also representative of the 8 students who accepted our invitation for interviews. They reflect stories, motivations, challenges, opportunities that displaced students face and are pertinent to the model developed.

About Student 6 [Full scholarship]

Student A is from Ukraine and arrived in the UK in March 2022: "I came here, and I didn't have anything". She used to be a lawyer in Ukraine but upon her arrival in the UK she realised: "Oh, I can't be a lawyer here because [...] another half of my life is just going to studying" [...]". It is sometimes very difficult to invest money in studying. It is very important, but when you have so many problems around, you just don't think that it is the best way [...]", she added. "I want to build a life here", she said. She wants to have a degree and change profession. She never thought she could study in the UK - "studying now in England, wow [...] I couldn't be happier! [...] [The scholarship] offers me just a future when I don't have anything"

About Student 8 [Full scholarship]

Student B is from South-East Asia. As a person seeking asylum in the UK, he "[...] had nothing to do and [no] job". He felt like "life was useless here [...]" - "I was in zero", he said. "I love to study [...]". Back in his country, he had a career as an intelligent analyst. "I have the bachelor's degree [...] and I was studying for a Masters as well, but I couldn't finish it [because of fleeing]". He applied for the scholarship with a plan to study criminology. However, he was told early on "no, you can't do the criminology" due to being an asylum seeker. "So, then I turned to the health sector [...]" he said. "It is a good sector in the UK [...] there are a lot of job opportunities [...] and I want to build up my new career [...]. How can I tell you that? This is my dream. [...] It's like the best thing in my life the scholarship [...] I grabbed it by both hands [...] It is a big thing for me."

About Student 2 [Access programme]

Student C is from West Africa. He has been in the UK for 12 years as an asylum seeker. He initially applied for a full scholarship because he wanted to do a degree in politics, philosophy and economy. "Unfortunately, I was not lucky enough to have the full scholarship", he said. "It has been a disappointment". He was given the chance to study the access module. "I'm still hoping to do the same [degree]..." He was agonising over the subject to choose in the access programme. But in hindsight, "when I got into it [...] I've already done the work and all I have to do is go back to it, apply that to what I'm doing and then it's going fine". Only last year, he said, he applied to more than ten universities [...] "But maybe God wanted me to come to the Open University and I think I found myself the right place to be".

About Student 4 [Access programme]

Student D is from Ukraine. She has a background as a teacher and a specialty as a sports coach. Other than a masters' degree, she also has a university diploma as a marketing manager. "I'm constantly studying", she said. "I am very fond of arts", she added. "I used to go to the English theatre in Ukraine [...] And I'm in languages. So, I have chosen this speciality [access module]". The main motivation is "to improve my language [...] I just want to write more fluently [...] more freely [...]" She currently has a job in a school so improving language skills "helps me to work with the British children". In terms of her goals - "I'm here [UK] and I have this opportunity to study [...] I'll need all this knowledge [..] When I come back to Ukraine, I would be able to open my school and to teach [...] And I just managed to enter in the university and I'm so just happy and pleased and well, I just try to do my best, just to study in proper way"

As these vignettes demonstrate, all these students have prior educational qualifications and most have professional experience, which is an aspect that is often ignored in narratives around forced migrants. They are all highly motivated to pursue further studies that all associate with improving English, getting a job or changing profession or improving their mental health. Furthermore, they are also thinking ahead to the future and how their studies will support them - either in settling in the UK, or as in the case of Student D to return to Ukraine and open a school.

6.3.2   Components of Value: Students

The following sections are structured around the four components of value and will offer more insights on key findings from interviews with students.

6.3.2.1 Accessibility

The component accessibility refers to students being able to find their module content easily and engage with the various formats of the content (written, audio, video) and with tutorials. Students know where to access additional study skills resources, such as referencing guides and essay writing techniques and these are accessible and easy to understand. When unable to do so, they are able to contact their tutor for help and help is provided in a timely manner. This component received a score between 4 and 5 (see Figure 1), which indicates that performance exceeded expectations as set out in the components' description (see Section 5.3). The evidence provided below will offer insights into this component. This section is split in various sub-sections as following.

Access to module materials and institutional spaces

The interviewees largely expressed high satisfaction with module materials and other resources provided to them.

> "I just use all the resources. Yes, I mean every, I just use all the textbooks, all the materials. I just watch all the videos. Well, I use everything, and it's useful [...] This is the first experience when I study online. Yes, distance learning. Before I couldn't do it. Yes, now I can do it and I'm just confident in searching information, yes, in using your website, yes, in submitting all my tasks. I've never ever had this experience before." (S4, interview I)

Even in the situation where they experienced some difficulties, they appeared able to identify a person – usually their tutor – or a team to direct their issue at, which led to the issue usually being resolved, as indicated by the following:

> "I have […] **some difficulties to log in with my account**, but I called them to this student support team or how it's called. And they helped me to log in because it was, I create[d] like [a] password and they say that "password cannot contain some signs. That's why you have problem to log in". So, they helped me as well with this. And then **they send these books and information about module, about how it will be**. And then I write to my tutor email and my email come to spam and my tutor so that I don't know where. Then I decided to call him because he didn't call me back. And oh, he say, "Oh I think you miss[ed] somewhere"… My email address is like from Ukrainian domain. It was sent to my tutor's spam in his email, so lost my email for first time." (S7)

The same student reiterated in his second interview that she felt she could always get help (also related to component: 'support')

> "When I didn't know how to do something or whether [there] could be some help or no, all my tutors say me […] send me a link or give me a number that I can call [them] or I can directly call or write to student support team and ask them about this (S7, II)

Similarly, Student 8 referred to difficulties he faced with studying in the module website, but also suggested he was able to draw on various networks of support that supported access to those spaces and resources (also related to component: 'support'):

> "Initially it was really difficult because there are a lot of things to study in the module website. There's **a forum and I have no idea about that […]** And **how to upload assessmen**t and how to do assessment tutorials and **how to register the tutorials** and how to use the resources and like that. But **with the help of PLA sessions** and I studied lot and how to get a live library support and I tried all the things in here. (Student 8)

The sanctuary students had to move across physical and digital spaces / boundaries and were expected to blend their in-university and out-of-university practices, their prior academic experiences mostly outside the UK, but also their cultural and linguistic experiences to support such movements. It was not enough to simply gain access to those spaces through the scholarship, but on-going support was needed to help them

traverse those boundaries. A relevant example is related to access and participation in forum spaces.

Participation in forums is seen as a good practice for students at the OU – it is an act that leads to connecting with other students, engaging with content materials, and potentially leading to new ways of thinking. It can also be particularly troublesome for students new to this practice, as pointed by Student 1:

> *"What I didn't really feel comfortable about is the forums because **I couldn't use them**. Maybe I have only commented one time in the group forum because like I didn't really **feel confident enough to start a conversation and speak with other people because maybe because I'm not really feeling confident about my English** […] Need to know how to communicate with people. So, it's my first experience so **I find it difficult like to write or start conversation with people.** So, this is like challenging […] I tried but it was difficult for me. Just I wrote one time but I couldn't like use it frequently as other student"* (Student 1)

Drawing on this quote and the case of online forums, there is a widespread assumption that studying at university level now takes place within increasingly digital technology-rich environments and that students are able to access and participate in such environments. Whereas this is to an extent true, for students in this cohort this varied, as evidenced above (also see 'Access to equipment' section).

Taking as an example the students on the access modules, one student expressed very positively about moving to an online platform, because he felt that this made things easier for him. Of note, the first term in the access programme starts with offline mode of study (i.e. books, printed materials):

> *"When I had the book, I had to study, use a pencil, mark, do so many scribbling. But now […] the online platform really made my life super easy. I don't have many papers lying around anymore. Everything is in one place in my laptop. And it's working perfectly fine"* (S2)

On the other hand, two other students in the interviews talked about their **preference for printed materials.** During her second interview, Student 7 was reflecting on the question 'What additional things you would have liked to see offered to you this year or happening as part of your studies?' and her response was linked to this aspect –

"It will be good if they can provide with normal book as well. But then as I have printer so I can just print because not always you can take laptop with you and read your course material online [...] Online is also very, very good and they are very good because module was very like interactive, so you just press link and go to other website. But like for first part we have normal book, and it was easier with normal book" (S7- II)

Similarly, Student 1 also views books easier to study and adds that they are 'mobile' and offer a 'step-by-step' guidance to their studies.

*"What I really liked first time was [...] when the university sent me the material, the book, the leaflets. And the book I found it really helpful [...] because **I can take it with me everywhere** so, and take some notes, see the images, read the pages [...] It's like **step by step** [...] because they [OU] use the book like to study [...] they are like baby steps because especially, as I said, for people like me who left school or education for a long time ago [...] it's a start how to like to remember studying and how to start again from the beginning (Student 1)*

The same student also described some difficulties she faced when moving to studying online in the second term:

*"it was a bit difficult for me because [...] **I'm not good in computing and digital skills**. So, this is the big challenge then [...]. Because I need to know everything, manage like how to go online and find the options to study. You know, how to write maybe in the boxes. And like it's a bit difficult because I didn't know a lot about computing, so I needed some training, but I couldn't do it"* (S1)

She further provided an example related to the use of library and library tools:

*"when I try to search something in the library, **I find it difficult how to use the tool**. **There is everything there. But how?** For example, there are some options about… they are numbers there but I couldn't… know why these numbers are there in the library? […] But when I concentrated, and I tried to listen more about how we can access the library I found it's like alphabet. If for example, you wanted to search for a dictionary, for example, say Oxford, for example, dictionary, I have to go to the letter O and then click on the O and then I can find the Oxford. So**, it was easy, but sometimes it's difficult for people who are not used to this system,** you know? It's just a small example. So, this is one like I always need more practice. But sometimes the time is challenging […] I really struggle like to find the right time for myself to study"* (Student 1)

Student 1 explains these challenges as being related to her own limited capabilities to using digital technology but also to her being 'new to the system' and thus not being familiar with the UK HE system. These examples illustrate the many challenges that students may have faced in the process of shifting to a system that presumably differs from what they were used to – that is in terms of institutional norms and rules but also shifting across various devices, tools, materials, and platforms (also see Section 'Integration'). For Student 1 and other students in this cohort, such movements were not always happening with ease; they were challenging, meshed with failures and achievements, feelings of self-doubt, and required additional effort and resources on their side.

In the same interview, when prompted to reflect whether she could access materials, including audio and video materials, she responded affirmatively but she also highlighted some issues around data and English language.

*"Sometimes when I was outside, for example, it's **difficult sometimes of the data** because it's not like strong enough to listen to videos […] But **at home I'm okay** […] So, what helped me is like especially interacting with the activities, communicative activities like listening to videos, watching audios and watching videos because I found it really important. So, first time **always I find it hard to listen because of the language**. I find it difficult to understand everything. But when I try many times, like several times, so I start to understand the words and what they mean […] I started to be used to this listening because the first time was very difficult […] to understand the words and the meaning."* (S1)

This quote highlights the centrality of the 'home' as the space where students predominately study. Secondly, it points to some strategies this student developed to address some of the difficulties she faced by for examples 're-playing' and 're-listening' to audio/visual materials. Here it is noted that although many students were reporting that their English language skills were not great, in their interviews, tutors emphasised that they did not perceive this to be an issue with this cohort of students.

Access to tutorials and meetings

A core characteristic of the OU provision is linked to tutorials with students. The access programme has a unique one-to-one tutor-student support model. For the sanctuary students in the undergraduate pathway, tutorials were taken to be both communication with their tutors (e.g. through emails, calls) and taking part in live sessions with larger groups of students (either run by their tutor or other tutors in the qualification). As with any other student, sanctuary students could opt-in or opt-out from tutorials.

Tutorials in the undergraduate pathways are recorded and this received positive remarks from a student, as shown below:

> *"I like that they record it and they're not compulsory, so, you can, if you wasn't able to join that time you always can **watch in repeat** and got the same information but at the same time you have an option to connect straight online and ask questions". (S6 – II).*

One tension related to boundaries not being well communicated was associated with the **tools and modalities** that tutors and other members of staff use in their contact hours with students. When organising tutorials with students or team meetings the institution's policy is to use Adobe Connect or MS Teams respectively. The OU strongly advises against using other platforms such as WhatsApp and ZOOM. Emails is another common tool that is used for communication with students.

In our EAP monthly sessions, we opted for MS Teams and we observed many difficulties that students had with this tool. Student 2, who regularly attended those sessions, described Teams as a "***not very user friendly [platform]***" and reminded us of an email he had sent asking us to use ZOOM platform. We were not able to take his suggestion forward as we had no access to a ZOOM account / subscription. Even though we explained the reasons, it seems that this had not made him feel any better with us using Teams.

The same student described a student event he joined, as an example of a situation that made him feel uncomfortable. In the following quote he might be referring to either Adobe Connect or to a Student Hub Live event, even though he could not recall the name of the event or the tool / platform he used:

> *The first time when I joined [...] online session, ... I think that was on something like [...], I've actually downloaded it here on my laptop. That's the platform that you use sometimes for communication. I've downloaded it and I thought, yeah,* **I was very confused** *[...] "Now, if I write something, maybe I'm going to embarrass myself [...]"* **It's similar to Zoom, but it's not. There's no audio, there's no video**. *So,* **but you can see the comment[s] from students**. *Hundreds of people [...]* **just dumping information in there.** *Until I started scrolling down and I thought, "You know what, I'm not the only novice [...] until I posted something and I said, "Okay, I get it. This is no video, no audio, but at least you see the information going on" [...]* **But that was very uncomfortable at the beginning".**

What is clear from these quotes is that our students come with expectations of affordances that tools have / should have and anything that diverts from these may be perceived negatively. Especially because of Covid19, when nearly everyone had an opportunity to use various tools for audio/video conferences, preferences on specific tools became solidified. As an institution we set firm boundaries in terms of tools we are using and this may come as a contrast to students' (and tutors') preferences, while it may further result in reluctance to use particular tools.

Phone calls are another common way that tutors use to contact students and/or have tutorials (upon consent). As illustrated by the quote below, phone calls not only made this student initially feel uncomfortable, but they felt less accessible due to hindering understanding of the language. References to ZOOM platform (as with Student 3) are also linked to the point made in previous paragraph.

> *"At the very beginning, the telephone calls, so my tutor were* **uncomfortable** *because* **it's easier for me to see the face** *[...] like in Zoom. And this is what I filled in the questionnaire form, and I have sent to my tutor this request, yes? So, for me it's easier to speak when I see the face, so Zoom conferences, Zoom meetings are more comfortable for me than the telephone calls. [...]* **When you don't see, it's just more difficult to understand the speech.** *Yeah, the English speech. And my tutor, she just suggested me next time just conducting it via Zoom. I said, "Okay, it will be just easier" (Student 4).*

In this quote, it is important that the student was able to provide feedback and the tutor's positive response to her request is noted (also related to VAM 'component: integration').

Indeed, a preference for more 'in-person' modes of communication (e.g. video-enabled, online) was raised in the interviews, and this was seen as helping the students build relations:

> "I would think probably having **a face-to-face conference on Zoom** with somebody directly from the Open University, **talking to a human being face to face** sometimes can remove some of the barriers because at first I did a lot [...] phone communication with the tech team and then the student advice [...] They don't see anybody**, they just see papers and pages and phone numbers.** But **if you can see somebody [...] you kind of calm down a bit.** You know, the person is smiling and you know, "Oh, well, this person means [well], you know" (Student 2)

The notion that '**seeing' someone feels more personal** and can support students feeling connected, is certainly one to explore further in our tutorial practices. This may also be related to feelings of 'trust' and may be quite particular to this group as they are used to interacting with individuals/authorities who may not have their best interests in mind. As with the quote that preceded (S4), it is a good practice to ask students themselves what their preferred mode of communication is.

For Student 6, her experience of taking part in a face-to-face student meeting/tutorial in Leeds made her see things differently and realise that in-person interaction is possible even when you are studying at a distance. Making certain aspects of the experience at the OU more personal and embodied, is what she reflected upon during her interview:

*You have got this letter that your application is successful, everything cool and it would be nice just to [...] [have] student meeting there because it is very important in the beginning because **all you see is just a website with lots and lots of things** and... **you can't digest all that information**"*
*[...] It would feel more real if you gather with other students who are starting and have some introduction meeting [...] It is nice, it is all explained on the website actually, **but when you are alone with your laptop you don't feel it is ... real!** [...] You are just **on your own, sitting reading, oh should I do this, did I miss something, maybe I didn't notice something or like this.** It would be nice to have more meetings like this [meeting in Leeds], because I very enjoyed it, it gave me more confidence and more inspiration to study after meeting other students. (Student 6)*

Here she emphasises how beneficial it may be for students to have in-person meeting(s), especially in the early stages of their studies. She also highlighted how isolating and overwhelming those first days may feel to a student. She came back to the same issue during her second interview a few months later:

*"It would be nice to have more offline, not compulsory things, but I mean like the [f2f event] in March in Leeds. **We had like everyone just came and we were speaking about how everyone is doing, what we can improve** and all this stuff. It would be nice to have **more some offline meetings so you can meet other students** who are studying because it was very helpful... [to] be a part of some community because **when you're doing everything online it's difficult to meet some new people** [...] you can't see who you're studying with. **You just see that maybe the tutor and that's it.** So, it would be nice to have some meetings just to build this network, just to speak about what difficulties we have just with each other maybe" (S6, Interview II)*

The emphasis she is placing on being part of a community and not feeling isolated, especially in those initial days will be discussed further in the component: Integration.

Access to wider groups, networks, and resources (within and beyond the university)

All the interviewees could offer examples of how they engaged with resources available beyond the module materials. These resources ranged from access to the OU Library

and other libraries in the UK (through the Sconul scheme[5]); studying free courses on the OpenLearn platform; use of apps that the OU developed (e.g. wellbeing app) or access to groups and other spaces that themselves and other students created (e.g. FB module groups, WhatsApp groups).

For example, Student 7 mentioned in her second interview that -

> *"I was using websites, not only Open University website as well others and different groups in Facebook, we have groups of our module as well. And of course, I was using dictionary sometimes. […] Facebook groups, yes. And yeah, and translator". (S7 -Interview II)*

Similarly, Student 8 referred to a range of resources that he drew on, including various support networks, such as:

> *"I have **library facility** and […] I have **PLA sessions** […][6] And there's a **help centre**. Not only that, I like the **free courses** you are giving for the students. So, I have done several free courses, two or three. I love it because those are the area I like to study […] I have some **academic support** as well […] I got it because I face some difficulties during the assessment […] So, I got […] a lot of help actually […] And there's a **wellbeing app** […] I have some problems in my life, so that was good, quite good. (Student 8)*

Student 6 also picked-up the wellbeing app that was made available to her and talked positively about the availability of such additional apps/services -

> *"I really enjoyed, I'm using this wellbeing app. It's not a real person there, you're speaking to a robot […] just every day asking you how you're doing and if you do not well, it's giving you some advice what to do. And it's funny but it's, I don't know, **I enjoy this thing and I enjoyed this Open Uni also take care about our mental health, not just only about how we're doing in studies.** So, I know I like all these newsletters that's about jobs, about events. It's also very helpful." (S6, Interview II)*

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[5] The Sconul scheme is an inter-library access national scheme, available to students and academic staff.
[6] Note: The PLA sessions were offered only to students on full scholarships.

The data shows that it was not always clear to students that they could create WhatsApp groups or be part of those and how these groups related to the OU itself. For example, Student 5 mentioned that she has *"access to WhatsApp group. I mean I can have access but I don't have any information about what subgroup, like if it's related to Open University"*. (S5).

It also came to our attention through email communication with a couple of tutors that the process of referring students to English for Academic Purposes support groups was not clear to everyone and thus was not widely used.

Finally, it is noted that many students had access to, or could mobilise, wider networks which were not associated with the university and are, in fact, rarely acknowledged within the university. These networks were available to students in their locality.

> *"I have a lot of support because I'm studying English in [name] College here […] and **I had a lot of support in community** […] Sometimes **if I don't have any idea about the assessment, so I go and talk with them so they really helped me** […] **There's a lady [name] I think she's also a professor. She also come[s] to that place and she also helped me a lot to go through with my assignment** and if I don't understand any grey areas in my module and learning. So, most of the time […] I go and meet them, Saturday or Friday. So, **they help me lot**. (Student 8)*

For student 7 having access to other local groups that were predominately taking place in person (e.g. accounting classes) meant that

> *"**I can't say that I was feeling alone or isolated**. No. Maybe because I have other my courses, not just online, but physically" (S7-II)*

These quotes highlight how all the wider activities and networks that students were involved / embedded in, had a strong influence on perceptions of, and performance in their studies.

For Ukrainian students in particular who lived with a host family, this family was often their point of support. Student 4 mentioned that she found out about the scholarships from her host family, who also encouraged her to apply as she was not aware of the OU before coming to the UK:

*"I have received lots of emails with help, just people just contact me and always asked, "Do you need help? Do you need a tablet? Yes? Do you need…" I don't know, just money, yes, for internet. **So, so many responses, so many contacts. I was like in a vacuum**, yes? **Who will help? Lots of people contact me in order to ask do you need, do I need something?** So, it was very good. And actually, I didn't need anything because my host family, they just also helped me." (S4)*

This quote also offers evidence that students might have felt overwhelmed with various people contacting them at various points offering advice and support – despite expressing feelings of gratitude about this at the same time. This distributed support and levels of responsibility across many individuals and teams may have been problematic, an issue that was raised in the interviews with tutors and SST teams too (see Section 6.3.4.2 Component: collaboration).

6.3.2.2 Relevance

Relevance refers to students studying at a level which is appropriate to them, given their prior learning, English language skills and study skills. The content of their modules is relevant. Their studies are relevant to their own career and life aspirations. This component received a score of 7 (see Figure 1), which indicates that performance is at highest level and exceeded expectations as set out in the components' description (see Section 5.3). The evidence provided below will offer insights into this component.

Interview data verifies how important the notion of 'relevance' is.

Students in the cohort emphasised the criticality of making informed decisions about which topic, qualification, and module to study. This is evident in the quote that follows.

*"I rang a lady […] from student support, I think […] **We had a very long conversation** […] nearly three hours […] And **I really struggled on that day because I was so confused** […] I'm thinking […] 'I need **to really make sure that this module is a good one** and I really **have to make sure before choosing it**.' And the lady, she was kind… she said, "Look [student name] right now you're trying to do the access module […] If you go on this module, you will see because this module it is an interdisciplinary module that has so many, so many topics […] Anything you think you've not studied, you're going to find it there from law to business to psychology to philosophy, the economy […] " (Student 2)*

Student 2 was one of 50 students who were offered an access fee waiver. What the quote above shows is that the student had limited understanding what studying on an access module would offer to him, so he reached out to student support team to find out more. The access modules are unique modules; the programme is specific to the OU and is not to be found in other HEIs (not with this name). It was therefore likely that **students who were offered an access fee waiver, were not aware what these modules are.** This may further explain why 18 of the applicants rejected the offer that the OU made to them[7]. At a practical level, once an offer was made to students, more information should have been provided so they could understand what the modules are about and what benefits studying on this module would offer. However, interviews with students showed that not much was communicated to students with regards to this (also related to 'component: support' and 'component: communication').

The analysis illustrates that students would not simply accept what was offered to them, but they were actively looking for modules and study options to be meaningful to them, align with their goals and priorities, and contribute to their life and work trajectories. We noted in our analysis not all students were able to study their preferred subject:

> *"There was one small problem [...] I think it was a course connecting with economics. But **in the last moment, they told me that they have some re-arrangement, and I can't continue education on this course,** so I have to make a choice between other courses. So, I made a choice like English and art. At least I can practise my English" (S5).*

What is more, a key aspect in their decision-making process was for their studies to help them secure a job, as illustrated in the following:

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[7] Academic Services may have more information about the reasons why applicants rejected the offer to study on an access module. This information was not made available to the project team.

First of all, I want[ed] to study criminology. But my student support said that I won't be able to study criminology since I am an asylum seeker […] At that time [of selecting the modules] I was a bit confused […] So, what can I do? She also suggested, and I agreed, […] **health and social care is a good sector in the UK** *[….] My student supporter, she sent me some emails and some guidance […] "So, what can I do and what are the sectors I can do then?" That's mean* **what kind of a job I can find if I finish this degree** *[…] (Student 8)*

As the point of writing this report it is not yet clear to us as project team why a person seeking asylum (as Student 8) could not study criminology, as mentioned both in the interview and in other communication the student had with us (also see Vignette 2). This student, as with Student 5, could not study their preferred topic. It seems that the next option he was given was to study 'health and social care', which was not directly associated with his interests and background ('intelligent analyst'). Student 8 was told by a member of the OU SST that this is 'a good sector in the UK' and could lead to job opportunities for him. Given the dire situation he was in at the time he got the scholarship (see Vignette 2), this might have been particularly appealing to him. In fact, at the point of the second interview in June 2022, the student had approval from the Home Office and was already working for a few hours a week in a care home. Considering potential pathways from HEIs to work is critical for students from refugee backgrounds. At the same time, it is equally important to consider their values, interests, and aspirations (as with any other student) and thus supporting them in making decisions that will also reflect and value those.

In addition to the prospects of getting a job, other aspects that students highlighted in relation to 'relevance' were for example selecting modules that could support them in performing better in their existing work roles and help their growth. The analysis suggests that key benefits for students ranged from improving language skills and communication skills in English language (see e.g. S5 above); developing/improving their confidence; interacting with tutors and other people who were seen as well embedded in a British institution / society; and developing knowledge both about a topic and the HE 'system' in the UK. The notion of flexibility as associated with time and space was also noted.

In her first interview, Student 4 with a speciality in languages (see Vignette 4) reflected that studying on an access module helped in performing her role as a teacher assistant better, by –

> *"improving my language, **helps me to work with the British children.** Yes, I do understand that my language is improved and they can understand me, yes, **and I can speak in proper way** when I started to speak fluently. So, it's like it's **easier for me now to communicate, yes, to British people.**"* (S4 – I)

In her second interview, she expanded on this -

> *"First of all, **I have managed to improve my English** [...] I'm a teacher of the English language, but here I have managed to improve it, yes. Secondly**, I like the process of studying.** I was organised, I had enough time to study and to work and to take care of two children [...] I could **study whenever I wanted**. Yes. Then the possibility to improve my English. Yes. The **possibility probably to get a job**. Yes. And the most important to **gain this confidence**. So now I'm more confident I can do, and this, I can go and get this job [...] So I have this confidence, self-confidence in myself. And it's good* (S4, Interview II)

Improving English language skills was for many students paramount in making a life in the UK.

In addition to these, students also seemed to appreciate the flexibility that studying with the OU offered to them, especially if they had a job and/or caring responsibilities.

> *"Flexibility, just ideal, because **you can choose when you want to study and if you work or like you have something happened, you can then study later or at night or when you have convenient time for it.** It's much more easier than just physically [...] I have, for example, accounting courses and I have to go to another town by train and all train strike [...] or train cancelled and you just miss and it's very stressful [...] Online you don't worry about this, just about internet [...] **It's very convenient.** (S7 – II)

Studying with the OU was a big unknown for students both in the application process and once they were offered the scholarship. They got to realise that this had many positive elements, especially in terms of managing when to study, as Student 8 claims:

> *But this is a new thing for me studying through the online module materials [...] but you know, it's a good thing. **I thought initially this is not easy** because all the things I have to do this study, I have to do the self-learning. But later I got to know **that it this is easy because I can work in my own time.** So, if I don't have time during the daytime so I can study it in the night* (Student 8)

The topic of flexible provision being framed to be relevant and liberatory in nature was widespread in the student interviews, especially by being understood through the freedom to learn and study as one chooses or is able. This may be because this group of students were new to distance education, so they were referring to aspects they perceived as positive in terms of studying at a distance. However, flexible education signifies "education that is responsive to learner needs and is available to multiple formats, through multiple deliver modes, in multiple timeframes and locations" (Veletsianos and Houlden, 2020: 850). It is thus no longer enough to be thinking of flexibility as being about time ('anytime') and space ('anywhere'). Rather the scope is much broader from providing learners with **hybrid choices between in-person and online learning or with choice in modalities, and choice in curriculum and assessment better suited to student needs.** As it was discussed above, such provision had gaps - for example a choice of subject was not accommodated for Student 8 and in-person meetings were rare. In other words, flexibility should also be viewed as about making many educational practices relevant and responsive to students and "aspiring to increase the student-centered and empowering aspects of education" (ibid: 851). It is thus argued that although this component is critical and received high scores, it is still work-in progress and should be better reflected in institutional practice.

Finally, responding to the question "Is there anything else that this opportunity has allowed you to do that you couldn't do before?", Student 1 referred to feeling more **"hopeful"** after studying on this module and that she now has *"more knowledge about learning and studying, especially with[in] the university"*. She also referred to meeting some of the (OU) staff, which *"were so kind and they were like comprehensive"* and concluded that she *"like[d] starting to build a kind of relationship with these people"*. We first met Student 1 during one of our drop-in sessions (December 2022), where she shared with us a dreadful situation with housing (i.e. she had been homeless with a newborn baby), their struggles with the Home Office, concerns about her family back home, financial difficulties they have as a family, and caring for her children. What she highlighted in her interview that she was able to meet 'kind' people who are based in what she views as a British Institution - and 'starting a relationship' with them, may look minor but is particularly salient for people in such precarious situations. Feeling hopeful and looking at relationships positively may help sanctuary students restore trust that had been lost when navigating the asylum system in the UK. This is seen as a valuable outcome from the sanctuary programme.

6.3.2.3 Support

This component suggests that sanctuary Students are adequately supported financially to ensure they are set up to succeed in their modules, including provision of equipment. Students are adequately guided to relevant university services and groups, but also organisations, and spaces in their locality, when necessary. Students receive adequate mental health support which is trauma informed. Support also includes recognising and responding to students' needs for additional flexibility, when necessary. The component received a score between 5 and 6 (see Figure 1), which indicates that performance exceeded expectations as set out in the components' description (see Section 5.3). The evidence provided below will offer insights into this component. This section is divided into several sub-sections as following.

Support during application process

The evidence generated points to the application process that preceded the selection of scholars. This process was bounded by **rigid institutional procedures**, including completing an application form and abiding to a deadline for submission. Many students described that they found out about the scholarships at the Open University because they were affiliated with specific community organisations that support refugees and asylum seekers or through other personal networks (e.g. host family). One referred specifically to seeing posters featuring the 'Future is Open' marketing campaign which prompted him to explore the OU website (S3).

Many students expressed that the application process was straightforward:

> *"it was rational question […]* **this form was quite easy** *[…] It is possible to do on the website, that you don't need to go to the post and send something like most things here, so it was quite convenient" (Student 6/A)*

Still, having to go through this process created strong feelings among students. Student 2 was feeling -

> *"***scared*** because obviously if you're applying for a scholarship […]* **there were going to be so many questions,** *some tough questions about your background, your educational background, your immigration status…" (Student 2).*

It also led to feelings of anxiety, as Student 3 described:

*"The communication, actually sometimes at the start [during the application process] it made me a bit anxious **[...] the constant communications trying to know so much about me and telling so many paperwork to fill** [...] It was really prompt and helpful, though it made me [...] **very anxious** [...]"* (Student 3, Interview II).

What Student 3 mentioned in his first interview was that the process "was a bit complex because **being new in the system** and I had **so much paperwork to hand in**. I had to **explain everything about myself**. And it was back and forth." (S3-I).

For an asylum seeker (as Students 2 and 3) being at the receiving end of so many questions can feel oppressive and raise concerns about the people and institution that engage in such questioning.

What is more, for students from refugee backgrounds whose documents may be missing or might be in the process of being updated at the Home Office, there were tensions in this process as indicated by the following:

"I faced some difficulties because at that time I didn't have any documents and I didn't have any papers from Home Office or any ID card. [...] I explained everything [...] I have one letter, so I forward that letter. So luckily, they [OU] accept[ed] that." (Student 8).

As evident by the latter, it was critical for Student 8 that the institution acknowledged his individual situation and accepted alternative documentation to allow him to proceed with his application. This also demonstrates that setting boundaries in institutional processes and at the same time leaving them porous is important.

Support with equipment

An important factor when it comes to studying at the OU is related to access to appropriate equipment. The analysis pointed to tensions in relation to this, linked to a system being organised in a way that creates divisions between students, to issues of miscommunication with students, and to a lack of appreciation concerning levels of 'digital poverty' that displaced people experience. Several examples can be traced in the interview data.

The first example points to the situation when boundaries were set by the institution in terms of which group of students would be eligible for additional (financial) support regarding access to devices/equipment. A student on a full scholarship was eligible by

default whereas a student on access programme could become eligible if specific requirements were met. What this meant for a student on a full scholarship –

"they [OU] gave me a laptop, printer and the internet connection as well. So, it was a great relief…" (Student 8).

Contrary to this, **the additional provision was not adequately communicated to students on the Access programme**. Student 3 mentioned that -

"at the start I didn't have a laptop, then I got one from my friend".

Similarly, Student 7 "told [her tutor] that I have no laptop. So [...] he made some arrangements, and they call[ed] me back and say that I can… try to apply for laptop [...] if I need this".

In his second interview she confirmed that the OU -

*"provide[d] me with all necessary things I need for my study like laptop and printer as well because **we come without anything, just as we come, and to study from phone it was not very convenient"** (S7 – II)*

Likewise, Student 1's interview is evident of how surprised she felt when she finally found out about this provision:

*"The university could help with [...] stuff like laptop and material, but I didn't know [...] So, I didn't have a laptop. I was just using my phone because **I couldn't pay** for it because I don't have money [....] I didn't know till one day one of the advisors called me and asked questions if I'm okay, if I'm studying [...] I told, for example, **I don't have a laptop. I'm searching in my phone.** And she told me they can help with the laptop [...] And I just was like astonished. I was wondering **why they didn't provide this information from the first time" (Student 1, Interview I)***

We recognise that information about available financial support might have been communicated to students at various points in their studies. However, especially in early stages of their studies, the amount of information that students receive is quite overwhelming. That said, the fact remains that our institution failed to anticipate that students in this cohort face significant issues with 'digital poverty'. Ensuring that

everyone in this cohort had access to equipment should have been a priority in the period leading to registration[8].

A similar tension was created for Student 4, who mentioned in the first interview that when she was given the opportunity to apply for financial support to get a device, the requirement to go to the bank and submit invoices and proof of purchase put her off:

> "people [at the OU] just have written to me that [...] I can apply for help to get the [laptop]. But when I opened the application form, [it] made this problem that I need to go somewhere and well, all these bank **– I don't know some [of these] procedures and I was afraid of these procedures.** I just prefer to buy the laptop by myself, not to ask [...] The last info about just submitting all these invoices. **It just scared me, and I decided not to do**" (Student 4)

What this student reminds us of is the anxiety that people with precarious migration statuses feel when engaging with various authorities, which they do not necessarily trust and not consider as having their best interest in mind. The bank in the situation above, but also the OU itself, can be seen as an 'authority'. Although the institutional intention here was a good one (i.e. to support the student to buy equipment), the process involved created anxiety and possibly feelings of mis-trust among students.

Support during studies, including pre-registration

The interview data suggests that all students were **highly appreciative** of regular contact and support offered throughout the year, though they could not always name who was the individual / team they had contact with at specific times (other than their tutors):

> "I felt supported when I just received this course, **asking me about what modules I would prefer**. I didn't understand anything about modules and stuff, but it was nice that someone is saying 'yes, you enrol', 'everything okay', 'you don't need to do anything else', 'just wait for the modules to start' and all this stuff [...] **There were [...] several calls just to confirm... what I need for studying, do I need a laptop, do I need this?**"(Student 6/A)

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[8] Note: the university has adjusted this policy in AY23/24 following evidence from this study, so all sanctuary students are able to access support for equipment.

This type of support appeared to be heightened to students in the undergraduate pathway (i.e. full scholarship) compared to students on access modules, particularly in the early stages in their studies. It is also noted that students on full scholarships had an additional service provision offered to them, that of the Personal Learning Advisor (PLA), which was not made available to access students. This division between the two groups may imply that access students had to negotiate many more layers in institutional processes to receive support.

At the same time, a few interviewees also highlighted the difficulty they faced, especially in the early days, to make sense of a completely new system by **relying on extensive written/email communication**, which was the preferred mode of contact:

> *"emails, there were lots of them. Yes, **especially at the very beginning […]"** (Student 4, Interview II)*

Students referred to feeling confused in terms of actions to take after they received the letter announcing that they got the scholarship / fee waiver. This is also linked to a point made previously re. selection of modules (see section Relevance):

> *"When I received the letter, **I didn't know what to do**. I was like, "Okay, **so what happens next?"** I just stayed there, and like, "Okay, let me see what comes next". Then email came through saying you're going to receive course materials. Then you start this day, blah, blah. Videos of tutorials, introduction videos. And yeah, **it was really not easy**. Not really easy" (Student 3)*

This evidence seems to suggest that a gap existed in the support that students received in the period between having awarded the scholarship / fee waiver to registering to a module. What might be needed in this case is to frontload person-to-person support early on in one's studies. This evidence also emphasises the importance of signposting who/where they students should go to and for what purpose.

Once the hurdles of these early days were over and students were able to make key decisions in terms of modules and topic, they seemed to be performing well thus sharing with us that -

> *"studying with Open University was **easy. I never thought that online study can be such good organised.** Sometimes I have problems with understanding where to look on site or what, but **I always can go to student support** and they explain me where to find things or what to do with them"*
> *(S7 Interview II)*

This demonstrates that a functioning system was put in place, and this led to high levels of satisfaction shared among students. Tutors further verified that students overall were performing well in their studies (see Section 6.3.3).

Additional support was offered to sanctuary students in the EAP monthly sessions organised as part of this project. Here evidence from one student in particular shows that these smaller gatherings provided a space for her to speak-up as indicated by the following:

> *"It was a small group, and I was always attending this tutorial, **so I find it very secure for me, comfortable to attend**. Usually, I don't like to attend online events, like forums or big events. **I don't feel safe and even I do not feel comfortable to attend and speak… but these small groups […]** felt very safe and comfortable to attend and speak, and speak even about my worries, what are the challenges and what I find positive about studying…"*
> *(Student 1, Interview II).*

What this evidence suggests is that **individual students may need different spaces and group formations.** Student 1 is the one who said during her interview that she could not participate in forums, and that she had reservations about both her English language and digital skills. She attended most of the EAP sessions (see Table 1) and was indeed very vocal in those sessions, asking questions and reflecting on her own situation. She seemed to value being in a group with other students from refugee backgrounds. That said we recognise that this may not be a preference for everyone and in fact many other students from refugee backgrounds may be reluctant to be grouped with students from similar backgrounds. This is related to the point made in an earlier section about the importance of providing learners with choices – for example with a choice of being in a group associated with a subject / qualification or as a group formed with sanctuary students. Different formations will serve students differently and may offer better / alternative response to student needs.

The importance of flexibility and porous boundaries were further highlighted in evidence generated around assessment and offering flexibility during assignment submissions after assessing students' individual circumstances:

*I remember my […] second assignment**, I was really, really, really struggling** […] having some difficult time. I didn't even wanna open my laptop anymore. And I decided to just like, you know, send a message to my tutor to say if we can talk. And my goodness, **she came back very quickly**. She said, "[…] I'm here to listen […] I think you need some help […] I don't want you to fail your assignment because of your **health issues** […]". Because I had done some medical exam at the hospital [….], which is like colitis ulcer. And that really got me struggling. And also **mental health and issues and depression**, you know. She said to me […] "take so two weeks off, please, to focus on that. And when you finish, you call me back and we can discuss your assignment and I'll give you more tips and more ideas […]" (Student 2, II).*

The relational aspects of studying in HE are often underestimated. What the analysis shows is the importance of establishing relationships and being able to reach out to others, including one's tutor. The tutor here recognized the student's needs and responded with a solution that deemed appropriate in this situation.

Likewise, Student 1 stressed how satisfactory this relationship was:

*"the aspect that made me satisfied **is the relationship with my tutor** because she's a really good tutor. **She's so helpful. She's so understanding**. So, when I have challenges, I always speak to her that I cannot, I'm sure as and she can understand easily and encourage me"*

Numerous examples were provided by both students and tutors that demonstrate the critical role that the tutor-student relationship played. More on this will be provided in Section 6.3.3.

Support with mental health

Two students (S6, S8) mentioned they were using the OU wellbeing app (see component: access to wider networks and services). Both students were on the undergraduate pathway. We are not in a position to say if this app was available only to those students, but is noted that none of the access students we interviewed referred to this app.

In both his interviews, Student 2 referred to having issues with mental health (also see quote above). Although in his interview he expresses awareness of support that the OU could be offering around mental health, it is not clear in his narrative if himself was referred to, and indeed been able to benefit, from such support.

Well, I would say one of the things is to do with mental health. I have struggled a lot with like, you know, depression, especially during the lockdown and then post lockdown [...]. And I think, well, from what I heard and what I read, the Open University can provide support to mental health [...] I think it's one of the biggest problem, not just in this country [...] many people are trying to dissimulate, you know, to hide it because nobody wants to stand up and say, "Look, I've got depression." [...] most people don't wanna do that, you know, because we feel ashamed to acknowledge that we have depression, just the way human beings are (S2 – II)

Mental health is associated with stigma and people may tend to suffer in silence. This may be the reason why the student refers to affected people not wanting to 'stand up' and talk about mental health. It may indicate that himself also chose not to do so.

Student 3 recognised that he had some mental health issues, but he also referred to the studies as being particularly helpful for him:

*"I would say mentally, I wasn't very stable mentally when I came into, when I decided to stay [at the OU]. It's given me a little bit of peace of mind. Like irrespective of anything, **there's something I can really do. Something that keeps me busy, something that I really like**."*

For people seeking asylum who experience numerous restrictions in their lives (e.g. work, study, travel) being able to do something well, offers satisfaction and may also help bring some stability in their lives. All the interviewees affirmed that 'becoming a student' and the ability to perform the role of a student provided a firm boundary to them and an important milestone in their lives which was seen as highly important.

6.3.2.4   Integration

The component 'integration' refers to students being part of the OU students' community and being able to learn in an environment which is inclusive, values diversity and which treats them equally. It also refers to students being able to relate to peers and staff at the OU and provide feedback on modules and more generally on their studies and experience at the OU. With this in mind, we view this study as contributing to this process itself, namely examining students' experience and sharing the evidence with other key actors / segments (i.e. senior management, operational team and fundraising - see Section 5.3) with an aim of taking specific actions to meet students' needs.

The component received a score of 5 (see Figure 1), which indicates that performance exceeded expectations as set out in the components' description (see Section 5.3). The evidence provided below will offer insights into this component.

Several instances in the evidence generated, point to students being able to develop relations, especially with their tutors (e.g. see quote above from Student 2). The tutor – student relationship was a key one for many students in this cohort, also evident in the following:

> My tutor […] she contact[ed] me. I was very afraid that I won't be able to understand her, but everything was okay and well, **she just spoke to me in proper way and calmed me down […]** I was afraid that I won't be able to contact her, but she always, she's always free just to contact […] " (Student 4)

> That [deciding about module] was a bit like **a stressful situation,** you know, **until I got a call from my lecturer** [name of tutor] […] **She rang me.** When she rang me, I think that was the point I actually understood that "Okay, now I'm in the course now, I think. I'm on the right track". She rang me for 30 minutes and gave me all the guide. And I said, "Look, this is my number, call me anytime, text me if you need anything" (Student 3)

To be able to reach out to the tutor, or having someone that could speak to them and offer guidance seemed to be key for the interviewees. Although all OU students have a tutor allocated to them, based on tutor interviews we acknowledge that many sanctuary students opted-out from regular contact and communication with their tutors. This was not surprising as many OU students follow this practice. References to names of people in our project team were also included in the student interviews, as people in the institution that the students were able to contact (e.g. Student 4, Student 8). Reflecting on a few instances where the PI of this project was contacted by students and asked questions on certain issues that were important to students (e.g. income from work and scholarship eligibility), this may on one hand show that students were not sure who to contact about this and on the other hand that a few students saw the PI as a 'broker' between them and the university. The PI had regular contact with these students because of project's activities and it may be that she was seen as a mediator and one with knowledge to help them navigate some of these issues with confidentiality.

Our analysis shows that **firm boundaries were set in terms of how a student could be contacted, and the type of advice and support an individual/team could offer**. These are well defined as part of institutional roles and responsibilities but could also feel quite restrictive. This aspect will be further discussed in Section 6.3.3 with tutors' interviews. Even for the purposes of this research project, strict timeframes related to who and when to contact students had to be maintained. What this means is that certain restrictions were placed in terms contact time which in turn affected how relations with students could be developed further.

When it comes to relations with peers, Student 6 specifically was quite vocal about **not feeling part of a community**. This was a recurrent topic in her interviews as this issue was also discussed in the component 'accessibility' (i.e. Access to tutorials and meetings). During the second interview she reiterated that –

> *"I don't feel isolated in terms of studying. **I feel a bit isolated in terms of like community** because uni, it's usually like a lot of events, lots of new friends […] it's a different stage of your life when you're communicating with people a lot when you every day you get someone new […] Yeah, obviously you can't have it with online studying. [Q – And do you think or do you feel that being isolated affected your studies?] No, I don't know. **It could affect in a good way if we had a community, if we would meet each other, we could speak about things, how everyone is doing and like consult each other in some things.** How everyone going through something. Yeah, it would be helpful. But **without it, I'm still doing what I should do**. So, I can't say that I'm like I will not study if I will not make the community (assembling) (Student 6 – II):*

Despite her comments of feeling isolated, her reflection on still being able to study and perform well in her studies is noted. She also highlighted that what helped her feel less isolated were participating in tutorials, because these could help them resolve difficulties they were facing in their studies and *"it's giving you inspiration to do something when tutors showing actually how it could be solved"* (S6 – II)

A similar suggestion was made by Student 2 (in response to Q – What additional things you would have liked to see offered to you or see happening as part of your experience at the Open University as a student?) and this was related to visiting the OU campus and meeting other students in-person:

*"it'll be probably very, **very helpful to visit [...] the main university**, [...] and maybe to attend one of the conferences, you know, physically to see because sometimes that can help, even though that won't be the format of what you study in the future. But if that could be organised and you could see other students, face to face it will boost your confidence"* (S2-II).

Another issue that was raised during the interviews was the competing roles that students had, and also challenges they were facing **in traversing boundaries between private life and institutional spaces, which in turn affected integration**. A boundary formed is the one between university and home or beyond-home-spaces. When it comes to this particular cohort (as with other cohorts at the OU), the institutional space is blurred with both the personal space and time – the sanctuary students reported being predominately at home while studying and often using their own material and personal resources (e.g. mobile phones) to access those institutional spaces created (e.g. online platforms, tutorial space), while the role of a learner is performed alongside other roles (e.g. mother, worker, volunteer). There is a constant movement and negotiations happening in and across those spaces, as indicated by both students below:

*"I have not too much time for this [explore information about the studies] because I **have to look after three of my children**, **work as well, English courses**, and a lot of things to do with house because **we're like in temporary accommodation and we always have war somewhere** [in Ukraine] so maybe if I have more time, I have more time to read about this and about what you can do."* (Student 7)

*"What makes me sometimes upset [...] **sometimes I struggle to manage my time. I struggle to find the place where to study,** you know? As I have said before, **because of the children**, because of the space, **because we don't have really like enough space in this place**. And sometimes time is like stress[es] me a lot, because sometimes I couldn't even find one hour to study from the morning till the evening **struggle to find the time to study**."* (Student 1)

The spaces that educational institutions are made of, and intentionally create for their students, are often viewed as different from other spaces that students may encounter in their everyday lives (Erstad & Silseth, 2023). However, as illustrated in the quotes, these spaces are blurred and there were many constraints for students in this process affecting their ability to shift flexibly across those boundaries: blurred personal and

institutional spaces, variety of devices, tools, materials, and platforms to use, and many material, social and political constraints. This was often exacerbated by the very different and conflicting roles that students were performing in each of these spaces (i.e. parents, students, workers, migrant). It was also affected by a lack of understanding regarding hidden and unhidden norms and rules underpinning those spaces (e.g. UK HE):

Student 6 explained this by reflecting on narratives she has been listening to since she arrived in the UK:

> *"When I came here [UK] it was like people are kind and friendly but when it is going to some serious things they are like "oh no, no, it is like … **you can't do that, you can't have this job, you can't do this because [...] you are not from here, you don't understand [...] you don't understand how to do that and that"** (Student 1)*

Another example that reiterates this point came from Student 5, in her response to the question 'And how accessible did you find the resources in general … is it easy for you to navigate the system on the Open University? How do you find it overall?'. She responded by posing more questions:

> *"If you talk about watching materials, easy. If you talk to have access to library, easy. **Just the main difficulty is to understand what they want from me?** I mean, **what I have to do, it's the main difficulty**, it's like what I have to prepare to pass TMA, **what kind of information I have to like unite together and to put in this work?** But I think it's not because of, it's not a minus of Open University system. **It's just my own… like my own misunderstanding, don't understand it so….**"*

Student 5 withdrew from the programme a couple of months after this interview. Although we had a follow-on communication with her for another interview after she left our institution, this was not possible to arrange. Her framing of not understanding certain things as being her own fault is noted in the analysis. This was not an isolated incident as many students viewed the challenges they were facing as a result of them being in deficit (e.g. skills deficit, language deficit). Transitions to the university were not happening with ease and required additional effort and resources on the students' side. Especially when considering the UK HE, there are many 'unknowns' for a newcomer to this and **many forms of cultural learning that students need to familiarise themselves with to be able to participate**. What is argued is that sanctuary students

"did not have funds of knowledge about the university sector, nor the confidence to negotiate it easily and bend the system to their will (Quinn, 2009: 120)".

Further to this, we cannot claim that once the sanctuary students had entered university there was a direct transition into a qualitatively different life. However, a view expressed in the interviews was that this opportunity was allowing them '**not to waste time' (S8) and taking them 'out of a situation in which they felt stuck' as a result of forced migration**. Only the fact that they could identify themselves as 'students' and not simply as a 'refugee' seemed to be salient to them. Student 3 articulated this succinctly -

> *"basically the best thing I've achieved is a sense of belonging. When someone asks you, 'Hey, what do you do?', '*I'm a student at the Open University', 'Oh, yeah, yeah'. ***You belong somewhere, you belong to a certain cohort. … You can identify as, yeah, not as a refugee but as a student.*** *(S3-II)*

6.3.2.5   Summary

To sum up this section, the sanctuary students, as everyone else, dealt with boundaries regarding what they could and could not do in specific situations and settings that affected their transition to the university.

The analysis of the interview data shows that:

Boundaries between university and their everyday life were fluid and intertwined; sanctuary students were positioned as learners in a way that was inextricably tied with their experience of displacement, which posed additional vulnerabilities on them - eloquently described by one of the students:

> ***"I do not know how long I [will] still [be] in the country, if I'm still here or not because of my situation right now, it's not yet resolved*** *[…] that's the only biggest uncertainty I have right now." (Student 3).*

Many of the students were not only new to a distance university, but also new to life in the UK, and with high levels of uncertainty and dependencies in their lives, which were not directly linked to their studies (e.g. housing, financial struggles). Boundaries were helpful for students as they aid in separating activities and making sense of situations across settings (Erstad & Silseth, 2023). We note high levels of satisfaction that students

shared about their experience as OU students. That said, "what becomes a challenge is when boundaries become barriers that hinder participation and learning" (ibid: p. 559). In other words, when the university experience is framed in terms of firm boundaries, rigid processes, and fixed points this may pose additional vulnerabilities to students from refugee backgrounds.

Our study shows that the pace of displaced people's learning lives does not synchronise with the set time frames offered to them. Their arrival time in the UK may not match the scholarship application times. Their pending / lack of documentation may prohibit students from applying. Situations arising in their lives (e.g. housing) may affect how they get on with their studies. For Student 5, for example, 'being integrated in HEI' may lie well in the future, after she will have withdrawn from the programme and reformulated her priorities. For Student 1, who completed the access module but decided not to carry on with another application for next year's scholarships, being integrated also relates to her priorities, and also to when the material conditions within her family are more able to support their study (i.e. her status changed; needed to find different house; caring responsibilities for two young children). Although her decision not to apply for scholarship for a degree in next year's round may be seen by the university (and/or policy makers) as an indicator of failure to keep the student and perhaps of her not being well integrated, for this student it was a rational decision based on her circumstances that meant this was not the right time and place for her to continue with her studies.

To our knowledge, there were also at least two more students (other than S5) who withdrew early from their studies. Although we are not fully aware of the reasons, this may be because they saw this as their only option at the time. It might be that they could not progress in their studies in the way in which they wanted, either for study-related reasons or because of other factors such as having to work long hours or other issues they may have been facing. In terms of university priorities (and policy agenda) leaving early signifies a failed transition into university. However, this may be seen differently from the students themselves and this may not be the end of their engagement with university and HE in general, albeit this is unknown to us in this stage. What is known is that there were certain skills gained, and their decision to withdraw may in fact signal confidence to make right decision for them. As Quinn (2009) argues, institutions should place more emphasis on flexible, 'unsettled' and spiralling movements throughout a learning life and recognising that this may be meaningful for students. What we see in the narratives that students shared is a situation of "forward and backward motions of life and the closures and openings of opportunities to learn (Colley 2007) that occur because of the material dilemmas and constraints produced

by economic, social and political forces" (Quinn, 2009: 121). Their transitions to the OU (and UK HE) are not linear; they may be in an open-ended, and fragmented process and thus as argued elsewhere it might be accurate "to depict the process [transition] as a number of zigzag or spiral movements within a web of contradictions" (Colley 2007: 438).

6.3.3   Key findings from interviews with tutors

The following sections are structured around the four components of value and will offer more insights on key findings from interviews with tutors and members of the SST teams.

6.3.4   Components of value: Operational / Delivery teams and Fundraising

6.3.4.1   Quality

There was consensus among tutors that the sanctuary students had access to high-quality materials and resources. This is reflected in the high score (Score: 5) this component received (see Figure 1), which indicates that performance exceeded expectations as set out in the components' description (see Section 5.3). The evidence provided below will offer insights into this component.

Sanctuary students had a similar provision to that of other groups of students in the university; the students "*get what everybody gets*" (T1).

Tutor 2 summarised in the interview -

> "there's tutor forums. There's tutorial forums [...] Obviously [we] give our email address out. We obviously **provide copies of all our slides** for the tutorials as well. And if required that **can be provided ahead of time** for students, particularly if obviously English is an additional language for them so they've got time to try to absorb the materials before they actually attend the Adobe Connect - is what we use [...] for the tutorials" (T2)

The same tutor recognised that "*there is just so much, that it can perhaps be [...] a bit awkward to find, unless you've got the specific link [...] maybe a slightly overwhelming amount of information*" (T2). Although Tutor 2 was referring to students, this is also true for tutors themselves **who may not be aware of certain services and resources**

available within the institution. For example, two tutors (undergraduate pathway) responded to our invitation to an interview to let us know that they were not aware that their students were a Sanctuary student (emails - 4 February 2023). Further to this, Tutor 2 acknowledged in the interview that **she was not aware of the referral process to EAP:**

> *"Obviously I was aware of the [sanctuary] champion, the website links, particularly in academic English. And I suppose I'll put my hand up, I'm not aware of English as an additional language [...] And if there's a specific person resource there, someone who is willing to provide support if referred, then I'm sorry I overlooked that or wasn't aware that that existed".*

Given the size of the OU, this is to an extend inevitable but what this may mean is that the students may not receive this information if, and when, is needed.

Overall, tutors shared an understanding of how important their role is -

> *"to keep sending out regular reminders that they can contact us if they have got any problems, as well as trying to arrange regular catch up sessions anyway so that we can help if they are stuck instead of them feeling that they've got to do it on their own" (T3)*

Within the context of studying at a distance and online, then the role of the tutor becomes even more important -

> *"I think for the OU, right, **if you don't feel like you have someone that cares, then the whole system falls apart because you are on your own**. So, it's really important to have some sort of something **that makes you feel that you're not just a number.** And that's what ALs do. They're fundamental to students, otherwise you might as well just do an online course on your own."* (T6)

This was illustrated by the analysis of student interview data too. All tutors emphasised though that this was a two-way relationship and if a student is not keen to take part and agree upon the rules of their communication, then this cannot be enforced. *"It is up to the students"* according to Tutor 5, whose sanctuary student did not request any tutorials with her. She carried on by explaining this further:

*"**There's no pressure on the student to […] have to join in** those [tutorials]. And what tends to happen in reality is that you get a proportion of students who never want to speak to you. You get a proportion of students who'd like you to call them every week. And then in the middle, you get those who need to speak to you as and when a particular question or, you know, if there's something they're not sure about within an assignment crops up"* *(T5).*

In our communication with tutors to arrange interviews, we had at least three tutors who responded to tell us that they have no regular contact with their students, hence they declined our invitation. For example, one tutor included on an email communication with the project's PI:

"I lost my one Sanctuary student at the outset. A few brief emails and one short phone call trying to arrange a time. My student did not complete what we agreed or talk when we said we would, although we made joint agreements to do so. I did keep trying to follow-up, but contact stopped". *(email communication, 27 February 2023)*

Similarly, another tutor wrote to her email to the PI:

My student on the Open Sanctuary Programme has never really engaged with the module. I did try contacting him by email and phone. I managed a couple of very brief conversations, but it was never a good time for him to talk. I did also do a couple of referrals to the SST *(email communication, date: 5 February 2023)*

Students opting-out from communication with tutors are all normal behaviours among the OU student body, so none of these came as a surprise to tutors. Tutors seemed to develop certain strategies to overcome the challenge of the lack of communication and the lack of contact with students. An example is provided below:

*"Every week **I send all my students a blanket email** and if I've got students that I know have something specific that I might need to speak to them about, **I send them a personal email highlighting anything that they specifically might need to know or want to know**. So then if they don't respond, at least they've had the contact from me even if they don't feel like talking back they've had… I still say, 'Oh, you should be doing this this week and hopefully you've been doing this.' 'If you're struggling with that, let me know, get in contact' so every single week I give them opportunity to reply to an email"* (Tutor 8)

Tutor 8 also mentioned posting on the module forum, including resources that she finds interesting (e.g. TV shows, podcasts). In the interview question 'What do you think works well in the current provision to the Sanctuary students?', the same tutor referred to the one-to-one contact that students could have with their tutors in the access modules. She felt that this model is valuable because it has student support build-in the programme at the outset:

*"The Access module in particular works well because […] there's a lot of opportunity for contact and there's a lot of support, so **there is lots of opportunity to speak to somebody one to one.**"* (T8)

This was echoed by another tutor on the Access programme in an email communication with the PI, where she offered her perspective about the one-to-one relationship with students. To her, this is -

*"advantageous to students, especially vulnerable students […] They enable me to gain an understanding of each student's strengths and weaknesses and so I can tailor tutorials to individual requirements […] **The one-to-one relationship allows the student to develop their confidence so that they are not worried about asking a question which they may struggle to do in a group tutorial**. […] I also follow up the telephone tutorials with a written summary so the student can refer back to the phone call"* (email communication, date: 12 February 2023)

In the Access programme, soon after the students registered on a module, they got -

"a book and an assignments booklet and a little informational leaflet about where to start, so where to contact for if they have computing problems, etc. etc. And then there's a module website that they can log into and join in the forums or get video materials" (T1)

A couple of tutors reflected **on the transition from printed materials to online platform** which for access students happened after the first term and thought that their students found this difficult. This was a point raised by students too (see Component: Access). In fact, Tutor 1 expressed some doubts if his sanctuary student had a laptop:

> *"I'm not sure that he had a laptop, basically. He certainly had a phone that was fully functional. So he was able to access all the online things that he needed".*

Although the university is ensuring that **all its provision is mobile-friendly**, it is **questionable if a student can indeed study appropriately and over long-term without access to a PC/ laptop**. Of note, this student withdrew from the access programme.

Related to this, for Tutor 3, the sanctuary students were able to make the most of the teaching and learning resources available to them, as long as *"they've got the technology in place early on and they've received their laptops on time"* (Tutor 3). As discussed in the previous section, only students on the full scholarships had equipment provided to them as part of the scholarship package.

Acknowledging students' digital needs was what made Tutor 8 suggesting that the OU,

> *"could offer more assistance with things like a phone and internet access and the things that they need to go online.* **If you need a student to go online you need to help them to be able to go online**" *(Tutor 8)*

As noted elsewhere, financial support to access sanctuary students was not offered by default, but it was pending approval by the university against certain criteria.

Tutor 8 continued by reflecting on the experience she had with her own student:

> *"I suspect that* **my student is struggling now that the work has gone [online]** *[…] And I know when I was having conversations with her […] her laptop wasn't great so she was borrowing one and then she asked if she could get help with funding to buy another one. And then the last time that I spoke to her she said, "When will I receive my next book?" and I thought 'oh no, because you don't get another book, it's all online'.* **And I was worried then that she wasn't engaging.** *And I've been emailing her since saying, 'Are you okay? Have you managed to get online?' and* **I know that she does go online […] but I suspect that it's not as easy for her now."** *(T8)*

Although this tutor recognised that resources and materials will primarily be online, she also thought that **not offering students the option to carry on engaging with physical books was a missed opportunity**, especially if one is from a disadvantaged background where the cost for internet connectivity and mobile data can be prohibitive.

Extra tutorials for academic skills and to go over class material were offered to access students. Tutor 6 explained that some of the meetings were synchronous but there was asynchronous provision to allow students who are working or have other responsibilities to access materials at their convenience. The same tutor referred to encouraging her students to use resources offered by the library:

> *"for academic skills like citations […] they're encouraged to go back to that [library] and make use of those resources". (T6)*

Referencing, citations and academic practices was an aspect that tutors (e.g. T4, T6) thought of as 'troublesome' for a number of students, despite students' previous studies. This simply points **to variations in academic practice across different educational systems.** This is related to a set of skills the students should be developing as part of their studies in a UK HE context. Some reflections on plagiarism, for example, were offered by one of the interviewees who acknowledged that she was not aware of such cultural variations in terms of academic practice:

> *"Certain countries and cultures have a very different view on plagiarism to what we have here. **And I was actually completely unaware of that**… And I was **quite disturbed, I suppose, to find out that I didn't know that** […] people may have grown up all the way through their schooling and been told that that is [plagiarism] what you should do. So, I just think **there maybe needs to be a bit more awareness perhaps with the sanctuary programme that we have to gently educate them into the way that we do things here** because they may not all have come from the same type of educational background" (T3)*

To this end, students could have been referred to one-to-one EAP support, as any other student in the university. We are aware for example that at least two tutors (Tutor 1 and Tutor 4) made use of this provision and booked EAP sessions for two of their students. Tutor 1 claimed in an email communication (date 7 February 2023) that the student *"has benefited greatly from the excellent support she has received"*. To this end, the tutor requested an additional 3 sessions to coincide with the student's assignments, but to our knowledge this did not proceed. This was similar to Tutor 4's experience too,

who wanted one of his students to book multiple EAP sessions but only one academic session was suggested on referral (interview notes). Tutor 1 expressed his disappointment as he thought that that the student needed more support in a more sustained way. That said, and as advised by a member of the project team (also member of the EAP team at the OU) students are normally offered one or two EAP sessions. These are seen as sufficient to help them deal with the specific academic challenges they are facing. If a student needs more support than this, the recommendation is that they enrol on an EAP course (email communication, date 7 February 2023).

In addition to this, one interviewee working with students in the undergraduate pathway, expressed surprise –

> *"by the level of study readiness of the students that have come through the Sanctuary programme." (Tutor 10)*

This is not because this advisor was not familiar with how capable students from refugee backgrounds are. Quite the opposite, as he had a strong experience of working with displaced people. Instead, **his expectations were that the OU scholarships would be targeting displaced people who may be harder to reach / in greater need and without any previous qualifications.**

Other tutors shared similar views about their students –

> *[student's name] seems to **be just getting on with things,** actually. So he hasn't been asking and looking at the standard of his work, **it's actually really good […] He's very capable**. His written work is of a very high standard, so he's doing well there […] So far **he's just submitted everything, done very well on time.** He hasn't asked for an extension, he just submits on time and everything is of a good standard. (T5)*

This is not often the dominant narrative one is exposed to when you refer to students from refugee backgrounds. It points back to the fact that most students in this first cohort came with strong educational backgrounds (see Section 6.1). Tutor 4 felt that no differential treatment was needed with sanctuary students, although he did describe giving more comprehensive feedback to his student, especially in relation to academic practice.

As already discussed, some additional sessions and resources were offered to the students (e.g. EAP monthly sessions, PLA support etc). One suggestion made was to bring students from refugee backgrounds together in sessions around their shared experience –

> I think **there are certain things that refugee, asylum seekers face that is a commonality.** And certainly, **at the beginning of their studies perhaps forming a support or having some support sessions** where people in the same boat can get to know one another and then decide whether or not, you know, as friendships develop they're going to continue those connections outside [...] offering people the opportunity to come along to a facilitated session where people can talk about their shared experience."
> (T10)

The advisor recognised that such a gathering was not offered in this year's cohort. In suggesting this, he acknowledged at the same time that **refugees come from very different circumstances and very different backgrounds,** and they are not necessarily going to mix any more than the general student population would. His suggestion resembles suggestions made by students themselves (see component: Integration). Whereas is important to treat everyone the same ('equality'), we also recognise that different individuals or groups might require different resources and needs ('equity'). In this respect, equity is a central concern in work with displaced communities and levels the playing field to ensure that everyone has an equal chance of inclusion, to opportunities, to contribute, and to succeed.

6.3.4.2   Collaboration

This component refers to the delivery teams in the OU working together effectively to make the best use of resources and avoid duplication of effort. All units / teams (e.g. in Development Office, Academic services, tutors / ALs, PLAs and the SST) work together effectively to support students through registration to the completion of their modules (in Year 1). This component received a score of 4 (see Figure 1) which indicates good links between performance and expectations, as set out in the components' description (see Section 5.3). The evidence provided below will offer further insights into this component.

The student interview data illustrated that the university had **a system in place that was functioning well,** and this led to **high levels of student satisfaction about their experience at the OU.** This system relied on structures and networks that existed

already within the institution (e.g. PLAs, SST), with the addition of a few new sanctuary-related elements. For example, **the role of the 'Sanctuary Champion' was established during this academic year, which was a positive development.** This person was tasked with maintaining an overview of the programme and contact with the students (also related to component: communication).

As discussed previously, the evidence generated pointed to a gap in support that the students received between award of the scholarship and registration. This was less related to tutors' role (hence interview data did not cover this) and more about other units working together effectively within the university. A concern expressed a member of the wider SST team during the interview **related to how their role fits within the wider system -**

> *"**It's difficult to know where [my role] fits within the wider core**. I mean because the student has a designated person within the student support team, often a lot of the information the student gives over to that student support colleague then means that [...] **fatigue, the student having to retell their story to another person can be quite tiring**, and actually perhaps there's been some duplication and perhaps crossover in terms... (T7)*

This quote raises two important points: the first is about the sanctuary system at the OU and the challenge faced by staff, namely **to see the links between their role and other teams and units also associated with this programme**. In other words, this was whether colleagues, whose roles were associated with the sanctuary programme, could in fact situate themselves as being part of an 'OU sanctuary programme'.

Based on insights shared by Tutor 7, but also reflecting upon our own experience of navigating through this system for the purposes of this project, it was **hard to maintain a holistic view of the system and an understanding of how 'all-fits-together'.** Tutor 7 offered insights into the challenge of understanding how their work was contributing to this system/programme. This may relate to the fact that the sanctuary work was a small part of colleagues' allocated workload so there were many competing priorities and tasks in their work life to be able to navigate this system meaningfully. Here, we make a note of a point also raised earlier, of two tutors who were not aware that their student was a sanctuary student. What the evidence suggests is that **there were gaps in the system regarding collaboration (and communication) across teams which may have left colleagues with inadequate information about the programme**.

The second point raised in the quote above is related to an aspect discussed briefly in the student data and that was about students possibly feeling overwhelmed with the amount of people across units and teams at the OU who made contact with them both in the early days of their studies and later on (see 6.3.2.1 Component: Accessibility). '**Telling' and 're-telling' one's story, as Tutor 7 indicates in her interview, is not good practice and certainly not one to be encouraged**.

Students had to speak to many people across the institution at various points (e.g. PLA, tutors, finance teams, SST, access team, academic services) and this was because not a single individual /unit/team had overarching responsibility for the programme and the students. This may lead to 'fatigue' and depending on the situation, may also re-traumatised students from refugee backgrounds.

This point was echoed in Tutor 10's interview:

> *"**It is quite confusing for people [students] to have a number of individuals with their interests at heart making contact with them [students] at the same time, to distinguish 'who does what?'** Can be a little bit confusing [...] Sometimes that whole willingness from the tutors, from the SSTs, from the Sanctuary champions and from the PLAs it's a lot of people offering you support and it can feel a little bit like, "Oh, who should I be speaking to about what in this instance?" (T10)*

Both Tutor 7 and Tutor 10 bring with them a wealth of experience of working with displaced people in previous work roles. What is more, each of them was allocated more than one sanctuary student and this may have enhanced their understanding about students' experience in Year 1. The point raised about **highly distributed levels of responsibility and support across many individuals / teams, which may have created confusion among students,** is a valid one. For Tutor 7, an alternative would be –

> *"somebody needs to be with them right at the beginning, basically taking them through everything" (T7)*

This is what the aspiration behind the role of the Sanctuary Champion is. The role was not in place at the outset of the sanctuary programme, but it was created soon after the students enrolled. Similarly, the PLA support (for UG pathways) was put in place soon after the students started their studies.

This is not to infer that the support offered to students was not appreciated. The analysis of the student data illustrated that students shared high levels of satisfaction both about the support they received and meeting OU staff who were willing to listen and help them. However, **a key element to consider is 'trust' and supporting students to build 'trusted relationships' with individuals and the institution itself,** which usually takes time. Within the system there were rigid processes and fixed responsibilities as to what a member of staff could do in specific situations. A student may have created a strong trusted relationship with their tutor or the PLA, but in certain occasions other individuals / teams had to be involved -

> *"So, I'm going to contact the student and say, "Do you want to have a chat about that?"* ***But I'm not permitted to advise or guide. That's not my role****. I then have to do the work with the student support team to get them to put the wheels in motion [...]." (T7)*

Getting a different team to intervene is not problematic at the outset, but it may affect how a situation is being dealt with: it may create delays in the process; it may mean that the student's concern is not a priority for the person the referral goes to; it may also mean that students have to 're-tell' their story to a person they have not met before. Both Tutor 7 and Tutor 6 (see below) in their interviews seemed to be viewing this situation as problematic. To them, having to refer students to a different team/individual, appeared as a rupture in the relationship they have built with the student:

> *"And you can push on student support, but then [...]* ***You're the one that they have become vulnerable, and they want you to do something because they're sharing their ideas with you.*** *So, if you just say, "Well, student support can put you in touch with somebody else," it just feels so cold." (T6)*

In this quote it seems that a referral was not signalling a collaborative effort. Instead, it was giving a message to the student that the tutor was not the one acting upon what was shared with her, and that she was in fact distancing herself from the student and the issue raised. Both these tutors (T6, T7) appeared to view referrals less as a form of collaboration across units / teams and more as an intervention from another (external) unit.

Relevant to this, another issue affecting collaboration concerns the highly **bureaucratic processes that underpin some of the procedures at the OU,** which can be prolonged and have implications for students. Tutor 4 referred to the process of booking the EAP sessions as time consuming for both the student and the tutor, as you can only book one session at a time. His suggestion was to adopt more flexibility but also allow the booking of multiple sessions. To him **all systems and processes are difficult to navigate for refugees so having a singular point of contact would be beneficial to build relationships.** This may not take place if multiple sessions need to be booked as this could result in different contact points (interview notes). Echoing a similar issue, Tutor 7 was also concerned of students 'falling through the cracks' of prolonged and bureaucratic processes:

> *"**a well-intended but somewhat decentralised or cluttery way of supporting the student**. So, almost **they fall back into the system and get lost a little bit in bureaucracy** [...] It happens to all of our students who are vulnerable groups. But you notice it more when you have that relationship with a sanctuary student [...] It would be good to sometimes jump over some of the hoops to just get a resolution quickly. No one seems to want to at the OU."* (T7)

An effective collaboration in this context was described as one that was 'anticipatory' and 'student-centred'. To be able to 'anticipate' issues that may arise, a certain level of expertise in working with refugee students and understanding their background and context was needed, particularly because -

> *"students that may be more vulnerable they may not have the confidence to come forward and ask for things, you know?"* (T5)

The following excerpt from Tutor 7's interview is also evident of this:

*"[Less experienced colleagues] aren't necessarily anticipating what some of those issues might be, **anticipating what might happen later on** […] 'This student is now disengaging. What are their options now? […]' All they seem to be focused on **is the student support process of sending the email out, trying to call them, not getting through and leaving it**. Whereas I'm thinking, "We can email the student and tell her what her options are and know that it's possible that they can take a study break". That student might not know that at the moment, that student might think they've blown their chance. […]" (T7)*

Being able to anticipate some issues before they arise is critical. A relevant example is the lack of equipment that many students experienced at the early stages of their studies (see Component: support). Another example was again offered by Tutor 7:

When you build a relationship with a student […] very quickly you're able to get a sense of something not being right *[…] so when this happened with [my student] I reached out to the student, they responded straightaway, very apologetic, said that they would contact their tutor. I then contacted the tutor. The student didn't contact their tutor. I then spoke to the student support team, who spoke to the tutor. So, **it set off a chain reaction of proactive activity to try and support the student** (T7)*

Although in this case the institutional processes were largely followed, the advisor did not appear fixated with these as she also opted for directly contacting the tutor before reaching out to the SST (also related to component: communication). This may not be a common practice, but the advisor was drawing on her strong knowledge and understanding of the student's situation. The quote above indicates that 'anticipating' is developed through both relational work and previous experience that teams have with regards to working with students from refugee backgrounds. To our understanding from the interviews, many tutors and advisors had a strong experience of working directly with refugees or other disadvantaged students in the past and this was **a great asset to the programme**. It may be - albeit we are not aware of this - that colleagues in the student support teams had less experience. This, however, is expected to increase by running the sanctuary programme for longer. What the quote above also highlights is the relational aspects that aid in maintaining good levels of understanding about individual students. This relates to an issue raised previously with regards to highly distributed levels of support across many individuals / teams in the sanctuary programme. The implication is that knowledge is highly distributed and thus it was hard to monitor and maintain an overview of individual circumstances.

What is more, interview data highlights that there was a need to strengthen capacity among staff / teams whose roles are associated with the sanctuary provision. In the quote below, the tutor was referring primarily to the SST team because of the critical role it has within the sanctuary programme, and because this person had a good understanding of the team. SST were regularly a student's first point of contact –

> *"We [advisors] came in I think one or two weeks afterwards [after students started]. The students at that point had explained so much to everyone, their tutors, the SST, it's quite hard to navigate. So, basically**, I think what works at distance institution is having a named contact right at the beginning who has the authority to cover a lot of that.** But it's so hard just to build that relationship with the student and also help them transition into university. **But it's hard to do that remotely because we're not permitted to give advice and guidance**. So, they do have to have that SST intervention. **Maybe it's a question of that SST person needs to be enhanced and trained up to be able to do what we do as well as what they do.** I can't see that happening."* (T7)

What the evidence suggests is a need to strengthen SST team's capacity in terms of working with students from refugee backgrounds and view this service as a combination of support and advise. The issue around strengthening capacity was a recurrent topic raised and is related to component: professionalism that will be discussed below.

6.3.4.3   Communication

Many of the points raised in the other three components are intertwined with evidence generated around the component communication. This component refers to effective collaboration and communication between Senior Management, Strategic management and Operational teams. It also refers to the programme forging links and processes of feeding back between senior / strategic management, operations and delivery (including administrative and academic staff and fundraising) and the students themselves.). This component received a score of 3 which indicates weak links between performance and expectations, as they were set out in the component's description (see Section 5.3). The evidence provided below will offer further insights into this component.

Interview data pointed to a few examples of good practice around communication. An example came from Tutor 10 in responding to the question 'How supported do you feel

of delivering your role to the sanctuary students?' referred to being in contact with the Sanctuary coordinator (i.e. champion) and that

> "we [a team of 3 advisors] have set ourselves up as a team within [a specific SST service] so **we meet regularly and compare notes and share challenges and share good practice and the Sanctuary champion coordinator has been along to that meeting** [...] All of us feel confident that if something comes up we have got the structure in place to work with it".

This arrangement that focuses on peer-support and communication was an isolated incident in the data generated by tutors. As noted earlier, Tutor 10 during the interview referred to the high level of readiness among students in the sanctuary programme, which at the outset it surprised him. Similarly, Tutors 4 and 5 referred to their students as 'very capable'. As such, not major issues with communication arose for them. This was echoed by more tutors, who viewed Sanctuary students as being –

> "not very different from any other student and as an Access tutor **I am well supported by the Access team**, so if I've got any problems I usually either **send an email directly to one of the team** and, you know, they'll sort out that problem. Or if it's a more general **problem I tend to put a message on one of the forums** and my colleagues, you know, different members of the team or my colleagues will reply and that works well to give me support." (T9)

In other words, existing communication mechanisms were utilised in various teams to support the delivery of the sanctuary programme. This, at the outset, seemed to be working well for many tutors. However, as noted previously, two tutors got in touch with the PI to let her know that they were not aware that their student was a sanctuary student. We note that there may have been communication with tutors, but the timing of the communication (i.e. September / beginning of the academic year) might have been problematic (also see component: professionalism). For one tutor in particular (T5), who accepted the invitation to an interview precisely because of this reason, her lack of awareness made her feel unease:

> "Oh my goodness. Should I have been doing something that I've not been doing?" (T5)

Both tutors were supporting students in the undergraduate pathway. None of the access tutors we interviewed expressed a similar lack of awareness. This may be

because the Access team followed a different approach compared to the faculties / UG pathway. To explain, the access team proactively sent communication to tutors describing the programme and asking them to put their names forward as tutors of sanctuary students. This was seen as another example of good practice around communication. In practice, this meant that tutors who nominated themselves did so because of either previous experience of working with students from refugee backgrounds and/or being highly motivated to supporting students from such backgrounds. The Access team also offered some training to tutors and set-up a sanctuary forum space, which, as indicated by the interviewees, supported tutors being more aware about the programme (also related to component: professionalism).

Contacting peers, the Access team manager and/or the Sanctuary champion appeared to be the strategies followed by tutors, if they had any problems, as indicated below:

> I feel as though **as soon as we were allocated the students, that's it, really**. I know that the head of scholarship [name] **she's the go-to person** if there are any problems. And I know that she will. So, it's fine**. I don't know who else would, I would speak to**, but I don't feel unsupported. I just feel like it's now almost become another student on my caseload." (T7)

In some situations where a student needed help with communication or had to go through highly bureaucratic processes at the OU, this advisor said she could offer some help:

> "Wherever possible, **if I need to contact a tutor on behalf of the student or if a student needs to ask a complex question, if they don't feel comfortable to do it, I will do it, but I will copy the student in** and I'll make the introduction and explain and then leave it with them." (T7)

A challenge highlighted by a tutor in terms of communication was related to everyday use of English language. Although this tutor was not referring specifically to her sanctuary student, she offered some reflections on what she called a 'language gap', which may be affecting communication with students -

*"**not just in terms of academic learning but in terms of communication**, because you say something to them, like you're trying to be funny in a tutorial and they don't understand. So, they could take [it wrongly], they then get upset […] So **that language which ties in with relationship building can be tricky**" (T6)*

In our academic institutions there is usually a strong emphasis placed on English as academic practice. This quote offers a different perspective though, which is strongly linked to **cultural awareness around language use**. A student that just arrived in the UK and has not been exposed to the British culture before, is likely to not have developed such an awareness. A refugee / asylum seeker who is based in the UK for a longer period, may be able to manage this "cultural chasm" (T6) better. For this reason, Tutor 6 made a distinction between *"there's an aspect being a refugee, but there's also the aspect which is being an immigrant" (T6).* In practice, when working with a student from refugee backgrounds, all these parameters (e.g. arrival in the UK, cultural background) should be taken into consideration and communication should be adapted accordingly.

During the interview, Tutor 6 also offered some reflections about the ways that COVID19 pandemic seemed to have changed patterns of communication with students:

*"Things have shifted […] When I started tutoring, a contact with your tutor and calls were taken more seriously. But because everything went virtual [during COVID19] and everything went on calls, not just for the AL… not for just the OU, but for everything, **students are far less responsive** […] It's just a different world to teach in […] The students were either really, really demanding or just disappeared in a way that they hadn't before. So that has been challenging. And again, **I contact students, I follow up with them, I encourage them to get in touch. But I can't cold call them constantly**, right? Because that would also, some of the students are very anxious and that would be a dreadful thing to do to just call them out of the blue. And if they don't want that contact, then you can't do it (T6)*

What the tutor raised here is partly related to tutors managing their expectations when it comes to communication with students. It also offers evidence of good practice that tutors are developing, i.e. not calling students without a pre-arrangement (also related to component: professionalism).

Finally, for members of staff who were already involved or affiliated with the programme, they were in receipt of (some) communication about this throughout the year. However**, not much was communicated to other tutors or the wider OU community:**

> *"I don't think that **tutors who haven't got any Sanctuary students are actually very aware of their existence**. […] I think they are probably not aware of the specificity of their needs or the challenges that those students are facing (T11).*

As such, communication for raising awareness about the programme itself should be enhanced.

> *"OU wise, I mean I went looking for the sanctuary scholarship information myself […] It's such a great programme that the OU and a lot of unis do **[…] I think it should be talked about more.** I think it's a great programme and it just it, yeah, it exists as a scholarship and **there's not really much said about it."** (T7)*

One such attempt was made by the PI and the project team when organising an event as part of Refugee Week, where two sanctuary students were invited. Identifying opportunities to raise awareness about students from refugee backgrounds who study at the OU may aid in countering dominant negative narratives that are regularly portrayed in the media and assumptions by members of staff.

6.3.4.4   Professionalism

The component professionalism primarily covers training, support and resources that are provided to staff working with Sanctuary students but also aspects around staff workload, and staff being well informed about issues relevant to, and challenges faced by, students as well as for staff being able to find the best ways to support students to succeed. This component received a high score (Score: 5; see Figure 1), which indicates that performance exceeded expectations as set out in the components' description (see Section 5.3). The evidence provided below will offer insights into this component.

The interview data highlights how **motivated all the interviewees were to work with students from refugee backgrounds.** Nearly everyone shared some relevant professional experience they had in the past of working with refugee and asylum seekers; being involved in a City of Sanctuary programme or a university of sanctuary;

frontline work/volunteering with refugee organisations; social work; tutoring work with other disadvantaged groups and so on. Having members of staff with relevant expertise and the ability to work with people from different backgrounds, is an important asset for the sanctuary programme itself. When the opportunity arose within the institution (e.g. Access programme, PLA), interviewees nominated themselves for this role:

> *"When I heard about this project I was very keen to be involved in it so that's why I put myself forward" (T10)*

In the question, '*Do you feel that you and your colleagues in similar roles are/were informed about the challenges in relation to sanctuary students when you started your post?',* Tutor 3 referred back to this self-nomination process to highlight that they opted for this and was not imposed by the institution:

> *"We were specifically asked to apply if we were interested in having them [students]. So, I'm guessing that **everybody was informed about what they were doing to start with**, because we did say that we specifically wanted them [sanctuary students] [...] So yes, I genuinely feel that we're supported and prepared for it all really". (T3)*

Despite perceived high levels of awareness about what their role may entail, **certain aspects seemed to have diverted from what they were expecting.** This was more related to offering advice which were more personal in nature rather than academic. One tutor mentioned that she was providing her student information about covid vaccinations, and another one that he was helping his student with identifying dance lessons in her locality (also see below). Tutor 4, for example, stated that he became inevitably involved in personal situations such as providing contact points relating to relocation. However, this was not part of his imagined role, as he explained in the interview. Like other tutors, Tutor 4 also felt that he was able to provide this support because he already had experience assisting students who had a refugee or immigrant background over the years. (T4, interview notes).

In general, tutors felt supported in their work allocation and shared positive views on this:

> *"I think that **I've been really well-supported**, and I think **that I've been given all the tools that I need** and if there was anything that I felt I didn't have I would be able to ask for it so, no [...] I think it works really well." (T8)*

A factor contributing to such positive views may have been that the responsibility that was allocated to them within the sanctuary programme was highly valued by tutors. To them, this programme was well aligned with the institution's social mission but also their own personal goals and views - eloquently articulated by Tutor 8:

> "Maybe just my personal background equipped me quite well for it, **I felt confident doing this, I felt excited to do this, I felt privileged to do this**." (T8)

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, sanctuary students, in their majority, appeared to have been performing well in their studies -

> "It's been fairly straightforward with those two students. Because there is nothing extraordinary that I would need to draft other people (T11)

Had this not been the case and had there been a situation where a student develops post-traumatic stress disorder or mental health issues, then Tutor 11 recognised that she would need more support, and she would have to bring in other services and signpost the students to make sure that they are getting the right support. Tutors did not appear particularly concerned about such situations arising though, as **most thought that the institution had systems in place to support tutors and students**, as and when needed.

> My feeling is that the Open University has always been very good at this kind of thing, and **I've always felt supported in whatever role I was doing, and you know, people were always efficient in getting back to me**. If they couldn't deal with a query, they would know who else in the organisation could help. So there seemed to be a lot of services there that could support me as well (T11)

That said, Tutor 1 referred to his student having developed PTSD. His description of how this situation was acted-upon within the institution, points to uncertainty on his side in terms of how this issue had been dealt with:

> "I'm not quite so sure of what happened with the PTSD thing**. I'm not sure that the OU was actually able to help apart from, you know, offering him sympathy kind of thing**." (T1)

As authors of this report, we do not have more information about this student, other than that he withdrew from his studies. Even if his withdrawal was not related to PTSD, it is essential that an institution that offers scholarships to students from refugee backgrounds to anticipate that this may be an issue that some students will be facing and offer support to them (also see above 'collaboration'). Equally important is for tutors to be fed back about the support their students are receiving. This did not seem to be the case with Tutor 1 above.

Additionally, it appeared that having a small size of sanctuary students (i.e. most tutors had a max of two) made their responsibility more manageable. The downside of this, as experienced by Tutor 1, was that if a student withdraws from the programme as it happened with his student, the tutor was no longer part of the programme. This development was unfortunate for Tutor 1:

> I would say **I was 100% disappointed that it didn't continue** [...] it's a shame that each of us wasn't allocated more sanctuary students so that if one did drop out at least you could continue with others. It was a shame to lose 100% of my allocation in one go." (T1).

When interviewees were specifically asked about the types of opportunities that exist or were offered within the last few months to develop knowledge and skills in working with students from refugee backgrounds, tutors on the access programme predominately referred to a training session that was offered to them in August 2022, alongside a set of resources that were made available to all (through an email / forum)[9]. A forum space was also set-up at the same time as part of this provision. These resources were designed specifically about the sanctuary programme.

Many tutors were satisfied with the training provided to them, as indicated by Tutor 3 below:

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[9] The person leading the training was Dr Suki Haider, EDI Manager and Associate Lecturer Support & Professional Development.

*I don't think there's been much literally just for the sanctuary programme. I did attend one right at the very beginning. I'm not sure that there's any… more [...] on that. But I don't feel like there's anything missing particularly, like there's anything we should have had. [...] We always know that we can contact our staff tutor as well if there's any issues and they'll point us in the right direction as well. So yeah, so **I feel like there is enough support** there. (T3)*

Similarly, Tutor 4 felt that he was well informed about the background of students included in this training and spoke highly of the information he received. He was aware of the forum and stated this was a great resource, although he has not participated in it heavily (interview notes).

Contrary to this evidence, there were also a couple of tutors who were not aware of training being provided. Among these was Tutor 2, as illustrated in her response below:

*"**I'm not aware of any specific training**. Usually, I keep a lookout for that. You're probably going to say, "Oh well, there's been training offered". No, but I've not noticed anything. And usually we keep an eye on [...] you're down the site, you get news of what's coming up. So, I mean obviously I've had the email from yourself saying that this study, this piece of research was happening. But in terms of specific support for myself then forgive me, I've missed it or it's not happened yet. (T2)*

The training was offered as a single occasion, so inevitably several members of staff, even if they were aware of this, could not have participated. A video of the session was uploaded online for tutors to watch it in their own time but this, according to Tutor 6, was not a particularly appealing option:

*"I got an email. I think there was supposed to be a training, but it got cancelled because somebody was ill. And so, **it was done as I think so they put in some videos**. But see the thing is again it's tricky because it's online. So, I have so many stupid classes I'm supposed to do online for the OU to get trained. And it's just a list of things that it's like, **"Oh my God, I have to watch another one-hour video"** (T6)*

Although probably not intended this way, this resource seemed to have become 'another video to watch'. There are several mandatory courses that staff are asked to complete regularly, but several other optional ones are also in offer. This was an

optional training. We recognise that it is of course difficult to satisfy everyone within an institution when it comes to development opportunities. However, **professional development opportunities (CPD) should cater for different preferences, be relevant to one's role, be diverse, and be offered on an on-going basis.**

A suggestion made was to combine the training -

> *"with some sort of benefit [...] So, I would say, "We're offering a free lunch, we're going to do it locally" [...] So, you could meet and actually talk. We're going to bring in a specialist psychologist at three points so you can talk about your experiences. Or [...] for this, you're all going to be paid [...] (T6)*

Elements such as in-person participation, peer-peer communication, and expert-practitioner communication seem to be highly valued and could be considered within future iterations of CPD.

Another aspect to highlight in relation to the training offered is its **timing**. To our understanding, there was communication about the sanctuary programme and the allocation of students to their tutors at the beginning of the academic year (Aug/Sept 2022) (also related to component: communication). The training took place the same period. **The timing of this looked problematic**. The sanctuary programme was launched in Spring 2022, but students were recruited in August 2022 so there may have been no other suitable period for this to take place. What is more, offering training in August may also clash with school holidays and childcare responsibilities for many tutors, as pointed to us by Tutors 2 and 5.

Tutor 5 for example was one of the two tutors who told us that she was not aware that her student was in the sanctuary programme. This is how she described this situation in her interview:

> *September is too mad and you just get... you do get bombarded with emails and things [...] **And you just get presented with lists and lists of student names. [...] They don't really mean anything to you at that point in time** [...] Things get lost in all of that. (T5)*

The beginning of the academic year can undoubtedly be very intense for tutors. This tutor also went on to explain that the **student flagging system was neither alerting her that the student was in the sanctuary programme nor of any needs that he may have** (also related to component: communication):

*"when we get our student lists at the beginning there's usually some, kind of, indication if they've got additional needs. But **now there is nothing when I go onto his.** If all I did was looked at this… the background [of student] […] what comes up on mine [interface/screen] I can see that he's doing [another module] and he seems to be getting good marks there as well. **But there's nothing to indicate any kind of […] additional need […]**. But if I go on contact history, I'm just looking [at this], but see […] I've got 90 students, so I don't always read all the contact history […] It does say on there that he's a sanctuary scholarship student.*

When prompted by the interviewer to explain whether this meant anything to her, she said that this is mostly -

"communications with student support or somebody called [name of Sanctuary champion] and [it is] saying he's got permission to work from the home office, and he's gaining practical experience in care".

The flagging system at the OU is an important one to alert tutors. It is only available to tutors on the undergraduate / postgraduate pathways. That said, the information provided in the system should make sense to tutors. In the case of Tutor 5, who was not aware of what the sanctuary system signified, what she needed was some practical information to help her identify any additional needs that her student required.

Drawing on her experience, Tutor 5 also suggested to provide the tutors with 'an information pack' and not consider training sessions as the only option available. She has been reflecting on her experience with students in prisons and to her, the **key information in this pack would be a link person**:

one main contact who could then signpost whether that question should be answered by the tutor, by a study skills person, by someone in finance […] So if […] each one [sanctuary student] had a key worker or a key contact […] they would then sort of assess the need and the question at that time and signpost the student to the most appropriate person who could help them with that particular issue.

Drawing on this quote, we may infer that this tutor was not aware of the role of the Sanctuary champion.

Another point raised with regards to training and professional development opportunities were the limitations of offering a single one-off training session. Tutors highlighted that students have diverse backgrounds, hence different needs:

> *"**Ukrainian students are different to refugees from say Syria or Afghanistan**" (T7)*

This meant that -

> *"it would be difficult in the initial training session to be able to train us in every possibility, whereas as long as there's **good solid support and follow up and the ability to share with peers and with more expert people** in the OU then as far as I could see we're doing everything possible." (T1)*

Considering more **informal peer-support groups for tutors** as a form of sustained professional development was suggested by a few tutors. As noted by Tutor 6 **"it's not just training, it's experience [....] and have places to share that past experience"***(T6)*. There was recognition to an extend that forum spaces serve this purpose – *"we can always go there and somebody will come back almost immediately with some advice"* (T3). Indeed, a dedicated forum was created for tutors on sanctuary programme, though one tutor shared a view that a forum is not an appropriate space to discuss and 'offload' emotions that may emerge because of working with vulnerable students:

> *"**You're left with all their stories** […] Especially for the access course […] The stories, what do you do with them? When I used to work in a traditional university of course we had some stuff like that. But then you have an office, you sit there, and you talk with each other, and you communally process it. And you have the shared memory of that. And you haven't been left on your own. So […] **what am I going to do? Put it on a forum for tutors? […] So, you're just kind of left on your own with all these stories** […] For the ALs, that's the problem […]" (T6)*

This tutor raised an important point, which is about having dedicated 'safe' spaces within an institution where tutors can draw on one another to develop further skills and good practice but also supported in dealing with the "emotional toll it takes when a student is really hurt" (T6). The data does not point to any evidence of such spaces (formally) existing.

The analysis of the interview data pointed to several areas of good practice that has been followed by tutors. A key part of what the advisors did, for example, was related to investing time to understand the student and his/her context, incl. practical aspects such as housing and family situation, digital needs, any additional needs, which –

> *sometimes there might be hidden specific learning difference that isn't acknowledged within that culture. So, for example, the student I was working with, there was a really strong suspicion the student might have something aligned to ADHD. But the student isn't eligible for disabled students' allowance because they're not eligible for student finance. So then [...] how do you ensure that that student has access to the same support that a UK (domicile) student would have? (T7)*

As the student data showed, their experience of displacement is intertwined with their studies. Thus, **strong knowledge of students' background may help to foster better relationships.** This takes time to achieve, and we recognise that many tutors and advisors are time-poor. Additional evidence related to this was provided by Tutor 10, whose appeared very knowledgeable about his students. One of them, as he explained to us in the interview –

> *"both he and his wife are studying full time, they have three children, they're living in rented accommodation in an area that they're not familiar with and have very, very little money so issues like finding the bus fare to take the kids to school and putting food on the table becomes an issue. So with **him I've been looking at the locality where he can access food that's free with the foodbank and services that are more accessible**, like the library for example. He hadn't thought about going to the library and he wasn't really familiar with the area. As it happened I know the area quite well [...] so I was able to talk to him about what is available there and he was very receptive around connecting up to that.*

The support that this advisor offered to the student was less about academic requirements (e.g. managing time, dealing with anxiety around performance, having the confidence to speak to tutors) and instead it was about –

> *"**plugging people into their local amenities to help with integration** is a valuable thing that I done there and obviously referring [student] to agencies that can help him and family in financially quite a challenging situation" (T10)*

Another example he offered was about a Ukrainian student living in one of the nations.

> The student [...] didn't have the financial issues [...] but **she's very much feeling isolation. She's living on her own, nobody else from her community really around** and about, and so that's difficult [...] What we did there is we looked at what her interests were, what her passions were [...] (T10)

Similar to the previous example, the tutor helped the student find a woman's belly dancing group and connect her to this so she can "*start making friendships that can help sustain her.*" (T10). Had this tutor not have strong expertise of working with refugees and asylum seekers in his previous roles, he may have not been able to notice and prioritise those aspects that were important to his students. Instead, he may have remained fixated to what the role of the advisor in a HEI should look like.

Further evidence was generated in the interviews with regards to practices tutors developed around referrals and signposting students to various services, but also dealing with difficult situations.

According to Tutor 7, students were able to access other spaces and services (other than their modules) but –

> "you have to be really proactive **[...] How do you know to look for something if you don't know it exists? And I think culturally, as well you're not necessarily going to know that there is mental health support ...** [Students are able to access other spaces] [...] but only because, [...] we are either signposting or triaging the students to those services. So, whether it's the mental health casework team where we've put referrals in, whether it's to the EAP scheme where I put a referral in... So, in terms of what other support is available at the OU, ISS, EAP, financial support and all the rest of it, yes, but only because we tell them [students] [...] And then it becomes a case of well, **it depends on who you talk to will determine what support you get**." (T7).

The final sentence in this quote highlights how important the role of the tutor / advisor is, as this is the person who is more likely to have regular communication with students. Further to this, this quote reminds us, that students from different backgrounds are not necessarily **familiar with what may exist within a UK HEI and may in fact not associate a university with e.g. mental health provision.** The language that is used in the UK

around mental health is probably different compared to how this is talked about in a different geographic context. Supporting cultural awareness of UK HE is often not valued within HE institutions.

Mental health issues are likely to affect a growing number of students, including sanctuary students. Tutors need to be increasingly prepared for dealing with complex situations, as the one described by Tutor 8:

> "I do know that she's not very happy because once when I tried… we arranged a call, and she didn't answer and it's because she was in hospital […] **It was such a shock when […] she said it so nonchalantly, she said, "Oh, I'm in the hospital because I tried to take my own life"** and I just thought, "Gosh" and it was on the phone and I had to respond really quickly to that but the Open University have given training […] on how to deal with those kinds of situations. And I'm also studying for my mental health sciences degree and I've done a lot of work with mental health **so I did feel comfortable, I felt confident in responding** but, yeah, it might have been a different situation if it had have happened five years ago and I hadn't had all that training." (T8)

It is evident that Tutor 8 had an appropriate background and confidence to respond appropriately to this situation. In describing this incident further, she illustrated through her words, how empathetic she was to the student -

> "it was awful and then I had a really good conversation with her and I told her that… it might make me cry - **I told her that she mattered to me and that she mattered to us and that we were here for her. I had a really good conversation with her** and then she hasn't really responded much since. I know she's okay, because I have heard a little bit, but she hasn't really responded much since". (T8)

This evidence illustrates **forms of expertise that are needed** when working with students from refugee backgrounds. Because of the expertise that several tutors had, **they were able to navigate many of the challenges that arose when working with sanctuary students**. This quote also relates to the point raised by Tutor 6 earlier, about the emotional toll that work with vulnerable students entails, and also having to manage the 'aftermath' of those incidents and stories shared with the tutor – often in isolation.

During the interview the tutor referred to the student 'gone missing' after this incident and not responding much to her communication. Soon after our interview took place, the tutor got in touch with the PI (email communication, 14 March 2023) to let her know that the sanctuary student had contacted her to say that -

> She **tried to end her life for the second time** and [...] **she was back in recovery.** I had a chat with her at the weekend and she's decided to try **to defer her studies and pick them up later. She's now getting counselling**, so hopefully will be getting the support she needs. She told me that **our support and help was really appreciated and that it really helped her**. I thought this was so valuable and **I feel so fortunate to have been part of the [sanctuary] project**. I wanted to pass on to you that she's okay" (T8, email communication 14 March 2023)

It was positive that the student was able, and was supported, to decide to defer her studies and return to these, as and when she will be able to. It seemed that she could not progress in her studies in the way in which she wanted, but this does not mean the end of her engagement with the university. As a university we should approach this not as a failed transition, but instead look at how to further support such 'interrupted' transitions to HE.

Further to this, tutors reported benefits from their work with sanctuary students, such as *"the professional satisfaction of dealing with somebody from yet another difficult background and helping them out"* (T1). Another benefit was about deepening their understanding of this cohort and cultivating their interest into a topic that matters and is relevant to them (e.g. T11). Finally, tutors became exposed to students from refugee backgrounds, and this brought enhanced awareness of their realities:

*"A lot of them are highly educated. **We sometimes have a stereotype where we think that people from other backgrounds aren't able to fit in and work,** and I think that's a really unfortunate view, because many of them have had jobs at a very high level and have been functional members of their society. And it must be horrible for them when they first arrive in the UK and they're told that they can't work until their whole application is processed. So, I think this [studies] allows them to feel like they are functional still and improving their lives and integrating into the UK while many of them are still, they're kind of in limbo, aren't they?" (T3)*

What Tutor 3 expressed during her interview echoes what students included in their insights about value from their studies.

Overall, tutors expressed very positively about the sanctuary programme and all thought that it fits well with the OU's social justice mission as the aim to be open to all students includes students from a refugee background. Tutor 8 referred to this programme as "wonderful" and feeling *"really grateful that I was given the opportunity of working with someone [student] so inspiring"* (email communication, 14 March 2023). What is more, Tutor 10 felt that the OU –

"has shown a great deal of commitment in supporting Sanctuary students […] The OU was brilliant, very quick […] Could it be done better? Again, I can't help thinking that there are people who have more need who are missing, and I worry that people have fallen through the net." (T10)

The point he is raising is based on his experience with four sanctuary students who were academically very strong. His expectation was that he would be working with students –

"who were perhaps in much more crisis focused situations but in fact, aside from the practicalities, the people who've come through the Sanctuary programme are pretty sorted compared to others that we work with." (T10)

This may simply be related to who in the first place applied for the scholarships, what criteria were set and how the selection of the scholars took place. Considering that most sanctuary students in this cohort had strong educational backgrounds, may indicate that the OU could consider extending the reach of the scholarships to displaced people who may be in greater need.

6.3.4.5   Summary

To sum up this section, similar to students, the tutors also dealt with boundaries regarding what they could and could not do in specific situations and settings related to the sanctuary programme.

Tutors reported that they could not always understand how their role fits within the wider sanctuary system. In other words, they were not supported to see the links between their role and other teams and units also associated with this programme. This may be because the programme was still at its infancy and some elements of the programme were still emerging during this first year of implementation. Despite this, all tutors interviewed appeared highly motivated to work within this programme and support the sanctuary students. When given the option, they put themselves forward to work on the programme as this was seen as being strongly aligned to their values. They performed their roles as they would do with other OU students, with practices that are commonly in use (e.g. referrals, calls, emails, forums). A few tutors noted with surprise that their one-to-one sessions touched upon more personal aspects of students' experiences in the UK, compared to primarily focusing on academic-related issues. This may indicate that tutors had to be able to move across these boundaries of personal and academic related aspects, which however contradicted their previous experiences.

What is more, many tutors highlighted that sanctuary students were strong academically and as such, not much diversion was needed from approaches they would normally follow, except for English for academic practices and cultural awareness around language use. The data showed that two tutors were not aware that their students were sanctuary students, and their students' strong academic performance offered no alerts to them. That said, we are aware for example that one of their students (S8) was at that time facing severe other issues (see e.g. vignette in Section 6.3.1). What this may suggest is that strong academic performance should not always be taken as a signal that a student from refugee background faces no other issues. Instead, tutors need adequate information what a sanctuary student is and what forms their support could take, but also good communication and collaboration with other individuals/teams/units that may alert them to their students' needs.

Many tutors showed heightened awareness of the situations that students had to navigate, because of strong relationships many of them built with their students but also due to their strong prior experience of working with displaced and other disadvantaged learners. The analysis shows that tutors largely felt adequately prepared to work on this programme. They expressed high levels of confidence in the institution to support both them and the students, and relied on existing institutional

mechanisms, networks, and systems. That said, the evidence generated emphasised the different forms of care and expertise that are needed when working with students from refugee backgrounds, which goes beyond the domain / subject expertise. Because of expertise that several tutors had, we saw instances in the data where tutors were able to navigate the challenges that arose when working with sanctuary students (e.g. mental health issues) - though this was not universal (e.g. student with PTSD). In a few situations, tutors and advisors reported feeling restricted by a rigid system with defined responsibilities, where for example 'advising' students was not seen part of their role and instead they had to refer students to other services in the institution (e.g. SST). This, too, is related to additional 'forms of expertise' needed, as inevitably other experts had to intervene to support students (e.g. EAP, mental health specialists). A few tutors viewed this as problematic though, as they felt that students needed 'trusted' relationships with individuals and not a system that would ask them to 'tell' and 're-tell' their story across several individuals/teams. In other words, referring students to other individuals with whom they had no prior contact or whom they were only going to meet once, might not be serving the student needs well. Interview data also revealed bureaucratic processes that students and tutors had to go through to make support happen. A few tutors were thus questioning how beneficial such a highly distributed system of support may have been for students. To them, this appeared as a 'rupture' in the relationship they had built with the student, plus they felt that the outcomes / progress that students were making by being referred to additional support were not always fed back to them.

Closing the feedback loops and creating mechanisms and spaces where tutors could be developing further knowledge and skills on this area is deemed important. Tutors could only recall one dedicated training session that took place in support of the sanctuary programme in the early stages of the programme. Although this was valued by those who attended it, the analysis suggests also considering more informal, peer-support groups for tutors as a form of sustained professional development which may offer opportunities to 'offload' emotions that may emerge because of working with vulnerable students. In other words, professional development opportunities should cater for different preferences, be relevant to one's role and profile of students allocated to him/her, be diverse, and be offered on an on-going basis. Elements such as in-person participation, peer-peer communication, and expert-practitioner communication seem to be highly valued and could be considered within future capacity strengthening programmes for staff associated with the sanctuary provision.

Effective provision in the context of educational provision for students from refugee backgrounds was described as one that was 'anticipatory' and '(refugee) student-

centred'. To be able to 'anticipate' opportunities and issues that may arise for refugee students, a certain level of knowledge and expertise in working with refugee students and understanding their background and context was needed. A certain level of flexibility among individuals and teams tasked with sanctuary related roles was also required. Despite the gaps revealed to such anticipatory provision, to an extent, all tutors/teams who took part in this year's provision learnt about their students' experiences, needs and desires and developed practices to meet those academic and personal needs. This is one among the many benefits that were reported to us, and as a result all tutors will certainly be more prepared to work with students in the next cohort and in the future. The establishment of a dedicated sanctuary champion role will also offer an important mechanism to support anticipatory provision. It is our view that this role should be further supported with additional dedicated sanctuary related roles/structures that will be more visible within the institution and with clearly delineated responsibilities.

The analysis points to several instances of 'student-centred' approaches that were developed, especially at the micro-level of tutor – student relationship. However, there was no evidence of tutors / advisors describing creating or adapting the curriculum to make it more relevant to their displaced students. Instead, there was rigidity in the content and forms of assessment the tutors and students were expected to cover in this first year. The tutors also emphasised how fostering relationships between them, and the students, formed a foundation for the students' learning experience at the OU, but we argue that further work is needed to foster relationships among students (displaced students to displaced students; displaced students with other groups of students). One advisor in particular, offered some insights into how he recognised the identities that his students brought to the sessions (e.g. displaced, parent, student, unemployed) and how he supported them to create new identities in the place they now live by connecting them with networks in their locality. More support with regards to this aspect is needed, as students should not only be seen as 'refugees' or 'OU students'. What is more, further engagement in future-creating activities with students is needed, despite the uncertainties that students are facing. Activities around cultural awareness, life in the UK, employability, and support for English language but also other pathways to the OU and other universities (especially post-Access modules) may in the long-term be particularly important for refugee students. Finally, more activities to raise awareness within the institution about students from refugee backgrounds and the sanctuary initiative will not only offer greater visibility and potentially support to students, but also bring renewed motivation to tutors to work in the programme.

None of the tutors we spoke to, raised any reservations about how valuable a sanctuary programme is within the OU, and more widely in the sector. To the contrary, they all expressed how displaced students 'mattered', whereas a few reported that the programme should be expanded and cater for people in the asylum system who are in greater need. The people we interviewed, may be viewing the sanctuary programme as an act of resistance against a highly hostile environment that is being created in the UK, often at great risk for universities that not only face lack of resources to cover such provision to displaced students, but also need to comply with changing legislation and structures at national level.

7.   Summary and Recommendations

The project was set to examine the transition processes of the OU's first cohort of Sanctuary students (n=44) who enrolled in the university in October 2022. The project focused on students' first year of studies at the OU to examine enablers and barriers they have in their academic journeys, strategies they developed or adopted, how they organise their studies at a distance, and the value that the learning activities bring to their educational trajectories. The project also focused on tutors and staff in the student support teams (SST) with direct responsibility to work with/support those students. This was deemed important as tutors often have regular communication with students hence their insights were critical to meet the objectives of the project.

Through a multi-phase approach drawing on ethnographic approaches, including repeated interviews with students and tutors, an initial value model consisting of three segments and twelve components was developed. The model helped to explore, reflect and assess how well the Open Futures Scholarships programme met their goals over time. Although further work is required on the model, it still serves as a good way to structure the analysis of how well the project is working and to bring to notice the areas where there might be room for improvement.

Through the analysis we note that transitions to the university are not linear and do not follow a prescribed pathway. Echoing Quinn (2009: 127), we also argue that "what is needed is a system that facilitates multiple transitions into, across, out of and re-entering HE". This kind of flexibility will benefit life-long learning and support decisions made by students based on social, political and personal constraints that they may face at certain times.

As a university (and a sanctuary programme) we need to have structures and processes in place; but ultimately in working with students from refuge backgrounds we also need greater openness and flexibility. Our approaches should reflect the pace that one's life may have. Refugee students are in flux; educational provision should mirror this and work around this, "rather than trying to subjugate it with rigidity". (Quinn, 127) Transitioning to university is not only about academic studies and transmissing knowledge, but it is about connections and relations, and viewing this as a holistic and on-going experience (Ingold, 2011). Taking our definition of knowing from Ingold (2011), knowing does not only involve internalising abstract concepts and systems (e.g. academic knowledge), but also it involves journeying through an environment and gradually changing to an ability to perceive and act within that environment. Being able to 'be' and 'act' in that environment forges a path that evolves, as we are creating transitory and relational boundaries – as opportunities and limitations – for students to move into our institutions.

Key recommendations have been identified to guide future work in subsequent phases of the Sanctuary programme. The recommendations draw on the components that were discussed previously as part of the data analysis. They aim to promote an approach to strengthening capacity for individuals and teams involved in the programme and creating an enabling and welcoming environment for students from refugee backgrounds to support their transitions to higher education.

11. **Ensure the programme prioritises and serves the most underserved / most in-need in the asylum system.** The sanctuary programme illustrates how university provision could be supporting displaced people. Many of the students in the existing cohort have strong educational qualification and previous academic studies. Approximately half students were in the UK under 'Home for Ukraine' visa scheme. To support displaced people who may be in greater need in terms of lack of opportunities to access education, the scholarships should set criteria that prioritise the most underserved in the UK asylum system (and beyond).

12. **Establish a key Sanctuary contact across the cohort and maintain high levels of dedicated support through individuals and teams.** The role of the Sanctuary champion is a positive development at the OU. This role should be further supported with additional dedicated sanctuary related roles/structures that will be more visible within the institution and with clearly delineated responsibilities.

13. **Offer enhanced support to students at the point of application and module enrolment.** The university offered a wide range of support to sanctuary students.

However, more support is needed in key stages such as the application process and enrolments on modules. This could be offered for example through drop-in information sessions, collaborative awareness events with key charities in the field, scholarship sessions, raising awareness of online and distance learning and the access programme, induction events for specific qualifications, other OU resources for preparation.

14. **Review and simplify existing processes in the institution to support access to resources and mechanisms of support, and appropriate information to be provided to tutors -** e.g. access to finance support, equipment, EAP bookings, flagging system.

15. **Foster relationships among students and create spaces to enhance a sense of belonging among students -** e.g. create opportunities for students to connect with other students in their cohort and the institution; offer more support in the early stages of studies through virtual or f2f meetings; offer induction events for students on the sanctuary programme; pair sanctuary students of the previous cohort with students on the new cohort.

16. **Consider the provision of EAP as a core offer within the sanctuary programme.** This can be achieved by establishing a dedicated EAP provision as part of the Access programme or continue with the provision of bi-weekly / monthly EAP sessions to sanctuary students. Opportunities for communication back with the tutor should be sought. EAP person / facilitator to be seen as part of the Sanctuary programme.

17. **Encourage greater flexibility in tools used for communication purposes**. This can be achieved by encouraging video calls between tutors and students (e.g. in early stages of studies) or being able to use different tools with students.

18. **Encourage sanctuary team / APD teams to organize professional development events based on the programme's needs.** Through a series of professional development opportunities (formal and informal) the programme will explore and respond to layered responsibility for tutor care and development through activities tailored to needs of specific groups of staff and recognition of emotional labour in workload. For example, academic services and SST - signposting, basic migration status understanding; tutors – trauma informed practice and mental health provision.

19. **Consider creating opportunities for student-centred and refugee-led activities at the OU** - e.g. in design of courses, in implementation of activities, adapting curriculum, different forms of assessment, events organized with students, events offering bespoke support to sanctuary students.

20. **Raise awareness of the sanctuary programme at the OU and strengthen its evidence-informed provision.** This could be achieved with dedicated promotional materials featuring students in the programme, events organized where students are invited / organisers. The sanctuary team could be working closely with academics to support monitoring and evaluation of the programme but also consider partnerships with local and national refugee organisations and other sanctuary universities to inform our provision.

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Annex

Table 1 Participants in interviews (Students)

Interviewees	Gender (perceived by us)	Region of country of origin	Status	Scholarship / Fee waiver	Dates of 1st and 2nd interviews	Duration (in min)
Student 1	Female	North Africa	Asylum seeker / Refugee (in 2023)	Access fee waiver	15/2/23 & 6/8/23	48'; 40'
Student 2	Male	West Africa	Asylum seeker	Access fee waiver	15/2/23 & 6/6/23	38'; 29'
Student 3	Male	East Africa		Access fee waiver	15/2/23 & 7/6/23	21'; 25'
Student 4	Female	East Europe	Limited Leave to Remain (specific visa scheme)	Access fee waiver	15/2/23 & 8/6/23	34'; 30'
Student 5	Female	(East Europe?)	Limited Leave to Remain (specific visa scheme)	Access fee waiver	17/2/23	23; NA
Student 6	Female	East Europe	Limited Leave to Remain (specific visa scheme)	Scholarship – STEM degree	15/3/23 & 16/6/23	32'; 29'
Student 7	Female	East Europe	Limited Leave to Remain (specific visa scheme)	Access fee waiver	15/3/23 & 15/06/23	29'; 30'
Student 8	Male	South-East Asia	Asylum seeker	Scholarship – WELS degree	17/3/23 & 27/6/23	28'; 27'

All students, apart from Student 5, were interviewed twice.

**Student 5 was among few students who registered in February 2023 - all other interviewees started in October 2022.*

Table 2 Participants in interviews (Tutors)

Tutor	Gender (perceived by us)	Access tutor / UG / SST	Number of sanctuary students allocated	Student interviewed	Duration (in minutes)	Date of interview
Tutor 1	Male	Access tutor	1	(student withdrew)	21	
Tutor 2	Female	Access tutor	2	-	41	
Tutor 3	Male	UG tutor	1	-	52	
Tutor 4	Male	Access tutor	2	Yes (S7)	45	
Tutor 5	Female	UG tutor	1	Yes (S8)	44	17/2/23
Tutor 6	Female	Access tutor	1	Yes (S2)	40	21/2/23
Tutor 7	Female	SST (UG)	4	-	55	23/2/23
Tutor 8	Female	Access tutor	1	-	45	28/2/23
Tutor 9	Female	Access tutor	2	Yes (S4)	50	16/2/23
Tutor 10	Male	SST (UG)	4	Yes (S8)	40	17/3/23
Tutor 11	Female	Access tutor	2	Yes (S1?)	68	24/4/23

Tutor 4's interview was conducted as a phone call. No recording is available. Notes were taken by the interviewer.

Interview protocol with tutors / advisors

PART A   About you

1   Name, faculty/unit, access modules / full scholarships, years of experience at the O. How many sanctuary students are you working with?

2   Previous experience with students with refugee backgrounds or other disadvantaged groups of students (e.g. disabilities, additional needs)

PART B   About your role in sanctuary programme

3   "What are the main responsibilities in your role, especially in relation to your work with students on sanctuary programme? Please describe 1-2 typical activities and tell us a bit more about processes you are following, people you are working with etc. What challenges have you been facing in this role, if any? - You refer to X, Y challenge (pick up 1-2 e.g. e.g. workload integration). What, if any, helped you overcome these challenges? - Have you had any signs that the OU is aware of these challenges and things are happening for improvement? "

4   " Can you describe a situation where you thought that the programme is working well and you are effectively tworking together with students and others at the OU? This could be related to communication / collaboration between different stakeholders at the OU "

5   Do you feel that you and colleagues in similar roles are informed about issues relevant to and challenges faced by Sanctuary Students?

6   "In general, how supported do you feel in this role / in delivering these activities between start of academic year and now? What types of opportunities were there for people (staff and ALs) to develop new skills /do things differently especially re. support to such groups of students?"

7   In what ways what you are doing with these students is different compared to work you did with other students before? (e.g. draw on trauma-informed pedagogies).

PART C   Perceptions on students' performance and use of resources (materials)

8   "What kind of resources / materials are sanctuary students encouraged to use? (sites, forums, books, course materials) How accessible do you think resources are for your students? (e.g. this could be in terms of language, in terms of navigation, in terms of assessment, in terms of cost, systems etc). To your knowledge, have students expressed any difficulties with engaging with course materials and other resources? (e.g. it could be about assignments) What might help them address these difficulties?"

9   "Do you think sanctuary students are able to make the most of the teaching/learning resources available to them? "

10 "Are you aware of other spaces and groups that students are able to access as OU students? Are students encouraged and able to access other spaces? (this could be mental health support, FB groups, students' association, EAP support) "

PART D   Reflections

11 "What do you feel are the positives from your experience with your students this year? (e.g. supporting students might be in their responses) In what ways were you

able to support students to succeed? Give an example. What do you think works well in current provision, if any? How do you know? What doesn't work well in the current provision, if any? How do you know? (example)"

12   What, if any, the OU could do in the future to improve provision for students from refugee backgrounds?

13   In your opinion, what do the scholarships enable students from refugee backgrounds to do so far that they couldn't do before? [Please elaborate on specific points, if possible]

14   In what ways / Which aspects of the sanctuary programme demonstrate the OU's social mission / social justice, if any?

Anything else you'd like to tell us about your work with the students

Interview protocol with students (Interview 1)

Part A	About You (introductory general questions)

1   Name / qualification / time in the UK and previous educational background / Confirm if they started in October or in February

2   What are you hoping to achieve through your studies at the OU this year?

2.1   [cue] What made you apply for the scholarships?

Part B	Application process

3   **How did you get to know about the scholarships at the OU?**
- Please tell us if this was through any links you have with specific community organisations

4   **How did you find the process of applying for a scholarship at the OU?**
- How did you find the information provided about the programme / scholarships' application?
 (e.g. was it advertised well? Was it accurate and clear and easy to understand?)
- What were the main challenges for you in preparing and submitting an application?
- What might have made this process easier for you?
(i.e. what kind of support do you think it would have helped you when preparing such an application?)
- What improvements would you suggest in this process then?

5   **Can you please talk me through what you had to do following the letter telling you "congratulations, you got the scholarship/fee waiver?"**

a. How did you find this process of preparing for your studies at the OU? (i.e. info provided, selection of modules, registration)
b. What type of information did you receive about your studies in this period? How helpful was this for you? With the knowledge you have now, what do you wish you knew back then?

6   **Can you give me an example, if any, where you felt particularly supported during the application / preregistration process at the OU?**
e.g. were you given a main point of contact? Were you made aware of who could help you with what issue?

7   **Can you recall a situation, if any, where you felt uncertain about what you were doing during the pre/registration process at the OU?**

8   As an OU student, what do you typically do? Can you please describe 1-2 typical activities, any specific tools you are using, resources, who you are working with etc

- What are the main difficulties in these activities? (draw on same example e.g. working with tutors, connectivity, devices, study space and personal responsibiltiies)
- How do you go about addressing these? What helps you address these difficulties?

9   What kind of teaching and learning resources (materials) are you using between the start of your studies and now? (books, online resources, webistes, forums, articles, etc).

10   How accessible did you find these resources in general?
(e.g. this could be in terms of language, in terms of navigation, studying offline/online, format, downloading or watching materials, data costs...)

11   Can you recall an example, if any, where you felt unsure of what you had to do with regards to resources provided to you?

12   Do you think you are able to make the most of the resources that are available to you? If not, why is this the case? Example?

13   What other spaces or other resources related to your studies (formal or informal) were you able to access/find out since you started your studies? (e.g. FB groups, whatsapp groups, mental health support etc)

14   Can you give me an example, if any, where you felt particularly supported during these early stages of study at the OU?

Can you give me an example, if any, where you felt uncertain about what you were doing during the early stages of study at the OU?

Part D   Looking back and looking forward

15   What aspects of your studies so far made you feel very satisfied?
Are there any aspects that made you feel uncomfortable, if any?
e.g. assessment, forums, materials, meet other students / your tutor

16   Looking back to these first few months of your studies, what do you feel most proud of what you achieved?

17   Looking ahead, what is it that you would like to achieve in the next few months?

18   What has the scholarship / fee waiver allowed you to do so far that you couldn't do before?
        – Is this an important thing for you?
        What are the main benefits for you through your scholarship and studies at the OU?

19   What, if any, the OU could do in the future to improve provision for students from refugee backgrounds?

        Anything else you think is important to share with us

Interview with students (Interview 2)

Thanks for meeting us again. Remind of on-going consent. Remind why we are doing this follow-up interview (nearly the end of the year, some things, feelings, plans might have changed and we would love to have another chat

1   **Congratulations for reaching the end of this year at the OU. What do you feel are the main benefits for you after studying for nearly a year?**
        What has changed for you this year as a result of starting your studies?

        If they refer to specific changes (e.g. improved english language, improved writing): How do you know that these changes occured? Can you give an example?

        If no benefits/changes: Why do you think it hasn't been possible to see any changes yet?

2   **One thing that we see a lot in the previous interviews with you and other students are references of support you got in the early stages of your studies when various people like tutors, student support teams, PLAs (only for scholarship students), academic services etc were calling you, emailing you, offering help, asking you lots of things, offering advice etc. We would like to pick on this point here.**

        - How did you find all these different types of communication with you at that time? How did this communication make you feel?
        - How could this be improved in the future?

        If they say it was helpful - In what ways this communication helped you to make some decisions? Can you give an example?

        If they say it was too much, not that helpful, too many people making contact at the same time - What would have been their preferred communication from the OU? What should change to make this better in the future? (e.g. being contacted by only one main person?)

3   **Studying, especially at a distance, is not easy. What kept you going this year with your studies?**

4   **How 'cared for' (supported) did you feel in your role as a student at the OU?**
    In what other ways do you feel the OU (or staff at the OU) could be supporting you in your
    role as a student?

5   **What additional things you would have liked to see offered to you this year or see
    happening as part of your studies? What, if any, do you feel was missing from your
    studies this year?**

6   **Being a student at the OU means that you use online technologies a lot. Can you
    please talk me through how you have been using technology to support your studies?**

    This could be about using specific apps, using WhatsApp with other students, using FB
    groups, using social media, Adobe Connect for tutorials, accessing info on a mobile phone,
    talking to tutor on the phone, using OpenLearn to study some courses; reading / watching
    stuff;

7   **Something that we see in the previous interviews with students is a feeling that
    studying online / at a distance can make you feel isolated. Is this something you have
    experienced?**
    [If yes] How has this feeling of being isolated affected your studies?
    What, if any, helped you feel less isolated?
    Has technology helped you with feeling less isolated at all? In what ways?

8   **What being a distance / online student offered to you this year? (i.e. doing studies
    online / distance).**
    (e.g. could be about flexibility, less expenses, being with family etc)

9   **Would you say that this year has been succesful for you?**
    What made it succesful? What success looked like?

10   (Students on full scholarships) **What are your plans for Year 2?
    What is it that you'd like to do different the next year?
    What is it that you would like to achieve through your studies at the OU?**

    (students on access modules)**: What's coming next for you following your studies on
    this module? What has the access module offered to you that may help you achieve
    your plans for the future?**

11   **For our next cohort of students from refugee backgrounds, on these scholarships that
    will start in october: What advice would you give them about their studies?
    Something that you wished you knew when you started your studies.**

12   **Anything else that is important for us to know about your experience as an OU
    student**

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