



## OLIVE 2024: SUPPORTING PEOPLE FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

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# OLive – The Open Learning Initiative

## Supporting people from refugee backgrounds into Higher Education

### 2024 report

Francesca Ruzzetta and Corinne Squire, January 2025

### Summary

Refugees frequently have strong educational aspirations and backgrounds. HE improves refugees' employment and wellbeing, promotes inclusion, and strengthens UK productivity. Yet, refugees face multiple economic, social, cultural and linguistic barriers to accessing HE. HE preparation for refugees is also restricted in scope, although research indicates that it has considerable benefits. UNHCR has set an HE '15% by 2030' participation target for refugees. However, currently, only 7% of refugees worldwide are able to access higher education (HE).

The Open Learning Initiative (OLive) aims to address this problem in England by supporting people from refugee backgrounds in their journey towards university. In 2024, OLive delivered a 12-week online programme, followed by a shorter four-week programme, and other complementary provisions, such as online resources, tutoring, meet-ups, university information presentations, conversation classes, and academic seminars. For the first time, this meant that we could offer an OLive e-campus to our students.

OLive 2024 was organised collaboratively between Refugee Education UK (REUK) and the University of Bristol (UoB), with support from colleagues in University College London (UCL), the Bloomsbury and University of East London Doctoral Training Programme (UBEL), and Manchester University. The programme was funded by the National Lottery.

#### **What is Olive?**

*OLive supports people from refugee backgrounds who want to go to university. It operates online across England, with in-person hub meetings in Bristol, London, Birmingham and Manchester, and occasional face-to-face meetings elsewhere. OLive is free, open to all, holistic, and refugee-centred. It offers classes in Academic English and IELTS; Paths to HE, Education, Training and Employment; Digital Skills; and Creative Writing. OLive also provides a catch-up YouTube channel, online resources, one-to-one tutoring for university and scholarship applications, and follow-up and between-programme support, outreach information workshops and short courses, university information sessions, conversation classes, and academic seminars. It is well-integrated with refugee-sector NGOs, and relevant local authority, Further Education (FE), and Higher Education provision.*

## **OLive 2024 has:**

- Generated self-reported gains for students in academic and general English skills, knowledge of UK HE, digital skills, creativity, online learning capacity, and confidence in learning – creating a full OLIVE e-learning environment – an OLIVE '(pr)e-campus'.
- Provided an online certificated 12-week higher education bridging programme with classes in Academic English and IELTS, Routes to University, Digital Skills, and Creative Writing for over 140 asylum-seeker and refugee students across England – increased from last year's 80 – of whom over 40 are submitting university applications.
- Made limited provision for people registering from outside the UK, including, by special arrangement, for two Gazan students.
- Organised a mini-OLIVE autumn 2024 four-week programme – extended from three weeks last year – for prior students and 98 additional students – up from 35 last year. This programme provided intensive academic English and Routes to HE classes, and a new short certificated Digital Skills class.
- Held in-person 'hub' meetings – with funded travel – for students in Bristol, London, Manchester, for the first time, Birmingham, and, for 2024-5 only, Portland and Folkestone.
- Supported students who could not attend classes or who wanted to revisit material with 'catch-up' YouTube videos and a new online resource bank, and set up an OLIVE resource archive.
- Extended communications to students about classes and other relevant opportunities, such as the STAR programme, using an expanded paid coordinator role.
- Provided all students with one-to-one tutorials during and after the programmes, ensuring full follow-up academic support across the academic year.
- Initiated a stakeholder advisory group to reflect on OLIVE's work in the present and future.
- Hosted a new series of English 'conversation club' sessions for all OLIVE students.
- Scheduled a two-term series of academic seminars, building on 2023's shorter series.
- For the first time, organised information presentations from a range of universities.
- Provided a certificated in-person short course for 20 residents of the Napier Barracks – a new initiative demonstrating OLIVE's flexibility in responding to current issues.
- Offered HE information workshops for NGOs and service users, including those from Bristol WEA, Napier Barracks, and the Bibby Stockholm.
- Involved undergraduates, graduates and university staff, often from migrant background, as tutors and researchers, thus developing expertise among emerging professionals in the migration and related social policy and education fields. Tutor numbers doubled in 2024. Small payments to experienced tutors strengthened the tutorial provision.
- Extended outreach: collaborated with national and local NGOs, universities, colleges and local authorities to reach interested potential students and to integrate educational and other service provision.
- Provided guidance to other HE and FE institutions, and to statutory and voluntary sector stakeholders, on refugee HE preparation.

- Initiated and coordinated OLLive students', teachers' and staff's contributions to presentations, research and publications, including for March 2024 Refugee Week activities, an early 2025 research report, and an upcoming book about OLLive and related programme.

## Full Report

### **OLLive student comments**

- *The program is so good, attractive and participatory*
- *Top notch programme, I have learned a lot; well-designed'*

This report covers OLLive's activities during 2024. In the first part of 2024, we continued serving the OLLive cohorts from the 2023-2024 academic year with one-to-one tutoring. In the second part of 2024, we run OLLive's core teaching serving two new 2024-2025 OLLive cohorts, alongside the continuation of many of the additional activities occurring earlier in the year.

### **OLLive case study 1: Ahmed**

*Ahmed had to flee his home country due to religious persecution. He came to the south of England with a law degree and applied for asylum. Whilst waiting to hear about his asylum case, Ahmed applied for an LLM at various universities in the UK and seven universities gave him conditional offers. He enrolled in the OLLive programme to improve his academic English so as to achieve a higher IELTS score on which his offers depended. Ahmed also needed a full scholarship to pursue his LLM and his personal tutor helped him apply to several highly competitive scholarships open to asylum seekers and refugees. As a result of his hard work on these scholarship applications, Ahmed was invited to two scholarship interviews. However, due to the small number of scholarships available to asylum seekers and refugees, he was not selected for any this year. Ahmed has deferred his offers to the next year and now has refugee status so will not need a scholarship. He is still supported by OLLive in his journey to continue his education and eventually qualify as a lawyer in the UK.*

## **1. January-May 2024**

### **a. Tutoring**

During the first part of this year, OLLive continued supporting students from the 2023 main and mini-OLLive programmes. This support entailed one-to-one help with university applications offered by our volunteer tutors from the University of Bristol as well as from London universities that are part of the ESRC UBEL Doctoral Training Partnership. The tutors sustained this work with around 30 students. In a new initiative, tutors included four University of Bristol's (UoB) placement students.

### ***b. Creative writing workshops***

For the first time, tutors from the UoB placement group organised a weekly peer-facilitated creative writing workshop, utilised by students from the 2023 cohorts. We are planning to include some of the work arising from these regular meetings, together with other creative writing work by OLIVE students, in a publication.

### ***c. Outreach***

During the early part of 2024, we reached out to relevant NGOs, such as the Workers' Educational Association in Bristol, where, together with UoB Widening Participation colleagues, we ran a Q&A session on HE access. We established contact with support groups working with residents of the Bibby Stockholm barge and the Napier Barracks, both of which we visited to provide information on HE in the UK and the OLIVE programme. We also reached out to Bristol University doctoral and masters students, London's UBEL ESRC Doctoral Training Partnership, and Manchester University, and were lucky to receive many offers to act as volunteers from staff and students, many of them highly skilled and experienced. We conducted induction interviews with tutors and supported them in obtaining Enhanced DBS checks when necessary. This outreach effort doubled our tutoring capacity for the 2024 main and mini-Olive programmes and for the ongoing tutorial work in early 2025.

The organisations with which we have worked with this year are: Ashley Community Housing; Ashley Down College; Borderlands; Bristol City College; Bristol City Council Resettlement Team; Bristol Hospitality Network; Bristol Refugee Rights; Dorset Stand Up to Racism; Evesham Vale Welcomes Refugees; Helen Bamber Foundation; Napier Friends; Portland Global Friendship Group; RefuAid; RefugeeEAP; Refugee Council; Refugee Education UK; Samphire Project; and World Jewish Relief.

The universities with which have worked this year include: Bristol University, Kings College London, Leicester University, Manchester University, UBEL ESRC DTP (Birkbeck, Greenwich, London School of Hygiene, SOAS, UCL, UEL), University College London, University of East Anglia, and University of East London.

### ***d. 'Finding Home' March Refugee Week project***

OLIVE collaborated with the University of East Anglia Sanctuary team and other universities to recruit participants for and to disseminate the results of the UEA's Finding Home project, a March Refugee Week project at Kings College London. The project involved a weekend workshop on universities as places of welcome and belonging and included poster- and film-making activities. Five refugee-background OLIVE alumnae/i, tutors, and researchers took part in the workshop and acted both as participants and tutors. Poster exhibitions and film showings followed at several universities. More details here: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/student-academic-refugees-transform-displacement-stories-into-art>

At UoB, Olive tutors from the placement student group, along with the University of Sanctuary team, helped organise and run the 'Finding Home' event, featuring the posters and film, to

publicise and build support for UoB as a University of Sanctuary. NGO colleagues linked to UoB through OLIVE attended, and an OLIVE tutor and researcher were speakers. More details here: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2024/march/sanctuary-celebration.html>

### ***e. OLIVE webpage***

The University of Bristol School for Policy Studies Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion team worked with OLIVE and Refugee Education UK to construct an OLIVE webpage (<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/edi/olive/>), featuring a short film about OLIVE made by Jad Habib, a filmmaker from a refugee background who is also an OLIVE alumnus.

## **2. June-December 2024**

### ***a. The main OLIVE programme***

#### **i Introduction**

After some delays in the approval process, OLIVE, as a joint REUK-UoB project, received National Lottery funding for a year of activities, starting June 2024.

In June-July 2024, we finished outreach, and asked all those on the OLIVE waiting list to register if they were still interested in the programme. A hundred and fifty students registered very quickly; we then closed the registration and started a waiting list for the shorter programme to follow.

While numbers on the main programme were double those on the main 2023 programme, we were aware that we could manage such an increase in the number of students. We consulted with the class teachers about the feasibility of increasing those numbers in 2024 and we also recruited many more skilled and experienced tutors, thus increasing our intake capacity. The catch-up videos uploaded on YouTube allowed engagement even when those students who registered for the classes but could not attend some. We foresaw the likelihood of considerable attrition, especially given the increasingly mobile situation of many asylum-seekers. We were also conscious that the UK backlog in processing asylum claims had helped generate this large cohort. Asylum seekers are very likely to lack access to university funding, information, and access to support, particularly during the first six months after their arrival when they do not have the right to access FE college education, and even subsequently – as appropriate FE classes were, in 2024, often full.

This situation meant that some OLIVE registrants did not have immediate or clear plans to progress to HE and, while many were looking to improve their English, a few were simply searching for any English teaching that they could find. The OLIVE programme aims, of course, to support people who have long-term future plans for HE engagements, as well as those who are ready to study immediately or very soon. However, there are areas of support – for instance around college vocational courses – about which we have little expertise, and we endeavoured, when this was an issue, to direct OLIVE students to appropriate college provision.

## **ii Who were our students?**

The OLIVE 2024 Cohort Analysis conducted in July 2024 provides insights into the demographics, legal status, locations, language proficiency, educational aspirations, and barriers faced by the 147 students registered on the main OLIVE programme. Our students were almost two-thirds asylum seekers (60.5%), again reflecting the UK backlog in processing this category of refugee. 57% of the students were male, 42% female, and <1% chose not to disclose gender. This reflects the large numbers of students registering in this cohort from all-male detention-like residential environments for asylum-seekers, such as the Bibby Stockholm barge and Napier Barracks. The age range was diverse, with the majority falling in the age range between 25-34 years (38%). Participants were distributed across the UK, with notable concentrations in Bristol (17%), London (16.3%), and Folkestone/Napier Barracks (15.6%). Farsi was the most common first language (25.8%), followed by Arabic (12.2%). Most had intermediate (44.9%) or beginner (20.4%) English skills. 60 students had prior undergraduate education (this figure includes also those who started a UG in their home country, but had to abandon their studies before completing their BA), and 13 had postgraduate degrees. While 77.5% reported no physical or mental difficulties, childcare, lack of technology, and study space were listed as significant barriers to HE.

## **iii. International students**

Despite the fact that OLIVE is a UK-centred programme, we received for the first time around 15 international applications. We were not funded for such provision. These applicants were offered access to online materials and to volunteer-staffed conversation class meetings.

Through RefugeeEAP, we were also asked to provide places for two students from Gaza planning to access UK HE. One of these students accessed most of the programme and has been able to proceed, with tutor help, to university and scholarship applications.

## **iv Why did students come to OLIVE?**

54.4% of the students who registered aimed to pursue undergraduate studies, primarily in STEM fields (64 students). The majority of students aimed to improve their English (44); academic English/IELTS courses are infrequently available, and rarely free; and/or, given the lack of language education access mentioned above, English tuition generally (see intake report, Appendix 1). Other reasons that incoming students gave for their OLIVE engagement included gaining knowledge, skills, or confidence (19). Interest in HE, either in continuing or in starting their engagement, also ranked high. A significant number (25) expressed the need for help with university applications or continuing education, while others focused on gaining qualifications (10) or preparing for university (16). A smaller group hoped for career or employment improvements (7) or assistance with scholarships (4). Additionally, one participant sought advice on UK higher education pathways or converting qualifications.

## **v. Structure of the programme**

Our induction session in June 2024 featured talks from teachers and from two specially invited OLIVE alumnae/i (for a recording, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-ZdtxzQA3o>). We



then began delivery of the main OLIVE programme, comprising 10 weeks' teaching, with classes weekly on Academic English and IELTS; Routes to University, Education, Training and Employment; Digital Skills; and Creative Writing.

The programme took a break from end July-beginning of September, to take account of school and other holidays, and finished in mid-October. While it was necessary to adopt this schedule, given that funding arrived in May and by then prospective students for the programme had by then been waiting for up to six months, it was also difficult to sustain momentum over the summer break and some student disengagement can be attributed to that. We anticipate scheduling differently in the future.

The main programme's 10 weeks of classes were followed by a final Graduation week, featuring student presentations. Students who had regularly engaged with OLIVE then received certificates. Such engagement was assessed through class attendance, use of catch-up materials, engagement with tutors, attendance at in-person meetings, and engagement with coordinators.

Just under one-third of registered students received certificates, a smaller proportion than in 2023 (around half), a decline that was predictable given the preponderance of asylum-seeker registrants. As mentioned above, asylum seekers have particular constraints and concerns stemming from ongoing legal cases for recognition of their refugee status, changing housing, and limited internet access. In continuing our work in 2025, we expect that the increased pace of Home Office resolution of asylum claims will allow for more OLIVE students to apply to university as home students with refugee status, thus taking the pressure off sanctuary scholarships – the only university funding available for most asylum-seekers – and hence reducing scholarship application numbers. However, refugees must find their own accommodation currently up to two months after they receive their status, and in the midst of a national housing crisis, this often proves problematic. So, we do not anticipate that large additional numbers of OLIVE students who are ready to go to university, and who are newly-recognised refugees, will proceed within this academic year. Moreover, the cost-of-living crisis is affecting all refugees as they are likely to be in low-income groups most impacted by this crisis. This economic pressure is also likely to decrease OLIVE students' ability to proceed to HE.

For the first time, at OLIVE we had a preponderance of asylum-seeker students who were being moved first into and then out of semi-closed environments such as hotels, the Bibby Stockholm and Napier Barracks. This entailed that we had to constantly monitor all addresses given at the time of registration since addresses were likely to have changed ever since.

## **vi Evaluations**

We conducted a mid-term and an end-of term survey completed by 15 and 12 students respectively as well as a mid-term focus group with four participants. Across these evaluation tools, over three-quarters of respondents had engaged with the programme in most weeks. Three-quarters were male; two-thirds had completed an undergraduate degree; just under half were in the 23-34 age group (See Appendices 2 and 3). By the end of the programme, many students had

also participated in evaluative reflections within classes, and in the stakeholders consultation group, so some evaluation fatigue may have set in.

### *Programme strengths*

The most highly rated aspect of the programme was the quality of teaching, with over a quarter of respondents highlighting the effectiveness of the teaching methods and the competence of the teachers. Students commented on how the teachers are very motivated and teach their material in a clear, accessible manner that enables effective learning. Learning opportunities received similar levels of praise; students appreciated having a valuable learning opportunity across a wide breadth of subjects. The wealth of content taught coupled with the practical skills acquired was what the students valued the most.

#### ***OLive student comments***

- *Thanks for the opportunity and guidance and skills I gained during this period until when I got a refugee status that helped me instantly to join a college, where I am taking a level 2 course in plumbing. Thanks OLive!*
- *Keep going forward and helping people with online learning courses*
- *I wanna thank you so much for what you doing!*
- *Thanks for your nice course, I do appreciate it, and I wish the OLive team best of luck.*
- *I want to express my deep gratitude for being part of the Olive Online program. It has truly been helpful for me. As you know, the war has taken a whole year from our lives as Gazans, affecting our education and so many aspects of life. Having the chance to participate in these classes during such a challenging time has been incredibly valuable. It has allowed me to focus on learning important things, will benefit me for sure. I am especially thankful to my teachers, and I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the coordinators and tutors for their constant support and guidance. Their help has made a big difference in my journey, and I'm truly grateful for it.*

During the stakeholder consultation meeting, six students and two teachers from among the attenders provided feedback on the OLive programme. The students praised the programme's design, participatory nature, and high standards of support. Teachers emphasized the complementary relationship between Creative Writing and Academic English in fostering personal expression and IELTS preparation. Advisors noted improvements, such as stronger NGO collaborations. Overall, the programme was commended for its positive impact, with actionable suggestions for improvement.

### *Suggestions for programme improvement*

One-third of respondents expressed complete satisfaction with the programme and suggested no changes. Among the suggested improvements, better access to the internet and dividing classes into levels were mentioned by around a fifth, more locations for in-person meetings by around a tenth. Meeting these requests would have resource implications the programme at present could not meet. Additionally, there was interest in expanding the programme's formal recognition through partnerships and accreditations with universities and language programmes (e.g. IELTS).

This would be an approach that would turn OLIve into a more formal university preparation programme, rather than a bridging programme, something that again, we do not currently have the resources to consider, and that might be more appropriately met by universities themselves running more such programmes.

In interviews, some students suggested more effective learning would be achieved by face-to-face classes, especially for technical subjects such as Digital Skills. While the OLIve team appreciates this argument, it is not really within OLIve's present remit, and we might again, more productively, be encouraging universities and FE colleges to provide such learning.

To enable the students to ask questions confidently, it was suggested that teachers allocate a specific time for questions either mid-class or at the end. Some students felt that by asking questions, they would interrupt the class, so they usually do not ask questions even if they would like to.

During the consultation meeting, advisors highlighted challenges like balancing online and in-person classes, addressing varying English proficiency levels, and providing digital resources. Key issues included the need for laptops, English classes tailored to different levels, and incorporating certificates for short courses to enhance employability and access to further education. Suggestions from students included adding business communication courses and strengthening partnerships with NGOs to support asylum seekers.

#### ***OLIve case study 2: Martha***

Martha arrived in the UK with an English qualification that would allow her to go to university, a two-year physics degree, a two-year teaching degree, and many years' experience as a science teacher. She has used the OLIve programme to find out about possible ways to extend her university qualifications. In the end though, she decided to continue in teaching, while pursuing UK Qualified Teacher Status.

#### ***Academic English and IELTS***

A third of respondents highlighted "everything" about the Academic English module as a strength, indicating overall satisfaction with the course. Development of specific language skills such as writing, speaking, and listening were also appreciated, with students noting the inclusivity of the course for all levels. Three-quarters felt no changes were necessary. However, a few suggested increasing the frequency of lessons or providing more timely feedback, and over a third suggested more English-speaking practice and different levels of provision would be useful. Again, these suggestions might be addressed by smaller classes and more teacher time for each student. The classes are also scheduled by level, but some students may not have realised this, so the

#### **OLIve student comments**

- The teaching was well explained
- I liked that it was easy to get into it and that it's so useful for who really wanted to improve and prep for IELTS test.
- That was so impactful!
- The communication and the topics are fantastic

differentiation in provision may need to be clearer.

### *Pathways to University, Education, Training, and Employment*

This module was particularly praised for providing clear and valuable guidance on accessing higher education and employment in the UK. Half mentioned "everything" as a strength, reflecting

#### ***OLive student comments:***

- *(The class was) great. He guided us*
- *The teacher was so understanding*
- *A very important courses to open our minds to more opportunity and ways to follow*
- *I learned many things which I will use in my academic daily life.*
- *I improved, it was how I obtained short training courses to apply for a job quickly*
- *Helped me to get know about how to join college*

general satisfaction with the course content. The students who responded to the final survey

expressed no suggestions for improvement, indicating complete satisfaction with the Pathways unit. At the midway point, students asked for university visits and help with applications. These requests can we think largely be addressed by tutors providing such help and guiding students towards university open days and by universities themselves presenting online to OLive students.

### *Digital Skills*

The general content and effectiveness of the Digital Skills module were strongly praised, with almost half of respondents emphasizing the quality and innovation of the course. There were no suggestions for improvement, indicating a high level of satisfaction with the Digital Skills course. At the unit mid-point, students requested more time to practice, more classes, and more help outside classes from the teacher. Digital Skills is a field that is difficult to teach, especially online, across knowledge and skills levels, and these levels vary widely between OLive students.

#### ***Olive student comments:***

- *I liked everything – the practice, the guidance.*
- *It was fantastic*
- *It was very useful to know about the important digital skills that are needed in the market today!*
- *I improved my skills on how computers will be used*
- *Helped me to discover more about digital skills*

### *Creative Writing*

The most frequently noted strengths of the Creative Writing class were the overall effectiveness of the teaching methods (one-fifth) and the encouragement by the teacher. Participants appreciated the focus on developing their writing skills and the professional nature of the teacher. While over 90% of participants respondents felt class needed no changes, there was a minor request for additional training on writing personal statements, cover letters, and CVs. These are, however, forms of writing that are covered in the Routes to University classes and in tutorials.

***Olive student comments:***

*I was able to practice my writing*

*I liked the delivery*

*I liked the teaching.*

*I liked everything!*

*The tutor was a good person*

*There was so much creativity and It was great way to improve our imagination which helpful in many aspects in this life included reducing the stress!*

*Overall it was the best online class*

**vii Future plans**

Among the survey respondents, probably the more HE-committed of the cohort, 75% were looking to pursue HE in the near future, while half were concerned with gaining employment and continuing to improve their English. This represents a fall from around 85% of respondents prioritising HE in 2023. As mentioned above, the pressures on asylum-seekers about to gain refugee status, and those who have recently gained it, combined with cost-of-living pressures on people with low incomes generally – refugees fall disproportionately within this group – are likely to be the cause.

***b. The mini-OLive programme***

The main programme was followed by a mini-OLive four-week programme from late October to late November. This programme expanded provision from three weeks last year. It was made available to the 90 people on the 2024 waiting list, but it was also open to OLive students from the main programme who want to re-engage with some OLive classes. This is in line with Olive's mission to provide continuing engagement with students. The mini-OLive programme was framed as a drop-in programme and focused on IELTS and university entrance by majority student request. This year, we also added a digital skills programme since students' range of digital capabilities was large and we reached students who had the competencies to complete a Microsoft certified IT course. We did not register attendance of the mini-OLive programme or issue certificates, but the catch-up materials and online materials were available to the mini-OLive students as for the main programme. Tutoring was also offered for students making applications. The newly introduced Conversation Club and university information meetings, open to Olive 2024 main programme and mini-OLive programme students, completed OLive's 2024 academic offer.

***c. Hub meet-ups***

In 2024, we held in-person OLive meetings at Bristol University; in London and – for the first time – Birmingham, both at REUK offices; in Manchester, at the Central Library; and in Portland, for Bibby Stockholm residents, and Folkestone, for Napier Barracks residents. We focused on the latter two locations because 30 and 20 students, respectively, had registered from there. We went to Bibby Stockholm and Napier Barracks also because these were known to be difficult, carceral-like environments, and because students from those environments were, by the end of 2024,

being very widely dispersed to many towns that we could not visit. These visits replaced the hotel-based work that we did in 2023; fewer hotel residents registered this year and many of those were already rehoused in the latter part of the year. These meetups encompassed HE information and advice, and some collective English reading, speaking and listening, using the News in Levels resource also deployed by the OLIVE's Academic English/IELTS teacher. As in previous years, some tutors attended these meetings. Travel funding was available for all meetings for students in the local area. This year, this funding was not sufficient to hold additional meetups; it was also difficult to meet the cost of existing travel expenses as many students on the programme were widely dispersed.

#### ***d. Catch-up and resource materials***

For the first time this year, we instituted an [OLIVE Drive folder](#), which gathered together all of the class materials in an online resource bank linked to our [YouTube channel](#). YouTube viewing figures for each class accumulate over six months to reach around 50. These materials were available from both the main and the mini-OLIVE programmes.

In the final evaluations, all the respondents appreciated both the catch-up videos on YouTube and the slides and other materials on the drive, which facilitated learning in the event of missed classes but also allow students to revisit materials and classes when useful. As one respondent said about the Digital Skills class, *'I have all the records and definitely I will review them'*. Since OLIVE offers continuing engagement we continue to remind students of the materials' availability.

We are also setting up a new 'archive' OLIVE site which contains useful information on refugee-centred pedagogies, particularly in relation to HE.

#### ***e. OLIVE communications and referrals***

Two coordinators (one paid, one supported through a civic engagement workload allocation) each worked around 10 hours a week on the main and mini-OLIVE programmes, communicating with students, teachers, and tutors via the OLIVE email, registering enquirers on the waitlist, responding to other enquiries, keeping an attendance list for the main OLIVE programme, ensuring materials were uploaded weekly on the Drive folder, on YouTube and emailed to students, conducting evaluations and writing reports, and distributing notifications of interest to OLIVE students.

Students received regular emails announcing the classes and providing e-links to them, weekly and the day before each class, as well as emails providing the materials from all classes, and linking to YouTube recordings of the Academic English and IELTS and Routes to University, Education, Training and Employment classes. They also received information about other courses and meetings, online and in person, that might be interesting to them. For instance, coordinators disseminated information about the free online STAR (Social Transformation and Advocacy through Research) CPD training programme which is designed to tackle inequalities that people from racially minoritised groups face in their research careers. Around eight OLIVE students and alumnae/I working with NGOs were accepted onto this programme and successfully completed it with more to follow within the next STAR 2025 CPD cohort (<https://www.designforsocialimpact.io/research-for-design-for-social-impact-1-1>). Evaluation

respondents had overwhelmingly positive responses to getting emailed information and interest in it continuing after the taught programmes. Through a tutor's initiative, coordinators also engaged a number of OLIVE students with free KCL FutureLearn courses.

### ***f. OLIVE tutors***

Students were allocated a tutor in the first part of the programme and were regularly encouraged to make and maintain contact. Tutors emailed their tutees regularly. Tutorials were conducted by email, but often also by online meetings and, in some cases, through in-person meetings.

#### ***OLIVE student comments:***

*They (the tutor) supported me fully*

*He guides me what to do on my way to take short courses*

*My tutor is helping me a lot, specially in applying for college courses*

*Providing emails and their contacts for some questions in case they are needed*

In the evaluations, the feedback regarding personal tutors within the OLIVE Programme

was overwhelmingly positive. Participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the quality of tutoring, support, and guidance that they received throughout the course.

In the mid-programme evaluations, some students remarked that their tutor had either not been in touch with them or was not very responsive, but engagement seemed to have reached levels appropriate for the students by the programme's end.

Twenty-two tutors were recruited for 2024 or continued their 2023 work, and were allocated on average 5-7 tutees each. However, a group of four tutors with longer experience took on 10-14 students each and received a small payment. The tutors' role as advisors on applications was emphasised, and was mostly the role for which students accessed them. However, tutors' role in discussing students' broader educational journeys and suggesting other sources of support was also taken up, more than in previous years, again partly because of the breadth of concerns among students registering, but also due to the new variety of tutor experiences and skills. Students in the 2024 cohort, who came to the programme with unusually diverse requirements, often needed advice at FE or ESOL rather than the HE level in which tutors specialise, and tutors were able to recognise those needs and refer students appropriately.

In early 2024, tutors innovated the OLIVE offer by running peer English writing classes. Later in the year, tutors instituted and organised conversation club meetings fortnightly; these were also open to the international applicants. The conversation class provision subsequently became a general offer which we hope to maintain and develop.

While all students had access to a tutor, use of the tutors was initially limited to around 20% of the students – mostly those who were closest to going to university. However, during the main programme, many students were occupied with attending classes; class teachers performed many tutor functions for attending students, and other students accessed their tutors later in the year. Such ongoing engagement is expected to continue across the academic year – particularly as many

OLive students did not meet the early UCAS application submission deadlines and make later applications. Tutorial engagements were also, at times, constrained by students' other commitments, especially when – as for the majority – they were occupied with their asylum claims, or with moving accommodation. In addition, limited access to devices and internet connections (including data), and our own concerns about using non-secure though accessible platforms like WhatsApp, sometimes constrained tutorial involvement.

Tutors included undergraduates, graduates and university staff, often from migrant background themselves, as tutors and researchers. Tutorial experience can help junior colleagues especially develop expertise for later practice in migration and related social policy and education fields. Tutor numbers doubled this year and the small payments to experienced tutors that we introduced helped strengthen tutorial provision.

### ***OLive case study 3: Samuel***

*Samuel came to the UK with a degree and several years of experience in marketing. He enrolled in the OLive programme and at the same time began applying for a Masters in digital marketing. He gained acceptance in ten universities, and applied for scholarships at each of them. His OLive tutor advised him on applications and helped with references. He was shortlisted and interviewed for one scholarship, which he won. Having finished his Masters, and gained refugee status, he was able to start applying for jobs. While he is optimistic about getting something suitable in time, he is finding his lack of UK employment experience a barrier.*

### ***g. The stakeholder consultation group***

While OLive has consistently consulted with students and alumnae/i, and has commissioned external review, it has not had an ongoing stakeholder consultation group of the kind that was held this year. The group's 2024 meeting drew 25 attenders, including a prior external evaluator and coordinator, and was open to all OLive students and alumnae/i. Refugee Education UK and Borderlands both stated the necessity and value of OLive work in relation to their own. Borderlands, in particular, highlighted that OLive addresses a major information gap, i.e. the information gap that asylum seekers/ refugees face when they aspire to study at university but do not know how to approach it. Advisors from outside the UK and with historical knowledge of the OLive programme across Europe also helped to provide context for understanding the contemporary UK OLive programme.

### ***h. 'Conversation club' classes***

Tutors instituted online 'conversation club' classes in the second half of 2024. These were attended by a broad range of students, although numbers were small. As such classes were a key request from earlier cohorts, in 2025 we will be exploring how best to arrange them to meet students' needs.



### ***i. Academic seminars***

The seminars presented to the 2023 cohort continued to attract viewers in early 2024. Given the large numbers of other activities in late 2024, we decided to run the academic series across the first months of 2025 and we gained suggestions for these from the 2024 cohorts. Suggestions for seminar topics included Artificial Intelligence and Political Theory.

### ***j. University presentations***

Responding to 2023 student requests, we scheduled two presentations from different Widening Participation and university preparation teams which attracted broad interest, though, again from small numbers of students, with the presentations more often viewed later on YouTube.

### ***k. Napier Barracks ‘Life stories’ short course***

Following up on OLIVE’s long history of offering short community-based courses, we conducted a course of this kind in collaboration with groups supporting Napier Barracks residents for 15 students, with certificates for those completing the course and assignment. This course involved the acquisition of a mobile ‘OLIVE library’. It continued monthly in 2025.

### ***l. University information workshops***

We ran two HE information sessions online in late 2024, hosted by different university Widening Participation/EDI/mature student teams. Holding these sessions as a series was a new initiative stemming on feedback received from 2023 students; engagement has not been high so far and we will monitor the levels of engagement that such sessions command. Two more sessions are planned for early 2025 and fall within the existing funded period.

### ***m. Extended outreach and referrals***

This year, we benefitted particularly from links with RefuAid, which supported the translation of prior professional qualifications to the UK context, and in some cases also, English certification to reach professional standards. RefuAid, rather than OLIVE, sometimes offered the support OLIVE students needed to move forward with training and employment as OLIVE’s focus remains academic advancement rather than employment support.

### ***n. Research engagement***

#### ***i. Sharing refugee HE access research with HE colleagues***

In collaboration with a UoB alumna who had recently finished a dissertation on international students’ experiences, we gave a presentation to a UoB International colleague about the lessons to be learned for international student work from that dissertation and from the OLIVE programme. The presentation focused on convergences of experience between international and forced migrant students in for instance the value attached to HE, the difficulties of feeling at home in universities and with study in English, and the barriers encountered after HE in moving into employment.

## **ii. Participating in and disseminating research on refugees' HE access**

Present and past OLIVE coordinators, alongside a refugee-origin researcher, completed south-west-based research on barriers and possibilities for refugees' HE access in the UK in which around 10 OLIVE alumnae/i were involved. Results were shared and commented on by these participants. Around five OLIVE alumnae/i, alongside OLIVE teachers, coordinators and tutors, also contributed as chapter co-authors to a forthcoming book, *Debordering Higher Education* (Dona, Lounasmaa and Squire, Bristol University Press, 2025).

## **3. January-May 2025: Planned activities**

These planned activities are listed in this report because they are part of the National Lottery-funded REUK-UoB OLIVE programme, although they fall outside the 2024 calendar year and will be run in early 2025. They will be available to the 2024 main programme and mini-OLIVE programme cohorts, as well as to the 2025 waitlist, currently numbering 20.

### ***a. University advice sessions***

We will work with four more universities – UCL, Manchester, East Anglia and Exeter –, making six in total, to provide monthly online HE access advice sessions, and we will continue disseminating this information through the sessions' YouTube access.

### ***b. Academic seminars***

Following on from the success of these events in 2023-2024, we will provide a programme of ten academic seminars, led by tutors talking about their research, and by other interested academics. These will be fortnightly during early 2025 and, again, will be made available via YouTube for catch-up viewing.

### ***c. Conversation Club***

We will continue these fortnightly meetings, with tutor and coordinator input, in 2025, with thematic focuses to encourage wider student participation.

### ***d. Peer-led creative writing group***

We aim to reinstate this group in 2025, meeting fortnightly rather than weekly, and explore more structured processes to encourage students' writing development.

### ***e. Tutoring***

Tutoring will continue through this part of the 2024-2025 academic year, focused particularly on OLIVE students who are applying for autumn 2025 entry, as these students often make applications that are, in conventional terms, late.

### ***f. Hub meet-ups***

We will schedule additional meet-ups in London and Bristol in early 2025, focussing on university venues and guest speakers to promote attendance.

### ***f. Referrals and connections***

During this non-teaching time, we will concentrate on developing a useful database of free academic courses and programmes, such as FutureLearn, STAR, Kiron University and University of the People, as already initiated by one of our tutors and followed up by others. This will be made available online for OLIVE students and alumnae/i.

### ***g. Short courses***

We are continuing short course provision at Napier Barracks this spring and will trial an online short course again focused on readings and a short assignment. We also aim to obtain funding to run a similar short course in-person with a Bristol refugee NGO with a sustainability and capacity-building training element for staff and volunteers and ongoing links with local WP teams as a demonstration project.

### ***h. Report launch***

The research report to which OLIVE alumnae/i contributed last year will be launched in February 2025 with those students attending, along with tutors and coordinators. Some of those OLIVE colleagues will also be speaking at the launch.

### ***i. Follow up on 2024 students***

During the first few months of 2025 we will be following up with OLIVE 2024 students individually to gauge current needs and needed support from the OLIVE programme.

#### ***OLIVE case study 4: Nilab***

*Nilab came to the north of England on a resettlement programme in 2022. She had a degree in business and economics and 10 years' experience of working with NGOs. She used OLIVE classes to help reach a higher IELTS level, and to find out about entry requirements for UK universities. To improve her employment prospects, she planned to take an IT degree - but her local university said her high school and degree maths courses weren't at a high enough level. For a couple of years, she continued working to support her family in the UK and at home, and then returned to OLIVE this year for advice on applying for a Masters in business. Again, one local university said her existing degree did not count as a full UK Bachelors – but another university nearby accepted her.*

## 4. Future plans

2024 saw the successful delivery of OLIve's core programmes, and its expansion into some new areas of provision. In early 2025 we are continuing and extending this work, including some 'demonstration' projects such as short courses. We aim to maintain and develop this holistic, open and inclusive provision so that OLIve has its own '(pr)e-campus' atmosphere to welcome and support students in 2025-2026. We aim to address as many of the critical points raised by students, teachers, tutors and advisors as resources allow. And as this year, we will need to be responsive to asylum-seekers' and refugees' changing circumstances and to involve them in planning what we provide. We plan:

- To develop the '(pr)e-campus' character of OLIve, largely but not only online, to meet more of the diverse needs of people from refugee backgrounds looking to proceed in Higher Education who come to the programme.
- To provide one main OLIve 2025 programme and one mini-OLive early 2026 programme to meet the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees interested in going to university, at a lower level of numbers than in 2024 to enable more individual attention and to encourage more participation.
- To pre-direct those registering for pre-academic English and interested in non-academic or professional qualifications to college and RefuAid provision, through the registration form and through pre-induction and induction advice.
- To make the levels within the different classes clearer so that all students know which elements are best suited to them.
- To improve support for tutors, enabling them to work more productively with the wide range of educational needs that students bring to OLIve; to approach previously and newly interested universities to recruit more volunteer tutors, and to include some tutors from among OLIve alumnae/i.
- To develop the OLIve archive on the UoB OLIve website and to update its blogs and videos.
- To develop the resources drive on the OLIve Google site, including links to more relevant free courses and integration class materials with the YouTube channel recordings so that students have easy access to all materials.
- To develop and better fund travel to hub meetings.
- To develop workshop 'roadshow' meetings with local NGOs.

- To consider more collaborative work with, for instance, RefuAid on profession-related advice, with REUK, and with other NGOs.
- With REUK: To consult on short courses for later in 2025
- As advised by teachers, tutors and students, to explore the possibility of using secure WhatsApp provision for student engagement in future. Current OLIVE WhatsApp groups are student-led and may not hide identities. We will also investigate the use of Teams calls and Google Meet as secure platforms.
- To increase workshop and discussion meetings with NGOs and universities, based on OLIVE experience and related research, so that these can be of help to such organisations and institutions in their own development of support for refugees aiming to enter HE.