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October 10 to 11, Valletta, Malta

# CONNECTED LEARNING IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION OF REFUGEES

## A Critical Report



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## **Executive Summary**

The past years have been marked by increasing numbers of refugees, people on the move, lives marred by insecurity, marginalisation, deprivation and violations of rights. These are lives marked by interruption, including in education. While reasonable attention has been devoted to the education of refugee children, less research, policy and practice efforts (including in humanitarian work) have been dedicated to higher education, leaving a substantial portion of this population-youth- on the fringes. It is estimated that a meagre 1% of refugee youth make it to university, compared to 34% of the average global youth population (UNHCR, 2015), a crisis in its own right.

Connected learning has emerged as a narrative to try and encapsulate and perhaps contain higher education with refugees, and multiple initiatives have been spurred, notably by universities in the global North, aiming to make some of their certified courses available to refugees in host countries in the global South, including in protracted contexts. However, research remains scarce, in particular qualitative, critical research seeking to understand the intersections between higher education with refugees and connected learning.

This study reports on in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with academics from global North universities managing and implementing higher education programs in the global South, notably in the Middle East and Africa, with a view to shedding some light on this intersection. Findings illustrate lack of conceptual clarity as to what connected learning actually means among some of these stakeholders but lay out key dimensions linking higher education with refugees, and why these universities have a role to play.

The report illustrates how these courses are far from bottom-up, they are limited in number (and aligned with what these Universities have to offer and their resources and not what refugees necessarily want and need), exclusively in English, and dependent on donor-funding and conditions, limiting impact, reach and sustainability. While the demand far outweighs the supply of such courses, the lure of foreign certification and the doors it is assumed to open (by refugees and those managing such programs) are major push and pull factors, especially when there are few or no alternatives.

Initiatives such as these appear to contribute positively in supporting the formation of learning communities and dedicate substantial effort in building flexible localised resources and support for refugee students all of which require multiple inputs. While an online component makes these courses possible, they are entirely blended learning, and the physical element and support (including psychosocial), especially that provided by local tutors and facilitators, is considered a key and determining factor as to whether these courses can happen in the first place, highlighting how online learning on its own is likely to fail in such contexts.

However, and despite all good intentions, these initiatives are plagued by multiple obstacles (personal, economic, social, circumstantial, ideological and cultural and importantly institutional) in spaces and among lives that are as complex as they are heterogeneous- a dynamic requiring constant flexibility and adjustment. The demand severely outweighs the supply on account of capability and resources among others and many are left out on account of their dis/ability or the fact they do not speak English, are undocumented or located far away from main thoroughfares.

Psychological and mental health problems, childcare and cultural beliefs, paired with lack of services (e.g. mental health care) to attend to these, impact refugees, notably women, and also their ability to sustain a course with consistency. Even more critically, policy and institutional factors often act as serious problems, including unwillingness of national universities to open their doors and/or collaborate; devaluation or non-recognition of refugee certificates from their home countries by these same universities; racism; lack of collaboration and sharing between these global North universities- often caught in competition for funding; inadequate, ill-informed and decontextualized funding conditions; lack of mental health, child care and other services to support students among others. Throughout this process, initiatives such as those by these global North universities are faced with constant hurdles, requiring multiple interventions on the spot, and where reliable local partners are key.

The study concludes that:

- While connected learning offers a valuable narrative in bringing such higher initiatives together, more nuanced conceptual, theoretical, and methodological work is needed specifically looking at connected learning in higher education with refugees.
- Despite the fact that initiatives such as these are commendable and must be scaled up, a concerted, contextualised and informed strategy appears to be still lacking, especially one that brings multiple stakeholders across sectors to work together as opposed to competing for funding, alongside reflexive and (self)critical debates.
- At the most basic level, inclusive policies (by universities) are needed, to not only mainstream but also target refugee students, not as an act of charity, but an issue of social justice and that will ultimately benefit all students and enhance education.
- Finally, a broader change is needed among donors and the conditions they impose, if these universities are to operate in informed, sensitive and responsive ways that can be sustained, scaled up and sustained over time, and importantly that are inclusive of all refugee students. The alternative is maintenance of an educational system and model that more often than not maintains and perpetuates social and other inequalities.
- Throughout this process, the voices and demands of refugee students themselves need to be heard, prioritised, and education developed and delivered in partnership with them, and on their own terms. Only then can learning becoming genuinely connected, personalised and transformative.

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# 1. Introduction

Increasing numbers of refugees continue to flee, often seeking safety from desperate situations using desperate means, away from wars, conflict, persecution, violence, droughts and climate change among others in their bid to survive. The UNHCR (2018b) estimates that around one billion people are on the move, 70 million of whom are forcibly displaced (a staggering 37,000 people are forced to flee their homes on account of persecution and conflict every single day). Around 25.9 million people are refugees<sup>1</sup>, of which 85% are located in low- and middle-income countries (Bessier, 2019). Others flee because of poverty and compromised survival, as economies, livelihoods and States collapse, with 2018 seeing the greatest number of asylum applications by Venezuelans (341,800) (ibid, 2018b).

As people forcibly move, displacement is becoming increasingly protracted, with lives interrupted over the long term, often with no end in sight; lives lived in perpetual insecurity, fear, marginalisation and deprivation. Education is impacted too, with many refugees unable to start or continue their education through traditional means. This is a serious matter given that some 52% of all those displaced are under 18, but refugee children are 5 times less likely to go to school (UNHCR, 2016). The statistics are dismal for young refugees in post-secondary and tertiary education too. It is estimated that only 1% of refugee youth make it to university as opposed to 34% of the average global youth population (UNHCR, 2015), and only a fraction of those with a degree are able to further their studies, deterred by innumerable policy, social, economic, cultural and institutional barriers.

The impacts of barred and/or interrupted access to higher education on refugees are many and well documented, including exposure to abuse and exploitation, insecurity, reduced ability to seek and

maintain employment, constrained opportunity to rebuild their lives, return and contribute to rebuilding their countries and local communities among others (Ramsay and Baker, 2019).

Policy and organisational focus on the educational needs of refugees and the need to prioritise these, has stepped up in recent years, largely in response to the Syrian refugee crisis and the dramatic increase in refugee numbers over the past years, alongside increasingly protracted refugee situations. One of the major initiatives was the landmark Global Compact on Refugees in 2018, to which 193 Member States affirmed their commitment to increased solidarity and cooperation with refugees and host countries. Included within the Compact is also a section on education emphasising commitment to 'to facilitate access by refugee and host community children (both boys and girls), adolescents and youth to primary, secondary and tertiary education' (UN, 2018:13) through direct investment in financial and human resources as well as concerted efforts at removing obstacles to enrolment and attendance. Other policies and declarations have emerged in recent years also emphasising education, even if not specifically referring to refugees. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example, dedicate a whole section to education through SDG4 devoted to ensuring 'inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' by 2030. While there is no mention of refugees or undocumented migrants, there is some attention to 'vulnerable' children as well as disabled people. This, though, is rather ironic, as one is hard pressed to question how possible it is then to 'leave no one behind' when those who are most marginalised and oppressed are not even mentioned. Policy makers will easily tick existing boxes but are unlikely to create new ones. those who are most marginalised and oppressed are not even mentioned. Policy makers will easily tick existing boxes, but are unlikely to create new ones.

<sup>1</sup> The 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as 'a person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (UNHCR, 1951)

## Connected learning in higher education with refugees

Other efforts have emerged in recent years shedding some light on the higher education needs of refugees and the dire need to start seriously addressing these in practice, and some have started to take direct action, including universities. Of particular note has been the linking of connected learning with higher education with refugees by UNHCR. Sparked by a roundtable in 2014 in Nairobi, convening connected learning actors for the first time, concrete measures were taken at exploring how connected learning could serve refugees, and how key actors could come together to debate and collaborate. This translated into the establishment of the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium (CLCC) in 2016 which aims ‘to promote, coordinate and support the provision of quality higher education in contexts of conflict, crisis and displacement through connected learning by sharing and disseminating knowledge, experience and evidence; developing innovative and good practice; and ensuring accountability to students and their communities in order to foster self-reliance’ (CLCC, n.d.). The consortium has grown to 23 members including largely universities, education institutes as well as humanitarian actors. While connected learning is a relatively new term, and while definitions are multiple, including in academic circles, UNHCR adopts a conceptualisation emphasising approach/methodology:

“

...an innovative form of higher education that uses information technology to combine face-to-face and online learning. It enables students living in remote areas to connect with top universities and to exchange knowledge globally... an approach to education in which learners pursue their personal interests with the support of peers, mentors, and caring adults, and in ways that open up opportunities for them. Connected learning puts progressive, experiential, and learner-centred approaches at the center of technology-enhanced learning (UNHCR, 2019:1).

”

Indeed, over the past years, numerous initiatives and courses have been set up, notably by accredited global North universities working with national and international organisations serving refugee students in a range of host countries and regions, including the Middle East and Africa among others to earn a degree certified by these universities. The lure of connected learning as discourse and practice in higher education is perhaps understandable, given its emphasis on the provision of higher education to refugee students without uprooting them, and hence accounting for the frequent and serious mobility constraints they face; as well as attention to flexibility and awareness of the financial constraints and situations facing students.

While these initiatives and discursive turns in policy and practice are indeed commendable, it is also important to highlight that much more needs to be done and the statistics quoted above clearly reflect this. As Fons Coomans, the UNESCO Chair in Human Rights and Peace at the Department of International and European Law at Maastricht University in the Netherlands) recently stated, 'What has become much more important in practice is to translate all these nice international document standards so that they can be integrated into domestic legislation, policies and practices. On that level a lot still needs to be done' (UNESCO, 2018). It is a fact that higher education continues to be neglected in humanitarian response (Bessier, 2019), donor countries continue to fail to honour their commitments to education, national policies on education in host countries are lagging behind when it comes to inclusion, and national universities and educational institutions are not easily opening their doors to refugees in both the global North and South. Furthermore, while substantial attention is devoted to schooling for children, perhaps in line with the framing of children as 'vulnerable', higher education does not quite receive the same attention. At a more basic level, what happens between being a child (and hence considered 'vulnerable' and protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and suddenly becoming a young adult sometimes faces the wilderness of discourse, policy and practice for young people dealing with myriad barriers that are not easily contained (see UNHCR, 2016a).

Even more basically, much of what has been and continues to be set up and debated is rather speculative. To date, there remains a lack of research on higher education and refugees in a range of contexts, in particular critical research, as well as critical evaluations of programs on the ground (Ramsay and Baker, 2019). The discursive and practice linkages or rather intersections between connected learning and higher education for refugees and policy and practice implications, also have to date not been adequately researched. While much has been made of the supposed merits of connected learning in higher education, critical research is scarce, and the voices of those working on the ground remain disproportionately absent or fragmented. This is a much-needed direction to take, if connected learning is to develop conceptually and practically in a self-reflective, critical, and indeed learning way, and for it to be flexible and to avoid falling into the trap of becoming a metanarrative with little substance.

## This report

This qualitative report attempts to partially address this situation in the bid to explore and understand the intersections between technology-supported connected learning in higher education with refugees, conceptually and practically. In particular, a key objective is to prioritize, listen to, learn from and articulate the perspectives of those working in and implementing global North university higher education programs in the global South, programs identified as 'connected learning' by their own institution and/or their affiliation with the CLCC. Through these, we hope to better understand gaps and opportunity areas in connected learning in higher education with refugees.

To accommodate these objectives, in-depth unstructured interviews were conducted online with 8 academics based in global North universities who manage or co-manage certified higher education courses in refugee host countries in the Middle East and/or Africa including in protracted refugee contexts, camps, rural and urban. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and thematic analysis employed in the bid to find common patterns in the narratives and present the main emerging themes. Data has been anonymised to protect the identity of participants and names of countries and locations removed to protect participants and their students.



## **2. Findings**

The following sections present the key emerging themes from interviews. Substantial space is devoted to articulating and presenting the narratives of participants in the bid to prioritise their own views and perceptions, in particular on critical and sometimes thornier issues. To reiterate, the objective of this report is not to present a comprehensive landscape of connected learning initiatives, but instead a partial yet critical view on matters deemed urgent and worth discussing by those managing and working on such programs on behalf of global North universities.

## 2.1 Connected Learning: a fluid, unclear concept

The term connected learning has gained much currency in recent years, but findings from this study reflect how this term is often not understood with clarity, and there seem to be few or no shared definitions or understandings between those working in the field. Even more basically, it may not always have much currency. This, it was clear, was perhaps triggered by the lack of conceptual and theoretical development in the area itself, the relative newness in the field of forced migration, and even more practically, the lack of spread among academics and universities, notably those working in areas outside of technology:

“ I haven't read much about, and don't know what there is out there, it always seemed like something that techies apply, until UNHCR started to push for this in what we do...higher education for refugees. It sort of brings it together, but I'm not sure it means much or is anything new...blended learning ”

While UNHCR, including through the formation of the consortium, indeed works hard to promote 'connected learning' as an umbrella term to encapsulate higher education initiatives with refugees and to bring key actors together, a number, including those forming part of this consortium and actually implementing these

programs, often expressed little understanding of the term conceptually and practically, preferring to define the higher education courses they provided and the methodology employed as 'blended learning' and/or simply 'higher education courses'. Indeed, the word 'connected learning' was hardly used by participants throughout the interviews, even though UNHCR itself sometimes uses the words connected learning and blended learning interchangeably (see UNHCR, 2019). Some expressed how 'getting on with it' and/or 'focusing on teaching and programs' was all that mattered—the conceptual terrain, seemed to not be quite as important as getting things done and reaching populations that continue to be underserved.

Nevertheless, they valued the online component, often stating how it was that which made the courses possible in the first place, and for them to extend these to spaces and places outside the brick and mortar institution where they were developed and traditionally delivered in the global North. The following quote captures this scenario:

“ That's an interesting question because probably I've never thought much about it... the work that we do with refugees in camps... is only made possible because of kind of digital technologies... this idea of putting together some kind of structure that would enable people who were interested in providing higher education opportunities to people who were in protracted refugee situations, seemed like a very worthwhile thing...so the question of what it was going to be called... that did become a discussion point for several people and I'm sure there were lots and lots of meetings about what we would call this...so now it's a connected learning in crisis consortium.... I have to say I've not been that engaged with it because I'm not that interested in that...I found those kinds of meetings and conversations to be not that interesting...I was much more interested in building programmes, curriculum and actually doing the work and actually teaching...I teach alot of courses to students... ”



Nevertheless, when probed, participants expressed some key characteristics of what they felt might constitute connected learning, highlighting how the term may not quite be irrelevant to their work in practice. These included:

- Some or other component of learning online alongside face to face learning, but where face to face tuition cannot be replaced, but simply compensated, 'because face-to-face tuition increases the opportunity to get support from advanced peers, mentors or engaging lecturers' (Halkic and Arnold, 2019).
- Extending higher education to and within the refugee host country
- The existence of some or other learning community online and offline
- Uses one or more online tools or platform and where technology is the means and not the end
- Focuses on joint learning
- Adaptation to context and learner needs and complexities
- It equates to or may even be a fancy term for what is more commonly known as 'blended learning'
- Flexibility in teaching approaches and learning

The following extracts encapsulate these:



The way I see it, connected learning involves some community of learners working together...and it has a strong element of connectivity online...we wouldn't be able to do what we do if we couldn't communicate online, and offer a portion of our courses online...and we must be flexible in how we do it, online, in-person and adapt to circumstances which are very challenging. I think it has become a term to what we know as blended learning, I don't know... but nothing in what we do can replace to person to person contact.

I guess at a base it seems that folks I'm working with seem to agree that it involves a component of online work in the learning at some point and I think that's all that people seem to be able agree upon... in our work where we're serving refugees and local learners in 5 different countries, you would call it more 'blended learning', so it means there is a piece of online learning that's then combined with a local partner who is doing the in-person coaching and support as well as meetings and preparation for jobs and kind of some of the in-person pieces that happen...as the university, we also participate in some of the in-person learning, we do an orientation, we may help with discipline meetings, we may help with support encouragement meetings, we may also help with the employment piece...and so you kind of have this degree that's coming from the US that's then combined with a local partner operating in the camp or urban area where refugees reside and have a chance to learn... so for us, it's a way of bringing our degree to folks but also make sure there is a learning community, a supportive social component of learning... ”

Overall, and perhaps similar to UNHCR's own position and definition (see above), the focus seems to be more on approach or methodology rather than learning objectives and outcomes.



It is important to note that while participants did not stress the conceptual dimension as a main concern, and were more concerned with the dynamics of operation and reaching their objective (extending their courses to refugees), a number admitted that whether it is connected learning, blended learning, or any other term that is used, there is still space for collective debate, understanding, and learning in particular as to how to do what they did in a better and more inclusive and effective way. Probed further as to what this would require, participants expressed how this would require a genuine interdisciplinary approach, and more debate across sectors, to include perspectives from a range of fields including education, migration studies, anthropology, digital literacy, and tech-specific fields working with a range of practitioners including humanitarian and development sectors, global health among others. Even more basically, they stressed how while there are multiple initiatives and how they all seem to be 'just getting on with it', if connected learning as a category can serve as a unifying dynamic and support with collaboration, then this serves a purpose:

“

If connected learning can help people from different areas speak, share, learn and above all work together, then I'm ok with that, and then for me, it would have a good function...but just talking is not enough...or a name

”

## 2.2 The landscape: fragmented data

Mapping the landscape of higher education initiatives with refugees around the globe is far from easy, not least because comprehensive data is scarce if not absent. Findings from the study and literature reviews indeed highlight a complex picture of courses, including preparatory courses (especially in English language), degrees, diplomas, short courses, and on a lesser scale, micro Masters. In the case of stakeholders interviewed for this study, all the courses they offer are provided and certified by global North Universities, with what seems to be a substantial number in the US, Canada and Europe (notably Germany). The bulk of these courses are offered in the Middle East and Africa, including in camps, as well as rural and urban areas. A number also include refugees in the US and Canada courses. Some institutions and organisations (academic and non-academic) also provide training courses targeted at the humanitarian sector.

Overall, it is also difficult to present a concise map, since initiatives continue to develop constantly in different spaces. The table below lists a number of these collated by the UNHCR's Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium and that qualify as 'connected learning', and include a blend of organisations and universities, global North and South:

## Europe

Inzone: Geneva, Switzerland

Kiron: Berlin, Germany

## Middle East/ West asia

JWL: Amman, Jordan

JWL: Domiz Refugee Camp, Iraq

JWL: Khanke IDP Camp, Iraq

JWL: Erbil, Kurdish Region of Iraq

Inzone: Azraq Refugee Camp, Jordan

Kiron: Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

Kiron: Amman, Jordan

Purdue University: Azraq Refugee Camp, Jordan

SNHU: Tripoli, Lebanon

SNHU: Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

ASU: Amman, Jordan

ASU: Al-Mafraq, Jordan

ASU: Irbid, Jordan

ASU: Azraq Refugee Camp, Jordan

ASU: Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan

ASU: Mosul, Iraq

Mosaik: Amman, Jordan

Mosaik: Beirut, Lebanon

Mosaik: Joub Jannine (Bekaa Valley), Lebanon

MIT: Amman, Jordan

## South East Asia

ACU: Thai-Burma Border Program

JWL: Mannar, Sri Lanka

JWL: Vavuniya, Sri Lanka

JWL: Hatton, Sri Lanka

JWL: Puthukkudiyiruppu, Sri Lanka

JWL: Trincomalee, Sri Lanka

JWL: Taunggyi, Myanmar

ASU: Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

## East Africa

ASU: Kiziba Refugee Camp, Rwanda

ASU: Adjumani Settlements (Nyamanzi, Ayilo), UGANDA

ASU: Nakivale Settlement, UGANDA

ASU: Kigali, Rwanda

Kenyatta University: Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya

Kenyatta University: Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

Kepler: Kiziba Refugee Camp, Rwanda

Kepler: Kigali, Rwanda

Inzone: Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

JWL: Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

SNHU: Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

SNHU: Kiziba Refugee Camp, Rwanda

York University: Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya

Purdue University: Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

UBC: Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya

## Southern Africa

SNHU: Dzaleka Refugee Camp, MALAWI

SNHU: Cape Town, SOUTH AFRICA

JWL: Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi

## Central Asia

JWL: Bamiyan, Afghanistan

JWL: Herat and Jebrael, Afghanistan

## Americas

JWL: Los Cacaos, Haiti

JWL: Ouanaminthe, Haiti

JWL: WASHINGTON DC, USA

## Central Africa

JWL: Goz Beida, Chad

Data, including on numbers of registered students by region and country are fragmented and therefore difficult to estimate. However, the landscape overall, appears to be one, where more initiatives are being sparked, largely in response to growing numbers of refugees, including those in protracted contexts, and also funding possibilities. For example, in 2018, UNHCR supported 6,866 young refugees to further their studies in 784 higher education institutions, backed by the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) scholarship programmes alone, with 1,134 new DAFI scholars enrolled in 2018 (UNHCR, 2018a). The DAFI programme encourages and indeed prioritises further study in public universities in a range of areas including computer science, public health, agri-business and business administration.

Most of these students were located in Sub-Saharan Africa (41%) followed by the Middle East and North Africa Region (33%). The largest DAFI hosting countries were Turkey (12%), Ethiopia (12%), Jordan (11%), Uganda (7%) and Kenya (6%). The largest country of origin cohorts were from Syria (36%), Afghanistan (14%) and South Sudan (12%) (ibid, 2018a).

While these numbers may look impressive, the DAFI report itself goes on to note how much more needs to be done, and how demand for higher education dramatically exceeds what is currently on offer: 'In 2018, 10,230 refugees applied for DAFI scholarships, of whom only 1,134 new students were granted scholarships due to limited resource availability' (UNHCR, 2018a:5). These, it must be emphasised, are only those who are likely to be registered refugees, and who come in touch with or are in reasonably close proximity to service providers or who are lucky enough to be within the catchment area. For the large majority, it is safe to assume, these possibilities are very few and far in between (see below).

## 2.3. Inception: intersecting higher education with refugees.

Interviews with participants involved a fair amount of discussion not only on where they are at and the situation they confront, but also how their initiatives were sparked, including the linkages between refugees and higher education conceptually and practically.

The reasons foreign universities decide to engage in higher education with refugees and offer their certified courses, it was clear, are various. In some cases, courses were pushed for and motivated by a committed academic within the university who was sensitive to the situation of refugees domestically and internationally and/or had some or other personal experience, as was the case in the following program developed and shaped by an academic who was a refugee himself:

“

[The program] was originally the brainchild of professor X who is a professor here at Y (university) and grew up as a refugee...he came to [the university] proposing that it could do more based on its history and footprint in the world of education and learning...what we witnessed is a tremendous communal response both on campus...as well as thousands of people who have completed online courses in the past ”

Findings suggest, though, that there are indeed a number of factors, often interconnected and that propel this shift:

- The increase in the number and visibility of refugees in the global North (including where Universities are located and operate e.g. the US) as well as the global South. As participants emphasised, shifts in numbers, alongside physical and media visibility of the refugee population (including through politics of containment or closing of borders such as in the US or Italy) have pushed for some or other emphasis on the higher education needs of refugees, and to consider how these universities can start to open their doors and/or make their courses available to refugees elsewhere. Increased media coverage was a critical factor enhancing awareness, and in fact, most of the programs in the study were set up around or after the 2015 so-called 'refugee crisis', when refugees (notably those from Syria) started to reach Europe en masse and became a 'political crisis' and headline news.
- Some or other awareness of the unfulfilled learning needs and interruption of education among these populations on account of displacement.
- Awareness of the barriers to higher education in host countries in the global North and South on account of numbers, attitudinal factors, funding, and outright rejection by universities (e.g. on the basis of not recognising certificates from refugee home countries). While participants did not clearly depict such practices as 'racist', further probing, highlighted how inclusion in a global North university has and still involves some or other racialized process, whether through the devaluation of Southern education, or assumptions made about the 'quality' of students hailing from such spaces and the assumed ability to follow and complete a course. Participants stated that this process is often seen in the global South too, when host country universities (e.g. in the Middle East) reject refugee students (see below for more on this):



Western universities have historically not been very open, wanting to retain privilege and status at the expense of some others and devaluing who they are and their knowledge...and those others generally come from certain places... quality seems to have meant closing the door to specific people...I would say that this process has throughout history been a racialized one, and we can now see that happening in refugee host countries too...refugee students are not welcome and I wonder how much of this is motivated by racism or discrimination ”

- Some or other emphasis on the need to address the educational needs of refugees by powerful stakeholders such as UNHCR and IOM, their reports, as well as policy documents and declarations (e.g. the Global Compact for Migration). These, as participants stressed, not only push for a greater focus on these populations on the policy and practice map, but also have funding implications (see below), and which in turn serve as push factors for universities to start addressing them.
- An extension of a university's charter and philosophy of inclusion: most of the participants expressed pride in their universities' ethos, citing that the inclusion of refugee students was well aligned with their institutions' own emphasis on inclusion.
- A logical global expansion of domestic efforts at inclusion of those normally marginalised: in line with the above, a number of participants stated that they had historically already sought to reach 'off the grid' populations in their own countries for example those living in remote rural areas in the US, and that the inclusion of refugee students was simply an extension of this practice. The following quote lays out this trajectory:



“

From an institutional perspective, this initiative was started as an extension of our university's charter and philosophy of inclusion rather than exclusion, so a desire to expand educational access to learners everywhere, so that began domestically here in the US, reaching students who perhaps are in rural areas, maybe started university but didn't finish, and then we developed to that focused specifically on online learning... that started to kind of expand our thought on how to best reach populations not only domestically but globally as well. ”

- The possibilities offered by online means of learning: while all courses reviewed are blended (see below), the increasing use of online methods within their existing curriculum and better technology, opened up the possibilities to reach other populations in other geopolitical spaces and locations. It was clear across the board, that reaching refugee students elsewhere was only and in large part made possible through online means of communication as well as tutoring and the shaping of online student communities.
- A desire to complement humanitarian efforts: discussions with participants highlighted how while humanitarian organisations (national and international) were trying their best to address immediate and other needs, the needs went far and beyond capacity. This repositioned these educational efforts by these universities as humanitarian work, and that they had a critical role in complementing as well as filling in gaps left open by others on the ground:

“

Certainly one of the major crises in our time so to speak would be displaced migration and the ability to not have education be interrupted simply because of displacement,

so we figured we might have some part to play, some way to complement the services of humanitarian agencies and to be able to offer education that reflects the ambitions of learners themselves, so this initiative was started as a result of that philosophy ”

- Awareness of the contributions and benefits to home students' own learning and experience made by having refugee students included in courses: participants who had included refugees in their normal courses within their own countries in the global North, emphasised how home students benefited dramatically from having refugee students in the same class. This included openness to other experiences, development of cultural and contextual sensitivity, awareness and knowledge (including of geopolitical, cultural and ideological dimensions), and opportunities to expand and improve learning through constructive dialogue. The inclusion of refugee students, as they stressed, was not an object of charity or token participation, but something of concrete social, educational and personal value, and that should be scaled up by other universities and who should open their doors because this has real educational and personal value:

“

Including refugee students with home learners and following exactly the same course is not a charity thing...our students are better for it, they reap the benefits, and they are better students because of it. I have seen it over and over. I think it should be obligatory for refugee students to be there sitting in the same class. ”

Woven through and cross-cutting the factors discussed above, though, were two that featured prominently in participants' narratives, and which merit a more in-depth discussion. These include: 1. The attraction of foreign certification; and 2. Funding. These act as both push and pull factors.

### 2.3.1 The perceived value of foreign certification from a 'reputable' university

The perceived value and attraction of foreign certification to refugees was one that was hard to ignore in interviews. Feedback from potential students as well as local partners, participants noted, stressed the value placed by refugees on global North certification, in particular by reputable and globally recognised institutions. It meant credibility, reputation and the perception that this could somehow open doors and opportunities for economic and social development and mobility. This perception, however, was also diffuse among participants working in world renowned universities, and who felt that a certificate from their own institution was somehow worth 'gold' for refugee students in particular, and that it conferred some degree of almost 'supra-credibility' or power. The degree to which this is true or not is hard to establish and can only be asserted to some or other degree through critical longitudinal studies.

Participants expressed a number of points here, highlighting how certification from an established global North university is perceived as the golden key not only to jobs, but also social capital:

“...when you look at programs like X, they have to be framed in a particular context and fit into a traditional academic...of Western academic institution...academic and research institute...and that is why you can open almost any door in the universe with the 3 letters (university acronym)...”

Foreign certification was placed against certification from universities or institutions from refugee countries of origin which may not always be recognised within their host countries (e.g. Syrian certificates in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey), hence limiting opportunities for furthering education as well as employment. Refugees may also be unable to get hold of their certificates after fleeing or verify any courses they followed, hence limiting their ability to apply for studies in a third country (Crea, 2016). Others can only obtain these by applying in person to the relevant authority or awarding body in the country where they had studied- an impossibility by all means for most (see Yahya, 2015; Crea, 2016).

While a number of participants felt that this approach was neoimperialist (see below), they stressed that the emphasis on certification and the reputation of the university in question is not going to go away any time soon. They emphasised how refugee students themselves go to great lengths to ensure the course they embark on is by a reputable global North university, that it is globally recognised and valued. Furthermore, they believe that such certification can ultimately open up possibilities and doors for refugee students, not least because potential employers too value this certification (e.g. from a North American University) far above others, including national universities in the host countries. For refugees, the opportunity to embark on a course certified by such a university, participants claimed, is perceived as a golden ticket and one-time chance they want to ensure can reap concrete benefits:

“Sometimes we may forget how important a certificate like this is to a refugee student, and we can then see it in how much they want it, and the lengths they go to join us...they have to make it work...I wish things were different, but this baggage remains there”

Overall, this defies emerging discourse in block chain education that sometimes tries to do away with certification from formal institutions such as universities, or the anticipation of a progressive devaluation of the university itself, as people prioritise learning and process 'over credentialing what is taught' (Roberts, 2019). Learning has value in itself, and online and professional development courses that aren't certified do not need to be dichotomised from certified university ones following traditional routes, and indeed can and must co-exist. However, in the case of refugees, the role these universities have to play and their perceived value, appear to be bound to the certificate they have to offer. This is perhaps rather unsurprising when refugee lives are marked by dire lack of opportunities and safety nets, insecurity, interruption, and critically, devaluation, even as human beings (Crea, 2016). Education, in this case, is therefore not only a means to an end, but becomes also an important source of what Bourdieu would call 'symbolic capital'- 'the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability...' (1984:291).

This, though, and despite the efforts at contextualising the courses as much as possible, as the quote below suggests, implies that refugee students and the knowledge and experience they bring are ultimately squeezed into a hegemonic global North narrative. They are also obliged to take on what is on offer using dominant pedagogies and language, reinforcing the power and status of these institutions and their knowledge—a power conferred upon them historically, politically, and culturally—the familiar dynamic of 'benevolent but imperialist universalism' (Santos, 2012:46).

Even more basically, it perhaps contributes to the devaluation (even inadvertently) of education and certification from the global South and their institutions, what Santos (2007:1) calls 'abyssal thinking'- a system where 'the other side of the line' vanishes as reality, becomes non-existent ...a non-credible alternative to what exists ... disqualified and rendered invisible, unintelligible, or irreversibly discardable'. Quality as well as 'real knowledge', it seemed clear, reside, is framed in and exported from the West (notably Europe and the US) to the rest, reaffirming an all too familiar dynamic of 'academic neo-imperialism' (Alatas, 2003).

Having said that, practical and immediate needs of refugees, in particular in ensuring a livelihood, moving and ultimately surviving within spaces and places that are not their own, remain urgent. Participants suggested that if these courses may offer an opportunity to those who have been sidelined or excluded, or whose education has been interrupted, then, there is scope for them to not only exist, but to be scaled up, power differentials and baggage included. Still, they stressed that awareness of such power differentials and dynamics can never slip out of sight. The following quotes capture the scenario in respect to foreign certification and the status of the university conferring these credentials as well as ensuring that refugee students have a good chance of succeeding. Critically, it is evident to see the strong ties between this certification and potential employment:

“

Academic institutions that matter are recognising the value of connected learning opportunities, so I think the certification is critical...because what we are doing is taking talent that is otherwise sidelined and bringing them back into the fold... I speak metaphorically...when we are giving people their lives back, we have to make sure that we are doing it in a way that is effectively responsible...it is one of the ways we refuse to just do online certificate programmes for refugees, because we believe we had to do it in a way that gave them more than just a reasonable chance to succeed, in the program. If any university would admit that you only have a 10% chance of passing, who would do that?...and that's basically where online education right now is...and if we admit that you have a 95% chance of passing... you'll never be able to prove that you completed the courses, that cheapens it as well...so I think we have to complete the chain...and I think we have to do it in a way that guarantees the credential for life

“

It (certification) is more important than I wish it was...if I talk to employers or to students, they really need that credential to get a certain employment opportunity...we don't only just serve refugee students, we also serve for example a lot of rural students in rural X (African country), and they say that's the first thing that somebody wants to know from them or see...if they suspect they don't fit into a certain social class...there's been a lot of discussion around doing micro-credentials or skills or do away with degrees... I'm all about that discussion for people who have a social and economic social safety net if that does or doesn't work out, though I don't have that discussion for the world's most vulnerable populations... but I would love if the world would catch up with that mentality....so ideologically I am really on board with that, in terms of what I see employers want or what our students experience, I find it to be quite hierarchical, quite rigid.”

### 2.3.2 Following the funding trail

Funding, as with most sectors (e.g. international development), acts as a key motivator/instigator for which themes and areas, organisations, universities, NGOs and others choose to prioritise, how they manage, implement, monitor and evaluate projects, what resources are available, for how long a program can run, and whether projects and programs can be sustained over time (see Khan et al., 2018). In all instances surveyed in this study, higher education courses set up, were all supported by third party funding (donors), including through scholarships for refugee students.

This funding not only determines the scale and reach of courses, but also comes with a set of conditions, including location, duration, as well as language of delivery (more often than not English), expected outcomes and impact. It also determines what can or cannot be included or not as justifiable costs, however necessary these might be in ensuring successful progress and completion (donors are discussed in-depth below). This pattern has been well documented in others sectors such as international development (see also Macrae et al., 2002), and pushes us to engage critically with a number of issues and questions, including: who sets the priorities and agenda; responsiveness to context; the dynamics of delivery; ability of fund recipient to be flexible (including in how resources are used and where); time allowed; and whether benefits or outputs are expected to be manifest within a rigid time frame and how these are supposed to be documented and enumerated. Even more basically, how is 'impact' understood by donors, and to what extent do they allow for fluid constructions when subjective understandings and context heterogeneities may require alternative understandings?

Funding, it was clear in participant's narratives, plays a key role, not only in where and how many courses are set up and delivered and how many students can be reached, but even more basically in determining whether global North universities will engage in the first place, and offer their courses to refugees. Given the cumbersome funding requirements and power of donors, this means that more established universities, with a longer history and with adequate mechanisms in place to tap into funding (e.g. proposal writing, co-funding requirements etc.) are better positioned than smaller universities, in particular those in the global South. While efforts at working with local partners, as will be highlighted below are prioritised, it is by no stretch of the imagination, that disproportionate power and say resides with those holding the purse strings. Dependence on external funding, as will be discussed later in this report, also means that universities end up competing with each other, minimising the possibilities of collaboration, sharing (including of teaching, knowledge and materials), with serious effects on impact and sustainability among others. Even more basically, issues such as equality, poverty reduction, access and inclusion are relegated to a back seat and inequality perpetuated:

“Funding determines what we do and where we go... and it is tough...so much of what we end up doing and how we do it, for example the emphasis on courses being in English is dictated by funders, or how long we can keep on going...but a concern is that we all end up chasing funds, and we do not always put our heads together as we should...this is a missed opportunity for students and also for us, because it limits how far we can go individually.”

“

It is not unusual for institutions to follow the money...but the trouble with this is that sometimes we may not follow those we are supposed to be helping or helping others to do it and how they need us to support...sometimes through no fault of our own.”

“

...it is a tricky balance because you need to show all these outcomes that funders want, so I would say... we are big time elitists when it comes to the camp, which is very different from any of my other work... we are both alleviating and perpetuating inequality by our program...it is a stick issue because funders want to see that 'oh they get through in 4 years, they get jobs, they're this', so it's truly a creaming type of application process...that's pretty problematic if you had to look at 'hey is everything getting equal access, equal opportunity to this.”

## 2.4 The process

Intersecting higher education and refugees and eventually developing and setting up higher education courses, it was evident in the study, is a long and arduous journey that takes substantial preparatory work, including an understanding of the local context, the needs and demands of refugee students, alongside setting up a system that is localised and supportive of students that would facilitate the educational process and reduce drop-out rates. The following subsections discuss two key factors emphasised by participants: the choice of courses; and the selection of students.

### 2.4.1 Choices of courses: bottom up?

While the narratives highlight no identical strategy of action, stakeholders, in this case global North universities, often start off by scanning the context, and it is clear that substantial groundwork is done, consulting largely with local partners (NGOs, INGOs etc.) and potential students to understand and analyse contextual dimensions (including facilitating factors and obstacles e.g. demography and geography), identify learning needs, and to explore possibilities of courses and how to implement them (see below). The following extract documents a part of this process:

“ It always begins with focus groups with potential learners, so in each case, if we’ve done discovery work, we’ll visit, we’ll meet UNHCR locally, we’ll meet with potential NGO partners, and then we’ll have focus groups jointly to determine what some of the main interest areas are, to ensure that educational ambition matches potential, and then we take it back here to X (university) ”

However, as participants emphasised, what they do then offer in practice, is contingent on what their university (in the global North) has and can offer, implying that courses developed and delivered may not be quite bottom-up, ground driven and/or responsive to the needs and demands of refugees. This is influenced by areas of specialisation, human resources, and once again material, human and financial resources available:

“ I would like to say that we then offer is entirely tailor made on feedback of students, but then I would be lying...if we had to really be doing and offering what we should, then it would perhaps be a different thing altogether ”

Once again, funding conditions are important here, and what ultimately universities choose to do and how they do it, is strongly determined by donors, which means that these courses may ultimately be encapsulated in a power dynamic of donor money (and priorities) and university capacity.

### 2.4.2 Eligibility and selection criteria: doors not quite open

One of the main findings is that all institutions in the study appear to emphasise accessibility and providing opportunities for higher education to those who have been marginalised and/or whose education has been interrupted, who have potential to get back on, and for who they believe education can play an important role in social and economic mobility and opportunities overall. Some participants demonstrated substantial flexibility in approach and stressed how in principle, previous qualifications are not a critical factor in eligibility and eventual selection as much as ability and potential to succeed:

“ For us, access was paramount, and we really wanted to acknowledge ability and motivation over pedigree...so we eliminated any pre-qualification in the sense of previous transcripts or prior degrees or anything like that...we were interested in that information demographically, but it was not a prerequisite ”

This does in fact seem to contradict the narrative prioritising the name of the institution and quality and credibility being linked to certification from recognised universities, a narrative emphasised by some participants more than others. However, it was, evident that while on paper, access is a priority, in practice embarking on these courses is far from easy and not open to all, and in line with other literature (Halkic and Arnold, 2019), may not only exclude a bulk of the refugee population, but also prioritise a privileged subgroup with the 'right' background, legal status, cultural capital, geographical proximity and so on. There are indeed a common set of criteria for eligibility, which, participants stated, would ensure that they would pick the 'brightest' or 'best' students, those they feel would stand the greatest chance of successfully completing the course. These criteria, all or in part, are often critical in identification and eventual selection of students:

- English language proficiency: since courses are all provided in English (see more on language below), suitable English comprehension is a key determining factor. While most seem to provide English proficiency preparation classes before starting the actual course, adequate oral and reading comprehension is one main factor in being eligible to apply. This requirement most likely acts as a powerful barrier to many refugee students, notably those from certain regions and countries and more rural areas, where English may not be spoken or diffuse.
- Gender parity: all participants stated how they take active measures to ensure gender parity, including through affirmative action, many stating they have a 50/50 gender parity benchmark that appears to be stringently followed and implemented.

- Qualified standard test: in the case of applied science subjects such as Maths and Computing, potential students are required to take a standardised test to check for understanding of key concepts.
- Registered refugees: while not all, most of the institutions in this study offer their courses only to registered/documented refugees, requiring potential students to provide evidence of status. This inevitably bars a substantial number from coming forward or even being identified as potential students (see more on status below).

These and other criteria are used as benchmarks and shared with local partners, who are then, in most cases, responsible for identifying, short-listing and eventual selection of students, while the university oversees the process and audits. The following extracts illustrate this process. It is, though, possible to see within these, a margin of flexibility in emphasis (or otherwise) on specific criteria over others, indicating a well-intentioned motivation to include rather than exclude, despite the limitations imposed in practice:

“...the only prerequisites we had were that you had to take a qualified math test that we designed that was offered online...to see they had the baseline mathematics to do well in the courses and an English test primarily focused on oral and reading comprehension to ensure they could follow the curriculum which is in English, and a motivational video that they would upload and answer 3 questions, and finally for refugees or IDPs, they had to produce evidence that they were in fact a registered refugee”

“

The only thing we really try to push for is 50/50 on the gender front, including if that means affirmative action...it is a non-selective university we like to say, that we serve the top 100% of the world.... so we need to basically verify that secondary school has been graduated and that the student is proficient in English, proficient enough to be successful in the program, so we ask the partners to run their process around that...and from that we will run a secondary check to make sure that they fulfil the [university] requirements...but otherwise it is up to the partner...so essentially they send a list of recommended students to us, we'll do a secondary check, we kind of make sure that the gender thing is going ok....usually when we are on the ground, we ask around 'how did you feel about the admissions process?'....just to make sure there is no funny business essentially, but we're not looking to run that process ”

The conditions of a small number were less stringent, especially ones with a smaller cohort of students, and where remedial actions are implemented as obstacles crop up as opposed to taking a strictly academic requirement approach at the start premised on assumptions about ability determined by qualifications and tests or documentation:

“

Our admission requirements or criteria that we set up for recruitment...are based on more practical matters than documentation or eligibility....its whatever will allow a learner to be most successful in the programs themselves...so if it is one of our university level courses...so do we have an English diagnostic.. we want to make sure that learners are at an appropriate English level...but we have no requirement for documentation, for transcripts, for registration of any sort....

a learner can begin at any point and really we judge a learner's ability to proceed through the courses based on their performance in the courses themselves....so learners are able to attempt the courses as remedial aspects are needed, we are able to seek those out...we tried to remove the barriers as much as possible to accommodate ”

## 2.5. Facilitating Factors and Processes

There are a number of factors and processes that participants felt are key facilitators to success in a program, in this case, which would ensure course completion, reduce drop-out rates, and contribute to positive outcomes for refugees, notably in employment or furthering their education. A number of key dimensions emerged and were discussed in interviews:

### 2.5.1 Reliable local partners: the irreplaceable value of physical contact

Development and humanitarian literature emphasises the need for reliable and competent local partners throughout a program, including in situation and needs analysis, contextualised knowledge, implementation, monitoring and evaluation among others (ATHA, 2013; Van Huijstee et al., 2007). In this study, these include UN and International Organisations (INGOs), as well as local and national NGOs. Local partners are key stakeholders based on their in-depth knowledge of the local context, as well as direct contact with and ability to identify potential students, and ability to provide ongoing support.

Participants highlighted how the identification of and collaboration with a reliable partner throughout the program is perhaps the key starting point and ingredient, given that these serve a number of critical functions throughout the process. These include:

- Contextual and personal knowledge: refugee contexts as well as refugee experiences, circumstances, histories and trajectories are complex, heterogeneous and diverse (Abbas et al., 2018; Pisani and Grech, 2015). These include protracted contexts, rural or urban, concentration of populations (e.g. in camps or dispersed in cities), degree to which refugees are integrated or not, proximity to the local population, public attitudes, racism and discrimination (including based on religion, provenance, cultural practices), access (or otherwise) to services (e.g. health, social protection), level of education, the political and institutional scenario, connectivity and so on. Local partners are those prone to be in contact with refugees, including potential students, know their circumstances, journeys, and the barriers they face, and also the baggage they come with and where they would like to go. Local partners are also a major source of knowledge and learning for other stakeholders entering the field, since they come with their own set of learning experiences garnered in the field. For these foreign universities deciding to operate within these contexts, the landscape is both daunting as well as replete with challenges and problems (see below), and without reliable local partners, the chances of failure are accentuated.

Importantly, local partners offer a critical opportunity to explore avenues for where these universities can actually fill gaps, contribute and compensate without replicating and/or trampling over what is already being done. As the quote below succinctly explains, local partners are instrumental in positioning these universities as 'good neighbours':

“

We entered slowly and we really tried to learn from what the NGOs were doing...they and all the implementing partners that were running the schools, were faced with tremendous obstacles and shortages of resources and challenging conditions and so on, so our job was not to go in there and be critical of anybody...it was really to look at what the NGOs were able to do, and what it was that we were in a unique position to do...NGOs were already undertaking all kinds of training and workshops for their teachers...they were not handed a budget that enabled them to go out and scour the planet for the world's best teachers to bring into these challenging circumstances...they had to work with what they had, they did what they could with the resources they had available to them...it was important for us to just pay attention to what was going on, on the ground, to who is doing what, and to what was the unique thing we could offer that other people couldn't offer... and to try and work in ways that were complementary to the work that was already being done...so I would say that we really did try to find a way to become good neighbours in an already existing community...”

- Identification and selection: as mentioned above, local partners are active in identifying and drawing up a short list of potential students, identifying learning needs, status and other issues that may affect the learning process, to then feed into how the university engages, including the dynamics of operation in practice.

- Provision of facilitators: facilitators provide key educational and other support to students, including personal and educational on the ground and throughout the course. While these may not be experts in the subject areas, they provide instrumental support and importantly act as effective mediators between the student and the university, including in monitoring and informing when difficult situations or circumstances emerge and change, as well as adaptation and contextualisation of teaching material. This supports other literature (Halkic and Arnold, 2019) contesting the limitations of exclusively online higher education courses including high dropout rates, especially when inadequate support is provided.
- Orientation and preparation: local partners are instrumental in orienting students, including the provision of language lessons, internet and computing, addressing cultural dimensions and so on, which would support in enhancing the chances of flow and success in completing their respective courses (discussed further below).
- Ongoing mentoring and support (learning, psychosocial etc.): local partners are the first port of call for students when any issues crop up, or when there is a personal or other crisis, providing not only technical and educational, but also psychosocial support while acting as a feedback mechanism for the university to respond effectively and in a timely fashion. The universities in this study, also claimed to provide an open and direct channel of communication with students online should they require direct support.

Psychosocial support, in particular is a major service local partners provide. Refugee journeys are rough and replete with hardships and even trauma, and where mental health issues may become manifest (Stenmark et al., 2013). These are journeys and lives often scarred by fear, insecurity and uncertainty, psychological distress, disproportionate burdens and responsibilities, feelings of hopelessness and despair, and anxiety among others (see Crea, 2016; WHO, 2018). This is intensified and/or exacerbated by lack or absence of formal support and systems (mental health is discussed further below). Local partners are instrumental in intervening in times of crises or problems encountered by students, be they psychological, social or directly relating to their course. For some students, women in particular, the load they have to carry is heavy when faced with the absence or fragmentation of formal support (e.g. affordable or free childcare facilities (see below) and this may result in interruption of studies. For others, issues such as PTSD alongside the lack of mental health support may once again prove a major hurdle in studies:

“

...it means that the student has a physical place and space to go to, or when women have babies they have somebody to talk through and support them and come up with a plan about maternity leave, when folks are sick...when there's trauma in a community, whether recent or long ago...kind of working through all those pieces...I think that's quite essential to our work.

”

Reliable partners, especially when these operate in physical learning centres, constitute a physical reference point and place where students can meet other students, interact and to seek support, in a way emulating a traditional classroom and education environment. In effect, participants made clear, how these provide access to community in ways more present and real than exclusively online interaction:

“Having a place to go to, a person to speak to face to face...nothing can ever replace that...a feeling of something or someone physical there for you...this cannot be achieved only online.”

- The ability to monitor and intervene quickly when something goes wrong: one of the key findings is that there are multiple avenues for things to 'go wrong', come in the way or interrupt students' education, and the need for constant monitoring is pivotal. These may include time constraints, personal, social or health issues, bureaucracy, attitudinal barriers or discrimination among many others. Participants stressed at multiple points how, critical, is the ability to intervene in the quickest and most effective way before problems spiral out of control and/or impinge on the educational process and outcomes. In this regard, partners as well as the universities appear to go to great lengths to set up systems and means of communication backed by an effective and personalised (often informal) monitoring system:

“

...one of the things we do, is monitor students' performance throughout the courses...when we identify students who are struggling or underperforming or we see changes in their performance, we make an extra effort to reach out...I would say that by and large, students have direct contact in person or via Skype ...not to mention text messaging...we make an extra effort to make contact when we see shifts”

- Reduce drop-out rates: physical presence on the ground, as participants explained is not only a form of accompaniment and crisis intervention throughout studies, but as they suggested, also contributes to reducing drop-out rates by offering personal support and encouragement and to reinforce student commitment to the course. A number of participants stressed how in this regard, blended learning is more effective than online learning when it comes to reducing attrition:

“

The other component we found, is it reduces attrition, so having a facilitator in person does keep learners engaged in coming to the centres, whereas online learning, generally does have a higher attrition rate than in the blended learning programs”

### 2.5.2 Preparatory and other support need to be in place

Preparatory measures appeared to be critical not only in students starting off on the right foot, but in ensuring continuity and once again reducing drop-out rates. While, as discussed below, hurdles are more than present, universities, operating through local partners dedicate substantial time and resources to preparation before embarking on the actual course.

But this does not stop here, and indeed, as most participants emphasised, training for students is an ongoing process, alongside careful mentoring and support. A number of participants also stressed the importance of training field partners and trainers to build their own skill and knowledge base, and to hence provide better, more engaged, effective and sustained support to students. For students, some of these preparatory courses include:

- English language lessons
- Writing
- Introduction to online learning
- Work preparedness

The following extract sums these up:

“

We have some preparatory courses going on, like introducing the idea of online learning...we have English language courses, so preparation for either education or work readiness, and then we have our first year of university courses and we're about to launch some masters courses for our field partners, and we are also creating some shorter micro credentials, certificate type programs in entrepreneurship and teacher training... ”

### 2.5.3 Enthusiasm, motivation and perseverance

As with any other course, student enthusiasm, motivation and will to succeed, participants noted, are key attitudinal factors to not only enrolling, but also moving beyond obstacles and challenges and eventually completing a course. Findings from the study highlight how these components are also crucial in selecting students most likely to succeed, and who are perhaps the most resourceful and resilient.

Participants stressed on multiple occasions how not only the number of applications dramatically supersedes the number of places available, but also how the process of registration itself appears to draw the most motivated students, with the most desire to learn, and with a higher possibility of succeeding. It was interesting to note, how participants observed the sheer determination of students who did not make it the first-time round, to then reapply and be admitted the following year. They explained how in that year, students took a number of measures to learn, improve their language skills as well as technical skills, seeking out a number of options, including online learning, independent study and other means to be able to succeed:

“

...a significant percentage of those students who are not admitted to the program, go on to reapply for the program the following year, but they admitted that what they did between those 2 application periods are other learning education programs, other learning opportunities, changing jobs, looking for new better jobs...this was in part motivated by the fact that X(program) was an opportunity down the road. ”

Participants claimed on multiple occasions how for students, the ability to embark on one of these courses is a one-time chance they cannot afford to miss. However, this point, and in line with the argument of whether such approaches may in practice be neo-imperialist or not (even inadvertently), raises another question- that of choice. That is, to what extent do students value, persevere, and indeed go to great lengths for a foreign certified course, simply because they do not have any other choice, constrained by multiple barriers?

And this begs another question: to what extent are choices, just like rights, ultimately bound to citizenship (see Pisani, 2012)? And at this point it would be apt to reflect, how, if choice may not be present, then, to what extent (if at all) are such courses truly responsive to what refugee learners actually want and need? The following quote, neatly reflects on this matter:

“...on one end our students are earning an American degree...we really want to come away with a kind of cultural competency that they would if they had to come to the US...I think where it becomes tough is when we are the only choice..so they're kind of backed into a corner so it's not like they can really say 'oh I'm gonna choose my local university now over this American university'...so I feel the lack of choice around so many things...housing, food, ability to move, who you spend time, where you can go, if you can work...this is another example of that, and I feel like the lack of choices is probably the problem...also you know our students often want to study something we do not offer...there's stock in that...so I think that's where the language or the neo-colonial pieces come in... sort of 'take this or have nothing”

#### 2.5.4 Inclusion of host country students

Findings suggest how inclusion of national students alongside refugee students is critical in any specific cohort, particularly in reducing conflict, obstacles and any negative attitudes that would further enhance discrimination as well as antagonism and racism towards refugee learners.

While they insisted that affirmative action is necessary, the inclusion of home country students serves practical functions, not least in reducing tension, and also ensuring some or other equal access to basic rights, in this case education. This, participants claimed is easier in contexts where refugees have substantial freedom of movement and 'blend in' with their host community. It is also critical in making visible as well as educating host country students about the realities of refugees, populations that may be seen but rarely known or genuinely accepted as human beings with rights and claims:

“I think it is pretty essential... so in X(country) we have a few programs...it is about 60% (refugees), 40% national students...but the way the system works in the country, it is very difficult to tell who is a refugee and who is a local...the settlements are open, refugees have freedom to move, and so the lifestyles are essentially the same, and so we think if we were to offer things or these educational programs to refugees alone, it would increase the possibility of conflict between refugees and those communities”

Overall, this is a key and well documented point in refugee studies among others (Strang and Awer, 2010), whereby any hopes of integration, and a level playing field involve a two-way process requiring inclusion and adjustments for and by all. Participants went on to explain how these interactions also served to encourage dialogue and shift attitudes towards refugees, including through debunking of myths, challenging of racist and xenophobic beliefs and behaviours, and humanizing refugees, minimising the focus away from difference and more towards commonalities, this time through education and mutual learning (see also UNHCR, 2018).

They also provide refugee students themselves with the opportunity to learn more about their host community, the realities and challenges that local students may face (including shared challenges and interests), and to develop contacts, relationships and even social capital with members of the local community and other stakeholders who may provide some or other leverage (e.g. in finding employment). Overall, and perhaps more than anything, these interactions provide a mechanism to challenge the reproduction of social, racial, economic, class, geographical, political and other relationships fuelled by difference and Otherness (see Bourdieu, 1986):

“ We do need to prioritise refugees, and this is why we are there...but we cannot isolate them or place them as separate.... this does not help with inclusion, integration or seeing them as genuine members of society. Students who access exactly the same course, requirements, and have to do the same things with no difference, mark similarities, that they are after all in the same boat, but with their own particular situations, and this is what we need to work for and celebrate. ”

### 2.5.5 Decentralising education with centralised facilities

Decentralised education, and this includes online learning, has over the past years been emphasised as a way of making education available to those residing far away from, dispersed, or excluded by centralised brick and mortar institutions and educational facilities such as universities (see Kizito Namukas and Buye, 2009). However, as participants explained, this can be a double edged sword in the case of refugees, where dispersion, isolation, lack of facilities, and importantly, fragmented or absent physical support (specifically support which is close by and at hand when needed), combine to produce a set of sometimes insurmountable hurdles.

They explained how courses need to be brought to where refugee students are and reside and to make sure that access (including to information) is not constrained or limited by distance or dispersion, something which online learning has helped with. However, they also stated that this process is often easier and indeed requires some or other physical learning centre close to students whilst they are studying and where they can congregate. These not only provide key facilities such as a more reliable internet connection and computing facilities, but also help foster a community of learners who can have contact and support each other throughout the course. Learning centres also enable students to have direct access to facilitators. In this regard, participants explained how despite the immense hardships, camps and rural areas are sometimes easier settings than urban ones in providing support and enabling students to continue and finish their courses.

This, they explained, is also bound to harsher living and economic conditions in urban areas such as cities, higher costs of living, lack or absence of housing, transportation problems and expenses, lack or absence of health care facilities, dispersion, problems with connectivity, and overall insecurity and greater mobility (see also Mendenhall et al., 2017; Halkic and Arnold, 2019). All these and other problems, make it very hard for implementing universities and local partners to control the diverse variables that may impinge on education and flow as well as attendance. To an extent, and supporting other literature (see Grech, 2015), rural areas and camps, which are typically pitched as disproportionately disadvantaged settings, are this time reframed as perhaps more accessible and productive ones.

The following extract maps this out:

“

Interestingly enough it has been easier in camps than in urban areas to help refugees finish because of the economic constraints, so I think the overall lifestyle is harder (in urban areas), because there isn't the economic or housing support, and in camps the commute is not so long to the learning centre for example, so I'd say in the urban areas, things like transport, the economic support, housing are big challenges, of course sickness, adequate medical attention, and of course just the political environment that the students are finding themselves in...”

### 2.5.6 Formation of student communities

Bauman (Bauman, 1992: xix) notes how communities 'are imagined: belief in their presence is their only brick and mortar, and imputation of importance their only authority'. He goes on to note how they '...must be believed to...make the whole thing work' (emphasis in original). The ability to attend a course, have lectures, and work together in a group has many benefits, well documented in literature, especially in what are called 'learning communities' (see Watkins, 2005). As Dawson (2008:224) explains:

“

This pedagogical model is framed within social-constructivist principles with a focus on developing activities that promote learner-to-learner interactions to support the co-construction of knowledge and the sharing of information and resources. In this context, learning activities involving group work and collaboration are commonly implemented practices.”

Students, as study participants noted do not simply find themselves in a space (physical and/or virtual) together, but more often than not, shape their own communities, instigated by a number of perceived benefits and overall the recognition that they are stronger when working together. This 'bonding social capital' (Putnam, 2000) serves a number of practical, social and even identity functions for students:

- A sense of belonging
- Formation of friendships and networks
- Study groups
- Mutual support and information in times of personal hardship or difficulties
- Minimisation of competition between students, working instead towards a common goal
- Collective initiatives to demand further support from the university and/or institutions
- Development of a sense of collective identity

Interviews illustrated at multiple points how students provided critical support to each other, and how this was often key in the learning experience as well as the ability to successfully navigate through and complete a course. One participant noted for example how in one case, one student was unable to attend lectures due to a personal crisis, going on to document how his peers painstakingly recorded and sent all materials and lectures via WhatsApp, enabling the student to progress in line with others. Another, recounted how students took it in turns to help a fellow student who had fallen ill, recording notes and reflections throughout for him to listen to when in hospital.



One important benefit of these interventions, as participants explained, was the process of learning together, which on occasion, provided a critical platform for further reflection, critical thinking, and also to resolve problems together:

“ We see them work and learn together and from each other using all means possible...and their creativity in using tools such as WhatsApp, or study groups, so what we see is the formation of critical thinkers and groups working to get over obstacles effectively...we are there to support these communities. ”

As the above quote suggests, while these communities do shape, the university and local partners play a critical role. For some it means the active promotion of study groups and communities or assessed group work, and for most, the provision of online platforms and tools to do so:

“ We are like the glue for these communities...we set up spaces online for them to interact with each other and with us, to make sure that support is there 24/7, getting them to work together... communities are what make it all work...and this includes the relationship with our facilitators on the ground. ”

### 2.5.7 Open and responsive university support

While local partners support, including with tutoring and facilitation, the presence of the university, it was clear needs to be solid and consistent, and importantly felt by the student. Participants were clear in suggesting that while local partners act as core facilitators, tutors and mediators, key decisions ultimately need to be taken by the university (in consultation with local partners).

This presence is both physical and symbolic, and students need to feel part of the broader global community of university learners, wherever they may be. In a number of instances, universities set up online support, with one also recruiting teaching assistants from around the globe offering online support 24/7 for students who need it, with a teaching assistant allocated to a number of students.

The need for, and emphasis on such support is perhaps not surprising, given that the university is itself the awarding institution, and that students embark on such courses based on the knowledge that the university will not only be offering and delivering these courses, but also supporting during their studies. As participants noted on multiple occasions, this support has to be consistent and ongoing:

“ We need to be present throughout the process, even if we may not be on the ground all the time... our local partners are present, and serve as key information day to day, but ultimately, we as the university must make our students feel that we are there and part of their journey. We set up personalised and group support online, so they know they can reach out at any time, and we also did this to ensure that they know we are there... ”

### 2.5.8 Partnerships and links with employment

As highlighted earlier, education not only has value in itself, but for refugee students as participants emphasised, is a core perceived opportunity to eventually find and access employment, alongside social, economic and cultural mobility. Indeed, participants stressed that a key motivator for these courses in the first place, is the potential to open the door for students to remunerated dignified employment. This, they went on to comment, has serious implications for how courses are designed, which courses are offered, and how they link with the employment sector. While it was clear that universities are largely restricted to courses already on offer and aligned with their expertise, it was also sufficiently evident that technical subjects, including the sciences, are favoured over the social sciences, where employment opportunities may in practice (and perhaps realistically) be more difficult. This is in line with the dilemma that is highlighted in critical literature (see Pisani, 2018) whereby the transition from education to employment is often driven by practical/functional/strategic needs (including transition from education to employment) perhaps at the expense of broader, critical, more transformative approaches and subjects that may not lead directly to employment. To insist, this should not be an either/or approach, as participants stressed, but with limited resources, and with refugee students needing to translate their 'investment' into immediate returns in the shortest time possible, this means that choice of subject becomes a serious concern.

It also, perhaps, pushes us to question initiatives and short courses positioned as 'empowering', but which in practice yield little or nothing in the way of opportunity, security and mobility in the immediate to short term. Even more basically, it challenges the notion of education for education's sake:

“

We would like to offer a broader range of courses... but we have to develop based on what we already have...our own courses and areas where we are strong...we also have to bear in mind what can help our students get a foothold on the job market... and this market is what it is. I think it is not great to equip them with something that may lead to nothing...job wise... this will create disappointment and maybe we would be deceiving them ”

Part of this process of linking courses with potential employment, meant that these universities also on occasion engaged local partners to create contacts with the business sector to provide internships to refugee students, and to help students build up a network with local business partners in the hope that this would increase their chances of eventual employment. This supports literature on 'linking social capital' (see Woolcock, 2001) to highlight relationships between people in different power and social circles or statuses, and how ultimately, it is contacts that can make education work in practice:

“

.... even for the employment pieces, it is really essential that education is important but without a social network, it is not really going to go anywhere...I think we would really skill back how we're doing and thinking about our work if it weren't for having local partners ”

An interesting component here, and aside from concrete measures such as internships and linkages with businesses, participants emphasised that cultural aspects also need to be addressed, since employment does not simply depend on contacts and qualifications, but also on personal and cultural attitudes, dispositions and behaviours, in particular in business settings where there is a hegemonic norm, be it cultural or behavioural, what Bourdieu (1986) would call 'habitus'. In some cases, short courses are included alongside the core study units, for example business dining and etiquette. While participants explained that they are not out to impinge on or vilify refugees' own customs and cultures in a neocolonising way, they felt it is also possible that certain behaviours considered 'customary' and 'normal' in rural areas that refugees hail from, may be faced with resistance and even rejection in other contexts. They insisted that they are trying to teach alternative ways of being and doing and thinking critically and reflectively that can be drawn upon in different contexts and situations, and even support efforts at resilience and ability to function within different contexts, spaces and places. The following (and rather lengthy) quote lays this out, but also highlights participants' own dilemmas and the fear of demonising and subordinating refugees' own customs and cultures:

“

...with one of our partners at the local university, we taught a course called 'business dining and etiquette' and it was really about how do you come to a dinner table with an employer, especially for a lot of our students who had grown up in rural areas...maybe eating with their hands which could surprise others... using utensils to kind of point at people...so when we taught the course it was like 'this is total neo-colonial kind of way of teaching', but we try to really profess it at the beginning and at the end, saying 'ok I'm learning one kind of way of doing things...when do I want to use this way?'

'When do I not wanna use this way?' 'Is there a version where we could bring business people and teach our way of eating and doing things?' I think it's trying to pull away and try and have that meta-cognitive discussion rather than just teaching content...kind of how can students look at everything with a critical eye, and hopefully take that critical eye to whatever it is they are learning... so its teaching students to think within that structure but not be sort of forced into it, but given a framework to agree or disagree. ”

The quote above offers not only a position of self-reflective criticality, but also does (perhaps inadvertently) stress the importance of cultural adaptation as a two-way process as seen in traditional, more dialectical literature (see Anderson, 1994). Unfortunately, it is also clear to see, how ultimately, and in practice, it will often be these refugee students who will have to adapt to dominant practices and ways of 'being'- a process of acculturation (see Berry, 2003)- and how perhaps mutual cultural valuation and appreciation of difference as a resource still has a long way to go, and requires broader cultural, policy, and discursive change and openness. Alencar and Deuze (2017:158) neatly capture this: 'the acquisition of cultural and socio-political knowledge of the host country refers to the migrants' need to rapidly assimilate into their host country's culture, politics and society'. This stands in direct opposition to the need to refuse 'sameness' as an act of resistance, whereby as Campbell (2008) contends, 'Instead of wasting time on the violence of normalization, theoretical and cultural producers could more meaningfully concentrate on developing a semiotics of exchange, an ontological decoder to recover and apprehend the life worlds of humans living peripherally'.

### 2.5.9 Flexibility is key

Just like refugee journeys are complex, heterogeneous and requiring constant adaptation, so do any measures aimed at supporting these journeys need criticality as well as flexibility to accommodate these diverse trajectories and lives (Halkic and Arnold, 2019). One common thread in the narratives of participants was in fact how flexibility, over time, has become a key strategy and approach in these higher education courses. It also means constant adjustments in the material they impart, how they deliver lectures, how they get different student cohorts together to discuss a range of different yet contextualised themes, encouraging learning from each other, about their histories and even about geopolitics, even when these may not be directly associated with core course content. The quote below lays out an example of this:

“It was really interesting to witness students displaced in a jungle in South East Asia engaged with a student who is in a desert in North East Kenya, and some of the readings had to do with the residential schools in Canada where the colonial government was rounding up indigenous people and encamping them...the fact that Canada had its own policy of encampment and that it also rounded up people in the 2nd world war and put them in camps was something that our students in Kenya and Thailand never heard this unfortunate chapter of Canadian history that we like to keep hidden... but this really did open up an interesting space and engaging conversation about the experience of displacement and encampment...so then when we talk about borderless higher education for refugees...”

Flexibility and willingness to engage with such issues, it appeared, is not quite a requisite of the course, but depends in large part on initiatives taken by individual educators/coordinators within the university. Participants with a more critical, social background appeared to have greater sensitivity to critical subjects, and also willingness to address them. As the participant above goes on to note, openness by educators and those running these courses is in this case a key attitudinal requisite, and where sharing experiences with others running similar programs can reap benefits in learning too. While this may not be written into or even an objective of the donor funding these courses, it is still important work, and ultimately costs nothing:

“The work that comes out is not work related to that grant...we would still consider this work...no money changed hands... it did not require a grant to do it, all it required was a bit of goodwill... just people who are in contact with each other sometimes via structures such as the CLC...sometimes it's just people meet each other at a conference and say 'oh I am doing this...oh that's interesting.'”

### 2.6 Challenges: an arduous and bumpy road

Discussions with participants in the study, were fraught with multiple and complex challenges- infrastructural, personal, psychosocial, economic, political and institutional- that not only vary across space and time, but also limit to some or other extent, reach, effectiveness, impact and sustainability, and on occasion students' ability to complete their courses.

They also mean that universities and their partners need to be constantly aware and alert and ready to respond, even though, it appears that multiple and largely extraneous factors, limit what can be done in practice, how, and to what extent. Instead, it requires, as one participant put it, 'learning how to work within what there is, and within the multiple problems that can sway what it is we are trying to do'. For some, it meant not rocking the boat, especially with powerful stakeholders, such as ministries and national universities who may not be very cooperative and on occasion cause problems, demanding an approach, as another participant put it, of 'flying under the radar and getting on with things'. The result is that courses may not flow in ways anticipated, that interruptions may happen, and that many will never be able to embark on a course of studies.

While these hurdles are multiple, complex and sometimes operate contemporaneously and in no clearly anticipated fashion, in the sections below, I attempt to organise these for clarity in reading: contextual and personal; and institutional.

### 2.6.1 Contextual and personal

The following sub-sections lay out key barriers that are related to refugee contexts and the heterogeneity of the refugee population and the hybrid circumstances they face. Participants in the study spoke about myriad challenges that actively interact and act as forces for exclusion, interruption and which call for constant vigilance and responsive reactions to issues as they emerge. Unfortunately, though, the extent to which these universities can respond and react effectively are constrained by numerous limitations- financial, human, logistical,

#### 2.6.1.1 Demand outweighs supply

The first key situational problem is perhaps the most obvious, that the demand for higher education among refugees far outweighs the supply, despite spikes in measures such as tertiary education scholarships for refugees (notably Syrian) in recent years (see UNESCO and UNHCR, 2017). This is even more dramatic when it comes to certified higher education courses such as those in this study. While the number of refugees continues to solidly increase and protracted contexts grow and extend, national and international universities (global North and South) are not easily opening their doors to refugees (see below) and those who do (to an extent) cannot even begin to cater with all the potential students waiting in line for a chance. Participants in this study, in fact emphasised how there are too many applicants for a small and limited number of places they have available, and how the numbers they reach are indeed a drop in the ocean. Some points are worth synthesising:

- While scholarships, courses (online and blended) have statistically increased over the past years, so has the refugee population.
- Lone initiatives such as these can hardly cope with such numbers in the absence of a concerted policy, strategy and approach, including multiple stakeholders working together and with sustained funding
- Universities (global North and South) are still to genuinely understand the value and benefits (including educational) of bringing refugees into the fold.

- Universities and higher education facilities are not too willing to be flexible to accommodate refugee student needs and requirements.
- Refugee lives, to reiterate, are marked by complexity, heterogeneity and insecurity, and when these meet political, social, economic, cultural/ideological, attitudinal and other barriers, the spaces open to them in education close even further, or are only open marginally, temporally and/or conditionally.
- Even more basically, demand will perpetually outweigh supply when basic needs may compete with or fragment education (see below).

The following quote highlights the dire demand/supply situation:

“ Definitely so many people outside... in X(country), we have had upward of 7000 applications in any given year for 150 seats...essentially what you see is that whatever inequality at play in the larger social scene of that country tends to be exacerbated by the time we get to higher education. ”

The quote above is worth further probing. Indeed, and consistent with the narratives of the other participants, education itself becomes not only a marker of concrete social, economic, political and cultural disparities present within any one context, but also may be strongly bound to and perpetuate social inequality. More specifically, education as a right becomes a superfluous context for those whose rights are violated on a daily basis in most life areas, including through opportunities for an education.

This is further aggravated by government assaults on education and universities through concrete cuts alongside the neoliberalisation of education (see Koch, 2018). For refugees, these violations are accentuated:

“ Historically, education has always marginalised and shut people out...we wouldn't have this situation if all universities opened their doors...and universities wouldn't operate like this, on privilege, and if societies were inclusive and equal...so one, like, feeds into the other...even within our own countries such as the US or Canada or the UK...how many students can never even dream of university because they are too poor, and because their lives are meant to be tough... and universities are increasingly pushed to make money...education is a commodity ”

The result is that many indeed slip outside the net and will never even get a foothold, because there are too many and spaces are limited; because they will never be constructed as having the right social, economic and cultural 'pedigree'; because cuts and austerity measures impact social protection and support in the neoliberal narrative of 'self-sufficiency'; or because rights (including to quality and sustained education) ultimately remain bound to and premised on citizenship, what Pisani (2012) calls the 'citizenship assumption' (see more on this below).

#### **2.6.1.2 Some are more excludable than others: intersectional dimensions**

The refugee population as has been amply emphasised is heterogeneous, and this heterogeneity is frequently faced with a situation where some are more 'excludable' and prone to be left out than others.

Findings from the study highlight how higher education opportunities by such universities are far from inclusive, and indeed many, including those traditionally considered 'vulnerable' in discourse, slip through the net, some on account of their invisibility or their bodies, others because the university does not have the resources to address their needs (educational, practical etc.) or both, education itself becoming a force for and/or reinforcing exclusion (see Sengupta and Blessinger, 2018). The sub-sections below illustrate a number of these dimensions.

#### 2.6.1.2.1 Education is not for every 'body'

Perhaps the most obvious population that is too often bypassed or excluded from higher education efforts such as these are disabled people. While literature and research looking into disability and forced migration has been slow to catch on (see Pisani and Grech, 2015), increasing evidence shows how disabled refugees continue to be those marginalised in humanitarian efforts and most sectors, including education, disability often neither mainstreamed nor targeted in initiatives (Crock et al., 2015; Istif Inci and Altintop, 2019). This is a serious negligence given the dramatic number of disabled refugees: a recent report on the WASH and Shelter sector specifically documented how 12.4% of refugee households had a disabled household member and 31% had a member with a chronic illness in 2017 (IOM, 2017). However, this invisibility is far from surprising, given that disabled people continue to be even excluded or marginalised from more sustained efforts in international development, compromising any commitments to disability inclusive development (see Grech, 2015).

When asked whether any populations are being disproportionately excluded or fail to participate, the immediate response by participants was 'disabled people'. In this respect, what we perhaps see is an ableist approach in education, as well as discourse on forced migration and refugees more broadly, discourse and practices, premised on productive able-bodies and minds that can fit, function and produce. As Campbell (2001:44) articulates, ableism is 'a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then, is cast as a diminished state of being human'.

Participants documented a number of barriers they felt impacted their ability to locate and include disabled students in their courses:

- Low visibility of disabled people in humanitarian contexts and scarce attention to disability and inclusive education within humanitarian and associated educational contexts and sectors. Disabled people, as it seems, are only conspicuous by virtue of their absence.
- Lack of statistical data on disability in forced migration and no evaluation and diagnostic mechanisms on the ground.
- Few or no disabled people approaching for information on courses or applying to become students: when asked why this may be the case, participants stated that information itself about the courses may be inaccessible (e.g. Braille) and unadapted, disabled people may not be being reached through targeted efforts, and overall appear to be invisible on the ground.

- Lack of knowledge and training on disability by university staff and local partners: this included basic knowledge on impairments, educational and physical adjustments, accessibility, support with application and so on.
- Virtually no planning on disability inclusion in these courses, and no measures to ensure affirmative action as with gender, also motivated by the fact that donors too, often do not demand this. More broadly, gender mainstreaming has a longer track record and visibility than disability mainstreaming in discourse, policy and practice.
- Lack of or no access to resources (financial, technical, human etc.) to support disabled students, including external support, such as therapists, trained facilitators and resources e.g. material in Braille, sign language translators etc.

Participants, when probed further, noted how the lack of visibility was far from justified, given not only the substantial numbers of people disabled as a result of conflict (e.g. in Syria), but also as a result of the journey and the conditions within protracted contexts. Many expressed how they struggled to even see disabled people in camps or other contexts and sometimes wondered where they were. Within the context of education, a number expressed whether their invisibility was directly related to the fact they may have already been disadvantaged and excluded from education before becoming refugees, and hence did not come forward:

“

I've begun appreciating the tremendous presence of disabled people amongst the refugee population particularly in protracted situations and what I've recently become aware of... what's shocking to me is how hidden this demographic is, not just in the literature, but also socially...we do not have any person in the program with a physical disability...I've done in-person information sessions in X (country) for the program, and there has never been anyone in those information sessions which have been as big as 150 people with a physical disability... so we have not cracked that, no...we have not found a way to reach disabled individuals, let alone disabled women...I think it is something we should try to do, in part because...and if I'm not mistaken, in Jordan, a statistic I read is that 60% of Syrian refugee families have a member who has a physical disability...it is astonishing because having visited Zatari camp in the last fall, I recall seeing 2...my sense is that disabled people are not in those statistics (education) because they never even made it to school.

”

While participant narratives broadly address the subject, one can anticipate that once intersectionalities are factored in and multiple dimensions interact, some within the disabled population may be well more disadvantaged than others, for example disabled women, disabled students with mental health problems, and/or those with chronic impairments requiring sustained medical and other care and support, and which may interfere with the ability to embark on and sustain studies. Even with moderate attempts to address disability, resources are dramatically limited when multiple sources of oppression combine together:

“

A lot of the school systems or the systems...do not have a system to identify disability or 'otherwise abled' or whatever term you want to use....and so by the time students get to us, they might have to get through with dyslexia, or have a mobility issue, or in need of occupation therapy... the university system is used to this in the US, where if you make it to higher education, of course you've already had an identification of whatever the issue is, plus you need extra time, visual accommodation, so we're having to really rebuild the system where we can't really afford to get a qualified diagnosis person out to each site... some of our sites have little to no students with disabilities, some of our sites are 85% men, some are no older than 25, whereas others have folks coming up on 65... so depending on the site, you have sexism, ableism, ageism at play...it is really...all the 'isms' we see, I feel are like on steroids in refugee contexts and plays out in our own admissions and who we are serving...we have a lot of work to do around that... ”

What was indeed interesting in the participants' narratives was that while they made frequent references to the obstacles and issues posed by mental health and trauma, what they seemed to equate disability with, was exclusively physical impairments, accommodating the stereotypical image of disability as a person in a wheelchair. In this regard, intellectual, communication and other disabilities were not mentioned, a worrying pattern given this is where serious adaptations in content and approach and support are required (see Barrett et al., 2019).

#### 2.6.1.2.2 Unregistered refugees:

In the findings above, it was illustrated how one of the main criteria for eligibility by these universities is that potential students need to be registered refugees. This is a serious limiting factor, not only because it excludes those who are undocumented (not a minority at all), but also because those who are undocumented may well be those who are most isolated from key services (e.g. health, social protection etc.)(Peralta-Gallego et al., 2018; Matlin et al., 2018), unable to claim their human rights, and among the poorest and most vulnerable (Merry et al., 2017), and if anything, require targeted intervention. Left to their own devices, these lives are further confined to a precarious and invisible existence:

“

...who is missing now?...quite clearly displaced people who are not registered...in the protracted situation where we are right now...if you look at some places like Greece, there's a tremendous youth bubble of refugees, some of them actually university qualified in Syria who are in fact undocumented...so they are clearly locked out ”

This subject merits further discussion, because if such higher education is bound to legal status, then not only will substantial numbers be excluded, but education once again become yet another mechanism of marginalisation, Othering and exclusion, running counter to even notions of inclusive education, pushed for in policy and practice. As the quote above suggests, even if these foreign universities are out to 'seek out the brightest', this cannot quite be fulfilled when there may be potential students who are qualified and/or stand a great chance of success but can never even approach the facility to register.

Furthermore, this is where education can play a critical part in helping people regularise their status, contribute to the local economy and become valued citizens. One participant reflected further on these issues:

“

While we are 'duty bound' to implement this as a criterion, in truth we are closing out a large number who really do need our help...a leg up...and it becomes a cycle- no registration, no education, and no registration, no ability to participate on an equal level with others... so, I would say, education reinforces this.

”

### 2.6.1.3 Connectivity and geographical dispersion

Most of the courses, as noted above, use blended learning methods, and a good internet connection is a key prerequisite. This determines not only if and how students access information about the courses, but also the ability to connect and engage adequately during the course of their studies. Paradoxically, participants emphasised how those in concentrated areas and close to learning centres (e.g. those in camps) fare better in this respect than those on their own in urban settings, where living conditions and arrangements may be costly and unstable, and connection itself erratic. In this regard, therefore, proximity to a centralised facility provides better conditions for access and flow of education.

Related to this, geographical dispersion determines numerous factors, all of which combine to act as barriers, for some more than others, influencing even the ability to get to know about the courses in the first place:

- Contact with some or other NGO or civil society actor or local partners: these may be located in relatively centralised areas.

- Information: dispersion not only fragments information, but also makes it costly to obtain, what in economic terms are called 'transaction costs' (see Williamson, 1998).
- Transportation: dispersion increases barriers to reaching facilities as well as costs. These costs are no small matter when no support is provided to cover these.

The following extract captures these points:

It is no secret that however much we try to spread out and cover more areas, we are still restricted to some areas over others, especially where we can get the on ground support that we need...this itself is a discriminating barrier, because most will never even know about our existence, especially those who are most far away, and who maybe need what we provide the most.

### 2.6.1.4 Competing demands on time and resources

Participants explained how students come with life baggage and responsibilities, and how these demands do not go away once they embark on a course. On the contrary, they often operate as active barriers. The most notable, are the need to work and earn some money alongside childcare, care for other family members, housework and so on. These responsibilities are well documented (see Merry et al., 2017), and more often than not, shouldered disproportionately by women. Furthermore, cultural/ideological and practical barriers (e.g. lack of health care facilities, lack of economic resources, erratic livelihoods, fragmented or no social protection, transportation barriers, safety in reaching facilities etc.) often combine, impacting opportunity, time and resources to access and sustain other activities such as education and well-being overall.

Yet, these are not the only competing demands on refugees, who also have to deal with navigating cumbersome (and sometimes unintelligible) bureaucratic government structures, travel, learning the language, seeking work, navigating cultural and attitudinal forces among others in the ploy to simply survive. In such a scenario, education then comes at a substantial 'opportunity cost' (Sperling and Winthrop, 2016), especially when formal support and protection may well be absent or fragmented, especially for those who are undocumented:

“

Even with affirmative measures, most of these women will never be able to make it to us, and if they do, they will have it tougher, because it comes at a cost and they have to lose other things. They might have an educational background and potential to study with us, but no time because they are ground by life's most basic needs and feeding their children, or they may have no education because all they did was care for others at their own expense, or if they eventually make it to study with us, they are already burnt out by life and can't cope...kids, work, family...and no one or no services to help...”

#### **2.6.1.5 Cultural dimensions and practices: gendered barriers remain**

'Culture' is a complicated term. It is provisionally defined here as 'the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns' (Giroux, 2004:62). Culture is therefore 'the ground of both contestation and accommodation informed by the way power is used in a given society' (ibid, 2004).

Since culture depends on how power is used, it is also viewed as 'a number of divergent instances' in which power is used unequally. Cultural factors play an important factor, because they shape not only attitudes and behaviours and legitimize some over others, but also influence how people respond. While participants stated that students give the courses their all, like every human being, they come with their own cultural beliefs and practices, and how these may at times clash with contextually dominant others. One participant for example mentioned some practices such as eating with one's hands or pointing a knife whilst eating. Another mentioned extreme competitiveness and not sharing among certain students, practices they said, were not widespread, but needed addressing, for example through extra-curricular sessions, since they caused friction and impacted the formation of student communities. But even more seriously, participants mentioned beliefs about women's positions, roles and functions, which critically impinge not only on their time (see above), but also on the opportunities they and others perceive they have, what they should and can engage in (see also Hattar-Pollara, 2019) and what the implications are of going against established expectations and patterns among one's community. For example, the participant below highlights how the potential to study, become financially independent and earn more, may make some women threatening to men. It can also position them as unmarriageable, an issue that carries serious cultural and social weight, where marriage may be a critical component in full personhood for these women. This constitutes a cultural, physical as well as a psychological barrier for these women, and over the longer term, maintains power differentials while reproducing inequality:

“

The women have their own requirements around children and childcare, they also face challenges if they are to make more money than their husbands, they are not marriageable, which is a huge development milestone in many other places, like you know similar to coming out of diverse...like you need to be married at some point to become an adult, and I think we have some female students who have unique challenges around that.

”

Barriers such as these are severe. Lack of access to education will contribute to sustaining such patterns and fail to equip women to resist dominant narratives and customs that may limit their opportunities and/or oppress them. In turn, this has serious implications for those who depend on these women, especially when substantial literature demonstrates that the benefits of education for women transcend these women themselves, including better economic prospects and well-being for the whole family, and a greater chance of their own children continuing their own education (UNHCR, 2018a). Overall, participants expressed how while affirmative measures they take are were instrumental in bringing in and prioritising women students, it is far from enough, insisting that substantial work needs to be done in addressing these cultural terrains, alongside concrete support alleviating the weight carried by these women, including childcare and safe travel to learning facilities among others (see Ussher et al., 2017 for more on the complex cultural terrains and gender). These, they insisted, are issues that need cross-sectoral intervention, and which despite their multiple efforts, they do not have sustained resources to address:

“

Prioritising women and putting a quota is only scratching the surface...then there's all these cultural, practical, social pressures on top...and we cannot deal with all of these on our own...we are too small...cultural change is slow.

”

### 2.6.1.6 Language imperialism

The issue of language featured prominently in interviews, based on the power implications of English as the lingua franca of education, its historical, cultural and geopolitical baggage, and its equation with what constitutes 'legitimate' and 'quality' education, how it is to be delivered, and importantly by who. Even more basically, the dominance of English language across these courses and the need to speak English as a prerequisite, participants stressed, act as active barriers to lock out a substantial portion of the refugee population. Participants explained how the requirement to deliver courses in English comes from a number of fronts:

- Donors generally require courses to be in English
- University policies often require courses to be delivered exclusively in the dominant teaching language
- Universities may not have the resources (including human) to prepare and deliver courses in other languages
- Teaching materials (including books, articles etc.) may not be translated and available in other languages

As noted above, participants expressed substantial frustration, some more than others:

“

...for us it's the equivalent of language favouritism... so we do some language prep, but because our creditors will only allow us to do our programs in English only...what kind of BS is that? I'm proud of the work, but I take inclusion very seriously, and I'd say it's very bad

”

While all participants in the study stated how English language support was provided, and how they did their best to bring students up to par, they also expressed how, whether they liked it or not, intake of students was often limited and restricted to those who already came with substantial English speaking and writing ability, and hence with some or other cultural and social capital, who may not be the most vulnerable, disadvantaged or isolated who would ultimately benefit most from such education.

As participants went on to note, between university prerequisites, donor requirements/impositions, limitations in resources, and the fact that universities in the global South are not exactly opening their doors wide to refugee students, the situation is unlikely to change any time soon.

#### 2.6.1.7 Financial limitations and costs

Embarking on and completing a course is costly for students, even if the tuition is free, because there are multiple costs, direct and indirect, whether these include materials, transportation, connectivity, or childcare (for women). It also includes the opportunity costs of lost labour or any income that may be earned from alternative activities and which may have to be given up or cut down to prioritise and/or allow time for study. This is a serious matter when one considers that refugee lives are characterised by immediate needs that often demand immediate solutions, and how ultimately survival often takes over higher order or strategic needs (where benefits may be reaped over the long term) (Pisani, 2018). They are also people who may also have responsibilities to fulfil towards others when social protection and other mechanisms are more often than not, absent or scarce:

“

Refugee students have a tough time trying to juggle their multiple responsibilities, so studying is another weight they have to carry so to speak... there are trade-offs...and something has to give... they are not like other students who can just focus on their studies...some have family to think too, and everything comes at cost when you are struggling or don't have anything.

”

In this case, barriers are accentuated for some more than others, as financial limitations meet increasing costs. These include for example single mothers with small children, students with disabled or sick family members to take care of, those who live in distant places from main thoroughfares and for who transportation comes at a high cost, those in urban areas where living costs and rent are much higher.

#### 2.6.1.8 Computing skills limitations

From using university online learning platforms, to adequately using the web in support of studies, to typing, refugees, like any other person, come with a range of computing skills along a continuum. Participants noted how on occasion, students needed extra sessions to boost their abilities. One noted for example how students were not able to type on a keyboard because they had always used only a Smartphone, with the implication that they were using the one thumb to type. This required familiarity and learning how to type on a computer keyboard.

Participants noted how, while this may pose a barrier at the start, students, motivated by the will to get going and complete their courses successfully, are often quick to learn with remedial measures taken by the university and the local partners.

### 2.6.1.9 Psychological dimensions and mental health issues

Literature and narratives are replete with the harshness of forced migration and the psychological impacts, including mental health problems over the long term (Zipfel et al., 2019). This is to the extent that the term 'refugee mental health' continues to gather traction in fields such as psychology and psychiatry and in the humanitarian sector to describe:

“...mental health issues related to various aspects of becoming, being, or having been a refugee, such as traumatic exposure in one's home country that led to the person's flight, adverse experiences during the flight, as well as the various challenges refugees are frequently exposed to post-flight, when trying to integrate in their host country's society. Of note, from a mental health perspective, refugee mental health does not apply to refugees in a legal sense exclusively but equally to asylum seekers and internally displaced persons, i.e., persons who have fled their homes but never crossed an international border (Zipfel et al., 2019a)”

Mental health issues attract attention not only because they are a dramatic reality in refugees' lives, but also because this situation is often exacerbated or maintained by the lack of adequate, timely and sustained psychological and mental health services (see below), with the implication that issues such as PTSD, trauma, and other conditions seriously impact daily activities and functioning and well-being. Universities, as well as ground level partners, participants commented, often have little to no expertise in the area and cannot offer such services, a critical gap especially with refugees hailing or fleeing from very recent conflict and/or traumatic contexts and who require immediate support:

“

We don't have enough counselling in mental health support especially in X (country) where the conflict is more recent, so I think all our students need this, but we've also noticed that students that have been living in a camp for 20 years have built up certain levels of resilience and abilities to cope, versus those who are more recent situations. I'd like to see mental health for all, I think it's really critical for Burundian refugees who are newer conflict situations or Syrian refugees”

Overall, while field partners together with universities offer support to their best abilities with their limited resources to deal with such barriers, participants admitted that what they can offer in practice is far from what was required in quality and quantity. Participants described a number of instances, triggers and manifestations of mental health issues, and from which students are not protected:

- Feelings of disproportionate insecurity, including in regard to their studies
- Fear and distrust
- PTSD (e.g. after being subjected to extreme violence and war, death of family and loved ones, rape etc.)
- Mental health problems prior to migration that went undiagnosed and untreated in country of origin
- Post-flight challenges and trauma in adjusting and 'integrating' in host country e.g. related to racism, discrimination and rejection, violence, poverty and deprivation
- Stress and disproportionate responsibilities and juggling of multiple tasks e.g. childcare, caring for ill family members, work, navigating government bureaucracy and systems, cultural

A number of participants expressed on various occasions the seriousness of mental health issues and their impacts on students, especially when these go undetected and unaddressed immediately. These include erratic behaviour, attendance and participation in the course; gaps in course of studies; crises situations; and even dropping out. They insisted how mental health issues place substantial pressure on them to implement some or other remedial measures, but how what they can offer, other than referrals, is often short term, on the spot and rarely informed, professional and sustained. This situation, they stressed, is bound to the lack of financial and even human resources to offer adequate and consistent support, and more importantly a lack of available, professional, culturally sensitive and informed mental health services by other stakeholders (e.g. NGOs, INGOs, government etc.). Addressing mental health issues, participants reiterated is a matter of urgency, not only because it impacts the course of studies and outcomes, but these students' lives more broadly, and whether they can transition into employment and have a more stable and secure life:

“Mental health is like the glue that needs to hold everything together, including what we do and whether they will reap any benefits...it is ability to find and keep a job, to complete their studies, their relationships with others...and even to simply survive...but the gaps we have are just too big...this has us worried all the time”

### 2.6.2 Institutional

In this section, I use the word 'institution' to refer not only to formal organisations and structures but also established (institutionalised) discourses and practices which may or may not have an identifiable structure. In this regard, I will be addressing a number of barriers that emerged in interviews.

Participants, despite all good intentions and their extensive work, highlighted how the road is often bumpy and arduous, reach is extremely limited, and how much more needs to be done when it comes to providing adequate and effective higher education services to refugees. In particular, they noted how policies, operations of organisations and institutions (including local universities) constitute barriers that not only make their work more difficult, but also require sufficient investment of time and resources to circumvent or more often to try and work around these various obstacles:

- Securing visas and bureaucracy: one notable barrier participants spoke about was that of securing visas for students to be able to study in the host country. While countries such as Germany have made it easier for refugees to continue their studies, those in the Middle East, for example, are not always receptive and the process is immensely bureaucratic and cumbersome.
- Limited courses and small intake: participants, as noted earlier in this report, admitted that the choice of courses they are offering is in practice very limited. While the global North university accreditation is an attractive aspect, most admitted that in practice, the courses on offer may not be quite what students really want to study or even need, and that in truth there is little 'real' choice:

“...a 'take it or leave it' approach really. Do this or do nothing, and you should be thankful.”

This situation, to be fair, is exacerbated and intensified by the fact that national universities in refugee host countries are often bolted doors to refugee students, feeding back into a dependence on this limited pool of courses offered by foreign universities (see below).

- Few if any policies within universities (global North and South) to include and perhaps even prioritise provision of higher education to refugee students, for example through affirmative measures. This, in turn, and has already been stated, means that whatever develops in the way of courses frequently depends on a lone individual or department sparking such initiatives:

“ Starting with our own university, there is no policy across the institution that states, black on white that refugees must be included... so, then, like in our case it had to be one person... and then trying to see how and where to do it ”

- Resistant national universities: the most evident and uttered problem among participants, was that of resistance or lack of cooperation by national universities in refugee host countries in the Middle East and Africa where they operated, doors barred by racialized, bureaucratic, political, financial, economic, cultural and attitudinal factors among others. For participants, these stakeholders can be outwardly problematic, and emphasised how dealing with them is a delicate matter, and many choose to get on with their business and fly under the radar in the bid to avoid problems:

“ National universities, despite our efforts are not very collaborative to say the least...we have seen little initiative to open up to refugee students... connections with politicians...policies that make it so tough for students to even get close...and I would say even racism sometimes towards refugees at an institutional level ”

The problems with these national universities merit further discussion:

“ Institutionalized racism and/or xenophobia: universities are both a reflection of and a propagation of institutionalized public discourse and sentiment. Participants stressed, how in some institutions, more than others, racism and xenophobia are ingrained, acting as an active barrier to refugee students, as well as limiting possibilities of collaboration. However, a number of participants noted, how attitudinal and other barriers may on occasion be shelved when they can make money e.g. when a refugee student has a Mastercard Foundation scholarship to study at one of these universities.

Non-recognition of refugee students' education and certification: this, participants stressed, is an active and often not benign mechanism to barring entry to national universities for refugees, a critical problem intensified by the fact that some refugee students flee without their credentials and are unable to obtain physical copies of their certificates from their home countries. And when they do, these may not be readily recognised or require a long process.

Lack of will to collaborate with foreign universities: a number of participants spoke about problematic attitudes by national universities, including indifference and outright unwillingness to collaborate to take refugee students. Participants expressed a range of problems, including confrontational ones, as well as refusal to acknowledge online learning as a legitimate mode of education. Similar scenarios are reported by others, for example El-Ghali and Ghosn (2019) in Lebanon. The result, then, is either trying to find a friendly and receptive ally on the inside who could facilitate some or other communication, or avoiding these national institutions altogether, hoping they would not stir any problems. ”

The following quote lays out some of these issues:

“...Country X is the trickiest in terms of attitudes, souring towards Syrian refugees in the larger context, and also really not accepting of online learning so far...there's all these kind of structural pieces... but then when we got the right person and partner...a little more localised...and so he is really able to make those connections, and we found that through his networks that he built over a 25 year career, it is pretty receptive...however not receptive in a way that they'll say 'let us offer degrees to folks'....I think they're receptive to refugees as long as they are being paid...so universities such as X... super expensive, they gladly take refugees that have Mastercard scholarships because they are paying students...but in terms of saying 'hey let's do this because it's good for our society', I don't see a whole lot of that.”

- Political climate and perception of the local partner: These foreign universities function through and are indeed largely dependent on the local partner, as has been amply explained earlier. Participants articulated how local partners may be advocacy groups with their own baggage and history, which means not only that they may be perceived as problematic by government and other powerful stakeholders, but also that these conflicts may extend to the university programs- offering powerful stakeholders the opportunity to be punitive. As those interviewed explained, the strategy, apart from carefully selecting local partners, is then one of getting on with what they do, without attracting too much attention, including that of national universities who may not be politically neutral at all. The objective as they noted is to protect students and keep them safe and shielded. Overall, though, this contributes further to fragmentation of efforts (discussed further below):

“

In other contexts it is either neutral or...we try to fly under the radar... first of all, there our partner is a big political advocacy organisation and they've taken some cases to the supreme court... on refugee rights and employment...so the government would like nothing more than to cause a few problems...so there, we aren't even approaching universities, because we think it is the best benefit for our students to lay neutral...in W,Y,Z (other countries), it's kind of people know about us, we might see each other at a conference or its friendly, but I wouldn't say its integrated work...so we try and keep our politics aside and see what is going to keep our students the safest”

- Making students potential targets: Prioritising refugee students in these programs, as has already been explained often has to be juggled with the inclusion of home country students to avoid conflict as well as racist and other negative attitudes and rendering them more vulnerable to discrimination and even ill-treatment. However, participants went on to explain, how this conflict may even extend to refugee communities themselves, which are far from homogeneous, united or inclusive (see Kate et al., 2019 for more on intra-community conflict). As the following quote clarifies, any perceived benefits (real or not) to students by others may render them vulnerable to abuse and conflict, if others- themselves in dire situations- feel these students may be better off:

“

I also just worry about our students, the protection issues, becoming a target because you probably have a lunch stipend, have a laptop and how that can make them targets of violence as well”



- Dependence on external funders: dependence on external funding, as participants from these global North universities emphasised, means a number of issues, and which in turn impact what they do, how they do it, where, for how long, and even the ability or willingness to pool efforts and collaborate (see below). The basic tenet here is that donors retain inordinate amounts of power, and this power is asymmetrical, something well documented in development literature in relation to the aid system more broadly (see Brett, 2016). Donors determine priority areas and regions, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting, duration of programs, and multiple other conditions, which recipients have to abide by, regardless of whether these are responsive and sensitive to local needs, contexts, circumstances and demands and/or may even cause harm or conflict. Prerequisites such as those that courses be delivered in English already act as active exclusionary mechanisms. But projects such as these are also time-bound, and key targets on paper need to be achieved in a timely way, irrespective of delays or hurdles on the ground. There is often little space to manoeuvre including in how things are done. Importantly, funding rarely extends beyond the life of the project, meaning not only pressure on universities to be tracking alternative funding to keep programs going, but also compromising on sustainability. This is a serious problem given that the benefits of education are likely to be seen over the long term and only with sustained support alongside and beyond a given course, including those of furthering education, penetrating the job market, increased security and mobility and so on:

“

You need to stick by the rules even if we try and be as flexible as we can...that is what you are asked to do... it is not unusual for institutions to craft projects to accommodate what the funder wants rather than the students...obviously then there are problems round the corner...but I don't think this is going to change...like one year, one country is a priority and the next it is not, and what justifiable costs can we include.. ”

In a similar fashion, for example Koehler and Schneider (2019) highlight how policies and also donors often favour short term professional or vocational education courses over long term tertiary and other education, which would need greater investment, not only of money, but also time, human resources and adaptations.

- Competition and fragmentation between global North universities: participants explained how in the midst of limited resources and funding possibilities, the result is that of severe competition between these global North universities for funds as opposed to collaborating- each trying to pull in enough money to run its own program. This approach not only limits collaborative efforts, but also compromises learning, pooling of efforts and resources (including people and materials), sustainability and ability to scale up. It also strengthens the power of donors without challenging the conditions they impose. Even more basically, competition and lack of collaboration limits the choice of courses on offer to those by their own individual institution as opposed to joining forces and resources (academic, materials, tutors, experience) to offer joint courses capitalising on the strengths of each institution:

“

Instead of working together, we compete with each other, so our students suffer because we could do much more together. In the meantime, funders do not change anything, because there is always someone ready to do what they are told for money. We could do so much more if we put our heads together, because we all have our strengths...and also, I would say, our weaknesses ”

While initiatives such as the UNHCR Consortium, they felt have been beneficial in bringing stakeholders together to talk, fragmentation and competition remain strong overall in what to some or other extent has become an education market, at the expense of a concerted and unified strategy and approach committed to rights and social justice and a pedagogical approach reflecting this. Even more basically, fragmentation may also make the landscape unintelligible or confusing to refugees, when they cannot understand who is doing what, where, how and what they stand to benefit. The excerpts below articulate the severity of the situation:

“

...one concern we all share in education is that yes we need to be offer competitive programs, we shouldn't be competing with each other, and I think there is a real danger of us thinking of this as a market place versus us trying to improve these market places...I think we really need to evaluate what is the ROI (Return on Investment) we are seeking to achieve.

...It is a context that is starved for resources... fundamentally funding, but also content and space, and that makes it incredibly challenging...I think we need to be very careful in the way we coordinate how these programs not only reflect on each other, but exchange with each other...and I think when you look at the spectrum (of universities),

this happens with different bubbles in different spaces, but it is still a long way from being able to create a road map or flowchart that explains to refugees how this all works together...and where the benefits for them are. ”

The situation, though, and despite a sense of awareness and frustration, participants believe will not change any time soon, and the consequences of such an approach can be transferred to refugee students:

“

I feel like we're all on the university end tackling this in the wrong way, so it is all about who is getting the funding, who is serving the student, competing for students...I would like to see more collaboration and I unfortunately don't see the field moving in that way...people want to be leaders, they want to be the ones doing the best...and I'm really saddened and disappointed around that and I wish someone would just put us all in a room or a group of refugees would put us all in a room and be like 'wake up people, work together for us, not for professional accolades'. ”

- Limited mental health care, child care and other support: Universities struggling for funding and to keep the programs rolling, as noted above, confront other barriers, in particular in providing and/or accessing adequate mental health care, counselling and other services, not least because these services are lacking more broadly in humanitarian contexts, are specialised, and too expensive (WHO, 2019). These include health promotion, mental health services (in particular those for post-traumatic stress disorders), disease prevention, treatment and care, childcare facilities, as well as financial and social protection (ibid, 2019).

Furthermore, the universities themselves, rarely, if ever have a budget to provide any of these, and more often than not, lack human capacity while operating in complex and sometimes volatile environments. The barriers confronted by refugees are various in accessing such services:

- Language barriers
- Lack of knowledge of services available and familiarity and/or cultural resistance towards practices such as mental health
- Negative attitudes and stigma by local providers towards refugees and vice-versa
- Overstretched services when they do exist (e.g. those offered by NGOs) unable to cope with the demand and unable to offer sustained services over the long term (e.g. psychological and counselling services)
- Lack of screening and assessment facilities in humanitarian contexts
- Ill-equipped and ill-informed mental health and other services e.g. in transcultural and trauma-informed culture and lack of translators and cultural mediators in services

Part of the problem here are funding conditions too, whereby psychosocial support, mental health services (e.g. in cases of PTSD), and child care (predominantly for women)- which would support in continuity and reducing drop-out rates on courses- participants lamented, are rarely justifiable items, with serious impacts in practice, especially when these are not attended to by other service providers on the ground e.g. NGOs.

Overall, these barriers are well documented in recent research and literature, especially in regard to mental health (see for example Wylie et al., 2018; Satinsky et al., 2019), but as much of this body of work highlights, the road to adequate, timely, sustained, sensitive and responsive mental health and other services continues to be a bumpy one. Within the context of education, as participants emphasised, the lack, absence or inadequacy of such care has serious implications in their own work, including interruption in studies, and eventual employment:

“

We cannot provide these services because we do not have the expertise and no money for it... we try and find someone who does, but not always possible, and again, can't afford it...and then providers may be shut to refugees...and then education suffers, because they can't handle the pressure, they are suffering, and it's a downward spiral.

”

### Limitations

Like any other study, this report has its own limitations and must be read with these in mind. First of all, this is not intended as a representative study, not only on account of the very small sample, but also because of the complexity and heterogeneity of the landscape as well as the partiality and fragmentation of data that exists. In this regard, findings cannot and should not be generalised to all higher education or connected learning initiatives with refugees globally or even to all those by global North universities in refugee contexts in the global South. It is an in-depth, critical, yet very partial view of the situation, prioritising the critical views and perspectives of a small number of stakeholders.



It is within this space that it hopes to generate more critical debate and more research on the intersections between higher education, refugees and connected learning.

Within this landscape, there are multiple voices that are left unheard, including in this report, in particular those of refugee students themselves. This study, to emphasise, simply echoes the concerns and views of a very small number of academic staff from these global North universities. An in-depth, inclusive and perhaps more comprehensive view must account for these views and perceptions on their own terms.





### **3. Conclusions and Recommendations**

It is possible to draw a number of tentative conclusions and recommendations from these in-depth interviews, not only on the situation of higher education with refugees within these global North universities, but also how connected learning fits within, constructs and/or frames this narrative:

- Connected Learning is a relevant and perhaps timely category bringing together diverse efforts addressing refugee higher education, and platforms such as the CLCC are indeed commendable. However, there appears to be a lack of clarity about the meaning of the term itself, including whether connected learning is about process, methodology, or outcome or all of these, and which may contribute to further ambiguity. At the most basic level, it can reinforce the fragmentation and lack of collaborative efforts documented above without a shared understanding of what is being done, why and how. Furthermore, if those working under this umbrella term are not familiar or critically engaging with the conceptual terrain, it means that broader policy and practice debates about higher education with refugee are even more disengaged, with the risk that connected learning becomes simply a siloed paper tiger. One cannot help but pose a number of questions: would the term (or practice) be in fact adopted by these universities had it not been promoted by key parties such as UNHCR and its Consortium? If universities are just 'getting on with it' based on what and how they feel is necessary on the ground, are discussions on connected learning even relevant? Does connected learning have any currency among refugee students and local stakeholders? Does it represent genuine and responsive changes in pedagogy, methodology and process, outcomes or all of these- what exactly are we talking about here?
- Can discussions on connected learning be divorced from broader, critical and reflexive discussions on higher education among refugees, refugee issues more broadly, and the geopolitical, cultural, ideological and other dimensions that envelope and construct it? These questions require more critical interdisciplinary theory and research.
- Nevertheless, the apparent malleability and openness to interpretation of connected learning are perhaps its strong points, that is it leaves sufficient space for flexibility, including in approaches, fluid ideas around community, the blending of online and in-person education and so on, in a field where rigidity, as has been amply demonstrated, is unlikely to work and may indeed be harmful.
  - Overall, initiatives such as those in the study, appear to be working towards a shared set of objectives, though these are not always clearly articulated or formalised: expanding access to higher education for refugees in host countries, notably to those who are normally excluded and/or marginalised; localising this education as much as possible; offering an education that can provide some leverage when it comes to access to employment, security and mobility. Cutting across these, is the firm belief that education has and must play a critical role in complementing other initiatives, including those in the humanitarian sector- reframing such educational initiatives, to some or other extent, as humanitarian ones. This is indeed positive and needed, but there still appears to be a lack of a concerted, contextualised and informed strategy as to how to achieve these, perhaps in part fuelled by the scarcity in broader reflexive, critical debates, including by those working in the sector.

- In the instances surveyed in this study, what is on offer and how it is done is not quite bottom-up, students do not quite have any choice in what they choose to study, and critically, these courses may not necessarily be reflective of refugees' own interests, priorities and demands. Power, despite all efforts, remains firmly concentrated in the hands of global North universities designing and delivering these courses, and even more so, donors funding them. This scenario appears to contradict key principles of connected learning, notably those emphasising personal interest as well as development and exchange of knowledge as a two-way process (see Ito et al., 2013).
- It is safe to conclude that the 'selling point' and indeed attractiveness to refugee students of these courses remains the opportunity to obtain a foreign/global North certificate from what is deemed a reputable university, and the assumed doors this can open (realistically or not). This challenges newer narratives such as those pushing for blockchain based academic certificates, including an active questioning of what constitutes 'quality education' (see Tapscott and Kaplan, 2019). If anything, certification by formal brick and mortar universities with a history and reputation becomes even more important and pivotal for refugees, who are pushed to make their one chance work for them, especially when the rules of the game and employment have not quite changed, and even more importantly, when these students' lives are already haunted by innumerable other barriers devaluing not only their education and experiences, but also them as human beings in their host countries.
- Overall, while higher education courses by these global North universities have merit in filling critical gaps in higher education for refugees in the global South, they are still a drop in the ocean, and to restate, demand dramatically outweighs the supply. Very high numbers of aspiring applicants, lack of consistent funding, the absence of policies within these global North universities to include and target refugee students as a priority, lack of collaboration between universities (global North and South), combined with myriad personal, contextual, social, economic, political, institutional and other hurdles in very complex contexts, limit reach, sustainability, impact and the ability to scale up. As such, these courses appear to be constantly hanging on a thread with a relatively insecure future and limited ability to plan ahead. Informed, concerted, organised, cross-sectoral and institutional efforts, and sustained funding appear though much needed, are a distant reality.
- Many continue to slip outside the net, in particular those who are further disadvantaged by their dis/ability, gender, legal status and geographical location among others. With set requirements such as language (English) and legal status, these courses may also run the risk of reinforcing privilege and reproducing social inequalities by reaching only the most capable and best equipped students, who may not necessarily be those who need this education the most.

- Online learning is only one part of the higher education equation, and simply a methodological means to an end, and care must be taken not to overstate its merits. The in-person component and support, including that provided by local facilitators and partners is key in allowing constant, localised, adapted and adaptive and responsive approaches when dealing with contexts and circumstances (personal, social, economic, political, cultural/ideological) that are as complex as they are heterogeneous and changing. Understanding and navigating this context is therefore core in design and implementation as is having the right local partners on board.
- Education is contextual, economic, political and politicised and cannot be divorced from these. Findings emphasise how education is framed, constructed and delivered within such conditions, meaning that any understanding of education within context requires a clear understanding of the conditions framing it. Irrespective of how much these universities try to depoliticize the process and 'fly under the political radar', it is undeniable that the power held by local stakeholders such as universities, governments and others- alongside discourses and responses to foreign 'intervention'- determine not only process but also outcome, and need to be adequately navigated and addressed with local partners in informed and sensitive ways as a core part of strategy, at the very least to minimise problems, interruption and conflict.
- Finally, multiple barriers and issues, plague these initiatives away from the familiar home turf and institution. Competition for funding, lack of collaboration and input by a range of stakeholders (including in the humanitarian and educational sectors), mental health issues and lack of related services among others, mean these courses, if not limited by design, are constrained by context. This does not mean that courses such as these do not have a contribution to make. On the contrary, they not only are needed, but must be a priority for all global North universities and scaled up. However, this is unlikely to happen if there isn't input by multiple stakeholders, local, national and international, if there isn't a shift in how donors prioritise and set conditions, and importantly, if such universities themselves do not prioritise the need to include refugee students as an asset and obligation towards transformative and social justice.

### 3.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is possible to offer a number of tentative recommendations:

- Overall, there remains much need for critical, interdisciplinary research looking into the interconnections between refugees, connected learning and higher education, followed by genuine debate across sectors and fields e.g. education, connected learning and technology, refugee studies, international development, anthropology, humanitarian action, international relations and so on. Critical evaluations and longitudinal studies are also needed to see how initiatives such as these pan out in practice, what their long-term objectives are, and what learning can be drawn from them.

- More research is needed into the learning needs and demands of a range of refugees across space and time, acknowledging their heterogeneity and complexity as well as intersectionalities. A report similar to this is required to articulate these voices on their own terms.
- Related to this, an informed inclusive design is needed, understanding intersectional dimensions (e.g. disabled refugees, women, those who are undocumented) and barriers to education, followed by a strategy and measures in place to not only include, but also ensure that no one is left out. Quotas and affirmative action are simply a start. This necessitates information and expertise that can be drawn from other specialists, e.g. disability and gender experts and organisations working in these areas, but in particular requires learning directly from refugees themselves e.g. disabled refugee women.
- Flexibility is needed in admitting and supporting refugees throughout the process: the higher education sector, in particular national ones, have to develop tools that allow assessment of qualifications and experience, without documentation, and where knowledge and potential are prioritised over qualifications, nationality, race and/or pedigree. Only then can refugee students stand a chance on an equal footing. This cannot be done without a genuine desire to include, without prejudice.
- In-built within these higher education courses by these global North universities, there needs to be an informed strategy and resources devoted to informal and non-formal education to compensate their own efforts, especially on-ground support e.g. those on employability, customs and culture, healthy living, and so on. Formal education can only partially accommodate the objectives of connected learning in higher education.
- Training of local partners: the instrumental roles played by these, implies a need for investment in their training as educators and change makers in their own right, and therefore their own education.
- Active measures need to be taken to connect such higher education courses with support with broader needs and requirements and which impinge directly on education (including ability to sustain and complete a course) and well-being. These include access to housing, health care and mental health care services, childcare, and employment among others. This once again requires active partnerships with local stakeholders, in-depth knowledge of local contexts and networks, and ideally a budget to be able to support with development of these. •
- Higher education initiatives such as these, need to take into consideration the heterogeneity and diversity of refugee students, their personal situations, their study requirements and also their agency. Indeed 'through a differentiation along with the same characteristics as for all other students, 'the general' can be recognized next to the 'the particular' within the refugees' situation' and accommodate the fact that 'refugees take up educational offers in a flexible and seemingly idiosyncratic way' (Halkic and Arnold, 2019). This calls for an active approach, recognising them as 'agents' who try to reach their individual goals actively within their life realities and biographies' as opposed to 'assuming a structural determinism' (ibid, 2019).

- This needs to be compensated by 'tailored academic, social, and practical support throughout the process of applying to and studying in higher education contexts' (ibid, 2019). This can only be achieved by actively including and listening to refugee students and prospective ones, their diverse needs and requirements as assets rather than barriers, and incorporating them in the design of such courses working towards 'more focused interventions on a smaller scale rather than low-threshold interventions with a large intake' (ibid, 2019)..
- Educators, including staff from these universities as well as local partners need to be educated about refugee situations and contexts to be able to address these varying needs and to provide an informed, contextualised, sensitive and responsive education. The alternative would simply be the transplantation of decontextualized, perhaps neo-colonial courses from the West to the rest.
- Opportunities need to be created for refugee and host-country youth to interact, share and work together, not only on the courses, but also outside, and this requires active engagement with national youth and other organisations where available. • National authorities and higher education institutions need to be brought into the fold through genuine debate and support, to ensure that measures are taken to reduce barriers to refugee students e.g. recognition of certificates and to minimise threats to courses offered by these global North universities and more broadly minimise barriers to higher education for refugee students. Genuine partnerships, including jointly designed and certified courses may be a way forward, but this requires critical debate and education on refugee issues backed by an inclusive policy. Lobbying and incentive work for local universities to include refugees is needed.
- Cooperation as opposed to competition and/or conflict necessitates a concerted strategy and approach and a willingness to collaborate and share between these global North universities. Platforms such the CLCC have a major role to play here, but donors too, need to change their narrative and conditions. A step forward may be the requirement for collaborative courses and longer-term programs with flexibility to change and adapt. A change in culture within these universities and funders is also needed, whereby outcomes and well-being of students on their own terms is prioritized over money or visibility.
- Cross-sectoral partnerships (academic and non-academic) need to be harnessed as a precondition for courses such as those in this study. This includes those working in humanitarian action, education, health, national ministries, development organisations and others. This necessitates not only time and resources to facilitate debate, but also a more concrete commitment, with terms and conditions set out clearly for all working towards a common goal.
- Finally, donors need to be educated about the realities of refugees and need to partner with universities for the long haul in an adaptive and informed way. Critical evaluations are also needed by policy makers and others on how these funders operate, whether they are meeting their pledges, and whether their own and the practices of beneficiaries they fund, contribute to alleviating barriers to higher education for refugees and/or are accentuating them. In this regard, it would be helpful to have a comprehensive international data base of funders and higher education initiatives to facilitate coordination and avoid gaps or replication.



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