

Higher education in the context of mass displacement: Towards sustainable solutions for refugees¹

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Abstract

This paper provides a theoretical review of higher education access for refugees in humanitarian situations. Drawing upon the case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, we discuss challenges and opportunities around developing new higher education modalities to enhance its role in humanitarian response as well as reconfiguring refugees' 'unknowable future'. We also examine opportunities of higher education access and process of multidimensional partnerships, engaging with emerging practices and experiments in this sector from the perspective of future education and highlighting the opportunities that investment in higher education can serve for solidarity and peace in contexts of mass displacement. Finally, we reflect upon possible ways forward and offer insights into potential sustainable solutions not only for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, but also for young displaced populations globally.

Key words

Higher education, refugees, Lebanon, education in emergencies, Syrian crisis

Introduction

The world has witnessed the largest scale of refugee crisis since World War II with over 68.5 million people forcibly displaced from their homes in 2017 as a result of conflict, persecution and other forms of violence (UNHCR 2018a). There are 25.4 million registered refugees globally (UNHCR 2018b), including just over 5.3 million Palestinians who live under the mandate of UNRWA (UNRWA 2017). Following the Syrian crisis that began in 2011, Lebanon alone has received over 1.2 million people from Syria, making Lebanon a country with the largest proportion of refugees relative to its national population, where 1 in 4 people is a refugee under the responsibility of UN agencies (UNHCR 2018a).

¹ To cite this article: Pherali, T. and Abu Moghli, M. (2019) Higher education in the context of mass displacement: Towards sustainable solutions for refugees, *The Journal of Refugee Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez093>

Globally, children constitute half of the refugee population, of which, 3.7 million are out of school (UNHCR 2017a). Compared to an average 36 percent of global youth attending higher education (HE), the access to HE among refugees is scarcely 1 percent, [jeopardizing the prospects of refugees in the knowledge economy](#). Among the university eligible Syrian refugees aged between 18-24 years, under 2 percent in Turkey; 8 percent in Jordan; 6 percent in Lebanon; and 8 percent in Egypt were enrolled in HE (Lorisika et al 2015) as compared to 20 percent tertiary education participation before the war broke out in Syria (EU Regional Trust Fund, 2016). [In recent years](#), there is a growing demand for tertiary education among refugee [youth](#) (UNHCR 2014) [who have been displaced from middle-income countries with high enrolment rates in education](#) and reasonably high levels of [access to HE](#). Secondly, [the](#) refugee crisis is increasingly becoming protracted ([Anselme and Hands 2012](#)), [reaching an average length](#) of exile [25 years](#) in 33 protracted refugee situations [at the end of 2014](#), nearly three times as long as in the early 1990s (UNGA 2018). This means that a growing number of secondary school graduates [are](#) seeking access to tertiary education. Thirdly, the growth of knowledge intensive jobs in the global economic market including, [refugee host countries](#) or prospective third country of relocation motivate refugees to gain HE qualifications. Finally, despite restricted physical and social mobility, it is the same concept of mobility and prospects of freedom that incentivises refugees to pursue higher levels of education (Dryden-Peterson 2017a).

In the last two decades, the advocacy and programming in education in crisis contexts has predominantly focused on [challenges relating to](#) basic education (UNESCO 2011), [the HE sector in refugee contexts has been largely underprioritised \(Milton and Barakat, 2016; Anselme and Hands 2012; Dryden-Peterson, 2010\), creating a sectoral imbalance \(Buckland, 2005\)](#). [Despite](#) one of the key objectives of UNHCR's Education Strategy (2012-2016) and the UNHCR's strategic directions for 2017-2021 (UNHCR UK n.d) is to 'improve access to higher education opportunities for refugee young people' (UNHCR 2015: 1), HE is still considered a luxury rather than a part of the educational continuum and as a means to transform conditions in which refugees and conflict-affected populations live. HE has also been neglected due to the economic justification that supported investment in primary education [bear](#) higher rates of returns (Psacharopoulos 1989; 1994; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2004). Additionally, there is also an argument that the elitist nature of HE in terms of its disproportionate access among socioeconomically privileged groups raises concerns about reproduction of inequality and social divisions (Dryden-Peterson 2010). However, unlike the previous global initiatives, Goal 4 of Sustainable Development Goals offers a wider vision for education, promising to deliver 'affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary

education, including university' by 2030. In spite of this development, there are limited opportunities for refugees to enrol in [HE](#), constrained by financial support and politically [unfavourable](#) environments in their host countries and beyond. Depriving young refugees from opportunities to access [HE](#) can potentially fuel frustrations, negate their potential to be self-reliant and potentially risk stability in host communities with wider consequences of debilitating effects on their aspirations to rebuild their country of origin if/when they decide to or can return. Hence, the opportunity cost of neglecting tertiary education in contexts of mass displacement is high politically, socially and economically.

[This paper draws on secondary research on HE in refugee contexts to identify a range of barriers as well as emerging opportunities to deliver quality HE for refugee youth. We particularly focus on the case of Lebanon which hosts a large number of refugees from Syria to highlight three key areas of academic and programmatic debates in HE, including the use of technology as a means to increased HE access; HE partnerships; and the imagination of future education. We begin with a theoretical analysis of the contested role of HE in conflict-affected settings, explaining how HE can become both a vehicle for mitigating conditions of fragility and despair, and potentially, a space that could perpetuate existing socioeconomic conditions. Then, we provide an overview of different HE modalities in contexts of conflict and protracted crises and focus the critical analysis of barriers and opportunities to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Finally, we argue that HE should be an integral part of the debate about sustainable solutions to refugee crisis and, expanding this provision requires reconfiguration of conventional approaches and high levels of system innovations and creativity in teaching, learning and research so that HE could compliment broader initiatives around political settlements, post-war reconstruction and economic regeneration.](#)

[Methodology](#)

[The paper employed a qualitative methodology of a desk review drawing upon the existing body of literature that deals with HE challenges for refugees. We identified 65 papers including conference and \(I\)NGO reports and peer-reviewed articles during our initial search using the key words: 'higher education' and 'refugees'; 'higher education' and 'Syrian refugees' and finally 'higher education,' 'Syrian refugees' and 'Lebanon'. In order to set the context of this analysis and illustrate the scale of mass displacement and refugee crisis, relevant documents primarily published by UNHCR were reviewed without limiting the timeframe. The preliminary review revealed that theoretical, qualitative and quantitative studies on HE for refugees predominantly focused on the issue of](#)

[access, overlooking concerns around quality, intersectionality between outcomes, economic conditions and legal environments in host countries as well as the diversity of refugee learning needs. In this article, we examine the nexus of HE and refugees through an intersectional lens, where we consider multidimensional approaches to address the crisis of HE among refugee youth.](#)

[Based on the recommendations of the reviewers, a second phase of literature review was conducted using the google scholar as well as education specialised databases such as: Education Data Bases, British Education Index and Education Resources Information Center \(ERIC\). We also limited our search to the literature published during 2011 and later and identified and reviewed 19 papers including conference proceedings, \(I\)NGO reports and policy briefs and 21 academic/peer reviewed articles over three phases. Firstly, we focused on the studies that examined higher education and refugees globally to capture general statistics and general trends. Secondly, we moved on to the analysis of papers that focused on Syrian refugees and higher education particularly in host countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey \(MENAT\) region and finally, we concentrated on HE needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon that revealed some of the innovative provisions and solutions such as partnerships and the use of technology in the delivery of HE.](#)

Higher education as a critical space in [refugee settings](#)

Higher education plays an important role in providing vital human capital [as well as acting](#) as a point of critical reflection on national development not only economically but also socially, culturally and intellectually. The availability and provision of tertiary education also [incentivises](#) motivations for completing primary and secondary education for refugee children (Gladwell et al 2016) who can envision the continuous progression in their learning and educational achievements with clear pathways to [recognised](#) qualifications [enabling](#) them to secure stable livelihoods. In the era of digital technologies, [HE](#) experiences can offer multidimensional, deterritorialised and unrestricted prospects of opportunities for refugees whose lives [are](#) constrained by physical and social mobility. Most importantly, through shared learning space and collaboration with non-refugee counterparts, refugee youth can develop confidence and find ways to rebuild their lives with dignity. [HE](#) is also a key point of socialisation for a new generation of young people through which they could learn to exercise their agency to reshape their future by navigating through social and political barriers. Most importantly, it can help rupture the notion of *crisis as permanence* by enabling refugees to

renegotiate their lives in exile as well as a training ground to become champions in rebuilding their country of origin [by taking up leadership roles in political domains, policy and national development not least, serving to rebuild their higher education systems when the conflict ends \(Pherali and Lewis 2019\).](#)

[Notably, education can also fuel conditions of conflict by unevenly distributing access and quality across regions and social groups, reproducing existing socioeconomic inequalities, promoting biased history, repressing minority languages and cultures \(Bush and Saltarelli 2000\) and most importantly, excluding minorities and refugee populations from access to quality learning. HE can equally serve as a mechanism of elite closure, a key tool in the maintenance of elite power, a reproducer of colonial hegemony/dominance. These features are manifested through stringent admissions criteria in universities, dominance of upper-class students in HE \(Neves, Ferraz and Nata 2017; Marginson 2011; Brennan and Naidoo 2008\) and the tendency to import Western models characterised by neoliberal policies \(Brock-Utne 2003; Levidow 2002\). Refugee learners' experience in HE could be limited due to their unfamiliarity with the system and pedagogical processes that are divorced from educational, linguistic and cultural backgrounds of refugee learners \(Mangan and Winter 2017\) as well as adverse social and economic environments in host countries.](#)

The provision of access that is manipulated through selective frameworks such as offers, and scholarships made available to elite members of refugee communities; high costs and entry requirements attached to enrolments; and access restricted among the networks represented by groups with dominant social and cultural capital can exclude youth who are outside the [elite](#) network. In pedagogical terms, [HE](#) can also serve as a space of silence and, through promotion of rote-learning and narrow assessment and accreditation practices, [it can serve](#) as a place of 'social reproduction' (Bourdieu 1984). As Moore (2004: 38–39) argues, education can:

... reproduce the privileges and dominance of the ruling class (e.g. through access to educational advantages leading to elite jobs and social positions); secure the legitimacy of capitalist social relations through the inculcation of the dominant ideology; block the development of a counter-hegemonic working-class consciousness that could effectively challenge capitalism; and systematically prepare pupils for their differentiated future positions within the capitalist economy and social structure.

Even though the expansion of [HE](#) globally has increased opportunities for social mobility, resulted in higher levels of and diversified access [among](#) a broad range of social groups including women and marginalised communities generally, 'inequalities still remain' (Altbach 2000: 52). Brennan and Naidoo (2008: 290) note that the liberal view on [HE](#) assumes that 'higher education enhances productivity in the labour market and that, therefore, special rewards to those who possess its qualifications are justified and are functional to society'. [Opportunities for higher and adult learning in contexts of displacement can yield important 'social benefits' beyond personal gains \(Wright and Plasterer 2012\)](#). [However](#), educational success may not always convert into employment success for those who do not possess appropriate social and cultural capital [\(Brennan and Shah 2003\)](#), [particularly](#) in contexts where political and legal constraints, protectionist policies, nepotism and favouritism undermine entrepreneurship, fairness and talents. [Where refugee graduates are denied equal access to employment in occupational fields due to their legal status](#), [HE](#) can serve as a place of false hope and frustration, [problematizing the notion](#) that [HE](#) qualifications can naturally lead to better employment outcomes.

Modalities in [HE](#) provisions in protracted crisis

Gladwell et al (2016) find five different modalities of programme delivery in refugee contexts.

Firstly, there are [HE](#) programmes with a physical presence amongst affected populations in which international academic institutions transport their programmes into refugee camps and host communities where learning and teaching is provided in a blended model. In these programmes, some intensive face-to-face teaching is delivered by experienced academics from international universities and further learning is supported through online learning platforms. Students are supported through different learning and tutorial approaches such as peer-work and remote online guidance. Ideally, academic training combined with work placement or practicum would be attractive to refugee youth who bear the pressure of securing stable livelihood in [exile](#). However, restrictions on their employment rights hinder the potential of such programmes (Deane 2016).

Secondly, there are also scholarship programmes that fund places for refugee students in academic institutions [in](#) host countries through international, regional or local funding. For example, German government's scholarship programme in partnership with UNHCR's Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) has supported more than 12,000 students to study in the country of their asylum (UNHCR 2017a). Students in both of these provisions participate in [HE](#) without having to travel beyond the borders of host countries but the scale of access is limited due to costs,

mobility restrictions for refugees and issues of sustainability (Fincham 2017). Furthermore, access to these opportunities differ for camp and non-camp based refugees. Urban refugees live in sporadic dwellings and their access to information, particularly about these opportunities can be limited (The Communication Initiative Network 2016; [Bajwa et al. 2017](#)).

The third modality is concerned with the provision of international scholarships through which selected refugee youth are provided with funding to attend academic programmes in universities in high income countries (Student Action for Refugees, 2018; Slaven, 2018; UNHCR 2017c). This provision involves significant costs and is available to few high-profile students usually on Masters and PhD programmes. Fourthly, [there is a rapidly growing provision of HE via](#) online learning platforms [enabling](#) access [through the use of](#) digital technologies – without academic institutions’ physical presence in camps and host communities. These programmes adopt collaborative learning approaches through peer-to-peer support or involvement of instructors remotely and offer accredited learning that can be transferred across countries. Finally, there are information sharing platforms in the digital space where refugees gain advice and guidance about diverse [HE](#) opportunities available to refugees in exile (Gladwell et al 2016).

Refugees’ access to [HE](#) via digital platforms can be non-intrusive to host country’s physical university systems. It would potentially syphon off [HE](#) demands away from conventional universities that may be unwilling to create extra places for refugees or facilitate their enrolment by waiving the need to present their prior certificates and identity cards. It could also ease off the nationalist perception that refugees create pressures in public services such as education and take away educational and employment opportunities from rightful citizens of the host country. However, from a policy perspective, the involvement of external/ non-state actors in educational delivery may fuel a reactive process of subcontracting educational responsibility to external/non-state actors without necessarily ensuring sustainability or accountability of the provision or even the quality of that provision. Most importantly, it deflects the attention from the real crisis of access, quality and funding needs to simply create an illusion that the alternative educational model (learning through digital platforms) is sufficiently responding to the [HE](#) crisis. Additionally, the proliferation of externally led online [HE](#) programmes for refugees also deprives local universities of opportunities to develop and diversify their academic provision and student populations, not least the problems of language of instruction, accreditation, and such programmes’ value for employability. [Such programmes also overlook the importance of face-to-face interactions, diminishing the prospect of](#)

[socialisation, well-being and integration in the host communities \(Witthaus 2018; Jack et al. 2019; Reinhardt et al 2018\).](#)

Higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon

[As a consequence of the crisis in Syria, it is estimated that the Syrian education system has lost over 150,000 educational professionals, including teachers and 5.82 million children and youth are in need of educational assistance, which amounts to US\\$11 billion of the economic loss, equivalent to 18 per cent of the Syrian Gross Domestic Product \(GDP\) in 2010 \(UNICEF 2017\). A large number of university students also fled the war, for example, it is estimated that over 30% of students from Aleppo University fled to neighbouring countries before completing their studies.](#)

[The Lebanese HE system, considered one of the most established sectors, is comprised of Lebanese University, the sole public institution enrolling around 45 percent of university students, and 41 private HE institutions which are governed by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education \(MEHE\). Lebanese University is publicly funded and follows the French model adopting French as the main language of instruction even though some programmes are offered in English and Arabic. Lebanon has one of the highest levels of university enrolment in the Arab World and the HE market has grown significantly over the past decade resulting in more than 30 percent of Lebanese youth enrolled in HE \(El-Ghali 2011\). Despite the presence of dominant private HE sector, policies are controlled by MEHE and Lebanese academics operate under strict government regulations, which are often hostile to refugees due to Lebanon's history of civil war, sectarian and political divisions, making it difficult to deal fairly with refugees' HE needs. Particularly, high tuition fees, instruction in French or English, poor economic conditions of refugee families and the lack of pre-enrolment preparatory programmes discourage Syrian students from enrolling in universities in Lebanon. It is estimated that 95 percent of Syrian refugees aged 15-24 are not enrolled in secondary or tertiary education in Lebanon \(El-Ghali et al 2017\). Whilst programmes that target primary education exist, such as MEHE's Reaching All Children with Education \(RACE\) programme, 48 percent of 6-14 year olds are not enrolled in primary or secondary, suggesting that the long-term access to tertiary education for displaced Syrians will continue to be low in the foreseeable future \(El-Ghali et al 2017\).](#)

Opportunities to access HE

Humanitarian needs created by the ongoing war in Syria are so vast, continuous and resource-scarce that it is difficult to determine priority areas (Avery and Said 2017). Considering the urgency of the situation, the emphasis is usually on immediate needs rather than long term developments such as, [HE](#) (Dryden-Peterson 2016; Selby and Tadros 2016). However, [HE](#) for refugees has increasingly come to the fore as a key issue since 2015 - one year after the large wave of young refugees began travelling to Europe (Avery and Said 2017).

The Syrian mass displacement has now moved from a stage of acute humanitarian emergency to a protracted refugee crisis. In Lebanon, despite the low enrolment of Syrian refugee students in secondary schools, those who have gone through the Lebanese education system seem to be overcoming the issue of certification as they progress to university (UNESCO 2017). In addition to [HE](#), vocational education and training [has](#) also been increasingly available to Syrian refugees with the support from international organisations [alongside the](#) efforts to convince the Lebanese government that [work permits to](#) refugees [could be](#) economically advantageous [to the country](#) (Davis, 2018). For example, UNICEF and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), in coordination with Lebanese ministries, have launched a joint US\$ 2.5 million project to improve technical and vocational education and training (TVET) for youth, in line with labour market needs (ILO 2017; UNICEF 2017). [Due to Lebanon's sectarian divisions, history of conflict with Syria and its own legacies of civil war, the debate about equal economic rights to refugees is politically sensitive and highly contested. There are, however,](#) discussions within the MEHE to consider a policy to accredit blended university programmes that combine face-to-face with online teaching and learning as long as the online component does not constitute more than half of the total delivery of the programme (Based on an informal conversation with a MEHE representative in February 2019). Nevertheless, this policy is yet to be formalised whilst capacity of Lebanese universities to offer courses online or via a blended approach is also a major concern.

Even though the donor funding for [HE](#) was not a priority at the beginning of the Syrian crisis, some initiatives began to emerge in the period between 2014 and 2016 (Davis 2018). Currently, there are some higher education scholarships for Syrian refugees to enter universities in host countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey as well as the opportunities to study abroad (Student Action for Refugees 2018; Slaven 2018). In 2017, UNHCR was supporting 2,528 Syrians in the Middle East and North Africa regions to complete a bachelor's degree and Spark, a Dutch non-profit organisation has

provided a total of 8,398 scholarships for Syrians to pursue a bachelor's degree or vocational training across the Arab region under its Higher Education for Syrians programme.

However, the provision of scholarships does not always meet indirect costs such as, transportation and subsistence so, the opportunity costs related to forgone income to complete full-time academic courses serve as additional barriers. This practice also exposes socioeconomic inequalities among refugees as many from low economic backgrounds who are unable to bear the additional costs are likely to be disadvantaged despite meeting all academic prerequisites for scholarships (Davis, 2018), consequently, meeting a fraction of the overall demand for [HE](#). This is also evidenced by the fact that between ten and thirty applications received for each available scholarship, barely 2 per cent [of refugees](#) are accepted in the programme (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010). Scholarships provided for refugees through institutional partnerships do not cater for complex legal status of refugee populations. Palestinians from Syria [are often granted short-term](#) entry permits, approved by the [Lebanese](#) General Directorate of General Security, [which](#) limits Syrian Palestinians' access to tertiary education, as well as their ability to [study](#) abroad.

Challenges

[The](#) medium of instruction in core disciplines [offered by Lebanese Universities is](#) either English or French. While the Lebanese University offers degrees taught in Arabic, the STEM subjects are not available in the Arabic medium. As Syrian students usually have prior qualifications completed in the Arabic medium (El-Ghali et al. 2017), the [prior](#) language of instruction not only [makes admissions unlikely](#) but also [hinders](#) their academic success [should they manage to enrol in the programme \(Schneider 2018\)](#). Kanno and Varghese (2010: 323), drawing upon their study into immigrants and refugee students' experience of studying four-year college education in the US, [highlight](#) three main areas of challenges: 'institutional constraints that apply only to ESL students' as institutions privilege the linguistic capital of native English speakers; 'limited financial resources' as refugees may have limited resources to support their higher education; and 'the ESL student habitus that leads them to self-eliminate because of their perceived lack of legitimacy as full members of the university community'. Furthermore, Syrian students face additional barriers due to Lebanese universities requiring a proof of their former qualifications that should undergo a stringent and expensive process of equivalency (UNESCO 2017). This is not necessarily unique in the context of Lebanon as other researchers (e.g. Houghton and Morrice, 2008; Waddington 2005) have also highlighted significant barriers to refugees in getting their prior qualifications recognised,

preventing their access to university. For graduate studies, proof of qualifications and transcripts [is](#) required which, for many refugee students, is difficult to produce as these may have been lost, damaged or left behind [when they fled the war](#). Additionally, until recently and in all instances, a valid residency in Lebanon was also required, meaning that refugees must be registered with UNHCR. [However, an](#) estimated 300,000-500,000 Syrian refugees remain unregistered (El-Ghali [et al](#) 2017) and UNHCR has been banned from registering additional refugees since 2015. This situation makes [it difficult for](#) recently arrived Syrians to have legal [rights to access HE](#). Additionally, for those [arrived in Lebanon before](#) 2015, [renewing](#) residency permits [is usually costly and](#) particularly, Syrian men are regularly stopped at checkpoints by security officials, [leading to possible arrest or deportation and](#) restricting their overall mobility [within the country](#) (Fincham 2017; El-Ghali [et al.](#) 2017; HRW 2016).

Accessing private universities that charge expensive fees is usually beyond the financial capacity of [most](#) Syrian refugees. An estimated 70 percent of the total population of refugees from Syria live below the poverty line (Amnesty International, 2016), forcing many young refugees to choose between livelihoods and an education. Furthermore, an analysis of Syrian youths' perceptions and experiences of [HE](#) opportunities shows that refugees do not always have access to the disciplines they want to study, and the provision of scholarships is inadequate (Fincham 2017). The need to commute long distance to attend university campus, child care and family issues at home and risks of sexual harassment during their journeys discourages women from attending [HE](#) generally. More notably, 'there was a belief that the scholarships offered to Syrian refugees were 'leftover' spaces at institutions after paying national students had had their first pick of majors' which suggest that 'even when education is available and accessible, it might not be acceptable' (Fincham 2017: 18).

The job market is also more restrictive toward refugees, who cannot be employed in skilled occupations, such as medicine, teaching and engineering, even if they may be qualified and professionally experienced. In recognition of this, many young refugees as they already face economic pressures and everyday financial needs to support their families, tend to abandon educational aspirations and choose low-paid manual work in agriculture, construction or service sector which are currently permitted employment sectors for refugees in Lebanon. Refugees from Syria are ineligible for a government protection card (Janmyr 2016), which defines their status in Lebanon as undocumented migrants, treating them as international students should they apply for a university place. Such legal constraints are motivated by the Lebanese government's intention to

prevent Syrian refugees to enter the job market and restrict employment opportunities to its citizens only. Some academic institutions have expressed reluctance to accept Syrians in their programmes for concerns that they would reduce educational qualities and outcomes (Shuaib et al. 2014: 109), reflecting what is described as a general sense of hostility towards Syrians on some university campuses (King 2014).

Morrice (2013: 653) notes that ‘there is very little research on refugees’ experiences within university’ which reflects the assumption that refugees experience the university environment in the same way that their national counter-parts do. However, there is evidence that refugee students may have distinctive support needs to be able to integrate in the university culture and academic practices in host country’s universities (Joyce et al. 2010). Systems and [academic programmes are rarely adaptive to refugee students’ learning needs whilst](#) refugee students [may self-sensor or](#) feel intimidated in learning activities due to their self-awareness of refugee status within the overwhelming non-native academic environment. Refugees who live outside camps and/or in remote areas, particularly young Syrian women [and](#) those [from](#) marginalised socio-economic communities and/ or disabled students face additional structural disadvantages ([Charles and Denman 2013](#)).

Overcoming the challenges: Emerging models and applicability

Use of [digital technology](#)

[Digital technology serves both as a pedagogical tool as well as learning space, supplementing or serving as an alternative to the loss of physical infrastructure as well as other educational resources when learners are displaced.](#) There [is a growing number of such](#) online programmes [in recent years.](#) [For example, online](#) courses [are](#) provided by InZone, an initiative that is a partnership between UNHCR and University of Geneva; the PADILEIA program [me](#) which offers from 1 month short online courses to up to 24 months blended learning study programmes [for](#) Jordanian and Lebanese students, and Kiron, Open Higher Education for Refugees that facilitates access to [HE](#) and learning for refugees through digital solutions. Many of these programmes are not available in Arabic and few that are, such as those provided by Edraak, an online platform, are generally open to anyone in the MENA region.

Online education is being promoted as a viable solution in light of the high level of demand for [HE](#)

[among](#) refugees, [the](#) lack of resources in host country institutions, as well as the complicated and costly procedures for refugees to enrol in conventional university programmes. These online spaces and opportunities also provide refugees with the ability to experience new technologies that connect to the wider world while their mobility might be severely restricted. However, there is a lack of rigorous impact evaluations to demonstrate the effectiveness of such programmes (Wagner 2017). Additionally, national education authorities might put barriers to online education, often labelled as substandard in order to maintain control over the provision of education at all levels. Refugee students might also place low value in online programmes and equally, poor quality online courses which may not be monitored, or quality assured can build bad reputation among refugee students (Fincham 2017). The availability of online courses also creates an illusion of access, deflecting the attention from the real issue of access, quality and equity in provision as well as the lack of resources that are needed to operate an effective [HE](#) system. The lack of effective monitoring systems and poor completion rates in online programmes can lead to pandemic educational failures, [though may](#) be invisible in the immediate term. [Despite wide](#) access to smartphones amongst refugee populations, [the](#) internet connectivity and the cost [of](#) data [use may not be](#) financially affordable. The unavailability of technology such as computers and/or laptops particularly in camps excludes many students from [their](#) ability to participate in online courses. There are also regular and prolonged interruption in electricity supply in Lebanon which obstructs regular access to the Internet in economically disadvantaged refugee communities. Most importantly, there is also difficulty to distinguish between short-term project-based experimentation in online education and carefully designed academic and training programmes that enable refugees to support their personal and professional development or gain an academic qualification. [Despite these challenges, amid the multifarious problems of accessing HE in physical university settings, digital technologies do offer alternative learning platforms for refugee youth. However, there is a dearth of evidence around the quality, sustainability and levels of access and effective models of online education that can fill the gap.](#)

Partnerships

Partnership is a new buzzword in [development](#), and it is no longer an option but a mandatory provision for a fundable research or programme implementation in international development. It has emerged as ‘... a reaction against the ‘former’ power asymmetry between the North and South’ (Downes 2013: 2) to promote an idea that horizontally maintained educational partnerships can produce higher impacts in education development projects. In order to maximise the impact of

research on refugee and vulnerable communities, humanitarian and development projects need to improve involvement of affected communities not only as providers of research data but also as equal contributors of research design and knowledge production.

In recent years, there is a proliferation of partnerships-based programmes in the MENA region in response to the refugee crisis. For example, the Institute of International Education (IIE) created a consortium called the Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis. The consortium is a network of 80 colleges and universities, providing scholarships for Syrian students whose education has been disrupted as a result of the war. The scholarships are based [in](#) universities in the region, particularly in Lebanon and Iraq, or in universities in the global North, mainly in the UK and US (IIE 2019). Similarly, an Italy-based initiative called RESCUE supports universities, mainly in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq to meet the large demand for [HE](#) by creating ad hoc units (the Refugee Student Operational Support Unit – R-SOS), in order to help refugee students to resume their academic training (RESCUE n.d.). These partnerships mainly [aim](#) to increase refugee students' access to [HE](#), but they do not [necessarily](#) tackle issues of [relevance and quality of academic programmes](#), language [of instruction](#) and specific needs of refugee students. The RELIEF project, a partnership between University College London, Centre for Lebanese Studies at the Lebanese American University and the American University of Beirut aims to enhance inclusive growth through educational partnerships with local communities, universities and government authorities in Lebanon (RELIEF 2018). Part of the project's *Future Education* work involves a co-design model [to co-produce](#) a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on teacher professional development [in](#) refugee [contexts and particularly, to support universities](#), teachers and Lebanese authorities to [design contextually relevant, research-based](#) programmes in Lebanon (Laurillard and Kennedy 2018).

In spite of the presence of these partnerships and collaborative initiatives, educational partnerships in humanitarian [and conflict-affected settings](#) are often risky sensitive and difficult to implement [in terms of sustainability and accountability, whilst](#) project-based initiatives largely depend on donor priority areas ([Pherali and Lewis 2019](#); Al-Fanar Media 2018). Most recently, donor interest in higher education for Syrians seems diminishing, and the supply of scholarships is lagging behind the demand as new humanitarian crises, such as the exodus of the Rohingya from Myanmar, have drawn away donor support from Syria programmes (Davis 2018).

Overall, for partnerships to be sustainable and effective, appropriate coordination mechanisms are

needed so that the limited resources and capacities are utilised efficiently. [Engaging](#) the refugee and host communities [not merely as the potential beneficiaries but also the key contributors in design, planning and implementation of HE programmes \(Rasheed and Munoz 2016\)](#), is vital for ensuring [relevance, ownership and sustainability of the programmes](#).

Future Education

Humanitarian agencies argue that education provides a sense of stability, protection and hope for the future (Save the Children 2013). The dominant discourse on the purpose of education for refugees has largely concentrated on providing high level knowledge and skills to enable them to rebuild their war-torn society (UNHCR 2016). However, the idea that all displaced populations would return home after the war ends, is simply not true as ‘the trajectories of refugees do not fit neatly into the established policy categories of return, local integration, and resettlement’ (Dryden-Peterson, 2017a: 21). Dryden-Peterson (2017a: 21) further argues [that](#) future trajectories of refugees ‘are non-linear and complex permutations of migration, exile, and consistently re-imagined futures’. The protracted nature of conflict and mass displacement requires long-term educational planning and sustainable educational programmes which have relevance to both their life in exile either in the immediate host or a third country and prospects of post-war return and rebuilding of their country of origin. Refugees [view education as a hope for a better future – a way to give back to their community when they return home, resettle, or stay within their host community \(Crea and McFarland 2015\)](#).

[The precarity of refugees’ future is further complicated due to ongoing crisis in the country of origin and hard-to-secure economic and emotional stability and legal status in the host country. However, due to the protractedness of their exile, refugees’ circumstances in and connections with their host countries over time transform and generally become stronger making the prospect of repatriation increasingly less likely.](#) The notion of return is tied to the romanticised assumption that refugees have a place, social networks and livelihood environments to go back to or can easily [be recuperated](#). In reality, the destruction of physical spaces including homes, physical infrastructure such as water and energy supplies and social structures mean that there may be very little left to return to. The longer the crisis lasts, the more difficult it might become to realise the idea of mass repatriation.

Displaced communities also begin to develop new social networks such as, engagement with a range of [non-governmental](#) organisations, individuals and groups from diverse cultural, social and geographic backgrounds. This provides them with opportunities to explore new options [in their lives](#). Although displaced populations go through hardships in exile, these difficulties help [them](#) build confidence, ability to find creative solutions and formulate new aspirations. Displacement unleashes new 'habitus' for young refugees who live in new social environments of their exile (Morris 2013; [Zeus 2011](#)). Habitus [involves](#) culturally and situationally embedded structures that shape the way an individual interacts with her/his world cognitively, physically [and](#) emotionally (Bourdieu 1984; 1990). Hence, refugees' habitus develops out of new experiences in particular within their new environments and interactions. This concept is useful in explaining the new possibilities that higher education could provide for refugees, where there are processes of socialisation that align aspirations with the conditions in which refugee [youth engage with](#) and adapt what they see as possible to the logic of their surroundings (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010). Hence, expanding their aspirations and allowing them to think of and reach for possibilities that might not have been available previously. Consequently, the idea of future education needs to account for a range of these possibilities and access to a rich network with their fellow diasporic community that a diverse group of refugees might be adapting to and accessing a range of new opportunities (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2017). Young refugees are not completely isolated and/or completely reliant on the support of international humanitarian aid. Refugee students draw on a complex web of locally and globally situated 'traveling resources' (Tsing 2005). These travelling resources formulate a social capital, and the connection of refugee students to the kinds of social capital—academic guidance, support, and encouragement—that they need, helps navigate and chart pathways to and through education. This social capital could exist within the host community, from family members or members from the same community as the refugees in the diaspora, academics and other practitioners who come to contact face-to-face or through virtual networks with the refugees (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2017). Hence, the linear conceptualisation that [when the crisis ends displaced populations return to the country of origin is deterministic and ill-conceived which undermines the role of education in reimagining their futures](#). As Dryden-Peterson (2017b: n.p.) argues,

... refugee education at present is usefully focused on preparing students for an unknowable future. Yet to do so requires equipping refugee students with the competencies to make that future knowable and to create ways to live productively within it.

Educating educators and university students for an 'unknowable future' [requires a radical thinking and restructuring of the HE systems](#). One of the ways it can be done is by providing an ability to understand causes and consequences of conflict but host community schools are less adaptive of children's circumstances in [their educational processes](#) and most importantly, issues around violent conflict and mass displacement are ignored in the curriculum (Dryden-Peterson 2017b). Schools should teach children how to make sense of the conflict they have experienced; causes of their displacement; and current conditions of living in exile. Yet, 'very few teachers of refugees have the skills to address the trauma that their students may have experienced, the marginalization they may experience during life in exile and in their new classrooms, and their deep sense of uncertainty about the future' (Dryden-Peterson, 2017b: n.p.). The RELIEF [Centre's 'Transforming Education in Challenging Environments' MOOC](#) is aimed at addressing this vital issue and is fundamentally based on the assumption that universities in conflict-affected and humanitarian environments have [a crucial role in promoting transformative education](#) (Pherali et al, forthcoming). [By adopting a co-design and co-production methodology with teachers and educational practitioners working in contexts of mass displacement, the course promotes a transformative approach education, featuring some of the best pedagogical practices and educational approaches which are currently being used. This may be considered a new conceptual approach to future education that provides a relevant professional development opportunity to educational practitioners who support refugee learners.](#)

[However, new educational challenges created by mass displacement also create prospects for innovations and new ways of thinking about enhancing the role of HE in post-war rebuilding. Rethinking HE through the use of digital technologies, multidimensional partnerships and as a critical space of imagining new educational futures can facilitate new approaches and visions for countries affected by wars.](#)

Conclusion: Towards [sustainable solutions](#)

In contexts of mass displacement, conventional goals of education as a public service, which is situated within the national political, economic and social frameworks to serve for the citizenship and national identities, are significantly ruptured. [We have argued that, HE for refugees needs to enable their imaginative futures in a global society and new approaches and visions – effective use of digital technologies, multidimensional partnerships and orientation towards future education can](#)

[advance our thinking about imagining durable solutions](#). This lends us to reconceptualise [HE](#) as a process of social transformation beyond the market-oriented nationalistic lens [so that it serves the purpose of global responsibility, shared benefits and human prosperity](#). [As the conflict in Syria continues without any signs of peace in the immediate future, Lebanon can benefit more by harnessing the potential of refugees rather than preventing them from educational and economic activities and, the human capital investment on refugees would result in social and economic benefits to Lebanese society as well as regionally in the future. To this end, HE policies and planning should be carried out with the view of reconfiguring 'unknown futures' of both refugees and host societies](#) rather than narrowly aligned with current restrictive [approaches](#).

[Strategically, HE](#) should be conceptualised as a tool for peace-building, [promoting](#) equity, diversity and knowledge production beyond national borders. Considering this broader and multifaceted purpose of [HE](#), there is an opportunity to reshape refugees' futures through their aspirations and necessary knowledge and skills needed to [rebuild](#) their life with dignity. This could [enable](#) refugees to make positive contributions in the [host country](#) and create opportunities for [their](#) spatial and social mobility. With this framing in mind, the current/existing modalities of higher education for refugees, [which commonly lack insights from forced migration research \(Schneider 2018\) need to be reconsidered. HE systems in host countries should recognise that they have a shared responsibility to adapt their academic provisions to meet refugee students' needs which](#) can facilitate [partnerships with](#) international funding agencies, host governments and refugee communities to promote a policy of inclusion, equity and [expansion](#) of [HE](#) opportunities. Through this process, the organisations can collect useful data on refugee students, enabling them to make decisions about policies and provisions as well as to better understand the barriers and explore new ways of [establishing a sustainable provision of quality HE](#).

In conclusion, [HE](#) in humanitarian situations should be considered [not merely](#) a crisis response [but an enabling mechanism of refugees' futures as well as investment for peace, democracy and development of war-affected countries](#). However, the questions remain as to how universities in contexts of mass displacement can diversify and adapt their academic provisions to provide [good quality advanced learning to refugees; how to build capacities of host universities to maximise the potential of digital technologies and certified online provisions; and most importantly, how to establish global HE structures that reenvision the role of HE in peacebuilding and inclusive](#)

[development. Future research should focus on these agendas in order to enhance the role of HE in promoting sustainable solutions to refugee crises.](#)

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