



## JOURNAL ON EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (December 2019), pp. 156-176

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/60978>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/tm40-9q50>

### REFERENCES:

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Abu-Amsha, Oula, Rebecca Gordon, Laura Benton, Mina Vasalou, and Ben Webster. 2019. "Access to Higher Education: Reflections on a Participatory Design Process with Refugees." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 5 (1): 156-76. <https://doi.org/10.33682/tm40-9q50>.

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# ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS ON A PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESS WITH REFUGEES

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## ABSTRACT

*Refugees face significant challenges in accessing higher education. It is clear that new and diverse solutions are needed that both understand and address the contextual barriers to higher education access for refugees. In keeping with new approaches in the wider humanitarian community, which recognize the role communities can play in creating new education solutions, our organization sought to employ participatory design methods in the development of a new program to support access to higher education for refugees in the Middle East (mainly in Jordan and Lebanon). This note provides insights into the implementation of the participatory process and details the impact the participatory approach had on the design of our programs. Finally, we highlight the need for gender-balanced recruitment strategies through our reflection on the impact the design of the participatory process had on those participating.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is a crisis in providing refugees with access to higher education. It is estimated that only 3 percent of the global refugee population attends university (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2019). This is due in part to the circumstances of displacement, which significantly deplete families' finances, leave young people without valid documentation, impose residency restrictions, and offer only limited pathways into already crowded national education systems (Avery and Said 2017). Refugees also often lack the relevant skills or knowledge

Received December 10, 2018; revised March 10, 2019, May 22, 2019, and September 3, 2019; accepted October 15, 2019; electronically published December 2019.

*Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 5, No. 1

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ISSN 2518-6833

to transfer and adapt to new education systems. A lack of language skills is also a serious barrier for those accessing online higher education courses and national education systems that predominantly use English (Talbot 2013).

The Syrian example is a compelling one. Pre-war Syria had an extensive higher education sector; estimates are that as many as 26 percent of Syrians (male and female) went on to vocational training or university studies prior to the current conflict (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2019). Although reliable statistics are hard to find, the most recent estimates suggest that 91,000 Syrian refugee youth are missing out on higher education (European Commission 2016). However, evidence from several locations demonstrates a high demand for university-level programs among refugee students (UNHCR 2017); meeting this demand will require new and diverse solutions.

Several organizations have attempted to leverage technology and external funding to open up higher education access for refugees. Most interventions targeting Syrian refugees focus on providing tuition scholarships and stipends, teaching key languages, and advocating for universities to be flexible about the documentation they require.<sup>1</sup> However, for those who have received scholarships, overcoming the initial barriers to access does not inevitably translate into academic success. The Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium (CLCC), cochaired by UNHCR, produced a “playbook” of effective practices and guidelines for implementing online courses that are adapted to local contexts and delivered through in-person support and tutoring (CLCC 2017). The “Learning Pathway Design” section of the CLCC playbook details the importance of employing a holistic development approach, which empowers learners and improves learning outcomes. We view participatory design (PD) as an innovative approach that involves refugees and other stakeholders in the program design process to help ensure that they have a contextualized curriculum that meets their needs, which resonates with the recommendations in the CLCC playbook.

The founding of our organization, Mosaik Education, stemmed from our conversations about using bottom-up and participatory innovation to address the challenges refugees face in accessing higher education (Moser-Mercer, Hayba, and Goldsmith 2016; Obrecht and Warner 2016), and from our desire to understand more fully how to implement contextualized, learner-centered program design. Our vision was that refugees and displaced people in conflict-affected communities would be able to access, shape, and lead the education they require to rebuild their

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<sup>1</sup> Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians (HOPES) is one of the projects funded by the Madad Fund. See <http://www.hopes-madad.org/>.

societies or integrate into new ones. In this field note, we reflect on how using a bottom-up PD process—a mechanism that enables crisis-affected communities to be involved in creative problem-solving, to address challenges, and to create opportunities (Betts, Bloom, and Weaver 2015)—informed our programming. This contrasts with the humanitarian sector’s tendency to seek top-down innovations, such as new technologies or ways to improve organizational responses (Betts and Bloom 2013). We chose PD because it reflects the processes and benefits of the bottom-up approach used in humanitarian interventions. This note offers insights into the processes we followed and sheds light on the challenges of using this approach while working with refugees in the program design process. We note in particular the difficulty of providing inclusivity and gender balance in the workshops we held, and of ensuring participants’ long-term involvement. Finally, we share the existing findings on using PD in these contexts, including the need for more resources and more time to develop programs.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REFUGEE CONTEXT**

Our organization was founded on our understanding of the barriers to higher education that Syrian refugees were facing. Their biggest challenge was tuition fees (Watenpaugh and Fricke 2013), as local and international higher education opportunities demanded fees that were disproportionately high, relative to potential students’ income (Avery and Said 2017; Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere 2013). Moreover, scholarships for refugees do not always include livelihood support (Al-Abdullah and Papa 2019). Even students who do have ample funds may not have access to their previous school records, due to having fled conflict. For example, more than 150,000 college-age students in Jordan and Lebanon lack a certificate despite having completed their secondary education and qualified for higher education (Avery and Said 2017). Residency is another university admission requirement, but around two-thirds of the college-age refugees in Lebanon do not have residency papers, and obtaining residency is a complex and expensive process (El-Ghali, Berjaoui, and DeKnight 2017).

Syrian refugees often do not have information about the higher education opportunities available to them or know how to access these opportunities. Refugee youth frequently mention the distance to education sites and a lack of affordable transportation as a barrier to participation (Gladwell et al. 2016). Gender is another salient factor in access to higher education. A high proportion of young male refugees have been forced to contribute to their family’s income

due to the death or absence of the father, to parents' inability to find work due to legal restrictions, or to the low amount of money they earn through illegal or humanitarian work. Early marriage has been identified as an urgent concern for girls, as families may be compelled to resort to this as a way to cope financially (Salem 2018).

While the literature has focused predominantly on barriers to higher education access for refugees, it often overlooks a number of factors that contribute to poor learning outcomes among those who are able to access higher education courses. Some studies looking at primary and secondary education found that many refugee students experienced violence and verbal harassment due to tensions with host-community students (Abu-Amsha and Armstrong 2018). Psychosocial barriers are also pervasive among refugee students as they struggle to cope with their memories of Syria, and with the financial and social repercussions of becoming a refugee (Salem 2018).

It is clear, therefore, that being mindful of these issues is essential in providing successful and relevant higher education programming for refugee students, and that engaging with the students' perspectives could provide insights that are critical to designing the most effective programs and learning environments.

## **MOVING TOWARD A PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESS**

Although various design methods and techniques are used in participatory design, depending on the context and goals, certain core epistemological dimensions underlie the PD tradition. These include democratic decision-making, empowerment of marginalized voices, mutual learning among participants, sustained engagement, and iterative actions (Duarte et al. 2018; Halskov and Hansen 2015). Recent research and education programming have identified the central role displaced communities can play in creating new solutions to accessing education (UNHCR 2017; Betts and Collier 2016). PD also acknowledges the crucial role users can play in designing programs and services by allowing users and designers to work together to explore local knowledge and uncover solutions (Brown and Wyatt 2010). Used across a wide range of domains and user groups, PD has been adapted to meet the needs and characteristics of different design contexts and target populations (Rogers, Sharp, and Preece 2011). Core features of the PD process include holding meetings and workshops to define a problem, focusing on ideas to solve the problem, and evaluating the proposed solutions together.

Recent work has explored the potential use of PD in refugee camps. For example, Fisher et al. (2016) held PD workshops in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan to explore how Syrian youth use technology to help others in their community. They concluded that PD methods can be used successfully in low-resource settings that lack a common language and internet access to generate creative designs that reflect the complex context. Alain et al. (2018) used a similar PD approach with Syrian children living in a refugee camp in Greece, and with their parents and adult social workers, to explore the process of designing education technology systems that led to the creation of an independent digital learning space.

These examples and the CLCC-UNHCR recommendations, particularly to provide a holistic development approach that includes learners and produces contextualized curricula, matched our desire to design relevant programs to address the specific needs of our target population. This motivated our adoption of a PD approach. Our work examines the potential for communities to design new education models using PD. We employed PD methods while designing a number of new education program components to support refugees' access to and success at university. Our motivation for using this approach was the opportunity it provided to empower displaced communities that are typically outside the formal education system, and to ensure that the proposed education programs would be relevant and would reflect the community's priorities, contextual barriers, and challenges.

We next describe the application of a PD process in the emerging area of refugee education. We reflect on how the participation of different refugee groups was facilitated by our process. Our aim is to characterize the opportunities and challenges of using PD in this context and, hence, to inform future efforts to develop higher education programs for refugees through PD.

## **THE PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESS**

### **OVERARCHING PROGRAM**

The basic structure of our education program was developed in 2017, during our early work with refugee students and community center partners following a pilot Java programming course we organized in 2016 through Mosaik Education, which was previously named the Jamiya Project (Aristeronas et al. 2018). This work included developing the initial specifications for a preparatory program, as depicted in Figure 1, that included four components to prepare students for higher education. At this stage, our team identified the need for support in

English proficiency and in gaining the skills necessary to succeed at university, for remedial support in subjects like math or physics, and for mentoring and advice.

*Figure 1: The Initial High-Level Design of Our Program*

Student Profile	Overall Program	
A2 Level of English	English Skills and Proficiency	
High School Certificate	Academic Skills for Higher Education	
Working (Hours/Week?)	Remedial Subject Support (e.g., English for academic purposes, introduction to math for higher education)	
Living in Urban Area/Camp?		
Currently Studying?	Mentoring and Advice	
	Proposed Modes of Study	
	20 hours per week	25% with a teacher/facilitator
		75% independent and online study

## PARTICIPANTS

The PD process took place in Jordan, as our organization was already operating there, and we had strong connections with local partners. The purpose of the process was to update the overarching program we were offering, based on some of the gaps we had become aware of (such as a lack of English language and academic skills) and the method of delivery (such as online, blended learning, face-to-face); we sought in particular to design programming that would provide the guidance and skills students needed to prepare for higher education. Participants were primarily recruited through partnerships with local community organizations in both refugee camps, and from host communities. We also advertised through relevant social media groups aimed at prospective students and recruited from networks we had worked with previously. Although the majority of refugees in

Jordan are Syrians, we wanted to involve refugee groups that were not likely to be involved in discussions and programs focused on access to higher education, such as the Sudanese and Somalis. We aimed for an equal split of male and female participants roughly between the ages of 18 and 30. The number of participants varied from 9 to 30 for each part of the program.

### THE PROCESS

We used a PD approach that began with a clearly defined focus that concerned a gap that prevented refugee students with interrupted studies from accessing higher education in host countries, then moved on to develop ideas based on problems the participants themselves identified. Finally, we worked on developing prototypes based on participants' feedback (Sanders and Stappers 2008). PD is a flexible and iterative approach, which enabled us to select methods and tools that were appropriate for each part of the process and would support the participants' contributions, and that would fit within the various time/resource constraints of our particular context. The PD design phases were as follows:

- **Problem exploration and identification.** This phase included participant observations and design workshops of 2-4 hours each that presented the problem context, the background of our mission, workshop aims, our reasons for involving young people, and why their ideas were important. The workshops concluded with an exercise to prioritize the challenges participants identified according to their perceived importance.
- **Reflection and action.** This phase involved sessions held within our organization to develop the problem areas identified during the problem exploration and identification workshops into potential designs. We also adapted PD methods to overcome particular challenges with participation during the workshops.
- **Ideation and critique.** This phase also included 2-4-hour design workshops, in which we focused on the experiences and challenges identified by refugee participants during problem exploration and identification; these were related to the design plans our organization had developed during reflection and action. We encouraged participants to critique these ideas and suggest additions and alternatives.



- **Live prototypes.** In this last phase, we designed prototypes based on the final programming ideas developed during the ideation and critique workshops. Our organization then piloted these design ideas, evaluated their value and usefulness across program components, and then, after piloting certain parts of the new education programming plan, we refined them. One aspect of our programming developed during ideation and critique was to offer guidance workshops that would give students the tools they needed to access higher education. The ideation and critique workshops were held in community centers and as Facebook Live events. A small group of refugee students also took part in a pilot for the English language programming.

After the prototyping phase, our team reflected on the outcomes and challenges faced during the PD process, as discussed later in this note.

#### HOW PARTICIPATORY DESIGN WAS EMPLOYED IN OUR WORK

We used a number of design tools during the problem exploration and identification and ideation and critique workshops, including the following:

- **Personas.** A persona is a fictional yet realistic description of a typical program user. We created personas as a way to present a detailed picture, from the user's perspective, of their motivations and challenges. Personas also enabled workshop participants to project their challenges onto a fictional character, rather than having to discuss what they or their community had directly experienced. For example, participants at a youth center developed a persona of a young woman who was unable to take advantage of higher education opportunities due to her family's anxiety about her mixing with male peers. The barriers this persona faced were then brought into a journey-mapping activity.
- **Journey mapping.** Our team used a hypothetical journey to help refine a guidance program. The refugee workshop participants were asked to plot their persona's journey through four stages related to higher education access—awareness, understanding, applying, and enrolling. This tool provided a framework that participants could use to make the exercise

more tangible so they could contribute meaningfully to the design process. We asked them to prioritize the activities at each stage of their journey, which enabled us to see how they changed.

- **Storyboarding.** This tool uses a series of images or graphics to illustrate the unfolding of an activity or service, such as a new financial tool or software application. We used four storyboards describing four different learning activities to discuss the relative merits and challenges of different social learning models, the aim being to identify an activity to test. This was particularly instructive in revealing participants' perceived risks and anxieties, and in helping to gauge their interest in the different models.
- **Ranking prototype components.** To facilitate our interaction with different groups of participants, our team presented a prototype of the organization's proposed program in four workshops. The prototype summarized the proposed program activities and potential pathways to higher education. Participants were asked to match their needs and higher education ambitions to the proposed activities, and to rank the activities as essential, nice to have, or not important. The ranking helped program designers prioritize the activities and stimulated discussion among participants about why they ranked activities as essential or not important, and about the differences between their choices and others'. The discussion also helped designers understand how participants would engage with the different program components. For example, one workshop focused on the nature of possible financial support for those wishing to access higher education. As a result, program designers included multiple modes of higher education funding in the academic guidance activities, and Mosaik Education made designing programs around alternative funding methods a key part of its 2019-2021 strategy.

### **PARTICIPATORY PROGRAM DESIGN IN ACTION**

Below we present the goal of each part of the PD process, the design activities involved (see Figure 2), and the changes we made as a result of this work (see Figure 3). We note that some participants attended multiple workshops and thus were able to influence multiple components.

Figure 2: Overview of the PD Process

		PD TO DEVELOP OVERALL PROGRAM AND SPECIFIC PROGRAM COMPONENTS		
		PD to Develop the Overall Preparation Program	PD to Develop Mentoring and Advice	PD to Develop English Skills and Proficiency
PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESSES	Problem Exploration and Identification	Four workshops (with 30 refugees of different nationalities) and in-depth interviews	Two workshops (one with 18 Syrian refugees, another with 22 Syrian refugees and Jordanians)	Observation of an English class for refugees in Amman and two workshops (with 25 Syrian and Sudanese refugees)
	Reflection and Action	Reflection sessions with program team	Reflection sessions with program team	Reflection sessions with program team
	Ideation and Critique	Workshop (with 9 refugees of different nationalities)	Ideation and prototyping workshops (one with 15 Syrian refugees, another with 18 Syrian refugees and Jordanians)	One workshop (with refugees of different nationalities)
	Live Prototyping	Design of new program component and alteration of existing component	Pilot activities (with 25 refugees of different nationalities)	Alteration of program component

PD TO DEVELOP THE OVERALL PREPARATION PROGRAM

This part of the PD process aimed to improve the high-level program design described earlier. Problem exploration and identification at this stage comprised four workshops attended by 30 refugees of various nationalities in Amman, and in-depth interviews with two refugee youth. Reflection and adaptation led to ideation and critique, where we held a workshop with nine refugees of different nationalities. The participants demonstrated the difficulties they would face in paying for higher education, were they able to access higher education programs. This work led to the identification of a new component related to supporting higher education funding. Many students also noted that a lack of English skills was a primary barrier to accessing higher education, thus we decided to lower the level of English needed to enter our programs. We also found that there was

less support available for students seeking access to higher education than for those who already had access. This led us to change the participant profile for our overall programming to include youth who were still trying to access higher education and who had more urgent needs than remediating their subject-specific skills. This led us to remove the subject-specific (e.g., math) components of the program so we could focus on the more pressing barriers participants identified.

#### PD TO DEVELOP MENTORING AND ADVICE

The aim of this part of the PD process was to design a meaningful and accessible guidance and mentorship program that helped refugees access higher education. Problem exploration and identification in this case was comprised of two workshops, the first with 18 Syrian refugees and the second with 22 Syrian refugees and Jordanians. Ideation and critique included ideation and prototyping workshops, one with 15 Syrian refugees and another with 18 Syrian refugees and Jordanians. We also held pilot activities with 25 refugees of different nationalities. Following problem exploration and identification, our original goal was refined to include identifying the psychosocial challenges of seeking access to higher education. Reflection and action and ideation and critique brought in new ideas and content for workshop activities and aligned this program with one co-created by current refugee students that provided advice and support for Syrian refugees seeking to access university.<sup>2</sup> Ideation and critique in this case prioritized specific topics for content planning based on their feedback. It also identified new methods of delivery (including Facebook Live) that could adapt to the time constraints participants had identified and reach participants effectively.

#### PD TO DEVELOP ENGLISH SKILLS AND PROFICIENCY

This aspect of the PD process initially focused on support for the logistics of study (timing, location, transportation) and on helping the refugees themselves identify informal learning spaces where they could learn English. In problem exploration and identification, we observed an English class for refugees living in Amman, observed a British Council teacher delivering a conversation-based class, and held two workshops involving 25 Syrian and Sudanese refugees. Ideation and critique was comprised of one workshop with seven refugees of different nationalities. Based on participants' input, this component shifted its focus to pedagogy and providing opportunities for spoken English practice and conversation.

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2 See <https://www.facebook.com/StudentDardachat/>.

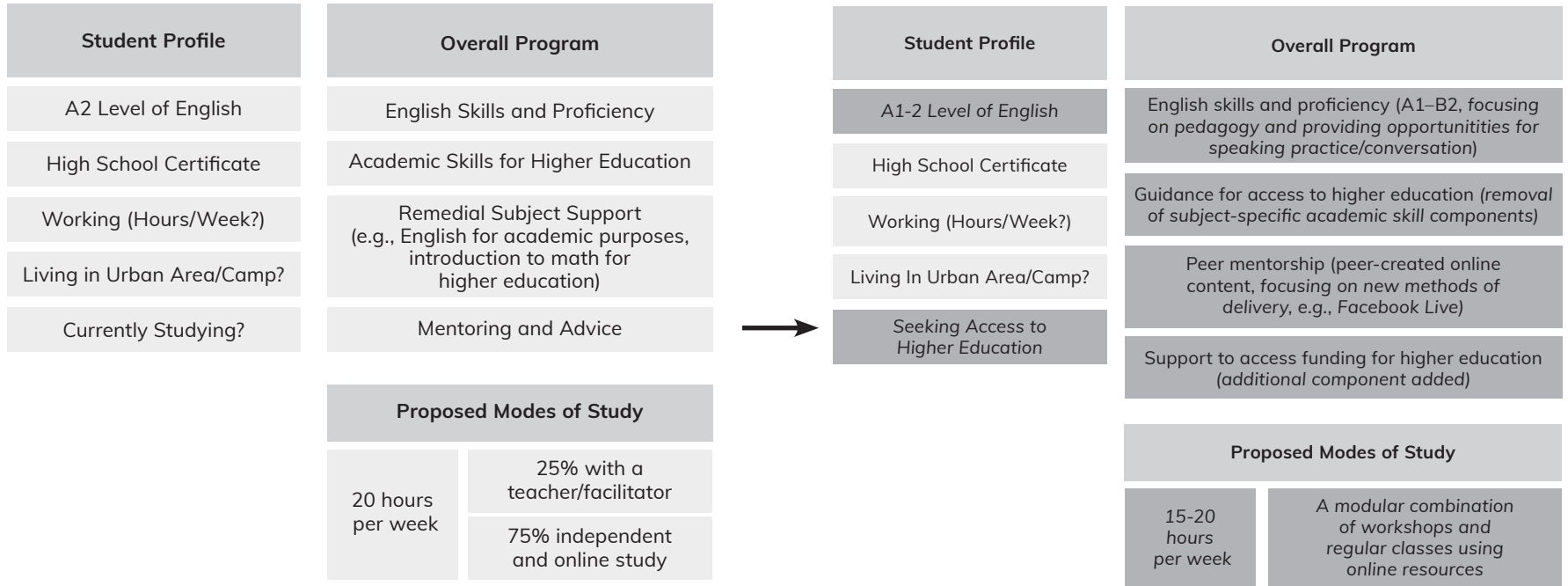
The changes made as a result of each stage of the PD process are shown in Figure 3. The profile of the type of students our program sought to support was refined to target youth seeking to access higher education and who lacked proficiency in English. Mentoring and advice became two separate components, one to provide guidance on how to access higher education opportunities in the participants' specific contexts, and one that involved peer mentoring and shared experiences. The delivery mode also was adapted, based on feedback from participants about time constraints. During problem exploration and identification, participants noted that they would find it difficult to attend programs for multiple hours but they wanted some face-to-face contact. Therefore, we decided to reduce the amount of in-person training, and to provide flexible face-to-face workshops and online material that were developed fully in Arabic with peer-created content.

### **BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND LESSONS LEARNED: HOW PD LED TO NEW IDEAS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

The second aim of this note is to reflect on the challenges and difficulties we faced in the program design process. We describe how these challenges led to new ideas for higher education and gave us greater insight into the complexity of using this innovative approach to program design. Facilitators took written notes during and after the workshops to document what happened and what the design outcomes were. These notes were subsequently reviewed and discussed by the team. Themes were formed from the bottom up, based on the refugee participants' prioritization in problem exploration and identification and ideation and critique. We paid particular attention to the key concerns previously identified by Vines et al. (2013), such as who initiates participation and how, what learning occurs, and what its mechanisms are.

Designing in partnership with learning communities requires critical reflection on key issues regarding specific practice contexts. Vines et al. (2013) argue that accounts of PD can sometimes lack transparency about the decisions and assumptions made, which makes it challenging to reflect on the forms of participation engendered. They use three lenses to bring attention to the explicit and implicit ways people participate in design, the role the initiators play in selecting particular people and shaping the benefits they experience, and the ways expertise shapes who has control over design decisions. Our experience of PD in the context of the refugees' difficulty accessing higher education naturally had similar dynamics and faced similar challenges, which we discuss below.

Figure 3: The Final High-Level Design of the Program (right) as Informed by the PD Process (changes highlighted in *italic* in the dark gray boxes)



**INCLUSIVITY AND GENDER:  
THE ROLE OF INITIATING AND CONFIGURING PARTICIPATION**

Participatory projects are initiated and maintained by specific actors who often are the practitioners charged with leading the project using mechanisms they identify. The form this takes can have a profound impact on who participates and benefits (Vines et al. 2013). Given our inconsistent presence in refugee camps and local communities, we organized our participant recruitment largely in partnership with community organizations, the exception being the three problem exploration and identification workshops (across all components), for which participants were recruited via networks we had established with the refugee community.

Despite our efforts and those of our local partners to have gender-balanced workshops, we found this to be a persistent challenge throughout the PD process. We had unwittingly done some of our recruiting through men, which could have made some women uncomfortable about joining, particularly if they did not know the men well. Moreover, the workshops were mixed gender, which might have led to the gender imbalance, as some families might have been reluctant to let their female members participate. We also observed that, when women attended the workshops, gender inequality was repeated rather than transcended. For example, during one workshop where women were in attendance and creating a persona was an activity, all the personas created were men. When asked why this was, one woman replied that she did not feel comfortable highlighting the challenges women faced while in a class with men. She also said it was not that important because she lived in a “male dominated society anyway.”

The gender imbalance in our workshops led us to reflect on families’ possible reluctance to let their daughters pursue higher education, as described in a recent paper on barriers to girls’ education in conflict-affected contexts (Perezniето and Magee 2017). We also recognized that access to PD opportunities alone is not sufficient and that PD must engage with the complexity of gender identities to bring marginalized groups into the design of higher education. Aware of the cultural and social constraints on female participation in group activities, such as those in the PD process, we think that organizing separate all-female workshops and involving the parents of female students could increase women’s chances of participating in the PD process by increasing their parents’ confidence and understanding.

### WHEN LEARNING BECOMES MUTUAL: WHO BENEFITS AND WHEN

One defining characteristic of PD is mutual learning (Halskov and Hansen 2015; Vines et al. 2013). During the PD process, practitioners become able to understand and design for their participants' realities, while participants learn how they can foster their own empowerment by helping to shape programs. As noted above, this contrasts with more traditional approaches to program development, where participants' empowerment is a goal of the program rather than part of its design process. However, as Vines et al. (2013) explain, participants' experiences and expectations coming into the process often shape how they perceive this reciprocal relationship.

Unlike our own aims, most other communication about higher education for refugees on social media and elsewhere has focused almost exclusively on ads and rumors about scholarship opportunities. These prior expectations, alongside the multi-layered chain of communication involved in participant recruitment, meant that the clarity of the workshop aims were lost and many participants arrived at the workshops expecting to be informed about a scholarship opportunity. As a result, participants in one workshop were reluctant to engage fully in the design activities. After that workshop, we made steps to communicate the objectives of the workshops more effectively when trying to attract participants, and to ensure that they understood from the outset what the workshop would entail. Despite these challenges, our encounters with participants during the early design sessions, particularly during the ranking activities, gave our team new insights that informed our future direction. We identified a wide range of known and new challenges in helping refugees gain access to higher education. For example, during the guidance design workshop, one commonly cited challenge in accessing higher education was the psychosocial issues stemming from the discriminatory and depressing context of refugee status. Formative research has identified psychosocial issues as a challenge facing students already attending university (Gladwell et al. 2016). This has been taken up in some NGO programming—SPARK (2018), for example, provides psychosocial training to refugee students—but only limited programming directly addresses the psychosocial challenges refugees face while trying to access higher education.

The PD workshops highlighted the critical importance of psychosocial well-being for prospective students, and the ranking exercises enabled us to see the need to prioritize this in our programming. Participants also benefited from presentations



about the range of higher education options open to them, which were held at the start of the problem exploration and identification workshops. These presentations often highlighted pathways and opportunities the participants had not previously considered or evaluated together, which also suggested that we needed broader academic guidance activities.

Unlike the waning motivation we observed among participants during a few of the initial workshops, those who chose to attend the next set of workshops benefited from their familiarity with and commitment to the PD process. This resulted in numerous actionable insights that they were able to own. For instance, participants shared ideas about how to distribute guidance content on social media, how to approach people in rural communities, and whether we should lower the level of the planned English program, all of which contributed in tangible ways to improving the program design. This underlined the importance of stating the purpose of these workshops clearly from the outset and of informing those interested in participating what they might get out of the process.

### **THE “WORK” INVOLVED IN MAKING LEARNING MUTUAL**

Moving participants from a passive, rewards-based orientation to becoming active participants with a vested interest in the process was not straightforward, and it contrasted directly with our knowledge of previous programming by NGOs in the area. In particular, for participants to participate meaningfully in our design process, which was the aim of our efforts to share control, it was important to guide their contributions and help them develop new expertise and skills. To this end, the process was structured to first identify challenges and needs and then to critique our proposed program design with respect to these needs. Participants at first tended to defer to the “experts” and facilitators, and the facilitators at times had to do a significant amount of scaffolding in order to identify a specific need a program could support from the many experiences participants shared. Nevertheless, these exchanges often demonstrated articulate understanding and offered insightful ideas. The time participants were given to engage fully with the process as co-designers and the richness of the insights and ideas they offered once they did engage were remarkable. The impact on their personal development of the scaffolding done during problem exploration and identification was evident during ideation and critique.

From a practitioner perspective, one way to address this tension and make sure the participants are fully involved and willing to provide ideas and constructive critics is to take time early in the process to build knowledge of the specifics of

engaging in PD culture and designing with refugees. This will help bring the PD process in closer alignment with the pragmatic constraints encountered at later stages. Moreover, rather than expecting refugees to have the skills needed to participate in PD right out of the gate, the process could begin with skills-focused workshops that prepare them to take on new roles. However, while it is important to help participants learn to engage with PD, the lack of sustainable long-term engagement with the process due to the volatility and uncertainty refugees face remains a challenge. Another challenge, in light of the important role local partners play in our context, is how to sustain and scale PD practices within our organization and between organizations.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER PROGRAMMING AND RESEARCH**

We believe that our experience has expanded understanding of the challenges and benefits of implementing PD to provide a contextualized and learner-centered design process—in our case, in the context of providing education in emergencies, as outlined in the CLCC playbook. PD enabled us to gain a much deeper understanding of the contextual barriers refugees face in accessing higher education, which we would not have achieved by relying solely on previous knowledge in this area. Our initial program design, based on a review of the literature, primarily identified economic barriers and those within higher education itself. Engaging with participants in the PD process confirmed the economic barriers, but it also broadened our understanding of the need to support students who had not yet accessed higher education. Furthermore, by understanding the extent of refugees' need for psychosocial support, we were able to ensure that support for students was integrated throughout the program we designed. This in turn led to a design that included both online components, which reduced worries about time constraints and the need to travel to program centers, and face-to-face workshops, which provided important support and opportunities for in-person interaction. This enabled us to support the students in our programs more effectively.

Another important lesson was the need to ensure equal gender participation in the PD process from the outset, which could be achieved by using recruitment strategies that recognized issues of gender and social inclusion. We also learned of the need to provide training to participants at the start of the workshops, which was critical in ensuring equal participation in the design process. While there are a few other examples of PD with refugee communities, our findings

provide some new insights into what is needed to build sustainable, long-term engagement with refugee communities. These insights advance the knowledge of what is needed most when providing education in emergency contexts, and in designing effective, gender-equitable PD programs.

Like other human-centered design approaches, PD requires sufficient resources and time to develop relevant and valuable programs. More PD experience and further reflection is needed to prove the greater effectiveness of this approach as compared with program designs that rely on previous experiences, piloting, and adjusting. Our PD process has shown how essential it is to align programming with the needs of the community, and that not doing so can prevent programs from reaching the intended audience and from overcoming the specific barriers they face. Therefore, taking advantage of the resources available for the PD process has enabled us to fully respect the aspirations of those we seek to support and to adapt to their specific needs.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors and our organization would like to thank all the local partners, volunteers, and, most importantly, the refugee participants for their involvement and support in facilitating the design process. Thanks to the *JEiE* editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments that led to the final version of this field note.

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