‘I have a degree but I’m still on the streets’:
Non-state actors and refugee higher education in South Africa

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Abstract

Non-state actors in international development are increasing the breadth and scope of their involvement in education due to the increasingly protracted nature of refugee conflicts. This research intends to inform larger research around the role of non-state actors in education globally by focusing on refugee higher education. This article investigates the role of non-state actors in refugee higher education by looking at a case study of a partnership between a private American University and a refugee serving organisation in South Africa. As online higher education degrees enable refugee students to access academic resources without institutions’ physical presence in host communities, refugee higher education is increasingly situated within local and global contexts. This paper argues that non-state actors’ involvement in refugee higher education reveals the complex relationships between state and non-state actors and their mutual complicity in absolving (or deferring) responsibility regarding refugee access to higher education.

Key Words

refugee education, higher education, non-state actors

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalised and competitive knowledge economy, refugee access to higher education sits at just 1 percent (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2021) compared to a global average of 36 percent. Simultaneously, non-state actors in international development are increasing the breadth and scope of their involvement in education (Selenica and Novelli, 2020), to which refugee higher education is no exception. Recognising the mismatch between refugee demand for higher education and the limited opportunities public institutions offer them to access it, non-state actors in the form of private universities are attempting to fill this gap. ‘Non-state actors’ generally refers to a wide range of stakeholders, also called ‘non-governmental’, engaged in education for charity or profit reasons. In this paper, the term ‘non-state actor’ refers to private universities operating as educational nonprofit organisations. Funding for non-state, private universities comes from investments, private donations and student tuition.

UNESCO’s 2021/2 Global Education Monitoring Report emphasises the role of non-state actors in education, since education goals cannot be achieved by governments alone. This research intends to inform larger research around the role of non-state actors in education globally by focusing on a specific subset of the education sector, refugee higher education. It investigated the role of non-state actors in refugee higher education, looking at a case study of a partnership between an American non-profit university and a refugee- and migrant-serving organisation in South Africa. The research attempted to answer: What does the administration of such a programme reveal about the role of non-state actors in refugee higher education? How do student

experiences of the programme reveal underlying motivations and agendas of non-state actors in refugee higher education? This research aimed to address several research gaps: research on refugee education has historically prioritised basic education (Dryden-Peterson, 2011); despite the increasing role of non-state actors in education there has been little research on their role in refugee education; research on the political economy of education has generally overlooked local perspectives, and this research was an attempt to have the local 'speak back' to the global.

This paper outlines the politics of being a refugee in South Africa within a political economy of refugee higher education in the country and provides background on the case study and its methodology. Based on the data, the paper argues that the programme amplified pre-existing precarities in the refugee experience, in that students might gain a university degree through the programme without meaningful changes in their everyday life. This paper argues that non-state actors' involvement in refugee higher education reveals the complex relationships between state and non-state actors and their mutual complicity in evading (or deferring) responsibility regarding refugee access to higher education.

The political economy of refugee higher education in South Africa

The politics of being a refugee in South Africa

Existing literature on refugee education has focused on crises in Lebanon (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2020), Palestine, the Balkans, East Africa or Sri Lanka. However, there have been limited studies on refugee education in South Africa. This is partially a result of the state's classifications of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and immigrants, where *refugee* is occasionally used as a catch-all phrase to describe African immigrants in South Africa. An analysis of the legal landscape underscores the need to look beyond legal definitions of *refugee* and *immigrant* especially because the term *refugee* accounts for a huge variety of different lived experiences in a single definition. An individual who moved to the country at age 5 and grew up in South Africa, and an individual who moved as an adult with children, might both be considered refugees in a South African legal framework. Many of those classified as *refugees* in South Africa were in a cycle of multiple applications, renewals and appeals that lasted years if not decades. Mumangi (2025) demonstrates that despite having moved to South Africa as a child from the Democratic Republic of Congo, having attended both primary, secondary and then higher education in South Africa, she is still on *asylum seeker status* (that must be renewed every six months) and continues to await *refugee status* (recognised status that includes permission to work). The term *refugee* works to reduce complex identities and political subjectivities into a static, de-historicised, homogenous category (Malkki, 1996).

When the state envisions a limited future for refugees, efforts are focused on preparing refugees for futures outside the country that discourage long-term opportunities or futures in the host country (Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson, 2023). In South Africa, educational policies reflect this limited future, where refugees are able to access primary and secondary education as outlined in the constitution, but face structural barriers to accessing higher education.

Refugees face struggles with both documentation and finance, such as not qualifying for different types of financial aid. A student who graduated from high school in South Africa[5] said:

> After matric I applied at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) ... [they] accepted me but when it came to finances things got a bit tough at home and I didn't have the deposit to pay for the accounting course. The following year ... I applied for nursing and UWC and CPUT (Cape Peninsula University of Technology), they were like no, they [are] just taking South Africans this year.

Another Rwandan student whose journeys to higher education had been disrupted as a result of conflict in Rwanda said: '... when I left Rwanda, I was in my first year at the University of Kigali ... I really wanted to study ... I applied like 100 times at different universities, [my application was] declined five times [at] different universities, UWC, CPUT.'

Their stories demonstrate not only the challenges

5 All quotations are taken from participants in our study, see section on Methods below.

refugees face in accessing higher education in South Africa, but how research needs to highlight the role national histories and politics around higher education play in determining refugee experiences. Higher education in South Africa is particularly complicated and contested, given that the right to university education during the country's period of apartheid was solely reserved for its white population. Consequently, post-independence initiatives to increase access to higher education prioritised populations that had historically been marginalised, at the expense of other vulnerable populations such as refugees. Higher education debates are particularly politically charged, with higher education policy being one of the major areas of debate in national post-independence policy discussions about how to create an equitable, economically developed and democratic South Africa (Lefa, 2014). The project of higher education is inextricably linked to the post-apartheid construction of a 'South African' nation, where 'South Africa belonged not to everyone, but to South Africans' (Chipkin, 2007, p.174). The construction of South Africa for South Africans fostered a sense of exclusivity — making it more difficult for non-South Africans to integrate into society, despite their initial expectations (Morreira, 2007). Refugee barriers to accessing higher education are reflective of wider political debates and dynamics that shape refugee lived experiences.

Case study of an American private university (non-state actor) in refugee higher education in South Africa: Background and methods

Wenona Giles argues that in the context of a global refugee crisis, 'borderless' education creates educational pathways that transcend geographic and political boundaries (2021). This often involves the utilisation of online learning, partnerships with universities in various countries, and creating flexible, innovative models for delivering higher education to refugees in a range of settings. This is consistent with the politics of service provision to refugees more broadly, where the provision of services for refugees is inseparable from global and humanitarian politics and legal frameworks (Betts, 2009). As demonstrated in the section above, host governments have sovereignty over their refugee policies and can choose whether to deny (or construct and enforce barriers to) higher education for refugees. However, refugee demand for higher education continues, and is then met by 'borderless' higher education for refugees that emphasises greater access to education, international partnerships and collaboration, technological integration and holistic support (Giles, 2021).

Higher education is not part of the Constitutional agreement of the South African government to provide education to refugees. As such, refugee higher education in South Africa is largely dependent on international actors and developmental agencies for provision (Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson 2023). Where there is consistent negotiation and renegotiation between international and domestic actors for the provision of higher education for refugees, non-state actors play a big role in trying to meet the excess demand for education that governments are unable or unwilling to meet. This often involves a minimal governmental role and greater international partner engagement, where service delivery may be mixed and may be more likely to change over time, depending on domestic and international politics of aid (Carvalho and Dryden-Peterson, 2023).

This research used a case study methodology (Stake, 1995) of a partnership between a private non-profit American university and an organisation serving migrants and refugees in South Africa, to provide online higher education degrees to refugees in South Africa. This degree programme is one of the first large-scale online learning initiatives for refugees and has received substantial Seed funding from funders such as Peregrine Global Foundation, The Stevens Initiative and Larsen Lam ICONIQ Impact Finalist Funding. It reflects the growth of refugee higher education via online learning platforms (Pherali and Abu Moghli 2021) enabling refugee students to access academic resources without institutions' physical presence in host communities. The programme partners with existing organisations, NGOs, and universities to provide academic coaching, internship and on-the-job training, individualised coaching, and career counseling even while the programme and its contents are largely online. The university has five international partnerships with various local organisations across other African and Middle Eastern countries with refugee populations (Lebanon, Kenya, Rwanda,

Malawi and South Africa). The programme is structured according to four tiers, with the American university at the top (first tier), the subsection of the university in charge of global education (second tier), local nonprofits in Lebanon, Kenya, Rwanda, Malawi and South Africa (third tier), and refugee students (fourth tier).

The programme in Cape Town launched in 2018 with a pilot programme of 150 students. For this case study, the in-person administration of the programme is largely facilitated through the nonprofit organisation in Cape Town (third tier) that is responsible for the recruitment and communication with students (fourth tier) but is subject to the larger decisions and priorities of the global education section of the university (second tier) and the university as a whole (first tier). The curriculum of the programme was initially generally organised around three degree streams: Bachelors in Communication, Bachelors in Healthcare Management and Administration, and Bachelors in Logistics. For this study, the majority of the participants had participated in the Bachelors in Healthcare Management and Administration degree stream, which had deep implications for their job prospects where the degree was not recognised in South Africa. The programme's online, project-based and competency-based degree model was meant to enable refugee students, who often face uncertain futures, to complete their studies at a self-directed pace, but the programme changed significantly during students' tenure, as shown in the findings.

Given that research on the political economy of education has generally overlooked local perspectives, this case study drew predominantly from primary (interview) and secondary (documents and archival records) data collected over a 12-month period. To explore the questions about the role of non-state actors in refugee higher education and how student experiences reveal underlying motivations and agendas of these non-state actors, the semi-structured interviews were focused on student experiences, how students understood the purpose of the programme and their outcomes after the programme. Nineteen 60-minute interviews were conducted with graduates or former participants in the programme. In identifying participants, the research team attempted to avoid the pitfalls of selection bias, privileging voices that are easier to reach. The research team remained flexible and adaptable as much as possible to reach more voices, while cultivating and maintaining relationships with research participants.

The author of this study, along with her research team, either contributed directly to the provision of the programme or were graduates of the programme. Their positionalities as non-South African women who were either refugees themselves, former students or former staff of the programme had a deep impact on the complex dynamics of current and former relationships. In refugee research, the building and maintaining of trust is of utmost importance and the research team took steps to ensure that the participants were able to express their individual stories and experiences freely. The team continuously checked on participant comfort levels before, during and after interviews, shared interview questions beforehand and communicated the research aims and impact transparently. This was commented on and appreciated by many participants, who compared the experience against their experience of the programme. The type and quality of data collected was undoubtedly influenced by the research team's familiarity with the programme, relationships with participants, and critical reflection on our own potential biases. Many of the interviewees had participated in programme evaluations previously, but because they trusted the research team, felt comfortable going beyond developmental narratives of being grateful and took the opportunity to share personal stories, experiences and challenges.

The primary and secondary data were thematically analysed following steps of qualitative data analysis: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Themes initially identified such as impressions of the university, precarities, refugee experience, uncertainty, certification and jobs, were analysed to elicit key findings and conclusions.

Findings

Amplifying pre-existing precarities in the refugee experience

Refugees in South Africa experience violence and exclusion, as evidenced by widely documented institutionalised and physical expressions of

xenophobia against African foreign nationals (Matsinhe, 2011). Faced with economic and public health challenges, the ANC government has historically scapegoated African foreign nationals. In this case study, the initiative's online, project-based degree model and the in-person resources were meant to enable refugee students to complete their studies at a self-directed pace. However, students were still expected to complete a certain number of modules each month to remain active in the programme. This expectation is tied to funding and aid streams that are time-bound and largely dependent on international partners for financing.

Student experiences revealed that the structure of the standardised programme was not only unable to respond to the everyday experiences of refugees in South Africa, but inadvertently amplified and heightened pre-existing precarities for refugees due to programmatic changes. Students were negotiating the programme amidst ongoing violence and exclusion in South Africa. Comments included: 'The facilities sometimes ... they are not meeting with the life you're living in. The program is said to be [at] your own pace, [then] suddenly someone is on your case, pushing you to finish ... you don't want somebody calling you to finish ... when maybe somebody stabbed you last night and you have nobody to tell.' The quote demonstrates that the programme structure, with its emphasis on academic performance and mastering competencies, sat at odds with day-to-day refugee realities. The online, mobile, flexible nature of the degree, where higher education is packaged and 'exported' to different settings, is unable to respond to the lived realities of refugees in particular contexts.

While refugees were told at first that they could finish the programme at their own pace, the messaging changed when seed funding for this programme was running out. Students reported:

> [At first they said the degree] is going to be for free ... all you have to do is put in the work but then the shift becomes less about the work [and more about] being on time ... finish quickly or you going to pay. The conversation changed ... I couldn't really understand what's the purpose anymore. If we are going to be focusing on the time of completion, which I know is important but working with vulnerable people, such as refugees coming from a different country not really being stable, that does cause a lot of anxiety and ... stress.

This shift in messaging, from 'at your own pace' to 'finish or you'll have to pay' can be traced directly to the programme's seed funding running out. This resulted in students either being forcefully withdrawn from the programme or leaving on their own. Refugee experiences can be attributed directly to the tiers of decision making and power that were present in this partnership from the onset. International actors financing higher education have a large say in the provision, quality and access to higher education. As a result, programmes are vulnerable to ebbs and flows of international funding, with implications for refugee students balancing higher education with other challenges.

The lack of transparency, miscommunication and threat of withdrawal mirrored refugee experiences of exploitation by unscrupulous landlords or immigration lawyers who initially seemed to have good intentions, but eventually ended up exploiting refugees. While students recognised that staff themselves (third tier) seemed unprepared for these changes and were responding to decisions made at the University level (first or second tier), the threat of being forcefully withdrawn from the programme was a persistent stressor for many students, as one said: 'We are all grouped but we are not the same. You're looking at me like I'm just a number. In the disciplinary [hearing], these people don't know me. Do you know me? Do you know the challenges I have been through? Nobody knows me. Anytime you could be withdrawn.'

Refugees' experience of the programme reflected the financial struggles, xenophobic violence, legal and documentation issues happening outside the programme. The aid and funding architecture, and the ensuing changes, had a profound impact on refugee students. Rather than providing the certainty and opportunity to generate possible futures, the programme became a microcosm of the implicit systemic violence that students were experiencing in their everyday lives. Student experiences of precarities, both outside and within the programme, are significant because online degrees situate refugee higher education within both local and global contexts, and between state and non-state relationships. Refugees in South Africa are residing in South Africa while receiving an American

higher education, which allows the host country's responsibility towards refugees to continue to be minimised.

I have a degree but I'm still on the streets

Although the university maintained its degrees are fully accredited and internationally recognised, the programme's attempt to solve the problem of refugee access to higher education failed to acknowledge the wider politics of recognition that the provision of degrees does not solve. In South Africa, all degrees granted by non-South African institutions need to be certified as part of a lengthy, expensive and often inaccessible process. Not only was the coursework sometimes irrelevant to the context refugees were living in, but degrees were often not recognised by employers, resulting in a situation where graduates had degrees but remained in precarious socio-political-economic positions.

One of the degrees offered to refugees was the Bachelors of Healthcare Management intended to prepare graduates to become hospital administrators. However, coursework provided was often not relevant to the experiences or employment opportunities of refugees in South Africa. A graduate recalls feeling disconnected to the degree programme, saying: '[The] Americanised way was difficult to get [with] the context of South Africa. We're learning like an American student but my experiences aren't related.' The content was also at times irrelevant to the context refugees were living in. A Bachelors of Healthcare Management graduate describes their experience of learning about Obamacare in the US while living as a refugee in South Africa: 'Another thing stakeholders need to consider [is] it's one thing to provide people with courses, but it's not going to benefit them here if you provide a course that is under a certain country and you teach it in another country. It is not going to make sense.' Students saw a disconnect between what they were learning and how they could use what they had learnt. Not only were they acutely aware of the specificities of their experience, but also of the need for higher education to speak to their local challenges as refugees in South Africa, saying: 'Refugees are a different story. Do you know what a refugee is? [When you implement a programme] you need to consider the country – the US, [UK]. It's different [being] a refugee in South Africa. Even if you're a qualified refugee you get nothing. Your document is not recognised in workplaces.'

Even after graduating from the programme, many of these degrees were not usable in a South African context. For example, the degree in Healthcare Management is not recognised in South Africa where jobs in healthcare management require at least five to 10 years of experience working in South African hospitals. A graduate describes her experience attempting to find a job or internship with her qualifications, saying:

> Five, no seven out of 10 practices that I applied to to do my internship, whether it's just volunteering, told me that, well, we do not recognise your degree. It's not like we can't give an internship. We're just not sure if your degree is valid, even though I did request a verification that I'm a student. Then they told me we will accept your degree but you need a license for healthcare management in South Africa.

Degrees granted by international universities do not necessarily solve the problem of certification and qualification. This is particularly important because some students already had qualifications from their home countries (medical, law, or nursing degrees) that were not recognised in South Africa. Instead of solving the issue of certification, they were essentially replacing one unrecognised degree with another.

Some graduates, particularly in the Bachelors of Communication degree stream, managed to acquire degree related jobs. However, for the majority of research participants, particularly those in the Bachelors of Healthcare Management and Administration degree stream, their degrees did not help them. Refugees felt betrayed by a programme that left them in the same, or worse position than when they started. One participant had quit her job as a cashier shortly after being offered a promotion. She had seen the opportunity to study as a means of upward social mobility and a chance of getting a professional job, saying:

> I even quit another job I was doing and they paid me nice. I was doing fine but it was going to need much more effort [to study and work] … You finish study, nothing ...Better I can do something ... to survive for a few months, then maybe I'll get a job. So I ended up to sell stuff on the street. I feel like sometimes people will [ask] 'you're studying right? Okay, what are you doing here?'

Part of the degree's explicit marketing was its ability to help refugees eventually obtain skilled, professional jobs. Another participant questioned the purpose of the programme in offering degrees that are unable to secure stable livelihoods, mentioning:

> I wish the benefit [of the programme] was seeing all the graduates employed ... The reason why everyone wants to study is [to] get a good job ...what's the point of having 150 graduates where they are back to step 1 where they can't even get a job at KFC. They can't go back to [being a] car guard where they were without education.

Many participants saw the inability of the degree to improve their livelihoods as a deep betrayal. Refugees expected their educational qualifications to allow their participation in the knowledge economy by generating opportunities for income and employment (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2020, Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Public statistics cited about the degree programme state that 88% of refugee learners are employed within six months of graduation. Of the 19 interviewees in this research study, only four were employed in a job related to their area of study, and less than half were in formal employment. While it is important to acknowledge the qualitative nature of this research study, these student narratives are equally important to highlight the outcomes of graduates of this programme that sit at odds with publicly available statistics. The finding that many graduates were unable to find degree-related jobs demonstrates that non-state actors are unable to address concrete state-constructed barriers towards employment documentation and job certification.

Concluding thoughts and further questions

As the idea of 'borderless' higher education for refugees continues to grow (Giles 2021), more research is needed on the current agendas and practices of non-state actors in refugee higher education today. Online higher education degrees for refugees are situated within both local and global contexts, and between state and non-state relationships. Such programmes have the potential to allow both state and non-state actors to avoid responsibility for refugee access to higher education. With non-state actors providing degrees to refugees, national governments are absolved of the responsibility for including refugees within higher education frameworks and initiatives. By providing degrees that are not certified by states, non-state actors are absolved of responsibility for refugees' post-degree trajectories towards employment, geographical and social mobility. Provision of higher education through online means has to be accompanied with advocacy and policy change on a global level that aims to remove the legal, financial and bureacractic obstacles that prevent refugees from accessing higher education.

As a result of the limited opportunities for accessing higher education in South Africa, refugees' options for higher education are often limited to those provided by international non-state actors. While the degrees offered in our case study were marketed as being able to generate employment opportunities, graduates found themselves either in the same or worse position than before. This pilot research study aimed to investigate the motivations and agendas of non-state actors in refugee higher education, revealing the need for more research on such programmes and the various state and non-state relationships in refugee higher education.

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