

## Reference Paper for the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention

### **Access to higher education for forcibly displaced persons: challenges, good practices, and suggestions for the future**

Rez Gardi

CEO & Founder, Empower

Co-Founder, Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies

Co-Managing Director, R-SEAT

March 2021

This reference paper was prepared for UNHCR to inform *People Forced to Flee: History, Change and Challenge*. This document reflects the personal views of the author(s), which may not necessarily be shared by UNHCR, and UNHCR may not be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

#### Abstract:

According to the UNHCR, an unprecedented 79.5 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide. Within this figure are hundreds of thousands of young people seeking opportunities to access higher education. Today, only 3 percent of refugees have access to higher education.

This commentary highlights some examples of good practices and will make some recommendations for the future of access to higher education for forcibly displaced populations. In a rapid move towards online education and the advancement of educational technologies across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated that online teaching and learning is not only possible, but a necessary development for the future of education, and can be harnessed to connect refugees and displaced populations to accredited academic institutions virtually in pursuit of higher education.

## I Introduction

In Pakistan, I was denied an education because of my refugee status. And in New Zealand, when I was in high school, a careers adviser told me I ‘should consider other options’ because law school would be too difficult for someone like me—a refugee with no history of education in the family.

People like me did not finish school, let alone end up at university. All our lives, we are trained to survive. Being a refugee means that our existence is based on trying to survive just another day and to reach safety. That’s all we ever dreamed of. Wanting more than safety and survival seemed ungrateful. And there I was, ‘Rez the ungrateful refugee’, dreaming of things that were not for me—going to law school.

To me, it was not just about studying law. It was all the barriers, the stereotypes, and the assumptions that I wanted to crush. To prove that we, refugees, could dream bigger than the constraints of our identities and experiences allowed. It was about taking back control of our own lives and, one day, hopefully, being able to influence the laws that apply to people who are displaced, as I once was. Now, I am a Harvard-educated lawyer fighting for refugee youth to have access to education.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (*UNHCR*), an unprecedented 79.5 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Within this figure are hundreds of thousands of young people seeking opportunities to access higher education. Today, only 3 percent of refugees have access to higher education.<sup>2</sup> UNHCR and partners have committed to ensuring that 15 percent of young refugee women and men can access the benefits of higher education by the year 2030—the 15by30 target.<sup>3</sup>

Children and young people are disproportionately impacted by forced displacement. When it comes to the needs of children and young people, education is paramount. No child should have to pay the cost of conflict by missing out on education. Yet we see whole generations of young people from areas of conflict that have to leave their homes and schools.

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019,” 18 June 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5ee200e37/unhcr-global-trends-2019.html>.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, “DAFI Annual Report 2019,” 28 September 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/5f5a7b784/dafi-annual-report-2019>.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, “Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education,” September 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>.

Armed conflicts around the globe have instigated academic emergencies leaving left thousands of young displaced persons in desperate need of opportunities to continue their higher education. Many students are forced to abandon their education when fleeing their home countries but only a small proportion of them are able to access or re-enter to continue higher education. Despite a fundamental right to education, refugees face profound barriers to accessing higher education.

As another section of this book addresses the challenges faced by refugees in their plight for access to higher education, this commentary will not delve deeply into the specific challenges which bar refugees from accessing higher education. Instead, this commentary will focus on highlighting some examples of good practices and will make some recommendations for the future of access to higher education for forcibly displaced populations. In a rapid move towards online education and the advancement of educational technologies across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated that online teaching and learning is not only possible, but a necessary development for the future of education, and can be harnessed to connect refugees and displaced populations to accredited academic institutions virtually in pursuit of higher education.

## *II Background*

Education is an essential and inalienable right for all and is especially important for forcibly displaced persons to prepare them for employment and for participation in community development and governance. Education remains an important aspect of our lives and it is vital to our development, our understanding, and our personal and professional growth. Education also builds knowledge and skills for self-reliance and resilience.

In conflict and crisis situations, higher education serves as a powerful driver for change. It shelters and protects a critical group of young men and women by maintaining their hopes for the future, it fosters inclusion and non-discrimination, and, fundamentally, it acts as a catalyst for the recovery and rebuilding of post-conflict countries. If displaced people received higher education, they are more likely to develop necessary skills to make use of in the existing economic, social, and political systems in their host communities.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Mary Anike Sule<sup>1</sup>, Ovat Egbe Okpa<sup>1</sup>, Francisca Nonnyelum Odigwe<sup>1</sup>, Joseph Udida Udida<sup>1</sup> & Ikpi Inyang Okoi, "Managing Higher Education Needs of Internally Displaced Persons in Cross River State, Nigeria," 9 October 2020, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1272721.pdf>.

As basic education had been the main focus of the global education movement, higher education was typically left out until at least 2015, when the Millennium Development Goals Agenda was replaced by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of higher education for displaced populations has now been highlighted in a myriad of international policies and agreements, notably, the Sustainable Development Goals through Goal 4: Quality Education and as well as the principle that no one should be left behind, the Incheon Declaration, and the Education 2030: Framework for Action.<sup>6</sup>

Access to education is critical for refugee and displaced people striving to build their future. Yet as the world's displaced population continues to grow, educational resources are diminishing. Despite the obvious advantages of investing in and providing a quality education for displaced people, education in emergencies continues to be one of the most underfunded sectors in humanitarian aid with 'higher education often considered as a luxury rather than a necessity'.<sup>7</sup>

As a basic human right, access to education is codified in many international treaties and declarations such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Though unlike primary education, higher education is not explicitly addressed by the 1951 Convention and, thus, remains within the confines of domestic laws and practices ton included forcibly displaced people in their national education plans.

With very limited exceptions, most states have not implemented a specific national policy to ensure access to higher education for refugees. Higher education institutions are largely left to their own decisions on how to address the issue (if at all). Though the demand for higher education is significant, only a small number of refugee students are able to access higher education through accredited programs, and those who do are mainly through extremely limited competitive scholarships.

---

<sup>5</sup> Connected Learning for Refugees, "Higher Education in Emergencies On The Road To 2030." January 2020, <https://connectedlearning4refugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Report-Higher-Education-on-the-road-to-2030-cover.pdf> at 9.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, "Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education."

<sup>7</sup> Institute of International Education, "Help Displaced and Refugee Students Pursue Higher Education," <https://www.iie.org/give-peer>.

Due to the fact that access to higher education is not universally guaranteed, refugees encounter significant challenges and obstacles in practice. According to UNHCR access to higher education or skills-based education among displaced persons is still very low due to some barriers like shortage of space, lack of documentation (birth certificate, school leaving), school fees, lack of transportation, and security concerns.<sup>8</sup> Other issues such as interrupted education, learning gaps, language, confusing application procedures, lack of accreditation of local programs, distance from education opportunities, and costs are among the challenges that need to be overcome.<sup>9</sup>

Recognition of prior learning and qualifications gained abroad is one of the biggest barriers preventing refugees from re-entering higher education. The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in European Region (*Lisbon Convention*) provides a legal framework for the recognition of qualifications held by refugees and other displaced persons. It is ratified by fifty-four countries including seven outside Europe: Australia, Canada, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, New Zealand, and Tajikistan.<sup>10</sup>

However, the Lisbon Convention has not been consistently implemented by all its signatories, and in some states appropriate recognition procedures for displaced people do not exist.<sup>11</sup> Large-scale, sustainable policies and frameworks for access to higher education are critically lacking. The education rights of forcibly displaced populations are being neglected on a large scale. With governments slow to address the critical barriers to higher education, it is incumbent on academic institutions to fill the gap and take the lead in the push for inclusive societies.

A global crisis such as the one we are facing requires a global response and shared responsibility. Accordingly, it needs new stakeholders beyond governments, non-governmental organizations, tertiary education providers, and international humanitarian agencies. Fortunately, there are many institutions and organizations leading successful programs and ought to be highlighted as examples of good practices.

---

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, "Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education."

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, "No more excuses: Provide education to all forcibly displaced people," May 2016, Policy Paper 26, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5742a5cf4.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Council of Europe, Treaty No.165: Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region opened for signature 11 April 1997, ratified 1 February 1999. See Council of Europe, "Monitoring the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Final Report," [https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/Monitoring\\_the\\_Implementation\\_of\\_the\\_Lisbon\\_Recognition\\_Convention\\_2016.pdf](https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/Monitoring_the_Implementation_of_the_Lisbon_Recognition_Convention_2016.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Ayselen Yıldız, "Access and Integration of Refugees In European Higher Education," In *Integration of Refugee Students in European Higher Education: Comparative Country Cases*, ed. Ayselen Yıldız (Izmir: Yasar University Publications, 2019) at 10.

When durable solutions are not achievable for all members of a refugee population, complementary pathways of admission can help refugees access protection and long-term solutions.<sup>12</sup> UNHCR and partners are working towards the creation of additional, complementary pathways that offer protection and solutions in third countries through higher education scholarships. These pathways can offer an additional way for displaced people to safely cross international borders, alongside national asylum procedures and humanitarian resettlement programs. While some education pathways provide refugees with permanent residence in the third country, thus ensuring a durable solution to their displacement, others are temporary.<sup>13</sup>

### *III Good Practices in Access to Higher Education*

#### *A Formal Initiatives*

With the establishment of the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) scholarship program in 1992, we saw a crucial shift from the sole focus of secondary education to one also focusing on higher education. DAFI offers qualified refugee and returnee students the possibility to earn an undergraduate degree in their country of asylum or home country. Through the dedicated support of the governments of Germany, Denmark and the Czech Republic, UNHCR and private donors, the program has supported over 18,000 young refugees to undertake tertiary studies. In many ways DAFI pioneered a ‘new approach’ leading to the acceptance of higher education in the context of refugee education as commonplace in the international community.<sup>14</sup>

Over the last two decades, we have seen a growing number of institutions opening their doors and supporting refugees’ access to higher education in a variety of ways such as through the emergence of online courses and programs, newly established scholarships and other forms of financial assistance, counselling services, and support for student visas for refugee youth. Initially, support for refugee students was primarily through ad hoc activities which provided guidance to potential

---

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR, “Complementary pathways for admission to third countries,” <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/complementary-pathways.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, University of New South Wales, “Factsheet: Complementary refugee pathways: Education pathways,” August 2020, <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/complementary-refugee-pathways-education-pathways>.

<sup>14</sup> Lucy Baily and Gül İnanç, *Access to Higher Education Refugees’ Stories from Malaysia* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019) at 9.

refugee students. But now we're seeing more sophisticated approaches that are oriented towards the creation of bridging courses or actually enrolling students in their institutions.

Increasingly, universities around the world are offering scholarships for refugee students such as The University of Glasgow, The University of Edinburgh, The University of Sussex, The University of Warwick, Cardiff University, Western Sydney University, Australian National University, Columbia University, and Wilfrid Laurier University, to name just a few. While many universities provide free language courses for refugees, some have gone beyond by creating educational programs in their national systems for refugee students. In addition to scholarship provision, access to higher education has expanded through innovative connected learning opportunities that help refugee students overcome barriers to higher education by participating in accredited blended learning programs.<sup>15</sup> Distance and e-learning are used, blended with on-site tutoring, providing students with certification from an accredited institution.

In some cases, advocacy at national level results in refugees being admitted under the same conditions as local students, as is the case for example in Cameroon, Iran, Mozambique, Kenya, Rwanda and Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Some of these programs are discussed below but please note that this is an illustrative rather than an exhaustive list of the initiatives established around the world.<sup>17</sup>

In 2014 the UNHCR Innovation and Education Unit hosted a Roundtable in Nairobi, Kenya, bringing together, for the first time, the representatives of pioneering educational programs to share their experiences, initiate collaboration, and facilitate networking. The roundtable participants were the Jesuit Commons Higher Education at the Margins, Borderless Higher Education for Refugees, the Australian Catholic University, InZone and the African Virtual University. These five participants came together again in Geneva in 2015, to design the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium (CLCC).<sup>18</sup> CLCC was established specifically to provide access to higher education in conflict and crisis zones through online learning. Many have adapted their services to account for the circumstances in which refugees study and ease the burden. For example, Southern New

---

<sup>15</sup> Global Platform for Syrian Students and Portuguese Government, "Higher Education in Emergencies: On the Road to 2030," January 2020, <https://connectedlearning4refugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Report-Higher-Education-on-the-road-to-2030-cover.pdf> at 34.

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, "No More Excuses: Provide Education to All Forcibly Displaced People," May 2016, Policy Paper 26, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5742a5cf4.html>.

<sup>17</sup> The European University Association has created an online "[Refugees Welcome Map](#)" where universities can share their initiatives supporting refugees. Over 200 initiatives have been submitted to date, and new ones continue to be accepted.

<sup>18</sup> Lucy Baily and Gül İnanç, *Access to Higher Education Refugees' Stories from Malaysia* at 9.

Hampshire University and their partners at Kepler, LAsER, Scalabrini, and Jesuit Worldwide Learning provide internet vouchers for their students and offer counselling for students via WhatsApp. Canada's York University allow refugee students to submit shorter journal entries and oral presentations via WhatsApp.<sup>19</sup>

Other prominent examples include the Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM) program, which operates in places such as Dzaleka camp, Malawi, and Amman, Jordan; Borderless Higher Education for Refugees in Dadaab camps, Kenya.<sup>20</sup> The University of Genève InZone program offers connected learning, where students have free access to an online learning community, similar to a blended learning format. The projects are located in three different regions; the Horn of Africa, Middle East, and Europe. The learning hubs in Kakuma refugee camp (Kenya) and Azraq refugee camp (Jordan) help refugees to obtain a wide range of formal and non-formal higher education courses that are developed in cooperation with several universities.<sup>21</sup>

Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology have partnered to establish bridging courses for teachers, nurses, and engineers with a refugee background. The program consists of 60 credits (two semesters) and includes courses in social studies, Norwegian language training as well as practical components.<sup>22</sup>

In Spain, the University of Santiago de Compostela initiated a support program for refugees with the aim of supporting the continuation of their studies. It provides full tuition, accommodation in the university's residence hall, a subsistence allowance, and courses on Spanish language. Applicants are eligible to apply for the scholarship program on condition that they possess or have requested a refugee status in Spain and, either they are registered in the academic year or be able to formalize their registration.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Gül İnanç and Charley Wright, "The online transition means high-quality HE for all is within our grasp," 31 May 2020, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/online-transition-means-high-quality-he-all-within-our-grasp>.

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR, "No More Excuses: Provide Education to All Forcibly Displaced People."

<sup>21</sup> Basak Yavcan and Hana A. El-Ghali, *Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Turkey: Policies, Practices, and Perspectives* (UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States, and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Norwegian University of Science and Technology, "Supplementary Education in Science and Technology for Refugees", <https://www.ntnu.edu/ntnu-for-refugees/further-education>.

<sup>23</sup> Basa Basak Yavcan and Hana A. El-Ghali, *Higher Education and Syrian Refugee Students: The Case of Turkey: Policies, Practices, and Perspectives*.



In Germany the In(2)TU Berlin program at the Technical University of Berlin allows refugees to attend classes with the professor's permission and take exams while learning German or waiting to receive recognition for past coursework. The program offers students an education and exposure to academic and university life in Germany and students can earn credits and apply them to a degree program if they are later admitted.<sup>24</sup>

In New Zealand, a newly established Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies, an academic institution based at the University of Auckland, seeks to respond to challenges of forced displacement through evidence-based scholarship and high-impact research to inform positive approaches to support people forcibly displaced by both climate change and conflict induced displacement. Centre offers non-residential graduate fellowships to enable the conversion of conflict and climate-based research conducted by scholars who have experiences of forced displacement into impact. The Centre also plans to instigate and fund site-specific projects with immediate practical impact for young refugee learners, by combining emergent digital technologies with innovative pedagogical models.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond universities, many online learning platforms such as Coursera, Futurelearn, and Edex are now offering their courses free for displaced communities, and universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and international networks like, International Network for Educations for Emergencies, are hosting platforms to drive creative solutions to the crisis.<sup>26</sup>

The Institute of International Education (IIE) is launching a pilot scholarship program for refugee and displaced students to pursue graduate work online. IIE's Refugee EdTech Program will see students enrolled in a MicroMasters program at edX, the online education platform built by Harvard and MIT. The pilot will allow IIE to gain insight into how displaced graduate students can thrive and succeed without leaving the places where they have found refuge.<sup>27</sup>

More initiatives are required that provide more comprehensive support, such as Canada's WUSC Student Refugee Program, which removes all access and initial cost barriers to higher education

---

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Costello, "Europe's Universities Respond to Refugee Crisis," 17 October 2016, <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2016/10/europes-universities-respond-refugee-crisis/>.

<sup>25</sup> The Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies - Tāwharau Whakaumu, <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/education/research/research-centres-and-units/the-centre-for-asia-pacific-refugee-studies-.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Lucy Baily and Gül İnanç, *Access to Higher Education Refugees' Stories from Malaysia* at 9.

<sup>27</sup> Institute of International Education, "Supporting Refugee Graduate Students," <https://www.iie.org/Donate/Where-to-give/IIE-Refugee-EdTech-Program>.

through peer-to-peer sponsorship of refugees from camps directly into university and college campuses.<sup>28</sup> However, these programs are still very limited in numbers.

The Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project (*BHER*), an international development initiative that provides access to university education through a blend of online and in-person instruction in which refugee and local students are integrated into Canadian and Kenyan university classrooms.<sup>29</sup> The BHER model combines online and onsite (blended) teaching and learning to deliver university program in Dadaab camp in Kenya. Online courses are delivered through partner universities' eLearning platforms such as eClass and KUSOMA. On-site sessions are run for first-year courses (students are scaffolded into online learning with the number of online courses increasing as they progress in their studies), practicum courses, examinations, remediation, and more. The course offerings in the BHER program allow students to earn a certificate or diploma at each level of study, incrementally building towards earning a degree. This means that the same students can continue beyond the teacher training certificate and diplomas, applying their "portable" earned credit towards full degree university programs.

### *B Recognition of Informal Initiatives*

One of the keys to success and seeking opportunities is having role models who look like you, having networks, and getting the right advice. Whilst this is accessible for people who are privileged enough to grow up in these environments and are surrounded by educated family members and networks, these are not accessible for refugee youth. In the absence of formal initiatives, informal initiatives must be recognized and supported to enable students to transition effectively from secondary to tertiary education and gain important 'soft' skills.

I founded *Empower* to address the critical gap of refugee youth in education and change those statistics.<sup>30</sup> Our mission is to empower, educate, and enable refugee youth through education, leadership, and capacity-building to pursue meaningful paths of their choice. We run workshops in camps across the globe using innovative ways to access education because there simply aren't enough schools to accommodate all the youth. So far, we have been able to provide workshops and mentoring programs for over 20,000 youth. Our workshops cover skills that are important for

---

<sup>28</sup> World University Service of Canada, "The Student Refugee Program," <https://srp.wusc.ca>.

<sup>29</sup> The Borderless Higher Education for Refugees <https://www.bher.org>.

<sup>30</sup> Empower Youth Trust, [www.empoweryouth.org.nz](http://www.empoweryouth.org.nz).

refugees' futures and prepare them for higher education but that aren't necessarily taught in a classroom such as how to apply for scholarships, financial literacy, how to study effectively, how to draft application and CVs, and other fundamental skills. We also offer ongoing support through our monthly newsletter and our online speaker series amplifying refugee youth voices around the globe.

Opening Universities for Refugees (OUR) has hosted numerous forums bringing together diverse stakeholders to collaborate and create strategies for effecting change in higher education opportunities for displaced persons known as the '3C Forum'. Forum participants represented a range of organizations working in this space, including United Nations offices, non-governmental organizations, universities, schools, research organizations, community learning centers, and community activists. The 3C Forum utilizes an unconference format, which creates participant-driven dialogue rather than following a prescribed program. Unlike traditional professional gatherings, an unconference is a participant-oriented approach where the attendees decide on the agenda. This flexibility provides an opportunity for diverse stakeholders to work collaboratively on topics of common interest and provides the foundation for collective consideration of solutions.<sup>31</sup>

An important initiative coming from OUR's 3C Forum held in Malaysia was the Connecting and Equipping Refugees for Tertiary Education (*CERTE*) course to deal with the problem of "bridging" secondary and tertiary education for refugee students. A collaborative effort between OUR, UNHCR Malaysia, Teach for Refugees (T4R), Payong, and local universities, the three-week program provides refugee youth exposure to university life and builds hard and soft skills necessary for collegiate success. An evaluation of the CERTE program revealed that participants particularly valued how it built their soft skills, gave them confidence, and connected them to other students from both similar and diverse backgrounds. They include improvements in distinct skill areas for refugee students seeking entrance to tertiary education, as well as less tangible but still important network and communication effects. The most valuable element of the curriculum seems to be the soft skill components such as public speaking; several of the students praised it. Participants also praised other components such as learning about the university application process, writing a

---

<sup>31</sup> Opening Universities for Refugees <https://initiativeour.org/our-work/>.

professional email, time management, IT skills, academic reading and writing, referencing, and critical thinking.<sup>32</sup>

#### *IV Conclusion; Impact of COVID-19 and Suggestions for the Future*

In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, in a matter of weeks, universities around the world were forced to transfer their teachings from physical classrooms to online classrooms. Whilst this move was not without challenges, it did prove that innovative alternatives to traditional classrooms are possible. The positive impact of this in relation to access to education for refugees and displaced students is that there are no more excuses as we have seen high-quality, assessable courses delivered online. It has highlighted some unique education models and knowledge networks that have previously been established to support higher education access for the displaced youth. It has proved to governments and institutions what advocates have been crying out for years; that online learning is possible and is central to the delivery of education to displaced and refugee students.

We are now at a crossroads. We know what is possible. In a post-pandemic world, when things return to normality for institutions around the world and most return to physical classrooms, there will likely be a mixture of blended learning with some aspects of learning continuing online. Displaced communities will still be in their locations but there will be ample opportunities to take advantage of the unexpected development precipitated by the pandemic in providing quality education for all.

Institutions can develop digital learning curriculum that can be made available to learners across the globe. This will create space for students to access the best academic material that the university has to offer, in a format that is accessible in a wide variety of settings, to a broad set of people, including, youth who have experienced displacement

Though online learning is not going to be the panacea on its own. COVID-19 has highlighted to us the need to provide additional support to refugee background students. As a marginalised group, refugee background students face many barriers in their academic journeys and these barriers have been further exacerbated by the pandemic, for example, lack of access to a reliable internet

---

<sup>32</sup> Audrey Hudgins and Benjamin Curtis, "Evaluation of the 2016 3C Forum: A report for Opening Universities for Refugees," May 2019.

connection, lack of access to an electronic device to use for their studies — oftentimes only one device is available for the entire family, crowded living situations which make studying difficult, language barriers which depend on physically assessing the contextual setting for understanding, difficulty asking questions in an online context amongst other challenges.

We have a unique opportunity to put universities at the ‘forefront of the online revolution’ by offering online or blended learning to displaced communities.<sup>33</sup> It is critical for universities to evolve and be creative in what they have to offer and how they offer it. A new approach to education for displaced communities is possible but we must all play our part in tackling the issue of access to education, for all our futures.

For an overall change to materialise, the whole-of-society needs to play an active role. This includes having a dynamic network of experts from across a diverse range of educational and cultural backgrounds to be engaged in innovative and robust conversations about the inclusivity and equality of access to quality education.

In this regard, universities have an important role to play. In an increasingly consumer-oriented global education marketplace one of the few things that unites all universities is the global ranking system. Global rankings have been used by students to help them choose where to study, by staff looking for career opportunities and by research teams seeking new collaborative partners. Rankings of institutions in higher education have been on the basis of various combinations of various factors ranging from funding and endowments, teaching and research excellence, specialization expertise, admissions, student options, award numbers, student selectivity, graduation rate, internationalization, graduate employment, industrial linkage, historical reputation and other criteria.<sup>34</sup> Recently, rankings have been used by institutions to benchmark themselves against global competitors and even by governments to set their national higher education agendas. If offering education for displaced communities (under a criteria such as humanitarian or international community outreach) were included in the ranking system, it would act as a catalyst for all universities to engage. This tiny modification to the assessment criteria offered by these ranking agencies globally could reach all universities and not only have an immediate but also a long-term impact for access to education.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Gül İnanç and Charley Wright, “The online transition means high-quality HE for all is within our grasp.”

<sup>34</sup> Ali Khaki Sedigh. “Ethics: An indispensable dimension in the university ranking,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 23 no.1 (2016): 65–80.

<sup>35</sup> Lucy Bailly and Gül İnanç, *Access to Higher Education Refugees’ Stories from Malaysia* at 10.

Education is pivotal to changing the future for refugees and displaced persons; there is no future for countries affected by conflict or other crises unless their children learn today, and receive an education that gives them the tools and skills to be empowered to make positive change. Education empowers not only the individual, but their family, and entire community. Empowered youths can transform societies but they need access to quality education and the networking and employment opportunities that go hand in hand with higher education to help them realise their immense potential.

If we build on the unexpected developments that have come out of the pandemic, we can make serious progress towards addressing SDG 4 Access to Quality of Education and address the inherent inequalities in higher education. Universities can reach an “entirely untapped pool of talent and potential via digital means”<sup>36</sup> and displaced communities can tap into high quality educational programs that extend beyond their geographic location creating life-changing opportunities. Then we can ensure that we leave no one behind.

---

<sup>36</sup> Gül İnanç and Charley Wright, “The online transition means high-quality HE for all is within our grasp.”