



Early College Folio

Unconventional Paths to College Education

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Rolling a Boulder Up a Mountain The Path to Higher Education in Displacement Contexts

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In Kakuma Refugee Camp, tumbleweeds blow across the dry, cracked, yellowing earth outside of the door of the refugee-led organization, URise's Learning Center. Inside the building, constructed out of bright blue metal sheeting, a group of students—mostly men—are gathered in a semi-circle, headphones in, devices in hand, studying in the Refugee Higher Education Access Program (RhEAP). RhEAP is operated under the Open Society University Network (OSUN) Hubs for Connected Learning Initiatives and co-led by Bard College and BRAC University's Center for Peace and Justice. These students are studying excerpts from great works of literature and learning how to write in academic English; they are thinking, writing, and analyzing together, as they build both concrete and less tangible skills that are critical to post-secondary success. Together, they sit with Bard College-trained teaching assistants, refugees themselves, and they take classes from professors sitting at partner institutions around the world, ranging from Princeton (USA) to Central European University (Vienna) to Ashesi University (Ghana). They are the lucky ones; according to UNHCR's official data, only 3% of displaced students (as opposed to a global average of around 40% of post-secondary students worldwide) are able to access any kind of higher education opportunities.¹ Those who are born into refugee camp settings, and those who experience educational interruptions due to displacement, are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to accessing these very limited opportunities. To level the playing field, we need to build complete pipelines for students. We need to create bridging programs that can raise students' skill level, shape them into complex thinkers through liberal arts-informed approaches, and prepare them for the professional world. Then we must negotiate access to degree programs and support for identifying their own post-graduation opportunities.

Entering higher education is dependent on having access to solid primary and secondary schools. Across refugee contexts, educational opportunities at the K-12 levels are poor, with overcrowded classrooms, untrained teachers, and often different curricula from what the national learners study. In protracted situations where refugees are born into the camp, students might go through K-12 systems that follow the national curriculum but with teachers who are not part of the Ministry of Education and thus, who are pedagogically under-

prepared, as is the case in Kenya. In other protracted contexts, such as Jordan, refugees have long been integrated into the national schools and taught by Ministry of Education teachers, but until recently they were all taught in second shifts with fewer contact hours, very crowded classrooms, and the least trained teachers. Bangladesh presents a more extreme example of the impoverished K-12 refugee educational access. Until late 2022, the more than 300,000 school-age children in the Rohingya Camps had access to only four levels of informal education designed by an NGO partner and led by the education sector. This curriculum taught them the very basics of literacy and numeracy, bringing them up to around a third-grade level. Those who are driven to complete grade 10, what is called “matriculation” in the bordering country of Myanmar, have to do so in even more informal community schools led by other Rohingya who had some education prior to their displacement. Today, UNHCR is trying to launch the formal Myanmar curriculum for these students. This, too, will pose an enormous challenge when hardly any Rohingya teachers can read Burmese, nor can the host community NGO workers who are meant to lead this transition. While these three examples are quite different in terms of learner access, they all result in the creation of severely underprepared youths who do not have the skills necessary to compete for the very few post-secondary opportunities, whether in diploma, degree, or technical and vocational programs.

And yet, in spite of these unpalatable K-12 experiences, these students are hungry. As one student in the RhEAP program recently said, “education is like water; we will die without it.” The average 18 to 29-year-old, in both long-term and more recent displacement contexts, has very few options for post-secondary education. There are a limited number of scholarships for in-person study offered by major donors, such as the Mastercard Foundation in Africa or the DAFI supported by the German Academic Exchange Service [DAAD] across various locations. There are also blended, connected opportunities for displaced students, such as the Bard College–Parami University joint degree, as well as fully online and asynchronous options, like that of University of the People. Finally, there are limited Complementary Education Pathways, through which students move to a third country for the purposes of education that provides a legal solution for them to remain in that country post-graduation.

Even so, the opportunities that do exist are unattainable by the vast majority of displaced students due to their preparation levels during their inadequate preparation. Indeed, many of these scholarships go unfilled each year, or they are given to students who cannot make it through and drop out after a term or two. Thus, it is critical that higher education actors working in these contexts design innovative pipelines, sustained bridging programs that prepare learners with the necessary critical thinking, writing, and analysis skills. Such programs should lead directly to a choice of opportunities, including in-person, online, blended, and complementary education pathways. Finally, ethically, we must consider the employment landscape for which we are preparing these learners. OSUN is currently grappling with how to build this full pipeline, leveraging the diverse strengths of its global partners.

In their first step in a higher education journey, refugees can apply to the RhEAP program. The only sustained academic bridging program offered in refugee contexts, RhEAP takes learners through five modules that include academic content from the humanities, social sciences, and STEM disciplines. The program teaches them how to ask questions and to think critically, and includes a full module on university readiness and application preparation. From there, OSUN supports the learners as they move to new pathways, either within the Network or to pipeline partnerships with other institutions. The employment piece is the most challenging part of this puzzle for a higher education network and requires close collaboration between those focused on such questions, like the livelihoods teams at UNHCR offices and the private sector. RhEAP, and OSUN more broadly, takes employment considerations into account by supporting students in developing community-based projects with the intention that some can translate the experience into livelihood opportunities at a later date, so long as the students are empowered with the skills required to do so.

Finally, there is another challenge to supporting higher education in displacement contexts that must not be ignored: the NGO-created dependency culture. In the nearly 10 years that Bard College, and now OSUN, have been working in refugee contexts, especially camp settings, students have been disempowered by the many NGOs, UN actors, and others upon whom they have become dependent for food rations, shelter, and other basic needs. Students find it incredibly challenging to take full responsibility for their progress and their futures even when attending a fully-funded bridging program like RhEAP. To that end, all programs must be built upon both trauma-informed teaching practices and approaches to empowering these learners as leaders and directors, if not owners, of their own futures. Students need to be coached and guided in living with a discomfiting degree of the unknown, for most of their future hangs in the balance, and one more day of study is one day closer to that unknown.

For all higher education institutions with articulated social missions like Bard and the Open Society University Network, I would argue that we have the collective strength and an obligation to contribute to the creation of these pipelines. As the world enters the second year of unprecedented displacement, affecting over 100 million people, the time to act is now.

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ugees, internally displaced people and those in the host communities. She has also been an Associate of Bard College's Institute for Writing & Thinking since 2004, in which capacity she has developed and delivered teacher professional development in places as far reaching as Myanmar, Jordan, and Kyrgyzstan, among others. Past research has focused on the evolution of political movements inside prisons for political prisoners, with a comparative look at Palestine and South Africa. Following undergraduate and graduate studies at Bard College, Exeter College, Oxford, and CUNY, she received her PhD in Global History from Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada.

NOTES

- 1 UNHCR, “Tertiary Education,” <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education>.