Students from Refugee and Asylum Seeker Backgrounds and Meaningful Participation in Higher Education: From Peripheral to Fundamental Concern

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Abstract: For people who have experienced forced migration, the sense of agency, control, and forward momentum that can accompany engagement in higher education can become a vital driving force. In this special edition on educational engagement of students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, we highlight how attention to higher education is crucial to understanding and improving their lives. We focus on the factors that support and constrain access and meaningful participation in higher education. Here, we describe the social context for discussions in the papers that follow. We outline current issues of concern in humanitarian and resettlement settings and how these contribute to an imbalance in the production of knowledge, which we seek to address in this special edition.

Key words: structural exclusion; aspirations; politics of access; global apartheid; gender expectations

Higher education: an elusive dream?

Forced migration pulls a person out of the familiarity and stability of their everyday life, and propels them into uncertain situations. In an instant, educational aspirations, career goals, personal dreams, and familial expectations can all be drastically changed and destroyed by conflict, war and persecution. For people who are forced to leave their homes to seek asylum in other countries, interrupted education is a common hallmark (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010) with serious implications.
for both refugees and the nations where they eventually settle in the longer term. In the process of making sense of the new contexts of their lives and futures, education can be a crucial pathway to re-establish the sense of security and stability that was lost. Higher education in particular can provide opportunities to become familiar with the language and sociocultural norms of a new country, with pathways to employment and social connections. Access to and meaningful participation in higher education settings are absolutely fundamental to supporting the settlement process and promoting the well-being of people from refugee backgrounds.

However, issues of restricted access to university and other higher education institutions, limited opportunities, gender prescribed sociocultural norms, and financial constraints often prevent the meaningful participation of people from refugee backgrounds. Given the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR’s) estimates that there are currently 68.5 million people displaced across the globe, including 25.4 million registered refugees, the idea of preventing such vast numbers of people from accessing higher education does not bode well, for themselves, and for the communities where they have sought asylum or been resettled. The human cost of neglecting education for such a large population of displaced people is, therefore, potentially disastrous. The educational experiences and pathways of people from refugee backgrounds warrant further dedicated attention. In this special edition of *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, we place forced migration, refugee-hood, and asylum seeking at the centre of discussions about educational engagement. We highlight how attention to higher education is crucial to understanding and improving the lives of people from refugee backgrounds.

Before turning to the focus of this special edition, we first state our language choices, and note important distinctions in legal status that open and constrain educational opportunities for people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. According to the UNHCR (2018a), a refugee is a person who has been forced to flee their country due to persecution, violence or war, and who has been recognised as such. In contrast, an asylum seeker is someone who has left her/his own country to seek protection as a refugee in another, and whose claim of refugee status is still being processed (UNHCR, 2018b). These definitions may appear to be straightforward and broadly encompassing, but the reality is that the application of these internationally recognised legal identities is complex and contingent on national governments’ legal systems, meaning that many people who identify as refugees (or have legitimate claims) may not, in fact, have legal refugee
status. Furthermore, there is growing recognition that processing asylum claims or determining refugee status can take extended periods of time, sometimes years (Hathaway and Foster, 2014).

In this special edition, we recognise the salience of the UNHCR categories but also acknowledge that people from refugee backgrounds may not identify with or be formally identified through such conventions. Subsequently, we use the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ with the caveat that they poorly represent individual lived experiences of being forcibly displaced. Even then, ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum seekers’ cannot and must not be treated as a homogenous group as they do not necessarily share any significant national, cultural, social, economic, political or personally common experiences. Nonetheless, what often brings such individuals together as a form of ‘accidental community’ (Weston and Lenette, 2016) is structural exclusion from essential legal and social services in countries where they have sought asylum, including access to education.

The sheer scale of contemporary situations of forced migration provides a clear impetus to understand the kinds of educational experiences and opportunities that are available to people from refugee backgrounds in all their complexity. At the same time, popular media and political discourse have come to rely on often problematic tropes and stereotypes to represent refugees, often portraying them as a security risk, a burden on social welfare systems in the nations hosting them, a racialised ‘other’ (Walker Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016; Hage, 1998), or otherwise as vulnerable and passive victims (Anderson, 2017). Such tropes are not only disrespectful and disingenuous, but also fail to recognise that experiences of forced migration are complex and heterogeneous. Importantly, such narratives often exclude the very people – refugees and asylum seekers – from framing public narratives expressed about their experiences. We contend that bringing education into dialogues about forced migration is one way to push back against such limited and damaging representations of refugees, and a research agenda through which the complex and unique personal backgrounds, experiences and aspirations of people from refugee backgrounds can be foregrounded, at least in academic scholarship.

Higher education can provide myriad benefits, especially as a critical avenue for self-determination. Apart from potentially attaining advanced educational qualifications to access various jobs, higher education can also expand one’s general knowledge and experiences, leading to the development of critical-thinking skills that are crucial to the reproduction of an active and
socially engaged civil society. More significantly, however, pursuing higher education can lead people to feel autonomous and in control of their lives. For people in refugee situations, whose futures are often uncertain, the sense of agency, control and forward momentum that can accompany engagement in higher education can become a vital driving force.

The contingent and contested access to education for people from refugee backgrounds does not mean, however, that it is a peripheral aspect of their lives. In fact, educational opportunity is a broadly significant aspiration of many refugees and asylum seekers (Perry and Mallozzi, 2017; Harris and Marlowe, 2011; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Studying in preparation for or as part of a higher education programme is often a way to pass the time, either in a country of asylum or while awaiting asylum claims or refugee status determinations to be processed (Crea, 2016; Gately, 2014; Zeus, 2011). Educational opportunity (or lack thereof) not only structures the everyday lives of people from refugee backgrounds, but also impacts on the employment and livelihood opportunities available to them in the future (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). This means that restricting access to education can seriously impede the socio-economic mobility of refugees and asylum seekers in the short and longer term. Providing education in contexts of protracted displacement can also impact on post-conflict reconstruction in their home nations, if they are eventually repatriated (Avery and Said, 2007; Brown, 2006). Even when refugees have access to education, their study experiences are impacted by processes of forced migration structuring their lives in ways that are distinct from the experiences of citizens or migrants.

**Higher education in humanitarian contexts**

Despite the high stakes of excluding such large populations of displaced people from educational opportunities, education – and particularly higher education – continues to be a peripheral topic across humanitarian interventions, government policy, and academic scholarship. A primary reason for this neglect is due to how displacement has been conventionally represented and approached in popular political, humanitarian and scholarly imaginaries. Displacement is largely understood as an experience characterised by crisis and emergency, and humanitarian responses have traditionally reflected that temporal urgency by focusing on providing forms of care and protection that support access to essential needs like food, clean water, housing and medical care (Brun, 2016). The problem with such conventional approaches is that many people end up spending years, and even decades, in such situations, long after basic needs have been met. Yet, the
provision of education and other services that might provide refugees with longer term stability and the possibility of socio-economic mobility have been neglected in conventional humanitarian models of care and protection, which tend to position refugees solely as passive recipients of aid (Betts et al., 2017).

As most of the world’s refugees will live in protracted humanitarian situations – especially in developing countries, the need to seriously consider the educational opportunities they have access to has emerged as more of a priority in recent years. The UNHCR and other key humanitarian institutions involved in the care and protection of refugees have placed renewed emphasis on higher education in such contexts. Since 2012, the UNHCR has adopted a new education strategy focusing on integrating refugees into national education systems: that is, by developing partnerships with the governments of host nations to incorporate refugee students into existing systems, rather than create stand-alone programmes of education specifically for refugees. Although this step suggests a renewed focus on the importance of education in protracted humanitarian situations, relying on local government partnerships can itself be problematic, given their often overstretched and poorly resourced education systems.

Nonetheless, education remains a priority for the UNHCR, and access to ‘accredited quality higher education’ for refugees is included in the 2017–2021 UNHCR strategic directions (UNHCR, 2019). This mandate has led to new efforts to develop scholarship programmes for refugees in countries of first asylum (like Germany) to create partnership learning opportunities with affiliated universities. In addition, examples of digital higher education access are emerging (Reinhardt et al., 2018) as new developments in technology facilitate developing online solutions to higher education access and participation. To support such initiatives, advocacy at local levels is crucial to mitigate barriers that might limit university enrolments, like gender expectations or financial constraints.

Although these and other higher education initiatives are to be applauded, they remain limited to a ‘lucky’ few. Most people in protracted refugee situations still do not have access to higher education. Many are urban refugees who are not formally registered with the UNHCR and so cannot benefit from such programmes. Others may be in immigration detention or awaiting an outcome on their application for asylum, meaning that their rights to access the same educational opportunities are curtailed. Even for people who have been resettled or who have had their asylum cases accepted (with residency) in host countries, access to higher education is still prohibitive
because of financial or more implicit forms of exclusion. The neglect of education in dominant configurations of humanitarian support for refugees filters into other aspects of governance and restricts the range of choices to a problematic binary between economic burdens (passive recipients of aid) or economic boons (potential entrepreneurs or boosts to local economies), but without attention to people’s aspirations and desires (Ramsay, 2019).

**Higher education in (re)settlement contexts**

Access to higher education in (re)settlement contexts is no less contested. *Resettlement* is a specific ‘pillar’ of the UNHCR’s programme and partner organisations in countries of asylum that transfer refugees to designated third countries like the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany and Nordic nations for permanent settlement and residency. *Settlement* refers to situations where refugees have been accepted through the legal apparatus of a country to settle there permanently, with guarantees of residency (and eventually, with access to citizenship privileges).

In both settlement and resettlement contexts, there is often an existing higher education infrastructure – that is, an established network of universities and tertiary institutions. Although it could be assumed that the existence of this infrastructure would make participating in higher education more attainable for people from refugee backgrounds, the growing corpus of scholarship on access to and participation in higher education in (re)settlement contexts shows that this is highly problematic. Financial aspects, language requirements, systemic inflexibilities, confusing bureaucracies, family responsibilities, gender expectations, discrimination, racism, and the ongoing emotional impact of trauma can all have a prohibitive effect on accessing higher education. More fundamentally, and as readers of *WPLL* will already be aware, higher education institutions generally cater to student groups that often have the social and financial capital to manoeuvre education systems. The tertiary sector, across contexts, is often ill-equipped to mediate the specific needs and be inclusive of students from diverse or under-represented groups like refugees.

The growing body of scholarship on the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds and higher education in (re)settlement contexts is increasingly acknowledged (Ramsay and Baker, 2019; Stevenson and Baker, 2018; Mangan and Winter, 2017). However, given that: (i) less than one per cent of the world’s refugees are actually resettled each year, and (ii) asylum-seeking processes are increasingly contentious and challenging around the globe, this disproportionate emphasis on (re)settlement contexts – especially...
in contrast to humanitarian contexts – reveals an imbalance in the production of knowledge. In preparing this special edition, we were acutely aware of the ongoing tendency to centre developed, western nations from the Global North as dominant sites of knowledge production about education, while perspectives from developing, Global South nations remain at the periphery. We were committed to drawing attention to this unevenness as we describe below, to shed light on the significance of education within broader struggles over power and in/exclusion. As such, the educational experiences of people from refugee backgrounds (or lack thereof) reflect broader contestations over knowledge production.

**Global power hierarchies and the struggle for education**

The struggle for equitable access to higher education is inextricably bound with the broader politics of access to and authority over powerful knowledge domains along racial and gender lines, like the academy, which originates from western nations. Many scholars have referred to this boundary between the Global North (generally comprising the United States, Canada, Europe, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, Russia and the Gulf States) and Global South (Caribbean rim, nearly all of Africa, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Middle East and Southwest Asia, and much of Southeast Asia) as an invisibly reinforced, but nonetheless salient, kind of global apartheid (Besteman, 2018; Hage, 2016). This demarcation emerged from the times of colonial exploration and expansion and then well into the 20th and 21st centuries through projects of mobility controls, labour exploitation, and the dispossession of people in and from the Global South to the advantage of the Global North. It is still apparent today through restrictions on migration and brutal border control regimes to reproduce North/South power hierarchies. This global apartheid extends to access to higher education, as many of the papers in this special edition attest to.

The exclusion of people from refugee backgrounds from higher education is not, then, just a disruption to educational aspirations and dreams for a better future. Rather, this exclusion represents another instance of reproduced global apartheid, where the power of the Global North is reinforced at the expense of people from the Global South. Subsequently, when powerful actors such as policymakers, humanitarian workers, and researchers overlook education in dialogues about refugees, this is not just a casual absence. This is a form of solidifying global hierarchies and inequalities about knowledge and power by implicitly reaffirming who gets access to education and who does not. When citizenship and civic rights to seek out educational
opportunities are missing, access to education for refugees and asylum seekers simply may not be in the repertoire of choices that are made available to them through humanitarian systems of care and protection.

The transformative power of higher education

This special edition focuses on a relatively unexplored aspect of refugee education: higher education. There are numerous reasons why higher education continues to be overlooked in refugee scholarship, and remains a topic that does not create a high sense of urgency. One explanation is that conflict and forced migration can often lead to disrupted schooling, and large gaps in primary or secondary education may foreclose the possibility of accessing higher education. But this outcome is not the singular result of individual educational deficiencies. Rather, gaps in education are exacerbated in asylum as – in most of those situations – host nations do not automatically provide rights of access to higher education in the same ways they might support citizens to do so. Governments (and researchers) often treat refugees and asylum seekers as a problem to be solved, or an economic burden on host nations (Ramsay, 2019; Collier and Betts, 2017). Subsequently, the focus on stabilising livelihoods and reducing the economic pressure on host societies eclipses concerns about post-secondary and higher education.

Nevertheless, ignoring this issue can have detrimental consequences for individuals, emerging and established communities, and nations as a whole. Restricting refugees from accessing higher education imposes limits on their own aspirations, and future dreams for themselves and their family. As most refugees spend years, even decades, in protracted situations without access to educational opportunities, they are often (although not always) at a significant socio-economic disadvantage. When resettled, access to higher education is crucial to efforts towards increasing their sense of belonging (Lenette, 2016; Harris et al., 2015; Morrice, 2013) and restrictions on those opportunities can impact on how they develop social connections in host nations (Grace et al., 2018). Economically, the effects can be disastrous. Education is a crucial determinant of socio-economic mobility, and limiting access to higher education may solidify individuals’ economic precarity over the long-term and restrict them from workforce opportunities that may lead to sustainable livelihoods (Lenette et al., 2019; Stevenson and Baker, 2018). Once people’s circumstances propel them into the possibility of long-term, intergenerational and socio-economic disadvantage, addressing this issue can become much more complex.
People aspire to undertake tertiary studies for a myriad of personal reasons, but for refugees, in particular, aspirations for a better future is a primary motivating factor (Lenette, 2016). Engaging in higher education can also be a thread of personal control for people whose lives have otherwise been impacted on and directed by external forces of conflict and war. In addition, higher education can be a crucial mechanism for peacebuilding in post-conflict situations, thereby greatly impacting on repatriation processes (Avery and Said, 2017; Brown, 2006). These reasons highlight the importance of expanding the contours of critical discussions on meaningful participation in higher education as a fundamental concern.

Politics of representation

For this special edition, we seek to emphasise that bringing attention to the educational experiences of people from refugee backgrounds is not a neutral or inherently benevolent line of scholarly inquiry, but an analytical field that encompasses contested politics of knowledge in which factors such as race, gender, sexuality, age and socio-economic status, among others, intersect. What this means is that putting education at the centre of dialogues about forced migration also requires being critically attentive to the ways that scholarship can reproduce exclusionary representations of knowledge and experience. This is especially important in forced migration research, which has been dominated by researchers who talk about people from refugee backgrounds – almost always without first-hand experiences of forced migration – rather than attempt to incorporate their perspectives into the broader research process, from design to dissemination. Even when seeking to produce research that mediates a vast oversight and social injustice towards people who could be marked as vulnerable, academic scholarship routinely reflects conventional systems of global inequality, where power is concentrated within institutions and people from the Global North and along racial and gender lines where whiteness and maleness are privileged. We fully acknowledge our own complicity through our own work as academics who are migrants working in prestigious institutions in powerful, well-resourced, anglophone and white-majority countries.

Although we realise that this special edition will not radically transform such uneven power dynamics that pervade academic research, we hope, nonetheless, to set a platform of critical self-reflection from which future research can be developed in ways that puts people from refugee backgrounds at the centre of knowledge production.
Preparing this Special Edition

What we offer as Guest Editors is our common passion for the topic and social justice-concerned research. As an attempt to navigate uneven power dynamics shaping how people from refugee backgrounds are represented through academic research and publications, we implemented a number of initiatives to encourage the inversion of conventional hierarchies of knowledge production throughout the development of this special edition. Firstly, we deliberately sought to include papers that reflect the experiences of people from across a range of different contexts of forced migration: from asylum seekers who have yet to be formally recognised as refugees, people who have been formally identified as refugees and have temporary refuge, those living in protracted situations of displacement in a country of refuge, to former refugees who have been permanently resettled in another country where they have residency status. Secondly, we tried to encourage the submission of papers from institutions outside the Global North to disrupt the hegemony of western-based institutions in dominating academic research outputs. In particular, in our call for papers, we sought to privilege papers where people with lived experiences would be co-authors to disrupt the (often well-intentioned) telling of others’ tales by those who cannot understand the subjective realities of such experiences. Thirdly, we encouraged a forum for practitioners to offer reflexive accounts of their own practices in working with/as refugees and asylum seekers, whose perspectives are also rarely considered in the academic literature. Finally, we offered writing mentorship to people who were relatively inexperienced in writing academic articles, to walk alongside these writers as they grappled with the conventions of academic writing. We had mixed results with these strategies but feel that our approach makes a useful contribution, however modest, to decolonising the academy and refugee research.

Overview of papers

To try to do justice to the complex and layered dimensions that surround this topic, we have structured this special edition in a way that provides diverse entry points into this topic. Along with a section that includes more conventional research articles, we have a section dedicated to personal accounts and reflections from people from refugee backgrounds who have studied in higher education systems. We also have a section that focuses explicitly on innovative practice models as outlined by practitioners who are working in this field. Overall, we have included selected papers across these
three sections because they represent a wide array of experiences and perspectives across diverse global contexts, although we acknowledge that, despite our best efforts to disrupt conventional power dynamics about the production of knowledge, the perspectives we include here are nonetheless limited in scope and primarily speaking from contexts in the Global North.

We begin with a section that introduces the topic from the perspectives of people from refugee backgrounds who have themselves participated in higher education. Devendra Kodwani, Professor at The Open University in the UK, shares his experiences of pursuing education after being born in a refugee camp in post-partition India. He points us to the significance of mentoring and resources that are often lacking in the educational opportunities offered to people in refugee situations, but which are crucial to the intellectual growth and personal development that higher education can provide. Iglal Kodi and Nisha Thapliyal narrate the story of an educator who was inspired to enter the teaching profession as a result of her own interrupted schooling experiences after fleeing Sudan and seeking temporary refuge in Egypt. She was eventually resettled in Australia. She highlights the significance that meaningful teaching can have on student experiences, which has guided her contemporary path through teacher training in Australia. Similarly presenting us with the personal history of a student from a refugee background who has completed a doctorate in Australia, Alfred Mupenzi, Loshini Naidoo and Susanne Gannon use a postcolonial analysis to bring attention to the historical forces and local, national and supranational power dynamics that shape the education experiences of students from refugee backgrounds. When these longer histories are excluded from analyses of refugee experiences of higher education, then these students tend to emerge as a problem to be solved, rather than creative individuals with resilience, drive and much to contribute to the institution. Taken together, these three personal accounts reiterate the need to move beyond homogenising assumptions about the struggles that one must overcome to be ‘successful’ in higher education, and instead demand that we—institutional actors in higher education—recognise their inherent capacity to be valued and meaningful participants in higher education spaces.

Next, the research articles provide insight into the diverse experiences of students across various global contexts, drawing conclusions about how these fit into and expand the broader theoretical and empirical ways of thinking about this topic. First, Stefanie Schröder, Michael Grüttner and Jana Berg discuss how, even though many newly arrived refugees in Germany are highly qualified and have strong educational and academic aspirations, the system of preparatory colleges that function to prepare potential students for
acceptance into higher education institutions can nonetheless serve to reinscribe problematic notions of meritocracy and difference. Then, using a case study of a Chaldean woman resettled in Australia, Jeannette Lawrence, Shamiran Merhaal and Agnes Dodds draw our attention to the gendered cultural expectations that can impact on how women from refugee backgrounds participate in higher education, with implications for institutional support. Faith Mkwananzi and Patience Mukwambo follow with an article that provides insight into an initiative to widen participation in higher education in South Africa for marginalised students using Open Distance Learning, and show how unconventional access to higher education can enable students to redefine their aspirations. Next, Wondwosen Tamrat and Samuel Dermas examine the aspirations and experiences of medical students from Eritrean refugee backgrounds in Ethiopia, and the gap between student needs and available institutional supports. Aaron Kreimer and Silke Boenigk follow with an analysis of a widening participation initiative for asylum seekers and refugees in Germany, showing the cross-sector alliance between a public university, the local government, and non-profit organisations that made it possible to set up a higher education orientation programme for students from refugee backgrounds. They describe five key points through which widening participation programmes, especially through collective action frameworks, can work more effectively. Lastly, Caroline Fleay, Abbas, Ghulam Mumtaz, Mehdi Vakili, Nasrullah, Lisa Hartley, Baden Offord, Christopher Macfarlane and Rosemary Sayer conclude this section by emphasising the significance of lived experiences and collaboration with refugees and asylum seekers when developing higher education pathways. They describe how a collective of people seeking asylum, academics, students, and community members in Australia have sought to overcome and circumvent the restrictions to accessing higher education by finding innovative ways to open up the university to students from refugee backgrounds.

The next section encompasses a selection of innovative practice papers, which bring the perspectives of practitioners in this field into the academic dialogue about widening participation to higher education for students from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds. To begin, Carla Nayton, Gillian Meek and Ruby Foletta describe how the Education Program ran through the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) works to respond to and address the multifaceted challenges experienced by people seeking asylum in Australia who want to access higher education. Then, Scott McKenzie, Hannah Bayfield, Jan Stephens and Ffiona Mills outline various programmes
developed through Cardiff University in the UK that aim to widen access to higher education for students from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds, and the implications that have stemmed from the operation of these programmes over time. Finally, Felipe Balotin, Tatyana Friedrich and José Peres Gediel describe how a ‘whole of university’ approach to widening participation has produced effective results at the Federal University of Paraná in Brazil. Taken together, these innovative practice papers provide case studies of programmes that have created more inclusive higher education environments for students from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds, and may hold implications for future widening participation initiatives.

We conclude the special edition with a paper by Kristin Reimer, Mervi Kaukko, Karen Dunwoodie, Jane Wilkinson and Sue Webb that points towards the ethical and methodological complexities of research with people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds as a central concern for scholars and practitioners engaged in this field. These authors suggest that such unique ethical considerations are not adequately met by conventional university standards and urge us to take into account the more emotive, practical and moral implications of our work, engaging not only the ‘head’ but also the ‘heart’, ‘hands’ and ‘feet’.

As guest co-editors, we present this special edition with much pride and trepidation. We hope that the discussions that follow trigger a new level of engagement with the topic for all those concerned with the agenda of access and meaningful participation in higher education.
References


