CENTRE FOR GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Improving the Participation of Syrian Refugees in Higher Education through Online Study Courses

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Social enterprise and NGO

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Geopolitics of higher education

Context

- Ongoing civil war in Syria.
- Displacement of 12 million people (UNHCR 2024), many youths (Dereli 2018).
- Neighbouring countries (Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq) received most refugees.
- 13 years into the war, displaced children are now university age.

Rationale

- Donor interest in transferability of the model to other vulnerable contexts.
- Lack of documentation of experience with online higher education in the region or in similar contexts (conflict or crisis).

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Speakers

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Research questions

Research question 1

Under which conditions is online higher education successful? What are the major success factors and challenges?

Are there region-specific conditions (language, culture etc.) that affect the success of online studies for selected target groups?

Research question 2

To which other vulnerable groups (e.g. socially disadvantaged youth, youth living in remote regions, young women) can this approach be transferred? And how?

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Methodology

Primary data

- Learnings from the pilot project of the German development cooperation.
- Interviews (n=75).
  - Syrian students since 2020 pursuing bachelor's and master's degrees online.
  - Graduates.
  - Online education providers.
  - International organisations and governments.

Secondary data

- Analysis of extant literature (92 publications).
  - Very few studies on Syria, refugees, AND online education.
  - Used elements of several broader studies, focusing on MENA region, online education, and vulnerable contexts.
- Review of 99 documents, including internal company records, governmental reports, and white papers.

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Perspectives from the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Policy and Advocacy
- National Policies
- International Advocacy

Geopolitical Implications
- Soft Power and Influence
- Regional Stability

International Support and Collaboration
- Scholarships and Funding
- Collaborative Initiatives

Cultural and Social Dimensions
- Cultural Exchange and Integration
- Challenges of Identity and Belonging

Impact on Home Country Education
- Loss of Academic Talent
- Rebuilding Efforts

Host Countries' Higher Education Systems
- Capacity and Resources
- Integration Challenges

Digital and Distance Learning
- Online Education
- Technology and Innovation

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Online higher education

In general

Success factors

- Enhances teaching effectiveness and impact.
- Facilitates personalised learning and adaptive technologies.
- Encourages flexible pathways.
- Supports hybrid & blended learning models.
- Improves access and inclusivity.

Internal Challenges

- Requires student engagement, motivation, student-faculty interaction to reduce feelings of loneliness.
- Requires training and supporting faculty.
- Struggles to integrate online collaboration and social learning.
- Requires technological infrastructure, digital literacy.

External Challenges

- Negative perceptions of online learning, not recognised by host countries.
- Complex quality assurance and accreditation requirements.
- Restrictive employment for graduates e.g. in public sector.

Source: Empirical findings and published reports in literature, see references.

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Online higher education

For displaced students, it can be more challenging

- Inaccessibility to identification papers and educational documents for HE.
- Requirement to pass English foundation courses (also in Arabic programmes).
- Student dropout during the foundation phase.
- Family role and gender of student.
- Adaptation to online learning environment.
- Specific living conditions in refugee camps.
  - Unstable electricity supply.
  - Slow internet connection.
  - One mobile device per household > limited ability to develop digital literacy.

Source: Empirical findings and published reports in literature, see references.

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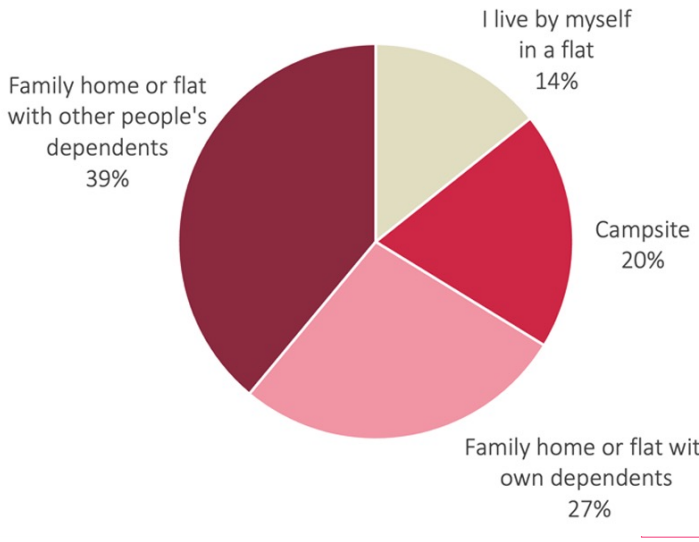
Most share living quarters

Responses to where displaced students live



Source: Empirical data (Paeradigms 2023), survey of 77 respondents

Student perceptions

- Displaced persons believe they are frequently confronted with HE programmes not matching their demand.
- No recognition by official bodies of education and knowledge development.
- Structure of integration services is frustrating due to poor inter-actor communication and lengthy waiting periods.
- Syrian refugee students have positive perceptions of blended learning.
  - It develops their ability to learn on their own and improve their computer skills.
  - High degree of satisfaction on the convenience, usability, and adaptability of blended learning.
- Albanian students perceived online learning as difficult and full of obstacles.
  - Students had to modify their learning strategies to adjust to online learning.
  - Found it challenging to focus and comprehend the subject and felt anxious before tests.

Source: Empirical findings and published reports in literature, see references.

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Public perceptions

- Host countries may not prioritise HE, e.g. the government in Lebanon has not prioritised HE due to other urgent crises.
- Perceptions of the public in the host countries towards online HE are influenced by the government's position.
- Parents' views still influence student perceptions, and parents in the affected countries tend to be traditional and think in-person learning is superior.

Source: Empirical findings and published reports in literature, see references.

Quality features for student satisfaction

- Asynchronous learning modes, students don't chase their courses.
- Clear course vocabulary (e.g. academic language not taught in foundation language courses).
- Proper illustration of material in online modules.
- Reasonable requirements of online modules.
- Moderate pace of course track.
- Easy to follow online directions.
- Having instructors that deliver the information with passion.

Source: Empirical findings and published reports in literature, see references.

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How to minimize dropouts?

Observation

- High dropout rates are a consequence of non-selective admissions and low-cost models.
- Monitoring student success: The learning paths are not linear, and students can proceed as they wish, making it difficult to understand if students are truly "gone" or suspending their study temporarily (Paeradigms, 2023).

Measures

- Foundation courses, counselling, programme advising.
- Flexible entry and exit points allow students to move towards a degree at their own pace.
- Asynchronous learning provides greater opportunities for women.

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Key point for donors

Conditions for improving employability

- Job-ready curriculum design.
- Applicability and practical experience.
- Learning outcomes.
- Accreditation of online HEIs in countries of residence.
- Labour market access:
  - Skilled employability requiring academic study.
  - Unskilled employability.
  - Issue of exploitation of refugees.

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Response to research question 1:

Under which conditions is online higher education successful? What are the major success factors and challenges?

- Flexible pathways offered by online platforms are especially beneficial for those unable to attend traditional classes, including women, working adults, and vulnerable groups.
- Success factors include autonomy, language proficiency, open mindset, and reliable internet access and devices. Refugees often require additional support, such as advising and mental assistance.
- Pursuing online qualifications significantly boosts refugees' self-esteem, reshaping their identity from "refugee" to "student".
- Online learning can be lonely. Students value opportunities for increased interaction with instructors, advisors, and peers.
- Limited recognition of online degrees in host countries restricts job prospects for graduates.

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Response to research question 2:

To which other vulnerable groups can this approach be transferred? And how?

S	• Asynchronous & flexible • Gender equality • UoPeople capacity • Program languages • Gaining knowledge • Designed Curriculum
O	• Other refugee contexts • Demand by refugees • Limited supply of free online learning
W	• Degree not recognised • Student services • Graduate rate • Language proficiency • Lack of social interaction • Lack of practical orientation, such as internships
T	• Negative perception • Reactive communication • Challenging MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning) environment

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Potential transferability

Other displaced populations

- **Venezuela**
  - 7.7 million refugees (Dec 2023).
  - High English proficiency.
  - Course offering in Spanish (can benefit non-refugee Spanish-speaking population).
- **Ukraine**
  - 6.2 million refugees (Feb 2024).
  - Course offering in Ukrainian.
- **South Sudan**
  - 2.3 million refugees (Feb 2024).

Other vulnerable groups

- Socially disadvantages youth and women.
- Youth and women in rural areas.
- Persons living with disabilities.
- Indigenous or minority groups.

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How? ...addressing the gaps

- **Accreditation is a key condition to the success of online HE.**
- Performance indicators.
- Proper definition of a "graduate".
- Learning environment of displaced persons.
- Legal framework (e.g. student status for undocumented persons, restrictions on eligibility for employment in host country).

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Recommendations

For policymakers

Policy coherence

Multi-stakeholder collaboration

Prioritising access

Normalising perceptions

For donors

Project design

Strong support from implementing agency

Clarify performance indicators

Ensure the participation of women

Embed partnerships for coherency

Understand implications of degree recognition

Monitoring

Clearly defining metrics

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Recommendations

For online education providers

Student services	Teaching & learning
Preparing for study	Add communication mechanisms
Guidance on study options and pathways	Enhance personal contact
Extra help with languages	Integrate program advising
Recognising prior learning	Add short courses

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Recommendations for Policymakers by Evaluation Criteria (OECD DAC)

Relevance	Coherence	Efficiency	Effectiveness	Sustainability	Impact
Asynchronous online learning highly relevant	Need to cooperate with local partner organization or university to provide human interface	Low investment cost per student Need to consider drop-out and retention rates	Demand-oriented programmes (Arabic) match the need Spanish could have same effect Labor market analysis for better course offering and employability Involvement of Ministry of Labor	Change focus from admission numbers to graduation outcomes Consider accreditation Improve service	Longitudinal studies to capture ○ Post-graduate experiences ○ Feedback about the programme ○ Gender issues ○ Employment data

...in closing

Contributions

- Advances policy solutions.
- Offers applicable solutions for practitioners and donors.

Limitations

- Limited sample size.
- Qualitative results have value but are not fully representative.

Future research

- Comparative research between asynchronous, online, and hybrid learning models.
- Longitudinal study of students.
- Tracer studies.
- Impact of artificial intelligence both positive (as a tool) and negative (as an obstacle to assessing student work).

end