Improving the participation of

Syrian refugees in education through online study courses

Accompanying Research Study

Imprint

Accompanying research study

GIZ commissioned Paeradigms in January 2023 to conduct a research study on online higher education for vulnerable contexts as an extension of the scheduled mid-term review of a pilot project of providing access to online higher education for Syrian refugees. This document summarises the results, learnings, and recommendations.

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Paeradigms

Paeradigms is an NGO and social enterprise that focuses on transformational outcomes that lead to social change and economic impact. It supports development actors and implements its own projects.

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The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of GIZ.

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Abbreviations

BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung *Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Germany)*	
DAAD	Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service)	
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)	
DAFI	Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative scholarship program	
DC	Development cooperation	
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System	
ERIC	Education Resource Information Center	
FL	Future Learn	
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH	
KII	Key informant interview	
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning	
MTR	Mid-term review (referring to the UoPeople-GIZ pilot project)	
NGO	Non-governmental organisation	
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	
ToC	Theory of Change	
ToR	Terms of Reference	
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	
UNHCR	United Nations Higher Refugee Council	

Abstract

Online education offers substantial promise for development cooperation as it can improve access to higher education for refugees among many vulnerable populations. Flexible pathways provide solutions for women, adults, and other learners who are not able to attend in-person, scheduled class sessions. This study is focused on refugees and examines the success factors and challenges of teaching and learning online while considering region-specific conditions, such as language and culture, which can have a positive or negative effect on the possibility of successfully implementing online studies for selected target groups. Information is included from a pilot project developed from a grant agreement between the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the University of People to improve access to higher education for Syrian refugees. Ultimately, the study responds to the question of whether this pilot project can be transferred to other refugee populations as vulnerable groups and provides policy recommendations for the various stakeholders involved. A literature review was conducted, examining online higher education studies specific to Syrian refugees and success factors for online education in general and education of any kind for Syrian refugees. Empirical evidence from development cooperation initiatives was used to provide specific examples, in particular, the mid-term review of the pilot project. Data from other empirical sources was limited due to the challenging nature of accessing essential information that can be of proper use in this study. The pilot has been successful in providing the opportunity for Syrian refugees to not only gain skills and therefore improve employment options but also to gain an identity other than "refugee" – that of a student – which greatly improves their sense of self-worth and mental health. Online learning poses significant communication challenges ranging from student-faculty interactions to students' feelings of loneliness. For refugees, these factors are more pronounced due to their difficult living situations, often in camps and with unreliable electricity and internet connections. Significant barriers include a persistent negative perception of online education and the fact that governments of host countries do not or not fully recognise online degrees, which restricts employment opportunities for graduates, particularly in the public sector. In addressing these challenges and in designing future projects, development cooperation projects should provide greater support to the online education provider to help overcome negative perceptions through strategic external evidence-based communication, which eventually can contribute to improving the image of online education and gaining recognition of the degrees, thus, improving the prospects of refugees in the pilot project. In conclusion, the study found that online learning and studying is a suitable tool for improving the lives of vulnerable populations, particularly refugees. It is recommended to consider online higher education as an efficient intervention option in development cooperation.

Keywords: online higher education, e-learning, vulnerable populations, Syrian refugees

1   Introduction

1.1 Background and context

The increasing numbers of refugees have caused economic, social, and security challenges for host countries and governments. Millions of young refugees have forced sponsors, development agencies, and higher education providers to come up with innovative solutions, such as providing scholarship funding for online learning. According to Dereli (2018), the Syrian refugee population, for example, is mostly composed of youth and children, which is why education has become an important asset for their empowerment, protection, and integration.

This study intends to explore to what extent online higher education studies as a means of human capacity development could be successfully upscaled and transferred to other world regions and other target groups in the context of international development cooperation. However, a major challenge remains the high and increasing number of displaced persons worldwide.

1.2   Objectives and goals of the project

Against this background, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) – on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) – is supporting a pilot project in the MENA region targeting Syrian refugees in four neighbouring host countries. GIZ has entered into a grant agreement with University of the People (UoPeople), which offers online higher education programs in English and Arabic language. The project aims to foster the employability of refugees in the MENA region through online higher education targeting this disadvantaged group. Another major goal is to achieve equity between men and women participants.

This research study was commissioned by GIZ as an extension of the required mid-term review (MTR) following the OECD-DAC evaluation principles (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact) of the pilot project. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

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

(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?

(3) Are there any region-specific conditions (language, culture etc.) which have a positive or negative effect on the possibility of successfully implementing online studies for selected target groups?

To answer these questions, the research team undertook a literature review of the status quo of online education, seeking, in particular, research into the provision of online higher education for refugees among other vulnerable groups. Reports from development cooperation and humanitarian projects that address the provision of online higher education were also included in the literature review. The research is supported by empirical findings from the MTR. Other empirical evidence was difficult to access due to the confidential nature of such information and the scant reports available in the public domain.

With regard to transferability, the study analyses the terms and conditions for other target groups such as Ukraine, Venezuela, and South Sudan. The observations and findings from the pilot project at UoPeople are

used to support findings from the literature or to illustrate some issues. The perspective of the immediate beneficiaries, the students, is the focus of this study. The triangulation of published data and empirical findings results in policy recommendations.

The findings of the mid-term report revealed good insights into various aspects of online higher education, but a much broader database would have been required to allow valid and evidence-based conclusions. Publications presenting facts and findings from any other relevant development cooperation (DC) programs, such as DAFI, UNHCR-related projects, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), reports on previous projects of University of People, or other well-known US-based Universities offering online programs to vulnerable groups were few and of limited use as a source of evidence-based data. Hence, the study applies a rigorous literature review, collect expert opinions on specific aspects and present initial findings from the MTR.

1.3 Structure of the report

This study is structured as follows. Chapter 2 describes the methodological approach, with reference to the MTR from which empirical data is drawn. Chapter 3 responds to research question (1) by providing a baseline overview of the status quo of online education. The research team notes that there is very little literature specific to vulnerable populations; however, the empirical findings from the MTR indicate that many of the issues are the same as for the general population; thus, these findings are relevant. Chapter 4 responds to research question (3) by homing in on the particulars of online education for refugees, also referencing general literature that applies to the refugee context. Ultimately, the common aim of all stakeholder groups is improved employment and integration possibilities for refugees, and thus, this topic is addressed in Chapter 5 as a key outcome of online higher education (for refugees and in general) and thus an extended response to research questions (1) and (3). Chapter 6 responds to research question (2), which is a conclusion of the study based on the answers to questions (1) and (3) and sets a path forward for future projects. Finally, Chapter 7 provides recommendations organised by stakeholder group.

2   Methodology

This study aims to derive insights rooted in empirical evidence from development cooperation initiatives involved in online studies, refugees, or the MENA region, including the mid-term review (MTR) of the GIZ project, "Improving the participation of Syrian refugees in education through online study courses." The representativeness of the data from the MTR is limited due to a small population and a wide range of factors to consider (host country, gender, and study program), although there were some valuable results. Consequently, the research team conducted a targeted literature review, focusing on studies that included empirical evidence and tapping into non-academic literature, such as reports and evaluations of relevant development cooperation projects. Results of the wide range of information were then synthesised to present key themes and recommendations for online higher education within refugee contexts.

2.1   Literature search process

The review of the academic literature was performed using the discovery service Primo and the available databases of electronic resources, academic peer-reviewed journals, books, book chapters, and theses. The journal databases used for the search were: Springer, Taylor and Francis, Sage, Routledge, Oxford University Press, Wiley, Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC (Education Resource Information Center).

The search used the combination of key search terms: "Syrian refugees", "online", and "higher education"[1], and looked into all the searchable fields (e.g. title, abstract, keywords, all text) within the journal articles in the targeted databases. The search returned 15 results,[2] indicating the scarcity of research that has focused on the involvement of Syrian refugees in online higher education.

In fact, even when the term ("online") was removed from the search keywords, only 94 results[3] were returned, again showing that although the Syrian refugee crisis began back in March 2011, little attention has been given to examining the involvement of this group in higher education, let alone the online aspect of it. More so, when the term "Syrian" is removed from "Syrian Refugees" the remaining search key terms produced 255 results[4] indicating that the academic focus that was given to the issue at hand was more broadly focused on refugees in general, not particularly Syrian.

Additional search results that were used in conducting this study were retrieved by looking up published reports by development cooperation actors that address providing education to vulnerable groups, narrowing this to higher education, and online education as much as possible. Further, reports were reviewed from intergovernmental organisations involved in educating refugees, such as UNHCR and UNESCO, or employability aspects, such as OECD.

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[1] Replacing "higher education" with "university", yields a high volume of inconsequential results because the search looks into every field in the publication (e.g. Cambridge University Press) and the affiliation of authors (e.g. xxx university...). Even if "higher education" is not used in the publication title, abstract, or body, it would still be used in the tags, keywords, subject; thus the search remained with "higher education".

[2] https://bath-ac-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/search?query=any,exact,%22Syrian%20refugees%22,AND&query=any,exact,online,AND&query=any,exact,%22higher%20education%22,AND&tab=local&search_scope=CSCOP_44BAT_DEEP&sortby=rank&vid=44BAT_VU1&mode=advanced&offset=0

[3] https://bath-ac-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/search?query=any,exact,Syrian%20refugees,AND&query=any,exact,higher%20education,AND&tab=local&search_scope=CSCOP_44BAT_DEEP&sortby=rank&vid=44BAT_VU1&mode=advanced&offset=0

[4] https://bath-ac-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/search?query=any,exact,higher%20education,AND&query=any,exact,refugees,AND&query=any,contains,online,AND&tab=local&search_scope=CSCOP_44BAT_DEEP&sortby=rank&vid=44BAT_VU1&mode=advanced&offset=0

This dearth of research on the access of refugee students to higher education and the challenges they face as a result is reflected in very recent studies by Hadid (2023) and Hauber-Özer (2023).

2.2   Learnings from the mid-term review (MTR)

The MTR conducted an evaluation with empirical data as well as a desk review of secondary data and metrics used by UoPeople, an asynchronous connected learning organisation that offers tertiary and adult education globally. Findings are limited to the institution in question and the specific project evaluated (a small group of Syrian refugees), however, it could be considered a case study and will be referenced as the "pilot project" to provide concrete examples of themes throughout this study and is included as a separate reference.

Findings from the MTR reveal that, unlike traditional brick-and-mortar universities, online organisations have already gone through the digital transformation often referred to in higher education literature. They have an effective "big data level" of information waiting for analysis and curated aggregation. They have systems in place to capture and store the information properly, and they can find it upon request. However, because they lack a centralised system where all requests are registered and processed, they tend to respond to such requests independently. Consequently, the responses and resulting reports can appear fragmented externally (e.g. numbers of enrolled students do not agree across reporting to accreditation and partners, such as GIZ). While digital literacy and knowledge management are much more advanced compared to a traditional university, communicating this rich information to different stakeholder groups is challenging. Communication is a known challenge in an online learning environment, more so in an asynchronous model because students do not meet in groups at a specified time, instead they check in on their own time, often quietly and alone (to not disturb their family or cohabitants). Even the best technology has not completely eliminated a sense of loneliness that many students experience. This topic is discussed in detail in Chapter 0.

The pilot project showed that students would like more interaction with instructors and peers, and faculty agree, expressing their desire to meet students "live", even if online. Internally, the staff at UoPeople communicate well, but the overall picture of external communication with key stakeholder groups (e.g. donors, humanitarian groups operating with the same target group, or accreditation agencies) lacks a strategic approach to properly address managing the reputation of the university (and overcoming the general negative stigma about online learning among students and parents) and engaging transparently with partners. The explosive uptake of online studies in recent years presents a need for UoPeople to consolidate institutional growth with a strategic plan to streamline operations and communications and centralise responsibilities and decision-making processes. It has to be clarified that UoPeople is an extremely lean organisation, and its concept is based on a low-cost model (tuition-free model) and volunteer faculty and staff. This concept is designed to provide US-accredited online higher education for anyone and was not intended to provide in-person support. The challenge of UoPeople is to match the academic standards set by the HE community and its bodies, such as accreditation agencies or national HE councils (Paeradigms, 2023).

3 Brief overview of online higher education

This chapter addresses research question (1) Under which conditions is online higher education successful? What are the major success factors and challenges?

3.1 Terminology

When exploring online higher education, it must be noted that there are numerous terms used and that the field has changed rapidly and continues to change. This is understandable as there is a strong link with technological advancement, on which online education is dependent. Further, the explosive growth of online learning since the global pandemic in 2020 has caused even more change and development.

Terms commonly used include online learning, e-learning, distance education, correspondence education, flexible learning, and the massive open online courses (MOOCs) movement. For the purpose of this research study, the term online higher education is used predominantly, although other terms are referenced in the context of specific literature references. A general description of the terms applicable can be found from UNECSO, defined as "Open and Distance Learning" (ODL).[5]

3.2 Online education – status quo

Online higher education has become a subject of increasing interest in recent years due to the rapid growth and adoption of online learning platforms and the increasing demand for flexible and accessible education. Research on various aspects of online higher education exists but is limited. The research team looked for recent research on various topics on online education, and this chapter presents a brief overview of some of the most researched topics, a deeper look into online vs conventional education, and different formats, methods, and implications.

Effectiveness and Impact: Online learning is considered one of the best strategies for enhancing teaching and learning. Researchers in a study on higher education in Oman conclude that education can be effectively extended throughout the country through online learning and solutions (Encarnacion, 2021). Now, researchers such as Yigal Rosen (Cision, 2021) are integrating artificial intelligence into online educational solutions to make rigorous learning experiences accessible. Institutions such as ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education[6]) regularly feature research and applications of online achievements in learning outcomes.

Student Engagement and Motivation: A student's engagement and motivation significantly influence their ability to succeed in an online environment. Not only the amount of engagement but also the emotional dimensions of such engagement are important, as confirmed in a study at a state university in Turkey (Vezne et al., 2022).

Faculty Perspectives and Training: Faculty need assistance and support from their institutions to teach online, and many rely on their colleagues for advice and support, even if their online teaching experience is limited. Yet, professional development for faculty is often not considered at the same level as preparing students for online learning. Institutional policies need to consider helping faculty overcome barriers to teaching with educational technologies through such measures as departmental support, mentoring them on their instructional designs and the delivery methods faculty members use or adopt to teach online (Quayson, 2022).

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[5] https://www.unesco.org/en/communication-information/odl-guidelines/guidelines?TSPD_101_R0=080713870fab2000fd4af91fd4669b478db14305f723a8bc16e7c97ff5b4da90fc8b71a809a350e208ef4b31771 43000c9199207c8601c3b0d24f3003c89da7353eb9e285d301fac49d419333d6ccf216349fb160a23cc2293e9c71fe71fcce8

[6] https://www.iste.org/explore

Online Collaboration and Social Learning: Online group-based collaborative learning can enhance individual learning and outcomes, but it demands more time and effort than non-collaborative online learning. Integrating online teaching with collaborative methods can extend benefits akin to traditional in-person classrooms to the virtual realm (Knopf, 2023).

Personalised Learning and Adaptive Technologies: Online higher education formats can be instrumental in realising adaptive learning, which emphasises personalised resources and breaking down information into small pieces that students can more effectively assimilate. This pedagogical approach using "adaptive technologies" is strongly supported by an online setting with interactive learning mechanisms and tools (including artificial intelligence) (Taylor et al., 2021).

Hybrid and Blended Learning Models: Since the pandemic in 2020, blended learning has been the "new normal" (de Brito Lima et al., 2021). Much research has been dedicated to understanding whether hybrid and blended learning are more or less effective than traditional learning. Indeed, an assumption that traditional learning is the best format is at the core of the negative stigma of online learning, which also affects the perception of blended learning. However, a recent study has found that in a blended learning context where classroom time was reduced by 30-80 per cent, learning outcomes were equivalent to conventional classroom learning (Müller and Mildenberger, 2021). Further, integrating online learning into an in-person course presents an opportunity to personalise instruction to individual students' needs and backgrounds and is, therefore, especially applicable to adult learning and continuing education.

Technological Infrastructure and Digital Literacy drive digital transformation in higher education institutions. However, research in this area focuses on skills needed and tools available within traditional learning environments as opposed to connected learning. A key challenge of studying online is the high degree of digital literacy required from faculty as well as students, which can affect access and, therefore, inclusivity.

Access and Inclusivity: Several research topics mentioned in this section can impact access and inclusivity. Research tends to focus on how online higher education can improve access to education for students who face barriers, such as geographic constraints, physical disabilities, economic limitations, or other life circumstances. The inclusivity of online education for marginalised and underserved populations, including refugees, has been a subject of interest. Online higher education is well-suited to address accessible and inclusive learning (Amy Lomellini et al., 2022). Yang et al. (2022) write about how inclusivity was affected by university closures in Sri Lanka, addressing a gap in extant literature that primarily focuses on the challenges of online teaching and learning. Instead, this study examined the support needed for inclusive higher education. This support addresses the psychological needs for students to succeed in online education – autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study concludes that this type of support affects students' success, and therefore, the design and implementation of online higher education projects need to include such support.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation: Online education has an important role in improving accessibility and learning quality, as emphasised by UNESCO's Qingdao Declaration.[7] However, online formats pose unfamiliar challenges concerning assuring quality and receiving accreditation due to the diverse array of entities engaged in dispensing courses, many of which fall outside the conventional purview of quality assurance systems within various nations (UNESCO, 2020).

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[7] The Qingdao Declaration on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education was approved at the conclusion of the conference on ICT for the 2030 Education Agenda held in Qingdao, China.

3.3   Online HE versus face-to-face education

The choice between traditional classroom settings and online platforms is not only a matter of logistics or convenience; it touches upon pedagogy, learner preferences, availability of either mode of learning, and the readiness of the receivers, in this case, Syrian refugees. Technological advancement and the recent global pandemic have forced many educational institutions to adapt to online education, thus reshaping teaching and learning. Further, the pressing need to educate the increasing numbers of refugees worldwide has made education providers and funders alike to opt for non-traditional approaches that can serve the masses of refugees in a cost-effective and time-efficient manner. This section examines the strengths, limitations, and suitability in diverse contexts of these two predominant learning modalities.

Learning in any format depends on the student's need for knowledge, the instructor's ability to deliver that knowledge, and the competency of both instructors and students. Face-to-face instruction in a formal classroom setting is referred to as "classroom teaching". Traditional face-to-face instruction takes place in the classroom, with the instructor mostly lecturing while students use the remaining time to engage in practical and group activities (Asghar et al., 2022). Advances in digital technologies have caused a shift in the entire education system away from strictly lecture-based delivery, adding technology to move towards student-centred learning.

In a study conducted by Young & Duncan (2014) involving 8,000 students at a Western university rating online versus on-campus courses, it was found that students rated on-campus courses significantly higher than online courses in communication, faculty-student interaction, grading, instructional methods, and course outcomes. In contrast, the effort that students put into their courses was rated significantly higher for online courses than for on-campus courses. This contrast between the two formats has also been examined in the context of refugee education. According to El-Ghali & Bank (2017), face-to-face education is not the most convenient option for Syrian refugees; therefore, to address the varying demands of this student population, the authors emphasised the importance of providing different modalities of tertiary education in addition to what is traditionally offered on campus. Such modalities can include dynamic pedagogical practices where the focus shifts from the professor to the needs of the learner through active, interactive, and experiential learning.

Many traditional educators would agree, such as Diane Ravitch, former US Assistant Secretary of Education, whose work in the field of education policy and reform led her to raise concerns about the quality and effectiveness of certain online learning initiatives (Ravitch, 2014). She argues that many online education programs may lack proper oversight, accountability, and pedagogical rigour, leading to inferior learning experiences for students. This sentiment, although changing rapidly since Covid-19, has not been uncommon and has resulted in a negative perception of online education.

However, online learning environments are unique and not necessarily the "poor cousin" of on-campus education, as it has always been labelled (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017). During exceptional times, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning might be a good substitute for face-to-face education (Asaad Hamza Sheerah et al., 2022). With the use of video conferencing tools that allow teachers and students to see one another and follow the lecture as they would in the classroom, there may be strong potential to redefine the phrase "face-to-face" to include online learning contexts as well and to stop using it to refer strictly to in-person learning situations (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017).

As for teaching effectiveness, each method has its own strengths. According to Jiang et al. (2023), face-to-face teaching is better than online teaching because instructors can observe each student's learning progress and build a positive learning environment for all students. In contrast, online education includes a pre-class preview process and the utilisation of online high-quality teaching resources, which encourage students to develop

independent learning skills and active learning habits (Jiang et al., 2023). Jiang's stated advantage of online education resonates with the move towards student-centred learning and experiential learning, where students "learn by doing". Thus, the online learning format not only facilitates pedagogical advancements but also empowers learners to assume responsibility for their own education.

This shift in focusing the responsibility for learning from the instructor to the student is not new and is particularly relevant for adult learners, a demographic which notably characterises most refugee students, according to empirical evidence from the MTR. In his book, "The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy" (1970), Malcolm Knowles explains his belief that adults are motivated to learn when they see the direct relevance and application of the knowledge to their lives and goals. Therefore, the role of the instructor shifts from being the sole authority figure to that of a facilitator, supporting and guiding learners in their self-directed learning journeys.

3.4 Formats, delivery methods, and implications

Online learning can be divided into synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid or blended learning. Synchronous learning requires simultaneous online interactions between students and instructors. Students engage with their instructors through voice, text, and video chats (Perveen, 2016). In asynchronous learning, courses are not given in real-time, but there is a deadline for finishing classes, assignments, and exams. Blogs and message boards may be used for interaction between the students and their instructors. Both synchronous and asynchronous methods use learning management systems (LMS), such as Moodle or Blackboard (Perveen, 2016).

One popular form of asynchronous learning is Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), MOOCs are considered an innovative alternative model of higher education that provides access to millions of subscribers from various ages and locations around the world (Jacob & Gokbel, 2018). According to Hollands and Tirthali (2015), MOOCs are becoming increasingly popular in the higher education market, considering their potential to generate revenue, expand access, and provide innovative pedagogical methods through teaching and learning, flexible course options, and international partnerships. Nevertheless, there are some areas of concern surrounding MOOCs, particularly with relevance to sustainability, quality, drop-out rates, and credit transfer to college degrees (Yuan & Powell, 2013; Daniel, Cano & Cervera, 2015).

MOOCs continue to widen non-traditional and underrepresented groups' access to higher education (Burd et al., 2015). In this regard, the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne (EPFL) has been offering its MOOC Factory with a threefold strategy that aims to improve the experience of on-campus students, especially those who fail during their first year, meet the increasing demand for continuing and professional education in society, and support developing countries, mainly in Africa, to improve their accessibility to higher education through capacity building.

> **Massive Open Online Course – MOOC**
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> The term "MOOC" was coined in 2008 by Dave Cormier, a researcher and strategist at the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada, and Bryan Alexander, an educational technologist. They used the term to describe a specific course called "Connectivism and Connective Knowledge" offered by George Siemens and Stephen Downes at the University of Manitoba in the same year (Mackness et al., 2010).

A successful example of alternative higher education in the form of MOOCs is Future Learn (FL). FL was launched by the Open University UK in 2012 and has since emerged as a major player in the MOOC field with its distinguished flexible course model and peer-to-peer interactions. With regard to flexibility, FL provides longer registration durations and offers courses dedicated to small and large groups as well as working individuals (Otoo, 2015). Another MOOC initiative is Kiron. Kiron open higher education is a nongovernmental

organisation supporting refugees in Germany and all around the world by offering an innovative academic model (Bajwa et al., 2017). Kiron courses are offered as part of bachelor's degree programs in social work, computer science, political science, mechanical engineering, and business and economics. The courses themselves are offered in English, but the user interface can be set in nine different languages. It is also possible to take language courses in English or German.

A study by Halkic & Arnold (2019) states that Kiron's online curriculum is based on MOOCs and other online courses (e.g. Saylor Academy[8]) and was designed in collaboration with "top universities". Regarding providers, the imprint states: "Kiron uses service providers in order to operate and maintain Kiron's website and Kiron's educational platform "Campus" and to be able to offer certain services related to it, which may receive and process personal data of the users. Any service providers engaged by Kiron are obliged to comply with the applicable data protection regulations and will process data exclusively in accordance with the instructions of Kiron. Kiron and its service providers commit to taking reasonable technical and organisational precautions to protect users' data.

The Kiron study program aims to support refugees living in a host country or displaced persons in their country of birth (internally displaced persons, IDPs). Ideally, students could earn 60 credit points within two years in the online study program and then transfer to a partner university. Kiron modules use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to ease transferability across countries. In 2018, Kiron collaborated with 56 partner universities, most of which are in Germany but also other countries. On the Kiron website, however, it is not transparent which universities are involved or whether they are also located outside or inside the EU. The partner universities generally recognise credits previously acquired in the Kiron online program, but each transfer process is checked individually.

Nevertheless, the Kiron model presents many challenges. Analysis of the Kiron model shows that students face challenges such as finding a job after graduation, lack of counselling and information, finding a good place to study, communication and integration with colleagues and administration. Moreover, the procedure for recognising certifications and transferring credit points earned to countries outside Europe is unclear (Bajwa et al., 2017a).

The third type of online learning is blended learning (BL) which combines face-to-face instruction and online intervention. It has been used for years in fields like distance learning (Anthony Jnr, 2022). A survey distributed to 90 Syrian refugees involved in blended learning at the Arab Open University in Jordan reported that through their learning, students developed their computer skills, became self-learners, achieved their academic goals, and attained educational success (Al-Husban & Shorman, 2020). In another study, Syrian refugees had a positive perception of blended learning, preferring it over online education since it boosts learning effectiveness and expands learning options through interaction with teachers and students (Bajwa et al., 2017a). On the other hand, Al-Husban & Shorman (2020) reported some technical challenges that refugees faced with blended learning, such as a lack of the necessary equipment to study and reliable internet access.

The evaluation report of a university cooperation project between Germany and Morocco concluded that blended learning elements were successfully introduced in two bachelor programs, "Applied Mathematics and Computer Science" and "Biomedical Engineering" at the pilot stage. The modules of the study programs were characterised by a high proportion of exercises and practical tutorials, and for this purpose, remote lab programs were developed. The lectures and tutorials were recorded and could be used asynchronously by staff and students of the partner university (Wollny et al., 2019). In a recent study by Yu-Fong Chang et al.

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[8] https://www.saylor.org

(2021) that involved dental medical students in Taiwan, the authors concluded that online learning is more effective than face-to-face learning, particularly in the areas of time management, content clarity through using well-designed course displays and presentations, and techniques such as virtual whiteboards and screen recording. In addition, Darius et al. (2021) found that online interaction between students and faculty, especially following online quizzes and digital collaborations, promotes efficient online learning and better teacher performance. It also ensured that all the activities during the online class followed the lesson plan, resulting in student assessments that were simpler to design.

In online formats, self-regulated learning is essential and has a predictive impact on learning effectiveness as well as reducing the potential ineffectiveness of online learning. In fact, online education can provide several advantages for students, namely, social egalitarianism, emphasis on verbal and written proficiency, time for reasoned response, and social agency (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017). For instance, in Taiwan, online education was found favourable by university students due to the ability of the instructors to plan, strategise, lead, and develop instruction (Yu-Fong Chang et al., 2021). Students argued that online learning was well established in addition to the online intercultural relationship between students and teachers, which students found equally enjoyable (Prihatin, 2022).

To ensure that the course learning objectives can be achieved successfully, teachers can engage students in the classroom through silent discussion methods like group chats and bulletin boards. (Jiang et al., 2023). Moreover, online discussions could be expanded with numerous approaches of inquiry in the accompanying forum discussions that take place on learning management platforms (Nasir, 2020). Nevertheless, online classes may be challenging for instructors for several reasons. Instructors cannot fully maintain control of the students when they are not paying attention during class (Yu-Fong Chang et al., 2021b) due to their inability to interact with students by making eye contact and reading body language (Ren et al., 2021).

4 Online HE for refugees – challenges and opportunities

This chapter addresses research question (3) Are there any region-specific conditions (language, culture etc.) which have a positive or negative effect on the possibility of successfully implementing online studies for selected target groups?

The last ten years have seen refugees emerge as a significant demographic seeking educational opportunities. The apparent solutions that numerous non-profit entities have offered, whether tuition-free and accredited online courses through face-to-face or online methods, have not explored the challenges of integrating refugees into these educational systems. This chapter examines the nuances of these educational initiatives, the role of scholarships, and the evolving dynamics in the wake of the global pandemic.

There are several non-profit providers that claim to offer tuition-free and accredited online higher education courses or full academic programs to young and adult learners globally.[9] To satisfy the enormous demand for education, education providers have prioritised efficiency and adopted methods like scholarship, TVET, non-formal learning, and online learning. A recent study by Fincham (2020) indicates that scholarships are the primary conversion element that enable refugees to take advantage of available higher education opportunities, and these measures have expanded the number of higher education opportunities available for refugees in these nations. These initiatives have enhanced education opportunities for refugees, but issues with accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability remain the same. Moreover, refugee experiences show that individuals have a variety of reasons for wanting to pursue higher education; these can be economic, intrinsic, or social.

Higher education for refugees in both systems "online and face-to-face" addresses new challenges to their integration into education systems. Over the past year, several online education projects have emerged in an effort to expand educational options for refugees, like Bilsy by GIZ,[10] basic education for Syrian refugee by UNESCO, and Moonlite.[11] The aim of these projects is to improve access to higher education for refugees (Fincham, 2020). Besides, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning models have seen a spike in the years that followed lockdowns, social distancing, and movement restrictions. Many institutions have been forced to close, and online learning has replaced face-to-face learning. Online learning has thus been viewed by students as an approach to addressing the world's educational difficulties.

4.1 Challenging nature of online HE

This section discusses the versatile world of online higher education, emphasising its accessibility for refugees, the challenges faced by those in refugee camps, and the perceptions and expectations that influence their academic experiences. It investigates key determinants of student satisfaction and the dropout rates associated with online education. The discussion covers challenges such as connectivity and limited internet resources, student anxiety with digital tools, waning motivation, the immediate feedback dilemma (Ren et al., 2021), as well as external factors such as geographical constraints and familial responsibilities (Nasir, 2020). Through this analysis, we present an aggregate view of the promises and challenges of online higher education with respect to refugee learners.

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[9] For example: https://www.saylor.org/; https://kiron.ngo/de; https://www.uopeople.edu/

[10] https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/40562.html

[11] https://moonliteproject.eu/: MOOCS offered by European based universities targeting refugees and migrants

4.1.1 Accessibility of online HE for refugees

Individual refugees differ in their ability to enrol in and benefit from higher education due to structural and cultural challenges. In this sense, equal access to education resources is not the same as equal chance to benefit from education (Fincham, 2020).

Accessing online education can be challenging for both refugees and immigrants. Refugees express difficulty in obtaining their identification papers and educational documents needed for postsecondary education, as these documents are often inaccessible from their countries of origin (Anselme & Hands, 2015).

Even universities publicised as "open access" can in fact offer access that remains conditional upon the completion of further requirements. In the case of UoPeople, every qualified student, who claims to have completed secondary education, is accepted regardless of their background and personal circumstances. However, prospective students are required to go through a foundation program where they must complete an orientation course to prepare them for the connected learning environment and "non-degree seeking" courses to demonstrate that they meet UoPeople academic standards. Non-native English speakers must also demonstrate proficiency in English before starting a degree program. Students going into the Arabic programs must also demonstrate proficiency in English. If a student has studied elsewhere, courses or degrees could be recognised if documents such as transcripts could be provided.

> **UoPeople definition of a refugee**
>
> The university collects information from every student during the admission process. Students are asked about their country of residence, and if it is different from their country of birth, they are required to provide the details of their country of birth. The university defines refugees primarily based on self-declaration, wherein students are directly asked if they consider themselves refugees. The university's definition aligns with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, n.d.). For example, all students born in the following countries but currently residing in a different country are recognised as refugees: (1) Syria, (2) Yemen, (3) Somalia, (4) Eritrea, (5) Myanmar, (6) Iran, (7) Iraq, (8) Venezuela, (9) Ukraine. It means any student born in one of these countries but not currently living in the same country is classified as a refugee (Paeradigms, 2023).

The scope of the foundation program is to support student success, and the orientation module was developed because they recognise that students need to be prepared for the radical differences that studying online encompasses. However, the consequences of this preparation can be daunting to refugee students since they do not earn credit for the orientation or English language courses but must still pay an assessment fee. Underscoring this point is the finding that more students withdraw or stop taking courses in the foundation phase than when they proceed into degree-seeking programs. Thus, the accessibility is somewhat limited.

4.1.2 HE in refugee camps

Residency-refugee camps or urban areas play a significant role in refugee living conditions and educational performance. Refugees in camps have worse living conditions than those in urban areas. These conditions include unstable electricity supply, slow internet connection, and difficulty accessing educational institutions (Duran, 2017). Some refugee households may have only one mobile device, which usually belongs to the patriarch, for socio-cultural and budgetary reasons. As a result, opportunities for a refugee to develop digital literacy abilities may be restricted (Drolia et al., 2020).

As far as programs are concerned, MOOCs and blended learning initiatives are two examples of distance learning programs that could help refugees who are physically or financially confined to remote camps. These initiatives provide access to higher education opportunities and open doors to better futures for the refugees and their communities (O'Keeffe, 2020).

For the MTR, an online survey of Syrian refugees receiving a GIZ scholarship was conducted (April 2023). Results show that 20% of respondents (n=15) live in refugee camps and range in age from 20 to 39 years old, as shown in Figure 4.1. Half of these individuals cited problems with connectivity, electricity, or a device as the key challenge they face in their studies. Others cite financial struggles and vulnerable status as the main challenge.

"[my main challenge] is to pursue my university studies in the difficult conditions we live in the camps from the lack and weakness of the Internet and difficult living and that I am a head of family and in charge of my family ".

Another describes the consequences of the lack of connectivity: *"the weakness of the Internet caused me to interrupt a number of courses".*
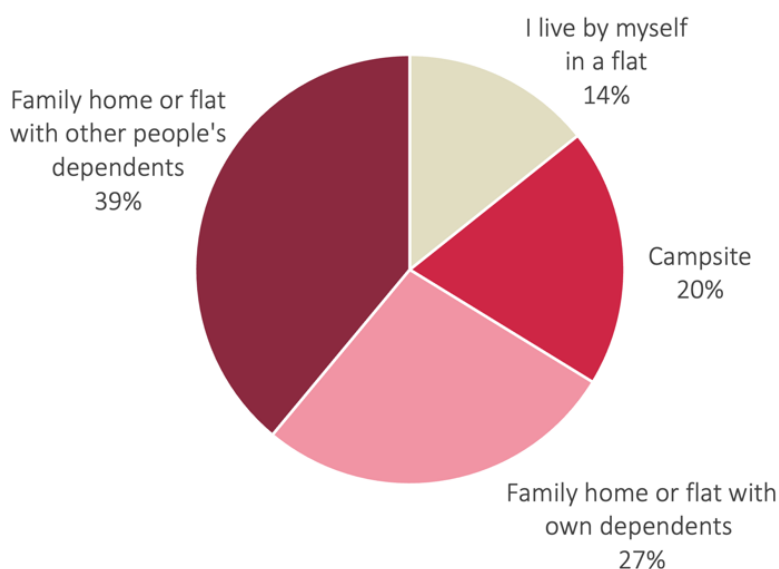
Figure 4.1: Responses to where students live from the MTR online survey of 77 students receiving a GIZ scholarship (campsite = refugee camp) (Paeradigms, 2023)

Although connectivity is a major issue for many, most students (53%) heard about UoPeople through social media, followed by recommendations from family members or friends (39%), which is considerably high. Only a small fraction (7%) indicated that their primary source of information was the university website (Paeradigms, 2023).

4.2   Student perceptions and expectations of online HE

Refugees believe that they are frequently confronted with higher education programs that do not sufficiently challenge them, that officials lack the capacity to see their education and knowledge development, and that the whole structure of integration services is frustrating due to poor inter-actor communication and lengthy waiting periods (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019).

According to a study conducted by Henry (2020), Australian students in higher education expected the online course to run in a manner equivalent to on-campus education, with materials and communication simply delivered online and activities performed at a distance rather than through attendance at courses on campus (Henry, 2020). A study by Al-Husban and Shorman (2020) revealed that Syrian refugee students had positive perceptions of blended learning because it developed their ability to learn on their own and improve their computer skills. They were also satisfied with the convenience, usability, and adaptability of this type of

learning. In a contradicting study by Xhelili et al. (2021), Albanian students perceived online learning as difficult and full of obstacles. Students had to modify their learning strategies to adjust to online learning. They found it challenging to focus and comprehend the subject and felt anxious before tests. Only a small percentage of students thought it was simple and straightforward to learn online (Xhelili et al., 2021).

Many factors affect students' expectations toward online learning: the organisation of the remote education, the tools employed, and the uncertainty resulting from governments' reluctance to recognise online degrees (Cicha et al., 2021). Such expectations can be clarified in advertising and promotional materials, while educational programs can be adjusted to meet the aspirations of students. Prospective online students may benefit from further explicit information about the time commitment, level of contact, participation flexibility, technical needs, and required skill sets. This information may help online students better prepare for their education and make educated decisions (Henry, 2020).

In the case of UoPeople, the foundation program was developed and is monitored and regularly updated to support students in understanding the expectations of connected learning. However, staff involved in this process also recognise that students can be overwhelmed if the orientation is comprehensive. Thus, the flow of information is choreographed to convey essential information in small batches. The main driver of information is student inquiry, either independently online or through an advisor. The advisory function has also undergone significant changes to respond to explosive growth in 2019-2020. Students are first followed by admissions advisors in the foundation program and assigned a program advisor once they begin a degree program (Paeradigms, 2023).

4.3   Instructor and public perceptions of online degrees around the world

A study on teacher perceptions by Rahayu and Wirza (2020) revealed that 49% of high school teachers in Bandung, Indonesia perceived online education as useful for students and an important factor in improving their performance. In contrast, 51% believed that the online learning approach was less effective due to the lack of communication and interaction with students. Some teachers reported having trouble using technology, creating engaging materials, outlining the topic, assessing it, and providing feedback. The study concluded that these issues led teachers to believe that online instruction is neither more comfortable nor more convenient than traditional instruction.

Empirical evidence gathered in the MTR reveals that the perceptions of the public (including students and refugee students) in the host countries towards online higher education are influenced by the government's position. As an example, the government in Lebanon has not prioritised higher education due to other urgent crises. It also emerged that parents' views still influence students' perceptions, and parents in the affected countries tend to be traditional and think in-person learning is superior. Online options have shown that they can offer quality education, yet there is a need for people to change their mindset about online education to overcome the negative stigma (Paeradigms, 2023).

Accordingly, managing a connected learning environment and maintaining a reputable public image can prove challenging. Thus, when engaging with partners, such as international organisations or public institutions, a well-examined strategic approach is needed. A typical business growth model does not provide the metrics needed to communicate effectively with these stakeholders, especially when the perception of this *online* public good is critical to changing mindsets and accepting it as a norm.

4.4   Student satisfaction and dropout

According to Mubarak (2022), dropout is a concern in online learning. Online education platforms continue to suffer high dropout rates in addition to difficulties in predicting methods to minimise these rates. The most important factor influencing student satisfaction with online learning and consequently decreasing dropout rates is course quality (Ghaderizefreh & Hoover, 2018). Despite the challenging nature of reacting to individual learner needs in online education, there are elements of quality that can enhance the student experience and result in fewer negative emotions of stress, rage, and boredom. These elements include clear course vocabulary, proper illustration of material in online modules, reasonable requirements of online modules, moderate pace of course track, easy to follow online directions, and having instructors that deliver the information with passion.

Social presence also has a big impact on the success or failure of a student in online learning. In addition, students' age influences their course satisfaction. Between the age of 22 and 35 years, students have significant contribution factors, and are more independent and responsible (Nasir, 2020). Nevertheless, dropout rates can present some benefits to educators as it alerts them to existing problems, urges them to respond when students are at risk, and assists them in improving students' performance in real time.

UoPeople also struggles with retaining students. Partly, high dropout rates are a consequence of the non-selective admissions and low-cost model, which incentivises people to enrol without fully understanding the learning approach. Flexible entry and exit points also allow students to move towards a degree at their own pace, and considering the low cost, there is less incentive to finish in the traditional time frames (two years for associate's degrees and four years for bachelor's degrees). Similarly, 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).

UoPeople "incomplete grade" policy

An incomplete grade (I) is a temporary grade that may be given at the instructor's discretion, subject to approval by the Department Chair, **to a student who needs additional time to complete class assignments due to extenuating circumstances.** The grade I (Incomplete) is used when a student needs additional time (up to four weeks) beyond the end of the semester to complete coursework or exams. To qualify for an Incomplete grade, the student must:

- Provide documentation of the extenuating circumstances.
- Have a solid attendance record.
- Have completed approximately 75% or more of the work for the class.
- Not be failing the class.
- Have consulted with the instructor and have a viable plan to complete the coursework within the allotted four weeks. The request will contain a list of work products the learner must complete and submit to their instructor.

Assignments include but are not limited to papers, quizzes, tests, and projects. Assignments do not include discussion board responses or other work products that may not be completed independently.

Instructors are not authorised to extend the time for completion of coursework without the Department Chair's approval. If an "I" is warranted, the student should request an Incomplete Grade Form from their Program Advisor and then submit the request for an Incomplete Grade form to the instructor, who forwards it to the Department Chair.

And "I" does not affect the GPA and is replaced by the final grade submitted by the instructor after the student completes the remaining work.

(2022-2023 University of the People catalogue)

To help support students while managing metrics of "active" students, UoPeople has a policy for the "incomplete grade", which is particularly relevant for refugee students (see text box).

4.5   Success factors

Reinhardt et al. (2021) studied a group of 1,024 refugee students participating in online education with Kiron Open Higher Education, the German online higher education provider. The study first considers that there are two measures of success: grades and stamina (as in stay in the course and finish). External factors, such as the disruption of displacement, unfamiliar education system, and dealing with a foreign language, have been examined to some extent. Instead, Reinhardt's research argues that the individual characteristics of refugees strongly influence their success. Personal characteristics of online learners are known to be important for online learners in general as well as in-person learners. These characteristics include academic language proficiency, cognitive functioning, study motivation, and sociodemographic factors (Reinhardt et al., 2021).

For refugees, these personal characteristics are perhaps more pronounced. Academic language proficiency is more difficult for non-native speakers. The study showed a significantly reduced dropout rate for students with high language proficiency. In terms of cognitive functioning, the researchers decided that the instruments used were too biased and seemed to indicate less influence; thus, they consider it inconclusive. Similarly, the study determined that the metrics used to determine motivation may have been Western-biased, and thus, the small influence seen for motivation is also inconclusive. Sociodemographic considerations, however, show that women start more and complete more courses, even though they participate less than their male counterparts (Reinhardt et al., 2021).

Successful profile for a refugee student studying online

- **Autonomy** – able to act alone and maintain self-motivation.
- **Self-advocacy** – proactively question policies and find solutions that work for themselves.
- **Mindset** – open to the opportunities for flexible pathways and able to handle the difficulties.
- **Language proficiency** – academic-level proficiency in the language of instruction as the learning approach is almost entirely written.
- **Access to internet and a device** – ability to connect with a well-functioning desktop, laptop, or mobile phone is essential.
- **Readiness** – basic understanding of the online learning environment

Design and implementation play an essential role in the success of online learning in addition to existing institutional resources such as labour, time, and funds. and understanding students' perceptions towards online learning (Alhabeeb & Jennifer Rowley, 2018). The text box outlines a generic profile of a successful student based on the findings from literature and the MTR.

This study explored the effectiveness of online learning in Saudi Arabia, looking at the perspectives of students and academic staff. The study found that both groups consider that the most important factor in student success is individual characteristics. Interestingly, students say the instructor's characteristics are the most important (followed by student characteristics), and instructors say that student characteristics are the most important. Also, instructors placed more importance on ease of access, whereas students rated this the least influential. This seems to indicate that students have more confidence in their ability to navigate technology than instructors.

The MTR also revealed issues in language proficiency, although the other factors were not explicitly explored. Students who passed successfully the foundation program had much higher retention rates and higher-than-average grades compared to the overall student average, according to UoPeople staff. In terms of gender, the evaluation had similar findings – that there were fewer women participants, but they tended to take more classes. In the case of the GIZ project, it is too early to say whether women finish at higher rates due to very few graduates up to now (through May 2023) (Paeradigms, 2023).

5 Employability of online HE graduates

This chapter addresses a key outcome of online higher education (for refugees and in general) and, therefore, a common aim for all stakeholder groups (policymakers, donors, funders, implementing agencies, online education providers, and most importantly, students). Thus, it is an important aspect of both research questions (1) Under which conditions is online higher education successful? What are the major success factors and challenges? And (3) Are there any region-specific conditions (language, culture etc.) that have a positive or negative effect on the possibility of successfully implementing online studies for selected target groups?

5.1 Job-ready curriculum design

Kiron provides an online curriculum based on MOOCs to all refugees around the world. In their study examining data from 1375 Kiron students, as well as the challenges refugee students encounter when accessing online higher education, researchers Halkic and Arnold (2019) question whether online higher education is the easy solution to integrating disadvantaged students. In particular, relying on MOOCs means that students are not following a designed curriculum, and their coursework is often not recognised in host countries. Having a support structure is more important for refugees, especially those in camps, to help with technical, as well as cultural and language issues. They found that rather than preparing students for a job directly, most students used Kiron to segue into a traditional university in the host country where they could obtain a recognised degree. There was a high number of students who did not finish due to transferring out, which confirms this finding. They concluded that the use of Kiron was different than expected since students still consider the issue of degree recognition with very high importance. The authors further suggest that the Kiron model could be refocused as a pathway to attend local universities, thus matching student expectations (Halkic & Arnold, 2019). In a non-published MTR report of the GIZ JOSY project (Wollny, 2018) Syrian and Jordanian postgraduate students and other stakeholders commented on Kiron courses, which were offered in addition to the university programs, as non-specific and of no use to find a job from their perspective.

5.2 Learning outcomes

Student motivation is an essential element of an effective learning outcome in both face to face and online learning settings. Because online learning keeps people away from campus and peer learners, motivation in this case becomes a more essential predictor of students' learning outcomes and satisfaction (Baber, 2020). These outcomes could be improved by actively participating in a variety of learning activities. Students could access an extensive selection of learning resources from academic databases and the Internet, complete assignments based on course requirements, watch videos, listen to audio, learn academic content based on lecture notes, review their performance, check their assignment marks, and take their quizzes, mid-term, and final exams (Yu, 2021).

In addition to having access to learning materials to improve outcomes, refugee students often require increased support, including mental health. Study programs designed to help refugees integrate through gaining education should recognise that support is a crucial determinant of success, especially for refugees living in camps. Academic support includes language proficiency at a level sufficient for academic study. UoPeople has addressed this through its foundation program, which includes eight-levels of English-language courses. However, it is difficult to learn languages with no personal interaction. Students also need non-academic support, including places to study, social interaction, and opportunities for mentoring from instructors. For low-cost online universities, it may not be possible to provide such support. Therefore, partnerships with civil society organisations, international aid agencies, or public institutions could be as important as scholarships in achieving targeted learning outcomes.

5.3   Accreditation of online HE in countries of residence

Higher education accreditation essentially refers to the compatibility of a higher education institution or system with national or global performance standards. Accreditation is an important factor in raising the quality of higher education. Both academic performance and the quality of education and research significantly improve as a result of accreditation (Anaper et al., 2013). Likewise, the accreditation of distance learning institutions improves their reputation on a national and global level, making it easy for their graduates to land jobs with multinational companies. Hence, the accreditation of distance learning is an important step towards ensuring that open and distance education programs follow the national educational philosophy, student admission requirements, and guarantee graduate employment (Ertuğ 2016).

However, many countries still do not recognise or accredit online education. For instance, in Lebanon, online learning is not officially recognised yet. A draft law has been in parliament in 2012 allowing 40% of the certification program to be taught online. The most significant obstacle in this regard remains the lack of a legal framework for the delivery and accreditation of online education (El-Ghali & Ghosn, 2015). Monk (2021) emphasised that the absence of curriculum uniformity, certification, and accreditation for schools serving Syrian students is one of the most significant but underrated problems in refugee education.

By offering access to vulnerable students from numerous countries, international online education providers, such as Kiron and UoPeople, are not in a position to operate nationally with different governments. UNESCO is addressing this issue with its Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, adopted in November 2019. The Global Convention is a transparent, fair set of principles with provisions for non-traditional learning models that aims to provide pathways for employment and further study.[12] It entered into force in March 2023, and 22 countries have ratified it. This powerful tool promises to democratise education and is of significant relevance for refugees, allowing them to continue studying in their host country and bring the qualifications they earn while displaced with them if they move or return to their country of origin.

Still, governments in the host countries often face serious economic crises and struggle to prioritise education, and even less, higher education. A key informant in the MTR stated that governments know they cannot continue in the traditional mindset and understand that online education has shown it can provide the necessary quality (Paeradigms, 2023).

5.4   Online education for improving the employability of refugees in host countries

Employability is a significant challenge for youths in less developed contexts, and among refugees, as described in detail in the previous sections of this paper, the difficulties can often be worse due to added barriers, including language, access to official documentation, immigration status, and unrecognised qualifications. The right of refugees to employment is mostly limited to low-skilled labour. Access to online education can improve the chances for refugees to gain skills needed to find skilled jobs. Among refugees, there are rather large differences in their status and how they are perceived in host countries. Nonetheless, refugees, populations moving for economic reasons, and anyone changing countries can experience issues with getting their qualifications recognised. Even highly qualified refugees might fall into low-skilled labour or under-employment due to such difficulties. This section first discusses employment in highly qualified jobs and then presents an overview of less skilled labour, which tends to be more prevalent among refugees.

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[12] https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/global-convention-recognition-qualifications-concerning-higher-education?hub=66535

5.4.1 Skilled employability requiring academic study

The advantages of online higher education for acquiring skilled employment for refugees include many of the same general advantages: flexibility, affordability, global access, life-long learning (thus varying entry points), and diverse course offerings. Disadvantages are also similar. However, for refugees, it can be the only opportunity. As stated by the leadership in UoPeople during the MTR (Paeradigms, 2023), "*We want to provide opportunity for those who do not have opportunities*".

The Ukrainian crisis presents an example of skilled refugees seeking employment (see inset). In the context of Ukrainian refugees in Europe, the OECD finds that notwithstanding their high skill level, early employment is mainly in low-skilled jobs due to difficulties in transferring formal qualifications and the need for host country language proficiency (OECD, 2023).

Although rather different than other refugee contexts, the Ukrainian example shows that the issue of degree recognition is common across contexts and skill levels since low-skilled refugees seeking to earn an online degree will face the problem of getting their degree recognised upon graduating.

> **Labour market outcomes for skilled workers. The Ukrainian example (OECD, 2023)**
>
> Very early findings (January 2023) regarding 4.7 million Ukrainians registered in the European Union.
>
> - Most are highly skilled women in the health and education sectors.
> - They have been absorbed into the labour market faster than other refugee groups.
> - The success is based on individual networks, more than skill profiles.
> - Skills transferability and foreign qualification assessments are highly relevant due to the high level of formal qualification.
> - Host countries are acting independently to adapt recognition systems and ease restrictions to regulated professions (especially in health care).
>
> In summary, policy actions are undertaken unilaterally and regional level action at a policy level has not happened.

Thus, any project seeking to ultimately improve the employability of refugees, whether through online education or other mechanisms, must consider the recognition of qualifications of critical importance. The OECD (2023) statement, "*host countries should introduce measures to promote skill-appropriate employment of Ukrainian refugees rather than any gainful employment*", should be taken to include online education as well.

5.4.2 Unskilled employability

Many countries prevent refugees from conducting formal work to the extent that refugee camps have become a particularly harsh tool used by states to control the size and class structure of their domestic labour market in reaction to refugee influxes (Turner, 2015). Refugees often have lower employment rates compared to other immigrant groups for several reasons. First, they enter with incompetence that makes them less suited to the job market of the host nation. Second, refugee employment grows rapidly during the first half-decade and continues to grow but at a slower rate in the second half. Third, compared to men, women refugees have lower employment rates (Brell et al., 2020).

In this regard, the huge number of Syrian refugees in Turkey accelerated the ongoing legislative efforts to address migration issues. Syrians are permitted to obtain work permits under specific circumstances, but the vast majority continue to work informally in poor conditions because there are few incentives for official employment on both the supply and demand sides. Employers prefer to hire Syrian refugees in place of local

workers due to the cheap labour they offer. Consequently, locals are losing their jobs in the informal market due to unfair competition, which is driving social instability (İçduygu & Diker, 2017). Additionally, in Turkey, the laws on international protection and work permits for foreigners already exist and provide the legal structures necessary to regulate foreign labour. Turkey has already affirmed the value of defending the right to work, as demonstrated by its adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ratification of the International Covenant on Economic and Social and Cultural Rights (Bidinger,2015).

The Jordan Compact, on the other hand, which was signed by the European Union and the World Bank in February 2016, promised the government of Jordan up to USD 2 billion in aid and loans in exchange for creating job opportunities for 200,000 Syrians (Stave et al., 2021). The Compact was signed with the intention of facilitating Syrian refugees' access to work and formalising their employment, thus generating 200,000 additional permits. However, very few Syrians have applied to acquire work visas.

In 2021, 62,000 work permits had been awarded to Syrians, according to UNHCR (2022). By September 2021, 230,000 work permits had been issued (Stave et al., 2021). However, the majority of Syrian refugees without work permits remain in informal work sectors such as agriculture (Del Carpio & Wagner, 2015), while few Syrians compete in the formal labour market, which limits the overall impact of their labour supply (Fallah et al., 2017). Besides, many Syrian working men have less stable and probably lower-paying jobs than Jordanians. In terms of gender distribution, Syrian men refugees had lower rates of labour force engagement than their Jordanian counterparts, while Syrian women refugees barely participated in the labour force. Despite the Jordan Compact being a significant step towards enhancing chances to participate in the legal labour market, Syrian refugees continue to work in a very constrained context (Krafft et al., 2018).

Consequently, Syrian refugees prefer participating in informal work because it does not require work permits. They are ready to accept less pay, longer working hours than their native counterparts, and be subject to a high risk of exploitation and minimum protection (Fakih & Ibrahim, 2016). In neighbouring Lebanon, for instance, Syrians working in agriculture experience numerous forms of exploitation, including lack of job stability, insurance, remuneration, and protection from agriculture risks (Turkmani & Hamade, 2020).

5.5   Exploitation of refugees in employment (formal and informal)

Integrating refugees into their receiving nations poses great challenges. Successful resettlement of refugees into their new communities can greatly depend upon their chances of finding employment. Yet, many refugees remain unemployed, underemployed, or work informally in delicate arrangements (Hirst et al., 2021). Consequently, labour market integration of refugees is persistently poor and puzzling (Harbisch, 2023). Numerous host nations declare the desirability of employing refugees; however, existing research indicates the opposite is taking place. Ethnographic data generated in Berlin and Vienna in 2019 reveals that at the same time as refugees are labelled potentially useful labour, they are also depicted as helpless children who are never ready for the labour market, an approach that Harbisch (2023) refers to as infantilisation of refugees.

Harbisch's (2023) research on Syrian refugees in Berlin and Vienna presents several examples of refugees who are locked out of the labour market due to negative societal perceptions. One Syrian refugee expressed his disappointment after being asked to attend a third labour market integration course while being denied access to the job market. This informant was lacking English skills but was sent to an integration course that was not useful and did not address his need. On the contrary, he was continuously considered as not ready for the labour market and in need of further training. Mozetič (2018) emphasises that even high-skilled refugees are perceived as receiving and in need, not as giving and useful, with their qualifications regularly unrecognised.

Harbisch (2023) observes that whenever refugees cannot provide certain certificates, they are directly assumed to be ignorant, thus they end up feeling useless. Refugees' labour market inclusion is therefore strongly hindered by societies that construct them as children in need of schooling while at the same time encouraging them to become useful. Such barriers systematically marginalise refugees and push them into low-paid employment, where they are frequently exposed to exploitation and prone to racism (Hirst et al., 2021). In this regard, accounts of exploitation and abuse revolve around the lack of legal recourse against employers. Negative attitudes towards refugees can impact hiring decisions and the support they are entitled to. Discrimination can be as subtle as mild prejudice to utter racism. Although many refugees may not be exposed to extreme exploitation, they remain prone to different forms of exploitation, such as being underpaid.

6 Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter serves as a conclusion to the study by addressing 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? This question is answered based on the answers to questions (1) and (3) in previous chapters and aims to contribute to the successful design of future projects.

To determine how the pilot project can be applied, scaled, or transferred, several factors need to be considered and are examined in this chapter.

6.1 Learning from success

Overall, learning from the pilot project presents a remarkable opportunity for GIZ to address the SDGs. As a partner, UoPeople proved capable of providing courses to the target group that meet the quality standard of a US Distance Education accreditation while adapting quickly to cater to the GIZ cohort and expanding its own capacity, such as developing full programs in Arabic with the corresponding advisory support and launching a series of short certificate courses (not associate's, bachelor's, or master's degrees).

What has made the pilot project a success is the nimble team behind the platform that focuses on the objective of standardising and improving the quality of the educational offer. This particular objective parallels GIZ objective and is, thus, an efficient partnership.

The pilot revealed specific areas that should be addressed before the end of the pilot project and be built into the design of future versions when replicated or transferred.

6.2 Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the pilot project

Transferring the pilot project to other social and geographical contexts necessitates understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the pilot project and recognising its gaps, which have been covered in detail in the MTR (Paeradigms 2023). Figure 6.1 summarises the analysis of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, which are described following the figure.

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
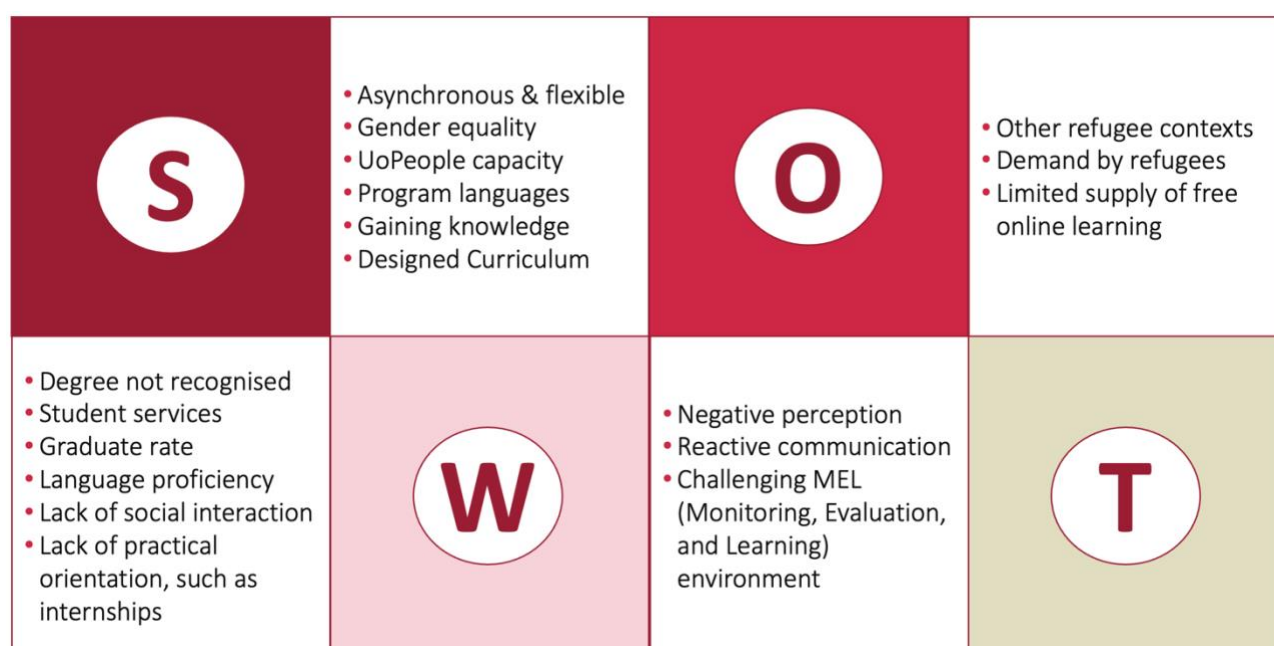
Figure 6.1: Strengths (S), Weaknesses (W), Opportunities (O), and Threats (T) for consideration in scaling the pilot project

6.2.1 Strengths

Considering the strengths of the pilot project, several aspects play a direct role in making it highly transferable: asynchronicity, gender equality, capacity, and program language. The asynchronous nature of the UoPeople model means students in any time zone can study for their degree online and at their own pace without the need to *chase* their lectures and classes, as is the case with other online programs that offer lectures online but at scheduled times. This flexibility provides better prospects for women to study, who were seen to complete more courses successfully once in a degree program. Capacity is another strength that UoPeople has, and this is translated into the growing number of enrolled students that the university serves. As for language, the university has catered to the Arabic-speaking population among its students by developing entire programs in Arabic, opening up new horizons for millions of native Arabic speakers to enrol in higher education. In all, combining these three strengths results in a fourth implicit strength – gaining knowledge, developing digital literacy, and improving language proficiency, all of which can take place while enrolled for a degree without the need to complete it.

6.2.2 Weaknesses

The pilot project has several weaknesses, in particular, degree recognition, graduation rate, student services, and language. Since UoPeople operates fully online and therefore serves students worldwide, the issue of degree recognition and the obstacles facing it surfaces here as a major weakness. Students enrolling in online programs in their host countries count on their degree being officially recognised so that they may find decent high-skilled jobs after graduation. It is worth noting that recognition of degrees is essential for finding employment in the public sector or pursuing further studies at other universities. According to the MTR, some instructors revealed that the private sector might, at times, pay less attention to the local recognition of online degrees and instead value the skills obtained and the performance of the graduate on the job (Paeradigms, 2023). Nevertheless, as long as many countries either do not recognise online degrees in general, or view them as deficient, the challenge of translating an online-acquired degree into real social mobility persists.

Graduation rate is another weakness that demands attention when considering transferability. Statistics presented in the MTR show that UoPeople has high enrolment rates compared to low graduation numbers (Paeradigms, 2023). This issue raises a question mark on the viability of the program, especially for refugees. Refugees consider acquiring a higher education degree key to a better future in their host countries. However, a delayed future may have numerous disadvantages for refugee students as well as their dependents and consequently further their existing desperation. The low number of graduates is mainly due to the newness of the project and the time needed to complete a degree. Therefore, there is no independent (or external) information about the achieved competencies of graduates, such as can normally be obtained with tracer studies or employer surveys. However, the quality of the course content and academic level of the programs is regularly reviewed by externals as required to maintain accreditation standards.

Finally, student services emerged as a significant weakness in any online environment, especially with refugee students that lack basic needs and have faced and might still be facing trauma. Services include academic support, such as tutoring and mentoring, mental health support, and opportunities for face-to-face interactions. This was also identified as a key success factor in the literature (see Chapter 3.4). UoPeople has taken steps to enhance student support. However, their model is designed to reach the masses, and therefore, their efforts are limited to services that can be managed by their slim central team. Nonetheless, the need for services remains an important area for future project design.

Despite classifying language as a strength in the previous sections, we also list it as a gap that needs filling. Transferring the pilot project to contexts where English, and recently Arabic, is not a native language poses many challenges for everyone aiming to enrol in university. University degrees may need to be entirely offered in a third language other than English and Arabic. Spanish, for instance, is one language that can make UoPeople accessible to millions of students worldwide, among which many are refugees.

6.2.3   Opportunities

The project can be transferred with some adaptations to other refugee populations. These individuals have a high demand for skills that will enable them to find work in their host countries. By effectively addressing these needs through online education, such as the pilot project, there exists the potential to not only bridge the gap in qualifications but also empower displaced individuals to thrive in their new environments. The expansion of successful projects into different contexts can be deployed as an effective tool in development cooperation, offering pathways for skill development and enhancing the prospects of those who have been marginalised. The fact that there are few organisations, like UoPeople, that can offer accredited online education (and even fewer in the Arabic language) is an opportunity for scaling the pilot project to other contexts. Aligning with accreditation standards and requirements of the region or country where the receiving refugee population is located should enhance the employability prospects of this population especially if online education is already recognised in the targeted country. Moreover, establishing partnerships with local educational institutions, governments, or other relevant organisations has the potential to support the sustainability and viability of the project.

6.2.4   Threats

The landscape of online education is not devoid of challenges, one of which is the – although improving – persistent negative perception it often faces. Additionally, the crisis context of vulnerable populations in general, and more so refugees, tends to encourage reactive communication rather than a more strategic approach. This scenario can hinder effective collaboration and goal achievement. Moreover, the intricacies of monitoring and accurately measuring progress pose another hurdle, as obtaining precise metrics is not straightforward. Navigating these multifaceted challenges demands thoughtful strategies and concerted efforts to foster a more constructive perception, establish effective communication, and refine monitoring techniques for a successful online educational outcome.

6.3   Addressing the gaps

Of the weaknesses identified, the recognition of degrees or qualifications cannot be directly addressed by GIZ or the implementing partner (UoPeople). However, this crucial issue must be recognised and outcomes adjusted accordingly. Therefore, promoting the recognition of degrees in host countries is a relevant measure to be included in future GIZ projects. Stronger support of the pilot project as well as future projects by GIZ, in the suggested manner, could advocate for ministry partners to address the issue or ratify the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, described in Chapter 5.3. The language issue is addressed to some extent by UoPeople, which offers an 8-level ESL (English as a second language) program and has launched programs in Arabic. The graduation rate and student services are related.

While UoPeople recognises the issues and has adopted measures to mitigate their impact, these represent gaps that should be considered in the program design for any replication of the pilot project. Specifically, the performance indicators need to be more clearly defined to specify the type of degree or certification that can be included in the program. UoPeople launched a series of short-form programs in 2021 that allow students

to get a certificate for three to four courses in a short time that could eventually be applied towards a degree. The pilot needs to clarify which degree constitutes a graduate and whether the certificates can be included. Defining the term "graduate" segues into how monitoring and evaluation metrics can be defined. This can be translated through shifting towards an output reporting system (graduate rate) rather than input (enrolment). In terms of student services, engagement with host country public institutions and civil society organisations could be included in the program design to improve effectiveness.

The threats identified all pertain to areas that can be addressed by UoPeople. The negative perception and challenging MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning) environment will be substantially aided by resolving the weakness in graduation rate and moving towards outcome-based reporting. Then, ensuring that the outcomes are integrated into communication through a strategic plan will contribute to improving the reputation of the organisation and of online education in general.

In summary, there is a clear need for GIZ to provide or facilitate for stronger support in future projects to deliver outcomes that are similar to the pilot project, and any replication should build in such support. For example, GIZ needs to include measures to improve the "ecosystem" by addressing such areas as the learning environment for refugees and legal frameworks in host countries.

6.4   Identification of groups that can benefit from transferability

Online education is a key contributor to the massification of higher education, that is, expanding access to tertiary education to a much larger segment of the population, making higher education more inclusive and accessible to a broader range of students, often beyond the traditional elite or privileged groups. Based on the findings of the literature review and the pilot and other similar projects, challenges presented by online higher education are similar across very diverse types of students. Thus, although this study did not explore other vulnerable groups, they remain a category worth investigating further; the experts believe that the learning and experience from the pilot project would significantly increase the chance for success of transferring to such groups.

The pilot project can thus be transferrable to other disadvantaged groups, in particular, refugees and asylum seekers. In view of the current political and security situation worldwide at the time of writing this report and the SWOT analysis, the research team considers factors needed to identify groups who can benefit from a similar project.

Venezuela can be considered the first potential target to which the pilot project could be transferred. Over 7.13 million refugees and migrants and one million asylum-seekers from Venezuela have left their country in search of protection and a better life. The majority have been hosted in Latin America and Caribbean countries (UNHCR, 2023c). The Venezuelan population has a high level of English proficiency and could, therefore, potentially pass through the required Foundation program quickly and matriculate into a degree program. Further, should UoPeople be willing to scale their offer to Spanish as they did in Arabic, the number of Venezuelan refugees seeking access to higher education would undoubtedly grow. Importantly, expanding the program language offering would benefit not only refugees from Venezuela but also any Spanish-speaking individual at university age.

Second, Ukrainian refugees present another strong potential for transferability. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, more than 6.2 million refugees have been recorded globally as of July 2023 (UNHCR, 2023a). Although UoPeople already serves refugees of Ukrainian origin, this operation can be expanded and strengthened by translating the programs already offered into Ukrainian and therefore benefitting an increasingly large number of refugees who do not see an end to the ongoing war in their country.

Finally, we consider South Sudan as a third option in this section on transferability to refugee groups. According to UNHCR (2023b), 2.3 million displaced refugees are currently from South Sudan.

In addition, a well-designed and flexible project could be made available to other groups besides refugees that could benefit from having access to online higher education. These groups could include persons living with disabilities, rural and remote communities, low-income individuals, individuals in recovery, or elderly learners. The scaling of the project to such groups would need to integrate student services, as this has been repeatedly indicated as a key factor for success.

The design of any scaled or transferred project can be designed to measure, monitor, evaluate, be accountable for, and learn from efforts to include women equally.

The next section details the conditions and obstacles that might be faced when transferring the pilot project to these other refugee groups.

6.5   Conditions and obstacles to success

The scalability and transferability of any online program to different groups of refugees is dependent on several factors. According to Almaiah & Alyoussef (2019), the factors that influence the adoption of e-learning systems and programs are course design, course content support, course assessment, and teacher characteristics. However, in the case of Syrian refugees, several other factors come into play, such as language, culture, and accessibility (Arar, 2021).

6.5.1   Language and culture barriers

Language is a major barrier that affects the transferability of higher education systems to different groups. For example, Crea and Sparnon (2017) confirmed that the English language is a barrier to online education for Middle Eastern and African refugees in Kakuma Camp Sudan. A large proportion of refugees who apply for online classes have difficulty understanding English. In addition to the English language, students found difficulties accessing technology, books, and post-program opportunities. Turkish is another language that forms a learning barrier for a multitude of refugees in Turkey. Syrian refugees' limited capacity to express themselves in Turkish has a negative impact on their academic skills and achievement in university. However, the undesirable impact reaches beyond the university and affects the refugees' social integration in the context they live in, leading to negative stereotypes and, ultimately, alienation (Dereli, 2018).

Considering the groups listed in Section 6.4, English is widely spoken among university students in Venezuela as it is taught as a second language in schools, and it is the primary language of South Sudan. However, English proficiency among most Ukrainians is still very low. According to a European Commission survey, only 9% of Ukrainians feel confident using English (English Raven, 2022) which poses a great challenge for UoPeople, whose courses are taught in English and, most recently, in Arabic. An alternative similar to the one developed for Syrian refugees by offering courses and modules in Arabic may need to be offered in Ukrainian should this group benefit from the UoPeople model of higher education.

6.5.2   Access to Online higher education

Higher education in Ukraine has faced numerous challenges due to the ongoing conflict. Higher education institutions have taken the primary responsibility to establish suitable conditions for instructors and students to engage in distance learning. The use of distance learning resources has been found to boost student motivation, enhance the quality of education and educational services, and broaden the scope of higher education institutions' instructional objectives. Web services like Moodle and learning apps such as Kahoot

were the most successful in encouraging the interaction between teachers and students throughout the conflict (Banyoi et al., 2023).

However, the challenges of moving higher education online are many. Krylova-Grek and Shyshkina (2021) reported an array of challenges facing Ukranian students. These difficulties include registering for classes due to interrupted internet access, having numerous assignments that must be completed in a short time, inconvenient class schedules, unclear guidance and challenging material, spending long hours in front of a computer screen, and little personal self-control and appetite for studying. Only a minority said they had no trouble completing tasks remotely.

Another study by Voloshinov et al. (2020) revealed that the main challenges and difficulties facing Ukrainian students learning online are the demanding accreditation requirements and the lack of self-motivation, social interaction in virtual learning, immediate feedback, practising oral communication skills, the possibility to take all required courses online, technology access, and self-motivation.

6.5.3 Accreditation of online higher education in other contexts

Distance education is recognised by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science. Thus, Ukrainian students wishing to study online may find it convenient to join UoPeople (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2019). One such university that is active in online higher education among Ukrainians is the International European University (IEU, 2023).

As for online higher education in Venezuela, the National Open University (Universidad Nacional Abierta UNA) is a public higher education institution that is entirely dedicated to distance education with more than 67 branches throughout the country, making it one the largest in Venezuela. However, confirming that online higher education provided by UNA is recognised in Venezuela was not possible as the university website was not operational at the time of writing this study.

With regard to online higher education in Sudan, no information has been found as to whether this mode of learning is accredited or not. This lack of information reveals a similarity between the context of Sudan and other host countries where UoPeople has students enrolled. As such, we may infer that refugee students graduating from UoPeople will likely face the same obstacles that Syrian refugees already go through: having their online degrees recognised and employability.

7 Recommendations

This section develops recommendations for policymakers, donors or funders and implementing agencies, and online education providers from a synthesis of the relevant literature compared with findings drawn from the MTR (Paeradigms, 2023). The section aims to develop a deeper, literature-informed, and practice-based understanding of Syrian refugees in higher education, and contribute to the body of knowledge on this increasingly researched area.

Table 7.1 presents a synthesis of recommendations to address the challenges of refugee integration and their access to higher education drawn from the previous chapters and in particular, the UNESCO report on refugees' access to higher education (2022), Martin and Stulgaitis (2022), Dereli (2018), and Yavan and El Ghali (2017). These findings are synthesised with the MTR empirical findings and organised by stakeholder groups: policymakers; donors, funders, or development agencies; and online education providers.

Sections 7.1 and 7.2 introduce the recommendations from literature and the MTR respectively and Section 7.3 describes policy recommendations using the frame of the OECD DAC Criteria as a way of thinking about them in terms of concrete actions that can directly impact future projects and result in positive and sustainable outcomes.

7.1 Literature-informed recommendations

Yavcan and El Ghali (2017) emphasised that many of the Syrian refugees in higher education are providing for their families while managing the cost of education and language learning. The authors note that scholarships can only temporarily solve these issues. From a policymaker's perspective, raising the living standards of the refugees could enhance their educational integration more sustainably. For providers of online education, offering skills and competencies, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, the curriculum in the pilot project for Syrian refugee students can increase their prospects of employment and improve their self-esteem.

To provide individualised support for refugee students, online education providers should ensure their academic and administrative staff are well-trained. Besides pedagogical and technical readiness, Policymakers can support online education providers to collaborate with mental health agencies to provide refugee students with culturally sensitive and trauma-informed holistic approaches (Bajwa et al., 2017b).

7.2 Empirical-based recommendations

The MTR revealed that the initial project design for the pilot lacked specific information and clear definitions of outputs. These oversights can be addressed in the pilot and need to be built into any replication of the pilot project to other contexts. Communication was one of the key challenges that emerged, and the key communication channel for students is the university learning management system LMS – Moodle is used by UoPeople. This platform plays a big role in the success and retention of students as it is the main access point to their learning material and their means of communicating with their peers and instructors. Thus, several specific recommendations relate to the LMS.

Table 7.1: Recommendations for policymakers and planners of refugees' access to higher education

Theme	Recommendation
Recommendations for policymakers	
Policy coherence	**Multistakeholder collaboration:** Establishing intra-ministerial coordination structures for the facilitation of refugees' access to host countries' HEIs.
	Sharing best practices among universities and cooperating with universities that have specific policies integrating refugees.
	Increasing international cooperation with the aim to share the responsibility of educating refugees and promoting higher education for youth groups in the host countries.
	Prioritising access: Including the access of refugee students to higher education in national higher education policy documents.
	Creating diverse policies that target each group among refugees as refugees are not a homogeneous group.
	Increasing the number of scholarships for young women to ensure that both men and women have equal access to postsecondary education.
	Normalising perceptions: Syrian refugees are commonly seen as a burden to the economy and society of their country. Improving the perceptions of Syrian refugees among local students by eliminating stereotypes and generalisations about Syrians and giving good examples instead.
Recommendations for donors and funders	
Monitoring	**Clearly defining metrics:** Collecting enrolment information, student progress, drop-out rates and graduation data in a standardised, protection-sensitive format to enable the monitoring of refugee participation in host country higher education institutions.
Project design	**Strong support from implementing agency:** Consider providing more frequent and participatory technical advice to the online education provider on the development and monitoring of a well-defined logical framework providing clear milestones in an operational plan.
	Clarify performance indicators: Define quantitative goals of expected results in compliance with partner structure (e.g. define academic degrees and consider requirements instead of providing a number overall).
	Ensure the participation of women: Provide development tools to strengthen and support the participation of women (setting an objective is not sufficient).
	Embed partnerships for coherency: Include provision for student services provided by local partners (public institutions, intergovernmental, non-governmental, or civil society organisations), including mental health support, peer knowledge exchange, and mentoring.
	Understand implications of degree recognition: Acknowledge the importance of recognising degrees by host countries; build this factor into expected outcomes, and advocate resolution with country partners.
Recommendations for online education providers	
Student services	**Preparing for study:** Providing structured opportunities for preparatory courses for refugees to obtain student status as soon as possible after arrival in host country.
	Guidance on study options and pathways: Making available to refugees easily accessible information on national higher education systems, admission formalities, funding opportunities, and credential recognition.

Theme	Recommendation
	Extra help with languages: Although refugees joining higher education receive a language certificate, their inability to express themselves in the language of the host country, let alone using academic language, is a major obstacle to their university success and social integration. This issue exists for online programs in English as well as in-person programs in the language of the host country.
	Recognising prior learning: Offering flexible (RPL) procedures that recognise non-formal and informal prior learning though interview-based documentation.
Teaching and learning	**Add communication mechanisms:** Add opportunities for interaction and collaboration among peers and with instructors, such as video call exchange, increase warm support interactions, aligning with Baker et al.'s (2018) findings, providing comprehensive feedback criteria, and sharing learning artifacts beyond basic requirements.
	Enhance personal contact: Add a personal touch to the chatbot (e.g. Michelle in Moodle) for non-technical concerns and add a direct suggestion box, and address needs of less self-reliant learners, that experience potential loneliness due to limited direct support.
	Integrate program advising with the chatbot and clarify student-advisor roles to students.
	Add short courses to the pilot: Include separate courses on essential skills, such as career management and entrepreneurship, to facilitate the integration of refugee graduates into the labour market, either as employees or self-employed individuals.

7.3   Discussion of recommendations for policymakers by evaluation criteria

The aim of presenting policy recommendations in terms of the OECD DAC criteria in this research study is to enhance the rigour, transparency, and effectiveness of the decision-making process, ultimately leading to more impactful and well-informed development policies. The following policy recommendations address key evaluation criteria aiming to structure them around the findings of the MTR and the ARS.

7.3.1   Relevance

There is consensus that offering opportunities for online higher education (or tertiary education) to refugees is considered by internal and external stakeholders as highly relevant. Public and private academic institutions offer an exponentially growing number of online courses and programs at different levels and of different quality; some have been used as specific interventions in previous and ongoing development cooperation projects. The asynchronous online learning design responds very well to the needs of active students who require flexible study hours due to their job and family obligations. However, the project design process must include a pre-assessment regarding the subject matter content of programs offered, the quality of the curricula, and the specific needs of women and men of the target group. The most vulnerable group is most likely women in Afghanistan at present.

7.3.2   Coherence

The literature and MTR findings clearly confirm that any type of studying has value in itself, helping to overcome difficult or traumatic life experiences. Asynchronous online studying programs of a globally operating institution such as UoPeople, which are flanked by academic or non-academic partnerships programs with local, regional, or international organisations, could strengthen the focus of the intervention. A typical example could be specific technical or administrative support on-site in a refugee camp. This would

require appropriate monitoring and communication channels, for example, provided by the local GIZ project or a partner organisation. Another approach could be to strategically cooperate with local universities, which could provide the human interface, which is often missed in the asynchronous online studying program of UoPeople.

7.3.3   Efficiency

The relatively low investment cost per student in online higher education based on the UoPeople model could result in very good efficiency from a financial point of view compared to traditional universities, which often charge much higher tuition fees for refugees or immigrants. Factors of actual drop-out rates and retention have to be considered. Any higher education program for refugees as a vulnerable population requires adequate scholarship support, which constitutes a direct investment in people. The allocation of limited scholarship funds (cost coverage only) through the university reduces the unintended effect of donor dependency, which could be observed in traditional programs. Transaction costs of conventional scholarship programs should also be considered and related to output and outcome indicator.

7.3.4   Effectiveness

An effective program intervention requires a well-thought-out project framework as a basis. In the case of online learning, language has been identified as one of the major factors. The pilot project with UoPeople has shown that demand-oriented programs offered in Arabic in the MENA region match the needs of the target group. A similar effect could be expected if a program could be offered in Spanish or another language to other refugee groups. The use of artificial intelligence in the context of teaching and learning will most likely support the development and expansion of connected learning. Gaining knowledge, skills, and competencies are the key factors for finding employment or starting a business after graduation. Specific short-term courses or certificates based on a small number of modules, such as entrepreneurship, could likely enhance the effectiveness of online programs if the specific needs and demands of the target group are known. This expansion is another area where local organisations could provide expertise to a globally operating institution. Assuming that promoting employability is envisaged within the scope of a higher education project, a labour market analysis should form the basis for selecting suitable courses of study; relevant ministries (e.g. Ministry of Labour) and the private sector should also be much more involved. The legal and economic labour market situation should be made transparent to the students to avoid unintended negative effects.

Students and staff have confirmed that mastering the process of connected learning creates added value *per se* in a transforming digitalised world.

7.3.5   Sustainability

The MTR and the literature findings showed the value and potential of online higher education programs for the masses, among which are refugees as disadvantaged groups in qualitative terms. The empirical database is still too small to recommend an immediate upscaling. However, it is strongly suggested to change the current focus on admission numbers towards graduation outcomes, and if relevant measures ranging from accreditation to service improvement are taken, the concept of UoPeople could attract support from international donors for various refugee groups. The GIZ, for example, may develop adjusted project proposals and include other vulnerable groups. The time-flexible online higher education concept of UoPeople in combination with scholarship support offers an excellent opportunity to promote and achieve equity for women and men.

7.3.6 Impact

The impact based on the pilot project cannot be determined yet since there are still too few graduates. However, mechanisms should be in place to capture information about post-graduate experiences, including feedback about the program, gender issues, and employment data through longitudinal studies that follow up the effectiveness of higher education students completing online programs. These studies can be conducted by UoPeople or in partnership with others. Provision for such studies should be included in the project design.

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