Online, Blended and Distance Learning for Education in Fragile Contexts

Conference or Workshop Item

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Pan-Commonwealth Forum proposal:

Title: Online, Blended and Distance Learning for Education in Fragile Contexts

Organisers: Open University and Association of Commonwealth Universities

PCF Sub-Theme: B. Opening Up Education; **Strand**: B1. Innovation.

When: 9 September 2019, 2-3pm

Background

The United Nations estimated that by the end of 2018 70.8 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide (UNHCR, 2019), with the result that quality education is not easily accessible by those affected. Half of the world's refugee children are out of school, and only 1% of refugees participate in higher education (UNHCR, 2018). In the context of these figures, there should be no question that higher education institutions (HEIs) have a vital role to play in exploring the educational needs, experiences, aspirations of, and opportunities for refugees and forcibly displaced persons. In turn, universities can draw on existing or develop new ways of working to address the high demand around good quality education in emergencies. Higher education is crucial to ensuring the wellbeing, socio-economic integration and mobility, and successful settlement of refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom have high educational aspirations and strongly value education as an important tool to restore dignity, security and hope.

This workshop will provide a space for participants to discuss opportunities provided by open, online and distance education (ODL) for enabling meaningful participation in education for the most disadvantaged learners. Participants will consider existing efforts towards opening up access to, and developing targeted supports for, participation in university study for refugees and displaced populations in contexts of protracted displacement or resettlement. As workshop organisers we acknowledge that for refugees and displaced populations the challenging situations are not only experienced in contexts of displacement (e.g. in host-communities) but are likely to be endured even in resettlement contexts or as returnees.

This workshop brings together universities working on ODL for refugees and forcibly displaced populations in higher education, who will share their unique perspectives and experiences in ODL for refugees and displaced peoples. Necessarily such a focus on HEIs will bring in the other organisations engaged in multi-stakeholder partnerships, such as NGOs, state actors, funders etc. The focus of the workshop will be on 'trouble-shooting' what common impediments arise and what are some of the innovative solutions that have been tried and tested in overcoming these barriers?

Objective:

- To move the discussion away from needs and problems towards opportunities and strengths that ODL for refugees and displaced people brings in the HE sector.
- To provide a forum for discussing and sharing good practice and learning gained from existing work in the field.
- To map evidence of the opportunities offered for ODL with refugees and displaced learners.
- To discuss ways of strengthening institutional commitment and preparedness, in terms of institutional policies, staffing arrangements, training and resources.
- To provide a networking opportunity for participants who may be already working with refugees and displaced people and ODL or are looking to develop ODL programmes for these learners.

Significance

HEIs are tasked with driving enhancement of teaching and learning but also addressing major societal challenges. Forced migrants are a student group where equality gaps exist and are under-represented in the HE sector at a global level. HE institutions have a role to play to review their own institutional policies and data and identify how they can increase access and participation in studies in HE for disadvantaged learners. The developments in web and mobile technology, the movement towards Open Education and a greater understanding of mobile and connected pedagogies for learning allow a shift to explore appropriate and relevant educational provision for these learners in challenging and diverse situations. This workshop will contribute to the ongoing debate about widening participation agendas and aspires to contribute to considerations and planning of ODL programmes for education in emergencies.

Overview of the workshop

This session examines open and distance education for refugees and displaced populations. All four presentations draw on diverse projects in the field to trace design milestones, achievements, strengths of the programmes and any learning that can be shared with participants. They offer insights from the development of programmes and their outcomes. The discussion in small groups will be structured around the following key themes:

- How to ensure local relevance and local expertise – refugees are diverse in terms of background. Interventions need to avoid being irrelevant and/or imperialist and imposing curriculum. It is about routes to localisation and presumably requires some sort of partnership model. Local expertise – how do you localise curriculum when local ODL experts may be thin on the ground – the default is to rely on external course designers, but this works against localisation. So, how can we develop capacity of ODL academics in situ?

- Online and connected-learning pedagogies for displaced populations – much of the discussion in the field is influenced by technological determinism and also production of content. However, the discussion should be centred on pedagogic approaches and the challenge is both changing students' assumptions about learning and also being able to design critical and engaging teaching and learning
- Perceptions of Open, Online and Distance education and acceptability of ODL – how to get passed the sense that ODL is not 'proper' university education?
- How can HEIs build capacity for people that are involved in this work? Especially dealing with trauma of displacement – these students have suffered a lot, and this makes pedagogy even more challenging.
- How can we build personalised and flexible pathways for forced migrants to include academic support – language support.

The British Council will focus on recent research that investigates the role of digital platforms and skills in refugee and host community relations. The Open University will draw on research in International Development and Inclusive Innovation and its expertise on open, distance and online education programmes in resource-limited environments to discuss design challenges and frameworks for overcoming these challenges in developing learning at scale. The PADILEIA project will report on best practice emerging from their work to increase access to higher education for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon using blended learning approaches. Finally, Kenyatta University will discuss the experiences of international partnership work and the impact of this work on their Borderless Higher Education for Refugees project. The four examples make a significant contribution by examining ways of organising, embedding and sustaining work in the field, as well as situate these within social, political, cultural, and pedagogical contexts that may shape future research and practice in the field of ODL for education in emergencies.

Lightning talks at the start of the workshop will act as a provocation and scene setter. Possible presenters include:

- **British Council** research on the role of digital platforms and skills in refugee and host community relations (*more info below)
- **Open University** – case study on one or more OU projects
- **Hannah Bond, Project Manager, PADILEIA** (Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access)
- **Teresa Mwoma, Kenyatta University** to talk about the partnership Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project

These talks will be followed by discussion in small group format.

Structure of the workshop

This is a 60-minute session with 4 lightning presentations, including a discussant [ACU perhaps] and a chair of the session. Following a 5-minute introduction by the chair, each presenter will summarise their work on a given topic in 3 minutes (based on one PPT slide). Following this, each presenter will facilitate a small group discussion for 20 minutes around the key questions /themes that are provided by the organisers. Key points from group discussion will be shared in the plenary. Following this, 15 minutes of the session will be for the discussant to share any notes or emerging themes with participants and other attendees. The last 5 minutes will be devoted to the chair summarising main outcomes from the session, identifying gaps, and shaping future directions for work.

- **5 mins**: Welcome and introduction
- **15 mins**: 4 "lightning talks" of 3 minutes, one slide only
- **20 mins:** discussion in smaller groups
- **15 mins**: plenary/feedback
- **5 mins**: Final summary