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Exploring Paradoxes Around Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations

‘Borderless Education: The Provision of Tertiary Degree Programmes to Long-term Refugees’
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Background to the Research Project
This paper is based on a 2009 dissertation research project\(^1\). The idea for this research project developed as a result of the author’s long-term interest in refugee education and commitment along the Thai-Burmese border.

Young refugees along the border look for meaningful ways to support themselves and their families as they make the transition into adulthood in refugee camps. Their tremendous amount of human potential, creativity and eagerness to attain higher levels of education is accompanied by boredom, a lack of perspectives and lack of freedom and opportunities, means and resources to pursue higher education.

Not having the opportunities their non-refugee peers enjoy also puts them in danger of their extended periods of boredom translating into frustration and their energy being turned to non-productive activities resulting in increased social problems in their communities.

Having the time and willingness to study, but simply not the opportunities seems like an ironical paradox. How come higher education is not being provided on a larger scale as the time refugees spend in exile has increased?

The literature-based study follows a rights-based approach and adopts post-structural theories in exploring theoretical paradoxes entailing practical implications for the development of a global system of refugee higher education.

The study explores three main paradoxes around Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations:

1. Relief vs. Development aid;
2. Higher Education in a Nation-state vs. Non-state;
3. Victimisation vs. Empowerment of refugees;

Considering the scarcity of literature on the topic, this paper is not exhaustive, but rather aims to inspire future research and discussion around this topic.

Overview of Paradoxes Explored

1. Relief vs. Development
The main problem seems to be that many protracted refugee situations are not de facto recognised as such; for instance the Thai government refers to the refugee camps along its border with Burma as ‘temporary shelters’.

Viewing long-term refugees as temporarily displaced only results in many of their basic rights being denied (e.g. protracted encampment and the related restrictions of movement and income generating activities).

The paradox is about providing continued top down relief aid rather than adopting a more participatory development approach in protracted refugee situations. In a context of providing basic necessities, Higher Education is more likely to be seen as an unnecessary luxury. In short, it seems impossible to deliver Higher Education (requiring long-term effort and investment) in a context meant to be temporary.

Furthermore, while the current dominant educational discourse around Education For All (EFA) emphasises the individual’s right to basic education, Higher Education tends to be seen in terms of its externalities only, i.e. the benefits accruing to immediate and wider society, rather than recognising Higher Education as a right.

Part of the problem is how educational programmes in contexts of emergency and protracted crises are donor-driven and Higher Education programmes are undoubtedly more costly and complex to implement and cannot – unlike basic education programmes – deliver quick and easily observable impacts.

➢ Easier said than done, to resolve this paradox we need to first of all recognise protracted refugee situations as such.\(^2\)

Furthermore, we need to recognise the right to lifelong learning, and higher/tertiary education as an individual right as part of this.

In short, we need to look at immediate AND long-term development needs of refugees in protracted contexts!

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\(^2\) See UNHCR definition of protracted refugee situations as “one in which 25,000 or more refugees of the same nationality have been in exile for five years or more in a given asylum country” (UNHCR, 2009:7) 2008 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons. Geneva: UNHCR.
2. **Nation-state vs. Non-state**

The second paradox deals with the ways our nation-state system has become an accepted norm and how education in general and higher education and universities in particular are perceived to be linked to and dependent on the existence of the nation-state.

Refugees, on the other hand, are not part of the nation-state system; they are perceived to exist in a ‘liminal non-state’.

In Malkki’s terms: viewed through a sedentarist lens, refugees first have to be ‘normalised’, i.e. become part of the nation-state system again through either repatriation, local integration or resettlement before they can seek access to tertiary education.

- in Thailand for instance, DAFI scholarships are no longer available for Burmese refugees mainly due to the ongoing large scale resettlement programme coupled with the belief that refugees will have access to educational opportunities once resettled.
  This is not as straightforward as it may seem as students would need not only acceptable academic track records, GED or TOEFL test results, but also a scholarship.

Providing Higher Education outside the nation-state system has proven challenging for the refugee community in Thailand who have expressed interest and taken first steps to establish a camp-based Higher Education system. Internally, challenges are a general lack of resources and the politicisation of education. Externally, the efforts from inside the camp have little value as programmes are not accredited and recognised by any nation-state.

- To resolve this paradox, we need to ensure to address young refugees’ educational needs DURING displacement so they are better equipped for making their way into the nation-state system.
  To this end, we need to further explore alternative and flexible degree modes that can exist in virtual spaces beyond the nation-state system, such as distance education and online learning.

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3. Victimisation vs. Empowerment
The last paradox revolves around powerful narratives of refugees as dependent victims with no action of their own.

This narrative has shaped reality in justifying mechanisms for international protection, encampment and continued relief aid. Internalising this narrative, refugees have been incapacitated and are not believed to be able to cope with a challenge like Higher Education; they are rather perceived as a ‘burden’ to host nations and the international community.

The danger is that protracted encampment will eventually make refugees take on this assigned attitude of dependency and passivity; that is to say that refugee camps have the capacity to turn forced migrants into ‘refugees’.

We should not forget that refugee camps are sites of power-laden relationships and it is only too easy to allocate clearly defined roles; but even if the discursive power is strong, it is not definite. As Harrell-Bond\(^4\) has shown us, just as Foucault’s\(^5\) prisons can be both limiting and enabling, this can be equally true for refugee camps.

Higher Education can enhance refugees’ self-image and provide them with an identity beyond that of simply being a refugee; it can provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to criticise aid packages ‘enforced’ on them and to participate in planning and policy making regarding their own situation, empower them to be no longer a ‘burden’, but agents of their own development.

➢ To resolve this paradox, we need a vision of refugees not as patients but as agents. Through Higher Education, amongst other initiatives, the refugee narrative can be turned upside-down in SEEING refugees as agents and allowing them to BE agents of development.

Conclusion
Higher Education could be both a means and an end to refugee empowerment, but cannot be a panacea. Any efforts towards a global system for Refugee Higher Education would need to be accompanied by a serious transformation of power dynamics in refugee situations as refugees’ self-reliance depends on a widening of spaces for the exercise of refugee agency.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Research

1. Develop other educational and income generating opportunities alongside!
   - We need a holistic approach to refugee education; skewed investment and focus on one sector only would weaken the education system as a whole.
   - Refugee graduates need to have opportunities ready to put their acquired skills to good use.

2. Make educational opportunities available to refugees DURING displacement/encampment!
   - We need to work towards a global system of on-site Refugee Higher Education meeting young refugees’ educational needs during displacement and enabling them to adapt their skills and knowledge once a durable solution has been found.
   - With refugee situations lasting an average of 17 years, we cannot afford to have human potential linger around until a durable solution (repatriation, local integration, resettlement) is found.

3. Avoid establishment of parallel service systems and ensure participation of local host community!
   - Refugees cannot be marginalised from host communities.
   - Host communities may not feel disadvantaged.

4. Explore alternative, flexible modes of delivery and accreditation systems, e.g. distance education, university partnerships, etc.!
   - Although some successful programmes exist, the option of distance education still has a relatively low profile. More research needs to be available on good practices and lessons learned to inspire future projects.
5. Explore **alternative funding mechanisms**, e.g. remittances and diaspora support, shifting funds from military spending!

   - Remittances and other support from the diaspora constitute an overwhelming source of financial aid that still remains relatively unexplored.
   - Shifting funds from military spending may sound idealistic, but is actually pinned down in the World Declaration on EFA (Article 9). To illustrate this, in a recent New York Times article, the author claims that “for the cost of 40,000 troops over a few years — well, we could just about turn every Afghan into a PhD”\(^6\)

6. Enhance **evidence based qualitative research and advocacy** on the potential benefits of Higher Education for long-term refugees!

   - To be able to effectively advocate for more funding towards Refugee Higher Education, creation of a convincing evidence base is indispensable.

7. Develop **quantitative research** on Refugee Higher Education **demand and supply**: refugee tertiary gross enrolment ratio (GER)!

   - The gross enrolment ratio for tertiary level education worldwide is at around 26%, reaching from 6% in Sub-Saharan Africa to 70% in North America and Western Europe.\(^7\)
   - Despite the challenges of providing quantitative data on fluctuating populations such as refugees, it is essential to calculate such figures to be able to further advocate for and underline the need for Refugee Higher Education.

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The goal is for a balanced and inclusive education system that offers multiple options for quality lifelong learning in meeting the needs of all learners in an equitable manner, for education that enables refugees to become self-reliant actors of positive change.

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