Introduction: Higher Education for Refugees

Sarah Dryden-Peterson and Wenona Giles

Young refugee women and men provide hope for the future in the most uncertain and dire of situations. For their families, they represent the chance for more sustainable economic livelihoods; and for their countries of origin, the possibility of more stable political and social leadership. Yet most are denied opportunities to pursue the kinds of education that would help them to cultivate the skills, knowledge, and critical thinking capacities to live up to these expectations.

Education is not often included in humanitarian responses. This is so, despite a normative framework for the provision of education in emergencies since 2004, in the form of the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, which is a companion to the Sphere Project Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards; and the institutionalization, since 2006, of an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) humanitarian response cluster for education. The lack of educational response has been evident, for example, in the Dadaab camps in northern Kenya, where seventy-five additional schools or 1,800 classrooms were urgently needed to serve 75,000 recently arrived school-aged children, and yet education was not included in the July 2011 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) appeal for the Horn of Africa.

Compounding the lack of emergency response in education is the reality that displacement is not a short-term situation: conflicts between 1999 and 2007 lasted on average twelve years in low-income countries and twenty-two years in middle-income countries. Refugee camps, historically meant to be temporary transit places, often resemble poorly resourced villages and towns. At the start of 2009, 8.5 million people worldwide had been sequestered for ten years or more in long-term refugee situations, without prospects for returning to their countries of origin, settling locally in their countries of asylum, or being resettled to a third country. Currently, there are approximately thirty “protracted” refugee situations throughout the world wherein the average length of stay is now close to twenty years. These refugees represented 63 per cent of the 13.6 million Convention refugees and other asylum seekers located outside of their countries worldwide, as of the beginning of 2009. In addition, there are now 27.5 million internally displaced persons or IDPs, who have been ousted from their homes and local communities due to civil wars, but who remain within their home country borders.

The extended nature of displacement and the lack of possibilities for education in exile mean that most refugees miss out on their one chance for school-based learning. Yet given the uncertainty of the future for refugees, the increasingly globalized realities that most of them face, and the promise of knowledge-based economies, education—that is adaptable and portable—is critical.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that recognizing the right to education includes “mak[ing] higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means.” Realization of this right for refugees requires an approach that conceives of education as a long-term investment for society and the lack of access to quality education at all levels as stunting development potential. Refugees commonly articulate this approach, but it is not generally reflected in policies and practices of donors and UN agencies. While there remain many unaddressed issues related to the provision of quality education for refugees at primary and secondary levels, the issue of higher education for refugees is virtually unexplored in both scholarship and policy.

In what follows, we provide an introduction to the nascent field of higher education for refugees to situate this first collection of papers on the issue within broader debates in the fields of forced migration and education. We begin by examining the opportunities for higher education available for refugees, situating them within an educational continuum from early childhood to post-secondary. Next we explore the socio-economic and emancipatory potential of higher education for both individuals and society. We then
outline the papers that make up this special issue on higher education of refugees, mapping new terrain of what is known in this field. Finally, we conclude with some thoughts on the gaps that remain and ideas for ways forward in the pursuit of accessible higher education for refugees.

A Broken Pipeline

Higher education necessarily forms part of an educational continuum, often called a “pipeline,” beginning with early childhood education and continuing through primary and secondary school. These levels of education are linked, as the idea of a continuum implies: without successful completion of primary and secondary school, higher education is not an option; and, conversely, in situations where access to higher education is limited or non-existent, children and young people are less motivated to persist in primary and secondary school.

For refugees, education is rarely a smooth continuum from one level of schooling to another, and opportunities narrow at each step of the way. Available data indicate that for refugees the 2009 Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for primary school was 76 per cent globally, with lower rates of access in urban areas (70 per cent) and for girls (72 per cent). Access drops dramatically at secondary level such that the 2009 GER for refugees globally was a mere 36 per cent. At tertiary level, in particular, there are great gender disparities between regions such that, for example, only five refugee girls are enrolled for every ten boys in Eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa.

Among refugees who have completed secondary school, there is almost universal desire to attend university. Yet access to higher education for refugees is even more limited than at primary and secondary levels. Even when refugees have met all academic prerequisites for higher education, there are other barriers to accessing opportunities, including cost; documentation, such as birth certificates or examination results; recognition of learning certifications obtained in another country; and institutions’ national-ity requirements either for enrolment or the availability of low fees. There are several routes to higher education for refugees that attempt to circumvent these barriers, most commonly self-sponsorship—in the form of savings or remittances—for enrolment in host country institutions or distance and open learning programs; scholarships to host country or Northern institutions; and free or low-fee services through collaborations between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and universities.

No comprehensive data is available on rates of access to higher education for refugees, yet the numbers of refugees enrolled in higher education are certainly small. Data from the largest higher education scholarship program for refugees, the German-funded and UNHCR-run DAFI program, gives some indication of the availability of higher education. Over nineteen years, DAFI has provided approximately 5,000 scholarships for study at colleges and universities in host countries. This number of scholarships meets only a fraction of the demand, with generally between ten and thirty applications received for each available scholarship and acceptance rates as low as 2 per cent in some cases (see Figure 1).

Habitus, as used by Bourdieu, describes the culturally and situationally embedded structures that shape the way an individual interacts with her/his world, cognitively, physically, emotionally. One’s habitus develops out of experiences in particular “field structures,” or environments. This concept is useful in explaining not only the practical but also the emancipatory impacts of lack of access to education for refugee children and young people. In particular, it describes processes of socialization that align aspirations with the conditions in which refugee young people find themselves and adapt what they see as possible to the logic of their surroundings. Yet while Bourdieu argues that habitus is deeply engrained and durable, he admits that it is not immutable.

What socializing messages are sent to refugee young people by policies and practices related to higher education? How are these messages internalized, or how are they contested? UNHCR’s Education Policy Commitments affirm that UNHCR will “safeguard the right of refugees to education … which include[s] … equitable access to appropriate learning for youth and adults.” However, higher education remains a low priority for most donors, often perceived as a “luxury” for an elite few, especially in refugee situations where access to primary and secondary education is far from universal. There is a clear conflict between the lack of provision of opportunities for higher education for refugees and the aspirations of refugee young people.

Figure 1. The narrowing pipeline to higher education for refugees

*Used as a proxy for access given data limitations.
refugee young people (see Clark-Kazak, this issue), specifically in terms of how the future is imagined.

**Precarity to Possibility**

There is little question that post-secondary education has the potential of giving greater voice to displaced populations. It can create an educated segment of society that can return and rebuild local, regional, and national institutions should refugees have the chance to repatriate (see Farah, this issue). And education can contribute to personal growth, social development, and knowledge creation, application, and dissemination. The issue of the “voice” of refugees has been raised in much research and policy on refugees; i.e. where can refugees safely air their concerns and requirements; who represents refugees; are some groups of refugees completely denied the possibility of expressing their rights? In her discussion of representation, Fraser refers to the extreme case of those who are “excluded from membership in any political community . . . deprived of the possibility of authoring first-order claims, they become non-persons with respect to justice.”28 As per Nyers29 and others, refugees experience this precarious space as extremely delimited, particularly so, if they are located in refugee camps. Zeus describes this space as one that depends on “a narrative of the refugee as a passive victim,” whereas, she argues, higher education is a crucial “tool to … reverse this narrative” by making refugees into their own “agents” who are empowered from within, rather than from the (mostly) emergency aid that is imposed from without.30

The 1951 Refugee Convention recognizes the fundamental rights of refugees to access education, earn a livelihood, and seek justice when wronged.31 However, Smith32 states that since the enactment of the Convention, more than two-thirds of the refugees in the world are denied such basic human rights.33 The location of the majority of refugees in poorer regions of the world demonstrates the linkage between the global economics of wealth and a Western culture of fear.34 UNHCR has pointed out that “less-developed countries are both the major source and destination of refugees”: 86 per cent of refugees originated in these areas and 72 per cent of the world’s refugees are provided with asylum in these regions.35 Ensuring inequalities have left these regions and peoples of the world exposed to impoverishment and extreme precarity: “Poverty exacerbates conditions of forced migration and exile, no matter which economic class, ethnic group, or gender is involved.”36 Access to higher forms of education enables young adults to make the types of inspired, creative, and resourceful decisions that will not only improve their personal livelihoods but, when linked to a broader educated community, can reverse the negative effects of militarized violence and activate community reconstruction from within (see Wright and Plasterer, this issue).

We know that power relations are crucial in defining the situation of refugees. Kabeer defines power as the “ability to make choices.”37 To be disempowered therefore means that choice is denied. Empowerment, which is a slippery and overused term, is deftly and insightfully defined by Kabeer as “a process of change” away from disempowerment (authors’ emphasis).38 Choice, then, is central to her analysis. She distinguishes between first-order and second-order choice. First-order choice is defined as “strategic” choice and second-order choice as “less-consequential” choice. She writes: “Inasmuch as our notion of empowerment is about change, it refers to the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.”39 She is interested in the “inequalities in people’s abilities to make choices, rather than the differences in the choices they make”—although she also raises the issue of the emergence of critical consciousness in the ability to make choices (e.g. she argues that without a critical consciousness “women’s internalization of their own lesser status in society” leads them to “discriminate against other females in that society”41). In her application of similar principles to refugees, Zeus states, “Only with higher education can refugees be expected to adapt themselves to their new surroundings, to integrate into their host society and to become self-reliant….”42 She refers to Dodds and Inquai’s earlier work in which they state that “without [higher education, refugees] will inevitably remain outsiders and a permanent drain on the resources of the host community” (See also El Jack, this issue).43

Kabeer’s analysis leads us to three points regarding education and the precarity and possibility of refugees’ lives. First, the very provision and uptake of higher education in itself signals “a process of change” away from disempowerment. Clearly, this process also includes a prior and/or concurrent shift in power relations between refugees and others. Second, higher education will expand the ability of refugees to make better strategic life choices, as the quality and quantity of information and knowledge that is accessible to them expands and improves. Third, education at the tertiary level has a greater potential than lower levels of education to contribute to the development of a “critical consciousness” that will enhance the strategic choices that refugees make. This is particularly crucial in militarized and volatile environments such as refugee camps where the choices may include whether or not to join a militia group, to engage in risky or precarious types of work, or to return to the home country or put one’s energy and resources into resettling elsewhere.
A Foreword to the Special Issue

The articles collected in this special issue provide ample evidence that higher education for refugees is not a luxury. We have divided the articles into two sections: first, theoretical and empirical academic contributions and second, practice-based and reflective reports from the field. Taken together, the range and depth of evidence demonstrates the importance of higher education for refugees, both for individuals and for society in terms of rebuilding lives and fostering leadership in protracted settings and post-conflict reconstruction. The articles also critique and nuance the forms of higher education—in both content and structure—that can be most effective for refugees to meet these personal and societal goals.

In the opening article, Sarah Dryden-Peterson situates higher education for refugees within the broader field of education in developing education systems. Her policy analysis identifies the competing priorities of UN agencies, donors, and refugee communities, specifically within global movements focused on the provision of primary education. It also analyzes the common ground amid these competing priorities in terms of higher education as connected to future livelihoods and stability in regions of origin.

Amani El Jack’s interviews with the former, so-called “Lost Girls” of Sudan reveal the value that these women have placed on access to education prior to and since arriving in the United States. She describes the trajectory of their struggles—exacerbated by very unequal gender relations—to arrive at the doors of universities and colleges in the US and the sense of transformation that these women express as a result of becoming visibly present in institutions of higher education.

Randa Farah examines the situation of Sahrawi refugees in Algeria and how education has played a central role in the establishment of their government—in-exile. She documents the numerous ways in which Sahrawis have accessed higher education and explores how education is viewed as a means to alleviate poverty and to accomplish the establishment of a nation-state.

Laura-Ashley Wright and Robyn Plasterer delve into the weighty question: does higher education add value to the community or just to the individual? Through an examination of data from refugee camps in Kenya, they challenge the traditional notion that access to higher education for refugees will do little to address the needs and concerns of the encamped community as a whole. They point to the ways in which refugees with access to higher education provide leadership and help to bolster service provision in the camps, not only in education but in all sectors.

Christina Clark-Kazak explores the situation of Congolese refugees in Kampala and in the Kyaka II refugee settlement in Uganda. Her in-depth interviews highlight the many ways in which class, social age, and gender are implicated in access to education. She further examines the “politics of education” in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in exile, with emphasis on the gaps for refugee young people between educational aspirations and educational realities.

Yogendra Shakya and his colleagues explore a similar gap between educational aspirations and realities among Afghan, Karen, and Sudanese refugee youth in Toronto, Canada. Through community-based research, they show how newcomer refugee youth navigate complex barriers related to language and family responsibilities, among others, to pursue their goals of higher education.

Martha Ferede marshals evidence to show that refugees are the least educated among newcomers to Canada. Her review of the state of research on higher education for first-generation refugees in Canada points to several structural barriers refugees face, including misperceptions of the costs and benefits of higher education and the widespread tracking of refugees into non-college tracks in high school.

In the first of the field reports, Marina Anselme and Catriona Hands examine a prerequisite to higher education: secondary education. Drawing on their experiences working with the Refugee Education Trust (RET), they outline the gaps in access to secondary education by refugees, providing country-specific examples. They point to barriers of law, cost, accreditation, and culture, particularly related to gender, that provide new challenges for policy makers and practitioners in seeking to expand access beyond primary.

Mary Purkey focuses on four civil society initiatives in the Mae Sot area of Thailand that aim to expand educational opportunities for Burmese refugee youth. She notes the impact of a precarious legal situation on the development of these programs. In particular, she points to the challenges of developing collaborative relationships between Burmese educators and international supporters given dependency on this outside assistance and to the need for flexibility in curriculum design.

Duncan MacLaren’s site of investigation is also the Thai-Burma border, where he examines a formal higher education Diploma program provided by the Australian Catholic University in collaboration with several North American institutions. He focuses on the process of creating such a program and the ongoing challenges to course delivery in terms of useful lessons for replication of this program in other contexts.

In the final report, Glen Peterson traces the history of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) Student Refugee Program, which is one of the world’s largest sponsorship programs for refugees to pursue higher education.

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Through his experiences as an advisor to this program, he reflects on the transformational role of this program for refugees, for faculty and staff on Canadian campuses, and for transnational interactions. The WUSC program is also discussed in Robyn Plasterer’s review of Debi Goodwin’s 2011 book, *Citizens of Nowhere: From Refugee Camp to Canadian Campus*, included in this special issue.

**Remaining Gaps and Ways Forward**

The provision of higher education for refugees has been overshadowed by persistent challenges to access and quality in primary and secondary education that narrow the pipeline at tertiary levels and generate questions of equity and priority. However, the articles collected in this special issue point to both instrumental and emancipatory roles that higher education can play both for individual refugees and for societies in exile and upon return. Indeed, the theoretical, empirical, and practice-based evidence brought together by this special issue provides strong rationale for higher education as a policy priority.

This policy priority may be gaining momentum. On October 5, 2011, Erika Feller, the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, emphasized the role of education, including higher education, in UNHCR’s protection strategy in her speech to the sixty-second meeting of the Executive Committee. She reported that UNHCR’s new Education Strategy (2012–2016) will “expand opportunities for refugees to participate in tertiary education, e.g. through certified distance education programmes.” This discourse is encouraging.

Yet the articles in this special issue clearly underline that the provision of higher education for refugees is not without substantive and logistical challenges that are contextually based. The authors in this special issue provide some ideas of ways forward in developing higher education programs for refugees and the urgent need for extensive research in this area. For example, the Kenyan-Canadian-international collaboration, Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER), with which we are involved, takes many lessons from these innovative initiatives, particularly around the purposes of and perspectives on higher education for refugees and North-South relations in higher education provision. Yet many questions remain that are related to appropriate pedagogy; accreditation and recognition of earned credentials; the balance of efficiency and effectiveness in combinations of distance technologies and face-to-face interactions; the gender relations of access to higher education for refugees; the geopolitics of access to higher levels of knowledge and knowledge making; and the role of Northern universities in partnership with local institutions in home and/or host countries. If there is a single theme that emerges from this special issue, it is the need for collaboration—between academics and practitioners, between educators and humanitarian specialists, between institutions in the global North and the global South—in order to tackle the enormous challenges to creating opportunities for higher education for refugees.

**Notes**

1. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) was officially founded in 2000 as a global and open network with the goal of ensuring the right to quality and safe education for all in emergencies, chronic crises, and post-conflict recovery. It includes more than 5,700 members, from NGOs, UN agencies, donor agencies, governments, academic institutions, schools, and communities of affected persons. For more information, see http://www.inesite.org.

2. The Sphere Project was founded in 1997 by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement based on a collaborative process to define and implement common standards for responding to humanitarian disasters. The work of the Sphere Project is operationalized principally through the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (commonly referred to as the “Sphere Handbook”). For more information, see http://www.sphereproject.org.

3. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) was established in 1992 in response to UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182, with the goal of strengthening humanitarian assistance. It is the primary mechanism for humanitarian response by key UN and non-UN organizations and serves as a forum for coordination, policy development, and decision making. For more information, see http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/.


7. The UNHCR describes a “protracted” refugee situation as “one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo,” see UNHCR, The Executive Committee of the UNHCR. 30th Meeting of the Standing Committee. Protracted Refugee Situations (June 10, 2004), 1, accessed October 20, 2011, http://www.unhcr.org/40c982172.pdf. What was once initially a protective space becomes over the years and decades a site where
refugees “progressively waste [their] lives” (ibid., 3). One of the problems with this descriptive is that it tends to essentialize refugees as victims. The process of living for a long time in a refugee camp has also been referred to as “refugee warehousing;” see Merrill Smith, “Warehousing Refugees: A Denial of Rights, a Waste of Humanity,” World Refugee Survey (US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2004).


11. Despite the fact that internally displaced persons (IDPs) are not protected by the 1951 Refugee Convention, the UNHCR “is now embarking on its biggest operation to help displaced people since 1945;” Duncan Campbell, “Exiles in Their Own Land,” Guardian Weekly, 28 April–4 May, 2006: 28.


17. Gross Enrolment Ratio is the total enrolment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the official age group corresponding to that level of education. GERs can exceed 100 per cent due to early or late entry into school or to repetition. It is not to be confused with the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER), which expresses the enrolment of the official age group for a given level of education, expressed as a percentage of the population in that age group.

18. UNHCR, “Report on the Enrolment Rates to Primary and Secondary Education in UNHCR Operations” (Geneva: UNHCR Department of International Protection, 2010); see also Dryden-Peterson, “The Key to the Future: Providing a Quality Education for All Refugees, a State-of-the-Art Review.”


21. DAFI is the German acronym for the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative.


32. Smith, “Warehousing Refugees: A Denial of Rights, a Waste of Humanity;”

33. Ibid., 38.

34. Wenona Giles, “Class, Livelihood and Refugee Workers in Iran,” in Mobility, Mobilization, Migration: Class and
Sarah Dryden-Peterson is a research associate of the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, and a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Toronto, who focuses on the connections between education and community development, particularly in conflict settings. Her recent work examines the role of social institutions in immigrant/refugee integration, the connections between education and family livelihoods, and transnational institution building. She is part of an international collaboration to bring higher education degree programs to long-term refugees in the Dadaab camps, Kenya.

Wenona Giles is a research associate of the Centre for Refugee Studies and an anthropologist at York University, who teaches and publishes in the areas of forced migration, refugee issues, gender, ethnicity, nationalism, work, globalization, and war. She co-led the international Women in Conflict Zones Research Network, including a comparative study in Sri Lanka and the Post-Yugoslav States; recently completed research on long-term refugee situations in Iran and Kenya; and is now leading an international collaboration to bring higher education degree programs to long-term refugees in the Dadaab camps, Kenya.

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