



Vol.6 No.1 (2023)

Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

Refugees' experiences with online higher education: Impact and implications through the pandemic

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Keywords

Contextual challenges;
higher education;
inclusion;
online education;
policy;
practice;
refugee education.

Abstract

This paper examines and discusses refugees' experiences with online higher education during COVID-19, a phenomenon which impacted millions of lives in displaced conditions. Through this, it unveils conditions, or lack thereof, of inclusivity as well as other unexpected concerns which have impacted refugees' experiences through a change to online higher education which was inevitable. A scoping review of the literature is conducted to identify relevant studies that explore refugees' experiences and challenges with online higher education during COVID-19. This has enabled an analysis which generates fresh insights into a lack of inclusion in online higher education opportunities for refugees and deeper levels of unrest impacting their experiences. As such, results are classified into three overarching themes: (1) Refugees, COVID-19, and online higher education; (2) multiplicity of barriers; (3) socio-economic status and mental health. The findings indicate that inadequate opportunities and access to online higher education persisted for refugees' during the pandemic, impacting not only the continuity of education but also social integration, financial stability, and mental wellbeing. Stemming from the findings and reflections on the research questions, this paper presents the importance of implications for policies and practice within this arena.

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Article Info

Received 18 February 2023

Received in revised form 12 April 2023

Accepted 17 April 2023

Available online 17 April 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2023.6.1.21>

Introduction

The presence of refugees has been prevalent in the global community for multiple decades. Some of this has been witnessed through political conflicts leading to Rohingya and Venezuelan refugees, wars leading to Syrian, Afghan, Palestinian and Ukrainian refugees, and a continuous growth in numbers which can be traced as far back as World War II, resulting in mass numbers of refugees (Alemi et al., 2013; Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Shamsuddin et al., 2021; Ullah, 2011). Although there are multiple unfortunate similarities and hardships which are and have been faced by populations in these contexts, one, which is the focus of this study, and has continuing ramifications on policy, practice, social integration, economic development and mental wellbeing, is that of refugee education. Integrating and providing opportunities towards stable and prosperous lives for refugees has been a challenge for governments and policymakers for decades (Dagar & Sharma, 2022).

In recent years, this has also been witnessed through the unprecedented pandemic. Lockdowns, social distancing, disruptions in face-to-face livelihoods and education, and the resulting transformations necessitating a form of a global revolution into online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic have echoed screams of discontent from populations globally, the majority of which do not live in vulnerable contexts, conflict-affected areas or are subject to extreme poverty. Despite restrictive COVID-19 measures around the world, there has also been a "paradox not seen before in human history" (United Nations, 2021, para. 2), as millions have been forced to flee their homes. For refugees and populations living in displaced conditions and in circumstances of forced migration, the implications of COVID-19 measures on inclusion, education, and social integration have undoubtedly provided the context for additional challenges to already disrupted lives. As displacement for millions continues to increase, simultaneously, the need for inclusion into new environmental contexts and a recognition of their distinctive needs (Mangan & Winter, 2017) is required. The integration of refugees into new environments necessitates basic rights and needs, including medical care, accommodation, job opportunities, and the fundamental right to education. The effects of displacement result in "forcing mass numbers of people into new social, economic, and educational contexts" (Alfred, 2018; Shah, 2021, p. 2; UNHCR, 2017a). Displacement leaves adult refugees "particularly vulnerable" (Cerna, 2019, p. 4), and "super-disadvantaged" (Lambrechts, 2020, p. 803) in having to face personal, structural, financial, informational, procedural, and institutional barriers in their host countries (Khan-Gökkaya & Mösko, 2021; Webb et al., 2021). An example of this was found through an Equilibrium CenDe (2020) survey of Venezuelan immigrant students studying in Peru, where 40 per cent were not participating in the Peruvian Ministry of Education's at-home study option for lack of sufficient technology to successfully participate (Summers et al., 2022).

The use of technology in education became the dominant and necessary feature for learning when faced with the global pandemic. Access to learning was forced to take a dramatic and sudden shift as higher education institutions

rapidly moved into online education in order to enable their students to have some level of continuity in their courses (Santandreu Calonge et al., 2022a). This was a challenge for educators and students who, prior to the pandemic, maintained ease of access to learning and teaching through their institutions (Santandreu Calonge et al., 2022a). For refugees, the challenges have been even more daunting. Despite limited success stories of integration and social inclusion in Canada (Senthanar et al., 2021), Austria (Verwiebe et al., 2019), Germany (AbuJarour, 2022), and Denmark (Bredgaard & Thomsen, 2018), numerous studies have highlighted considerable challenges for refugee inclusion in higher education (Kingston & Karakas, 2022; Lanbrechts, 2020), vocational training programs, and job markets (Cerna, 2019; Santandreu Calonge & Shah, 2016; Shah, 2021; Shah & Santandreu Calonge, 2016, 2019). The lack of inclusive higher education opportunities and obstacles towards integration into job markets have also expanded due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted some dominant and ongoing struggles in adult refugee lives due to a lack of online higher education opportunities resulting in insufficient knowledge by which to enter job markets (Ergin, 2020). These circumstances persist despite some positive, yet rare, instances of full legal access to labour markets and significant integration efforts such as those found in Norway (Djuve & Kavli, 2019) and Turkey (Akar & Erdođdu, 2019).

Reflecting upon the ongoing increase of forced migration and displaced populations across the world, which according to the UNHCR, is a combination of asylum-seekers, people in need of international protection, internally displaced people, and refugees (UNHCR, 2022b), is estimated to be at 100 million as of May 2022 (Nugent, 2022). Access and therefore inclusion into tertiary education has been at a "critical" point since 2017, even prior to the onset of the unprecedented educational challenges that have arisen globally due to COVID-19 (UNHCR, 2017b; Shah, 2021, p. 4). Preceding COVID-19, the higher education (HE) gross enrollment rate was 36 per cent globally (Saral, 2019). However, this number has not been equally reached with inclusion for refugees. Despite investments in scholarships and other programs (UNHCR, 2017b), the percentage of refugees included in higher education globally has only marginally increased to five per cent, a somewhat promising two per cent increase since 2019 (UNHCR, 2021, p. 7).

COVID-19, natural disasters, and wars such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict are prime examples of disasters that have global implications. One result is the continued growth of refugees worldwide, estimated at approximately 30 million (UNHCR, 2022a). There have been more than 7.9 million individual refugees from Ukraine who have fled across Europe (UNHCR, 2022a), and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) predicts an influx of up to four million more Ukrainians in 2023. Just as emergency contexts are fluid, the need for accessible and inclusive education for refugees should also be fluid, as the "crisis to provide accessible education will not be contained within set international borders" (Shah, 2021, p. 4). Studies over the past decade have provided important information on the challenges and opportunities encountered by refugee populations in various contexts. So far, however, there has been little discussion about their *experiences* and

the impact of the necessary conversion to online learning in higher education during the pandemic (Koehler et al., 2022). Thus, the importance and originality of this study is that it provides a comprehensive review of literature regarding refugee experiences and challenges with online higher education during COVID-19. Or how has the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing challenges faced by refugees with regard to their access to online higher education.

Literature review

The right to education in emergency contexts

Examining the right to education in emergency contexts for refugees is essential in order to gain an understanding of any constrictions, which despite legal rights, continue to be prevalent in higher education settings as a whole. In this light, it must be reminded that the right to education has been a basic human right for all, as established in 1948 through Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Under the conditions of forced migration and emergency contexts, this right has been further reinforced under Article 22 for refugees in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2011). Despite these measures, however, access and, therefore, rights to education for refugees is well documented to be heavily limited, not prioritised, and thus in practice, not a right that is accessible for all (Conole, 2012; Shah, 2021; Shah & Santandreu Calonge, 2019).

The rights and access to higher education in emergency contexts are possibly even more challenging for refugees, as 99 per cent of the refugee populations who are eligible for higher education make up a "lost generation of young people with no or inadequate access to higher education" (Dridi et al. 2020, p. 251). For instance, a study on Turkey's higher education policy for Syrian refugees highlighted financial and language barriers as some of the challenges which, with a lack of guidance, has "complex sociological and political connotations" for the refugees and the country as a whole (Arar et al., 2020, p. 265). Similarities were also found in another study examining Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, suggesting again, opportunities to higher education "remain... problematic" (Fincham, 2020, p. 329). Challenges as such exist despite advances in technology-enhanced learning leading to more hybrid, blended, and online learning, as well as more flexible, more accessible options and contactless: Social distancing measures during the pandemic required all courses and programmes to be taught fully online, but also all student services to be offered without any direct contact between students, faculty, and professional staff (Santandreu Calonge et al., 2022a, b). Regardless, higher education is still not effectively prioritised as a basic and necessary right in emergency contexts (Dridi et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2015).

Calls for further acknowledgements, advances, and lessons learned in the lack of movement towards this right have been echoed for many years, as early as 2015. For instance, in 2015, when the Syrian refugee crisis was still in its initial years of development, calls were made concerning the management

of education in emergency contexts that continually reflected "temporary measures," which neglectfully or "accidentally turned into long-term responses" namely, minimal, or largely inaccessible "emergency education" (UNHCR, 2015, p. 13). Unfortunately, similar measures still exist today despite the recognition of the need for greater changes in addressing policies and practices for the provision of emergency education contexts. To progressively enhance the right to education in emergency contexts regardless of the *area* or *form* of education, be it online, contactless, or face-to-face, higher education cannot "fall victim to the ebb and flow" of issues such as funding when "new conflicts blow up and fresh emergencies need addressing" (UNHCR, 2015, p. 14). Changes in the management of education in such contexts are possible through the recognition of the severity, complexity, and unpredictability of crises; the prioritisation of education as a humanitarian response; and the recognition and implementation of current trends of flexible learning options. Managing these changes cohesively within the goal of educational inclusion can benefit what otherwise has been called "entire generations uneducated, disadvantaged and unprepared to contribute to the social and economic recovery of their country or region" (Dridi et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2015, p. 5).

Refugees and higher education

There are numerous challenges shaping the refugee experience with online higher education; the most obvious of these tend to point towards outwardly recognisable barriers such as language, lack of finances, insufficient access to guidance or information regarding higher education opportunities, insufficient and limited relevant mobile content and apps (Drolia et al., 2022), and "non-recognition to prior learning" (Atesok et al., 2019, p. 119). A factor less obvious that has had a significant impact on opportunities and experiences for refugees is that most of the focus on education for refugees has been on primary and secondary education and not on higher education (Dridi et al., 2020; Morrice, 2021). Prior to COVID-19, refugee access to higher education in 2016 across the globe stood at one per cent, with only a marginal increase to three per cent since the commencement of the pandemic in 2020 (UNHCR, 2020b; 2021). This low figure for higher education can be seen in comparison to the figures during the pandemic of primary school enrolment rates for refugees standing at 77 per cent and a drop from 37 per cent in 2019 to 31 per cent in 2021 for secondary education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNHCR, 2021; UNHCR, 2020a). Although primary and secondary education for refugees are unquestionably important, insufficient focus on and access to online or face-to-face higher education for refugees has the potential, as Dridi et al. (2020) stated, to create a "lost generation of young people" (p. 251). Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010) linked a lack of access to higher education as also negatively impacting younger generations due to "children and young people" being "less motivated to persist in primary and secondary school" (p. 4) if higher education is not part of their continuum in education.

In the context of forced migration, studies such as Crea (2016) have suggested that for refugees living in camps, their higher education opportunities are “especially lacking”, and yet they are crucial as they “may constitute a psychosocial intervention as much as an educational program” (p. 12) for the individual and their families as a whole. Atesok et al. (2019) added to this by emphasising higher education in this light is therefore also considered critical for refugees in order to “prevent a short-term crisis” (p. 119). This sentiment towards higher education is often strong among refugees themselves, as education may help them resettle in a foreign country (O’Keeffe & Akkari, 2020). Vasilopoulos and Ioannidi (2020) further advocated this view when considering the contexts of host countries when they emphasised higher education as “vital” for the “successful settlement of refugee communities into their host countries” (p. 61). As many low to middle-income countries host the vast majority of refugees, the UNHCR also examined this link between higher education and settlement into communities, stating that “higher education is key to creating long-term growth” in these countries (UNHCR, 2021).

Additionally, the experiences of, the need for, and the use of online learning in higher education cannot be neglected for refugees. Access to education, particularly in the context of camps, is heavily dependent upon the availability of technology, online trained facilitators, and reliable internet connection (O’Keeffe & Akkari, 2020; Shah & Santandreu Calonge, 2019). Refugees’ experiences in higher education are also influenced by the challenges of frequently engaging with learning content that is not contextualised, translated, and/or applicable to their camp environments. Thus, few channels of support for the application of any newly gained skills and knowledge are available (O’Keeffe & Akkari, 2020; Shah, 2021). These above-mentioned challenges, coupled with uncertainties of timelines for resettlement into knowledge-based economies, create the need for education that is “adaptable” as well as “portable” (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010, p. 3). Additionally, education needs to be connected to the requirements for resettlement, relevant to their current context/situation (vocational) and useful for current and future (self-)employment, as the length of time spent in camps is often unpredictable.

These contexts open the lens towards higher education policies and practices which host countries, and the global community, engage in when it comes to enabling access for refugees. Although there is a recognition of the right to education and the lack thereof leading to the loss of opportunities for refugee livelihoods and social integration into host nations, overall higher education policies remain turbulent at best (Dridi et al., 2020; Fincham, 2020). Even prior to the pandemic, it has been suggested that higher education policies maintain a “reactive track” despite the known and ongoing refugee crisis (Arar et al., 2020, p. 265). This contributes to the demand for higher education outstripping the “opportunities available” (Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017, p. 4). Therefore, with a shift in education policies to the ubiquitous use of online learning as a response to COVID-19, questions remain regarding the implications of these for refugees.

Purpose of the study and research questions

As COVID-19 not only impacted the health and livelihoods of the entire global community, it has also left a mark on education. This study examines that mark on education for refugees. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to investigate and discuss the experiences which refugees have had with online higher education and what impact and implications this may have led to. To date, the problem has received scant attention in the research literature. To examine this phenomenon, the following research questions were addressed:

How has COVID-19 impacted refugees’ experiences with online higher education?

What to date are the implications of the pandemic for refugees with online higher education?

Methods

Framework

The methodological framework guiding the study was the scoping review (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). Scoping studies are topic-based and can add value to a phenomenon, as they are said to “extract the essence of a diverse body of evidence giving it meaning and significance that is both developmental and intellectually creative” (Davis et al., 2009, p. 1400) for the purpose of informing research, policy, and practice (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). Scoping reviews provide a useful alternative to literature reviews when clarification around a concept is required (Munn et al., 2018). As highlighted by Cooper et al. (2019), the aim of scoping reviews is to help identify gaps in the existing published literature and “systematically explore and map the research available from a wide range of sources” (p. 230). Through this, scoping studies have the possibility to “enable rigorous review and critique the phenomena of interest” (p. 230) and provide an overview of the evidence. In summary, a scoping review is a broad overview of the available research on a particular topic, while a critical literature review is a more in-depth analysis of the quality and relevance of the research on a particular topic.

The phenomenon of interest in this study is refugees’ experiences with online higher education, particularly as the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic redefined borders of learning and teaching that is contactless, online, and socially distant and available broadly in any location, culture, population or living context. Analysing such a phenomenon through the scoping methodology is additionally valuable, as the scoping process lends itself to evidence that may be emerging and provides a broader base through which to examine it whilst also providing room for “analytical reinterpretation of the literature” (Levac et al., 2010, p. 1).

In accordance with Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) framework for methodological scoping, as further emphasised by Daudt et al. (2013), the following five phases were undertaken: (1) Identification of research question(s), (2) identification of relevant studies, (3) selection of studies, (4) charting of data

according to issues, codes, and key themes, and (5) collating, summarising, and reporting of results, providing a thematic analysis (Daudt et al., 2013).

Phase 1: Identify the research question(s)

The following research questions were investigated. First, how has COVID-19 impacted refugees' experiences with online higher education? Second, what to date are the implications of the pandemic for refugees with online higher education?

Phase 2: Identify relevant studies

As this study examines refugees and online higher education during the pandemic, the identification and extraction of data involved a review of studies published between March 2020, when the World Health Organization officially declared the outbreak as a pandemic, to January 2022. Inclusion criteria included peer-reviewed articles in English specifically addressing refugee experiences with online education as well as articles that identified and discussed challenges and opportunities faced by refugees within the sphere of COVID-19 and higher education. Literature explicitly identifying and explaining the challenges and opportunities faced by refugees was also included. Official reports, such as UNHCR reports, were also considered relevant and included. Exclusion criteria consisted of articles published outside of the defined dates, articles focusing on primary or secondary education for refugees, and articles not available in English. Relevant documents were extracted from Scopus and Google Scholar. Scopus allowed for a proximity search, an established advanced search procedure, with two proximity operators: W/n "within n words of", and PRE/n "precedes by", while Google Scholar enabled a wider range of studies and reports on refugees examined within the scope of the research. Search terms for both databases included keywords such as "higher education refugees online learning" and "refugee camp COVID-19 online experiences." As this scoping study involves a systematic review of the literature, the process by which to extract data was carried out through the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA). PRISMA provides the structure by which literature searches can be clearly identified and reproduced, and that minimises elements of bias (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

Phase 3: Selection of studies

Literature was carefully screened by the two authors, and all studies that did not meet the eligibility criteria of this research were excluded. Following this preliminary exclusion process and the removal of duplicates, all remaining abstracts and full texts were further screened to identify research that directly addressed the research questions. Discrepancies found were resolved through consensus. The authors of this article used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA) approach (Figure 1), as advocated by Moher et al. (2009). PRISMA provides a standard methodology that uses a comprehensive 27-item guideline checklist.

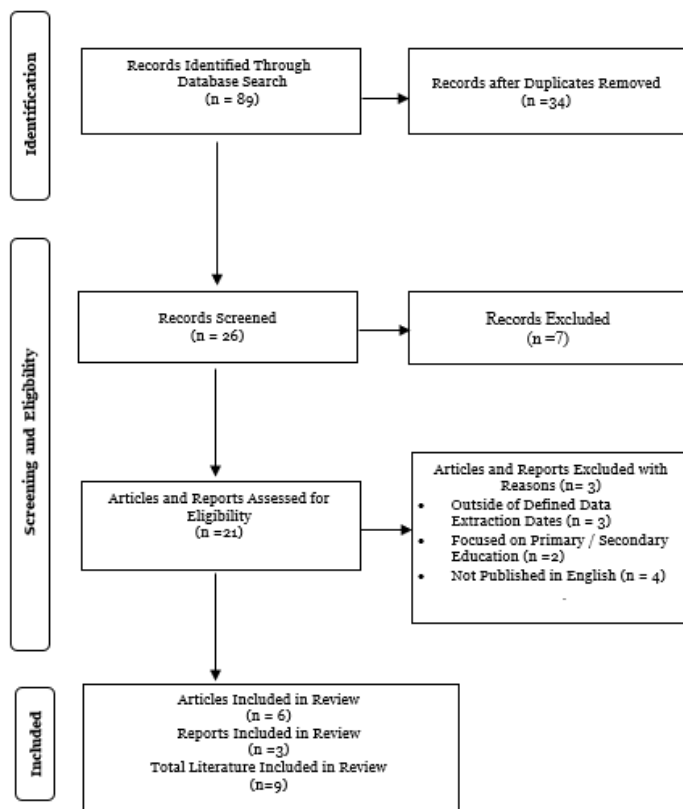


Figure 1. PRISMA data flow diagram.

Results

Phase 4: Chart data

Table 1 compiles the articles and reports included in the study, along with pertinent information such as the authors, article titles and the generation of codes/issues found through the literature.

Table 1. Overview of included studies.

Author (s) / Date of Publication	Article Title	Source / Article Type / Research Methods	Context	Codes / Issues
Baker et al. (2022)	COVID-19 online learning landscapes and CALDMR students: Opportunities and challenges	<i>National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education</i> Report, Mixed Methods, Qualitative	Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o New educational and social vulnerability o Balancing study with other duties (work, family) o Absence of a sense of belonging: impact on mental health o Living situation/privacy o Financial situation o Motivational issues o Internet access o Lack of support from university o Digital literacy issues o Language skills o Social isolation / emotional distance/ lack of opportunity for peer and staff interactions
Ogwang (2022)	Refugee education: Refugees' perceptions of educational challenges in Uganda	<i>International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies</i> Focus Group Discussions, Interviews	Uganda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Universities tuition policies o High university fees and lack of financial support / no available scholarships o Lack of educational advice and career guidance o Lack of / no access to online learning options
Finlay et al. (2021)	"It's like rubbing salt on the wound": The impacts of Covid-19 and lockdown on asylum seekers and refugees	<i>Newcastle University</i> Report, Qualitative	United Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Digital exclusion/digital poverty o The loss of access to the physical premises of support groups o local inclusion o socialising, mental wellbeing, o Sense of isolation and loneliness, anxiety, depression o Digital inequality, such as limited and intermittent Wi-Fi and data access o insufficient access to smartphones, personal computers, or televisions

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o asylum seekers and refugees were struggling to access the online spaces o Mobile data packages are not sufficient for extended internet access o Language barriers to learning o Poor quality tech
Lovey et al. (2021)	Basic medical training for refugees via collaborative blended learning: Quasi-experimental design	<i>Journal of Medical Internet Research</i> Quasi-Experimental Design, Qualitative	Kakuma Refugee Camp (Kenya)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Access to electricity, the internet o Security issues o Motivational issues o Additional resources needed o Pedagogical Support needed
Sobczak-Szelc et al. (2021)	Integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Poland: Policies and practices	<i>Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet</i> Report Mixed Methods	Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Language o Legal barriers o Access to housing o Anti-Muslim, anti-refugee prejudice
Tobin & Hieker (2021)	What the EdTech experience in refugee camps can teach us in times of school closure. Blended learning, modular and mobile programs are key to keeping disadvantaged learners in education	<i>Challenges</i> Exploratory Research, Qualitative	Refugee Camps: Greece, Jordan, Kenya, and Rwanda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Access to quality education o Lack of documentation to evidence identity / prior learning o Insufficient language skills o Poor internet connectivity o Transportation costs o Discouraging hostile host countries' policies o Lack of trained teachers o Security issues o Unfamiliarity with online learning o Absence of tech support
Yanay & Battle (2021)	Refugee higher education & participatory action research	<i>Radical Teacher</i> Participatory Action Research	Malawi, Kenya, South Africa, Rwanda,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Exclusion from the host nation's higher education system o High cost associated with Higher Education o Qualifications equivalency
	methods: Lessons learned from the field	Qualitative	and Lebanon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Limited access to electricity, availability of devices, poor internet o Language barriers
Ergin (2020)	Crisis upon crisis: Refugees and Covid-19	<i>International Higher Education</i> Essay	Turkey, Australia, Refugee Camps,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Financial disadvantage for refugee students o Mental and physical health concerns for students o Insufficient digital access to Higher Education o Universities' procedures for students during the pandemic
Mupenzi et al. (2020)	Reflections on COVID-19 and impacts on equitable participation: the case of culturally and linguistically diverse migrant and/or refugee (CALDMR) students in Australian higher education	<i>Higher Education Research & Development</i> Essay, Qualitative	Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Issue of accessibility to the vital infrastructures to facilitate online learning leading to family conflicts o Financial hardship / financial precarity o Physical isolation / insufficient opportunities for academic-social networking o Struggles to balance work/study life o Universities do not help direct services to students in need

Phase 5: Collate, summarise and report the results

Codes were generated from phrases and larger concepts prevalent in the examined literature to identify relevant information (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify and analyse patterns and to generate meaning from the data. Initial phrases and concepts are shown in Table 2. Codes were then collated into seven subthemes, and summarised into three overarching themes:

- Refugees, COVID-19, and Online Higher Education
- Multiplicity of Barriers
- Socio-economic Status and Mental Health.

Table 2. Themes unpacked.

Themes	Subthemes	Initial Phrases and Concepts
1 Refugees, COVID-19, and Online Higher Education	1 New educational and social vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of trained teachers and unfamiliarity with online learning created new vulnerabilities for refugee students. ▪ Digital exclusion/digital poverty and limited or intermittent Wi-Fi and data access also contributed to adding vulnerabilities. ▪ Additionally, unfamiliarity with online learning led to digital literacy issues for refugee students. ▪ Insufficient language skills and language barriers to learning also created new vulnerabilities for refugee students.
2 Multiplicity of Barriers	2 Balancing study with other duties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Struggles to balance work/study life may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, as refugee students often have family, additional responsibilities at home or in their home country, or face financial precarity.
3 Socio-economic Status and Mental Health	3 Absence of sense of belonging: Impact on mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social/physical isolation/emotional distance and lack of opportunity for peer and staff interactions may have contributed to a sense of isolation and loneliness. This lack of a sense of belonging negatively impacted mental health/anxiety and depression.
	4 Motivational issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of support from universities not helpful in directing services to students in need (orientation) may have led to motivational issues for refugee students. ▪ The loss of access to the physical premises of support groups may have affected refugee students' ability to access essential support and resources and contributed to a lack of sense of belonging. ▪ Insufficient access to online learning options and job opportunities post-graduation may also have affected refugee students' motivation, engagement with learning and mental health.
	5 Living situation/privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Limited access to electricity, Wi-Fi/data, adequate devices, and poor internet connectivity affected refugee students' ability to access online learning and maintain privacy in their living situation.
	6 Financial hardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High university fees and lack of financial support/no available scholarships may have created an additional burden for refugee students and contributed to a) financial
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> hardship/financial precarity and b) aggravated mental health issues. ▪ Transportation costs may also have contributed to increase refugee students' financial burden.
	7 Social exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Refugee students often felt excluded from Higher Education Institutions or work in their host countries as they often cannot provide proof of prior learning/equivalency.

Theme 1: Refugees, COVID-19, and online higher education

The unforeseen switch to online learning, following the suspension of all face-to-face classes and university services due to the pandemic in March 2020, resulted in several significant challenges for millions of students and faculty. As far as refugees are concerned, Dempster et al. (2020) argued that COVID-19 had aggravated the barriers displaced populations already faced prior to the pandemic. One of those barriers for those in financial precarity was access to synchronous online classes on Zoom, WebEx, or Teams. Another barrier was experienced by those who connect asynchronously via learning management systems that require a computer, a tablet, or a smartphone; an affordable data plan; a connection to high-speed internet; a quiet and safe learning environment (Santandreou Calonge et al., 2022a; Finlay et al., 2021; Lovey et al., 2021; Reinhardt et al., 2021; Tobin & Hieker, 2021; Yanay & Battle, 2021); and academic, personalised online support (Halkic & Arnold, 2021). Overcrowded conditions during the pandemic not only limited most of the basic conditions required to engage in online higher education but also increased vulnerability to becoming infected (Hennebry & Hari, 2020). Hennebry and Hari (2020) highlighted the "awful living conditions

(with as many as 20 people sleeping in the same room) endured by the city's hundreds of thousands of migrant workers" living in Singapore (p. 4). Similarly, Elçi et al. (2021) argued that refugees in Turkey mostly lived "in overcrowded and dilapidated dwellings with other family members", making "social distancing almost impossible" (p. 244). Gender inequality in accessing a mobile or tablet was also mentioned as a significant issue by Drolia et al. (2022).

The findings also revealed that physical access to work, immigration services (critical to asylum status updates, which are often key to getting financial aid or healthcare), social networks and friends, psychosocial support (Mupenzi et al., 2021), extra-curricular activities, community and religious centres, and faculty and classmates offline support were also challenges at the height of the pandemic with strict lockdowns in place (Kingston & Karakas, 2022; Mupenzi et al., 2020). These challenges exacerbated a) feelings of isolation, exclusion (Yanay & Battle, 2021), and emotional distress; b) financial distress (Santandreou Calonge et al., 2022a; Mupenzi et al., 2021); c) disengagement from learning; and d) mental health issues.

Theme 2: Multiplicity of barriers

The numerous barriers that refugees and displaced people need to tackle daily in camps or their host countries are well documented in the literature (Nell-Müller et al., 2021) and are beyond the scope of this article. In line with previously published articles, our findings from the literature indicate that the extent of those barriers varies based on their country of origin, ethnicity, or faith (Sobczak-Szelc et al., 2021; Tobin & Hieker, 2021), exclusion, discrimination, xenophobia, or rejection from the host nation (Yanay & Battle, 2021; Hennebry & Hari, 2020).

The findings indicate that these prejudices may have resulted due to 1. the absence of official identity documents, often lost during migration (or deliberately destroyed to avoid forced repatriation), which increases the difficulties faced by refugees in their host country to secure long-term housing (Sobczak-Szelc et al., 2021); 2. difficulties accessing medical, food, financial or legal aid, resources, employment or internship opportunities, which often requires citizenship or a residence permit (Baker et al., 2022; Finlay et al., 2021; Sobczak-Szelc et al., 2021; Tobin & Hieker, 2021; Yanay & Battle, 2021); 3. the absence of evidence and recognition of their prior learning (Yanay & Battle, 2021; Tobin & Hieker, 2021), which also hinders job search, and delays or denies them admission to university; and 4. sufficient knowledge of the local language, norms, values and culture and poor or no internet connectivity (digital equity), which prevents them from accessing or understanding unfamiliar content taught online by native speakers.

Additionally, as many businesses had to close their doors during COVID-19, many refugees were laid off or had to accept a significant reduction in working hours and income, often braving abuse or quarantine restrictions to be able to feed their families. Elçi et al. (2021) indicated that Syrian families often had numerous children, which aggravated the extent of economic hardship (e.g., technological resources

to access online learning, as all had to access courses taught online often at the same time with one device and low bandwidth. Purchasing an additional device was often out of reach for families already in financial distress). Dempster et al. (2022) indicated that 60 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon had lost their jobs (p.9), stating that refugees were 60 per cent more likely to be made redundant "because so few work in the less-affected sectors like education, public administration, health, and agriculture" (p. 11). Thus, priority was given to finding a source of income, and studies were often put aside (Dempster et al., 2020; Mukumbang et al., 2020). As indicated by Dempster et al. (2020), "without jobs and access to income... refugees are therefore more likely to turn to negative coping strategies including skipping meals, exploitative work, or child labour" (p. 21).

Theme 3: Socio-economic status and mental health

Research by Vogiazides et al. (2021) and van Riemsdijk and Axelsson (2021) showed that highly skilled refugees in Sweden, Holland, and Germany had lower rates of employment than less skilled migrants, often due to discrimination and exclusion, as employers' focus often was on their deficiencies and shortcomings in education rather than their skills and experience and how they could contribute. The absence of inclusivity education leading to a lack of employment opportunities has been found to further impact the "emotional wellbeing" of refugees (Cerna, 2019, p. 4; Finlay et al., 2021), mental health (Baker et al., 2022; Viazminsky et al., 2022), social engagement in the host country and thus their levels of social belonging and positive engagement with online higher education (Arendt, 2022). On a similar note, Hajak et al. (2021), in a systematic review of factors affecting the mental health and wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees in Germany, reported that "unemployment" or "employment" of refugees "below their occupational level" led to "lower self-esteem, frustration and despair" and "deterioration of mental health" (p. 8), leading to a significant increase of exclusion and marginalisation (de Montgomery et al., 2022) and therefore demotivation and disengagement from studying. This finding was further substantiated in a study by Haindorfer et al. (2022), which highlighted being employed at lower levels in relation to their capabilities, knowledge, and skills, did not have any significant positive effect on refugees' life satisfaction.

Socio-economic status and mental health conditions undoubtedly played a role in the approach (or lack thereof) concerning online higher education as many refugees additionally have struggled with feeling unwanted and being uncertain about their future in the host country, without legal documentation to stay, a significant source of income or possibility to access wage subsidies or COVID-19 incentives to be able to live decently, repay debts and tuition fees. Without a job or proof of being registered as a full- or part-time student at university, many were expelled, repatriated, or had to return to their home countries and face new forms of discrimination (Jones et al., 2021) and lack of support, due to already overstrained healthcare, education, and financial systems. Additionally, on a similar note, results found through the studies of Ergin (2020) and Ogwang (2022) emphasised that strained mental health

and socio-economic statuses were further exacerbated by insufficient or non-existent support by universities both financially and in terms of guidance for pathways to engage in online learning or careers.

Discussion

Impact and implications through reflections on the research questions

Considering the evidence found through the literature and reflecting on the primary research question, "*How has COVID-19 impacted refugees' experiences with online higher education?*", some key factors can be identified as maintaining prominence when examining the phenomena of COVID-19. It would be sound to say that although online learning took on a global role in higher education as a result of the pandemic, it did not equate to equality in opportunities and access for vulnerable and displaced people (Dempster et al., 2020; Ergin, 2020; Finlay et al., 2021). Factors such as strained mental health conditions and socio-economic status; overcrowded living environments increasing chances of infection and limiting constructive spaces in which to engage in online learning; along with a multiplicity of barriers such as lack of access to the necessary technology, complex application processes, stable (and affordable) internet connections, language, lack of recognition of prior skills and learning, and lack of advice, academic advising and support from universities, have all been instrumental in impacting the experiences with online higher education for refugees during COVID-19 (Baker et al., 2022; Hennebry & Hari, 2020; Ergin, 2020; Ogwang, 2022).

Given the findings indicating less than positive experiences, the sub-research question of "*What to date are the implications of the pandemic for refugees with online higher education?*", enlarges the lens towards practice and policies of online higher education and opportunities for refugees. Studies such as Vasilopoulos and Ioannidi (2020) seem to frequently indicate in some manner that host countries face a "sudden influx" of refugees. Thus, this is a key reason why host countries are overwhelmed or unable to adequately provide the mechanisms for effectively integrating refugees into their new contexts. Most often, a largely neglected or hardest-hit mechanism is integration into higher education, be it face-to-face or through the necessities of complying with contactless, online learning due to COVID-19. However, presented with a history of the unfortunate yet consistently steady rise in forced displacement, can a sudden influx continually be validated as a means for ineffective inclusive policy and practice measures and specifically for refugees' inclusion towards greater online higher education opportunities? Concrete strategies enabling rapidly adaptable measures for greater inclusion into higher education for refugees and displaced peoples by governments, host countries, refugee advisory boards and university systems appear to remain disjointed. A lack of synergy is also apparent. Micheline van Riemsdijk (2023, para. 15), Associate Professor of Human Geography at Uppsala University, exemplified the current situation in Sweden with the following: "We often see short funding cycles and a lack of coherence between different initiatives. There are many actors doing good things, but more

cooperation is required". In light of this, a holistic approach aligning the efforts of these institutions may combat the negative implications found to date. Reflecting on a "holistic approach", Koehler et al. (2022) similarly suggested "academic, social and emotional needs" can also "support the inclusion of these students in host countries' education systems" (p. 10).

In 2010, Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010) highlighted in their study that despite the growing numbers of forced migration, there was still a deficiency in the policies for implementing an emergency response to education, particularly higher education, within these contexts. Ten years later, in 2020, Vasilopoulos & Ioannidi (2020) similarly stated that despite the increasing numbers of people placed into forced migration and seeking asylum, cross-sectorial collaboration and comprehensive and coherent solidarity-based policies for inclusion into higher education, and consequently online higher education, were still lacking. Progression, as such, towards greater inclusion in education would require a stronger combination of "long-term commitment", collaboration, proactive "contingency planning", and better "preparedness" by host countries and the international community at large (UNHCR, 2015, p. 14). Most importantly, refugee input should shape the global and local responses to refugee issues. As stated by the UNHCR (2015), even prior to the pandemic, "there is no short-term fix for the education of refugees." (p. 23).

Limitations

The scope of this study was limited in terms of direct access to refugees' voices. As this study examines the phenomenon through literature, it is limited in terms of the amount of literature which was found to be in line with the contexts of this study. The literature which is identified, however, does allow this study to shed light on unexpected deep concerns ranging from lack of inclusion to mental health and access to online higher education for refugees.

Implications for policy and practice

To cultivate concrete strategies and rapidly adaptable measures by which to provide greater inclusion, there are several implications for practice that may be considered. For instance, when facing feelings of isolation, a lack of a sense of belonging, not fitting in (Naidoo, 2021), and challenging mental health issues, as highlighted by Ergin (2020), and Ogwang (2022), continuous online and offline counselling and remedial support mechanisms (Cuijpers et al., 2022; Nanyunja et al., 2022) and scaffolded refugee-centric local solutions may be offered. This may take many forms, including some of the following: a) relevant and decent job opportunities (posted online/apps such as <https://mygrants.it/en/>, work-integrated learning, vocational training (<https://itskills4u.com.ua/>) or <https://www.keylearning.io/>, and financing to start a business (Private Sector for Refugees (PS4R) or <https://www.refugees.kiva.org/>), apprenticeships, and internships (Ikea initiatives in Croatia and Poland), thus bridging graduate skills gaps and employability; b) links to further social services and social integration services (such

as the Diia app in Ukraine – <https://diia.gov.ua/>), enabling greater transition into the wider community post higher education (Crea, 2016; Santandreu Calonge & Shah, 2016; Shah & Santandreu Calonge, 2017, 2019); and c) refugee-academic and professional success programs. This practical experience while studying, which often helps improve skills, language, and cultural understanding, provides valuable teamwork (peer mentoring with locals and people from similar backgrounds) interactions, a sense of belonging and community, a professional network for after-graduation job opportunities and a hands-on alternative to those who struggle to adjust to a new unfamiliar educational environment.

In addition to this, as many refugees often identify with several languages and cultures, having transitioned, worked, lived in multiples countries and/or experienced various educational systems before settling down in their final host country, faculty development, related to pedagogical skills, empathy and intercultural communication, to address the specific educational, social and emotional needs of refugees is needed and could be beneficial to develop more long term engagement with online learning communities (Cerna, 2019).

In terms of implications for policies, this largely is impacted by the governments of the host counties as resources for refugees “vary greatly” and depend on the “confinement policies” of those host countries (O’Keeffe & Akkari, 2020).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the limitations in this study, the analysis of the literature, through undertaking a scoping methodological approach, has uncovered that COVID-19 has indeed impacted the experiences of online higher education for refugees. Although some may have assumed this, as COVID-19 has had an impact on the global community as a whole, the findings of this study unearthed not only an increase in digital inequality and a lack of inclusion to online higher education opportunities for refugees but also deeper levels of unrest impacting their experiences.

Strained mental wellbeing (anxiety, distress, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), poor socio-economic status with often limited scholarships, lack of universities’ guidance and offline support, insufficient strategies towards refugees’ specific issues and contexts, technological barriers and exclusion, as well as overcrowded and stressed living conditions during the pandemic, which may have otherwise been overlooked as factors impacting experiences with online higher education, are in fact prominent issues which may carry significant implications for the future prospects of refugees: a) disengagement and the continuity of education and learning, and b) the integration of refugees and displaced populations into their host countries.

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