

# REFUGEE-LED MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN REFUGEE CONTEXTS: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE IN KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP

P. O'Keeffe

*University of Geneva (SWITZERLAND)*

## Abstract

Higher education in refugee contexts has emerged in recent years as a key humanitarian-development solution. From the courses of study available to refugees, to the daily running of programmes, this education space is dominated by online and western-centric education models and development agencies. Refugees in camps are primarily passive recipients of higher education programme and rarely actively participate in shaping their education programme development futures. Over the course of 6 months from August 2020 to January 2021, the author worked with 3 refugees in Kakuma refugee camp to create a refugee-led management model to lead the development and implementation of a higher education programme for refugees living in the camp. The difficulties instituting this approach were exacerbated by the on-going Covid-19 pandemic, but nevertheless the refugees succeeded in creating a viable management team that empowers them to shape their and their communities' future educational success. This article charts the process of developing the refugee management team and highlights 6 of their successes to date.

Keywords: Refugee higher education, blended learning, refugee-led management, empowerment.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees defines 'empowerment' as 'a process through which women and men in disadvantaged positions increase their access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making power, and raise their awareness of participation in their communities, in order to reach a level of control over their own environment'[1]. Refugees living in refugee camps, in particular camps that follow a containment or encampment policy, rarely if ever, get the opportunity to exert much control over their lives and the environment around them.

One avenue that is often presented as a route to refugee empowerment is higher education, which has in recent years emerged as a key humanitarian response and development initiative within the forced migration management space [2]. Increasingly, it is acknowledged as being able to protect and provide durable solutions for vulnerable communities and foster resilience, recovery and peace [3]. While previous humanitarian and development efforts concentrated on primary and secondary education, higher education projects are now becoming common place in refugee camps and other hubs of 'developmental humanitarianism' across the world.

Despite the recognised potential of higher education programmes in refugee camps to empower refugees and promote human development, such programmes are seldom created, administered or delivered by refugees themselves. Resource shortages, employment restrictions, capacity limitations, administrative control and various other social, political, geographical and economic factors have coalesced to create a space that is dominated by online learning models imported via information communication technology (ICT) platforms and, to a lesser extent, via western education provider's 'campus' models operating in physical spaces in refugee camps [4]. Bound up with in these models is the delivery of higher education courses that are rarely contextualised to consider the particularities of refugee life and are administered and delivered through processes that do not always best reflect the needs of refugee students [5].

As academic investigation into higher education in refugee contexts (HERC) is a relatively novel academic pursuit, with a limited body of literature available [6][7], it is difficult to assess the broad impact of HERC on refugee learners and their wider communities. However, there is growing recognition within critical scholarship of the discrepancies between developmental humanitarian policies in refugee camps that promote 'resilience' and 'empowerment' and the realities of refugees' lives and activities which are heavily controlled within the international forced migration management system [8]. Furthermore, emerging research into HERC points to a need for greater thought and investment into higher education

programmes that suit the specific needs of refugee learners and promotes their agency in its administration [9].

## 1.1 InZone in Kakuma

Kakuma refugee camp in North-Western Kenya, where InZone (a programme for higher education in refugee contexts at the University of Geneva) has been enabling higher education courses for the past 5 years, is a clear case of a refugee context where there is a need for more relevant, meaningful and refugee-led higher education. Kakuma is 'home' to nearly 200,000 refugees, representing 22 nationalities from various countries in the East Africa region and beyond [10]. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), just 1,503 of these people had access to higher education in 2019 [11]. This figure is considerably less than the estimated 3% of the global refugee population, and 34% of the global non-refugee population, who are able to access higher education [12]. The under-resourced camp has limited access and opportunities for Kakuma residents to higher education. What is available, is further degraded by a vast array of technical, social, political, economic, and other practical barriers that make studying in Kakuma a very difficult task [13]

The majority of higher education opportunities available in Kakuma (and most other refugee camps) are delivered through online learning programmes administered at a distance by various western education organisations operating in the camp. Typically, these programmes utilise Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which are not contextualised, but are freely available online, provided one has the necessary technology and internet connection at hand. The InZone programme follows a 'campus' approach with a physical learning facility in the camp with classrooms and computers that are managed by a refugee management team who help to facilitate InZone's collaborative blended learning ecosystem (CBLE). The CBLE connects learners in the camp to their teachers at the University of Geneva and as is populated by 5 key actors, which the Fig 1 and the following explanation elaborate on.

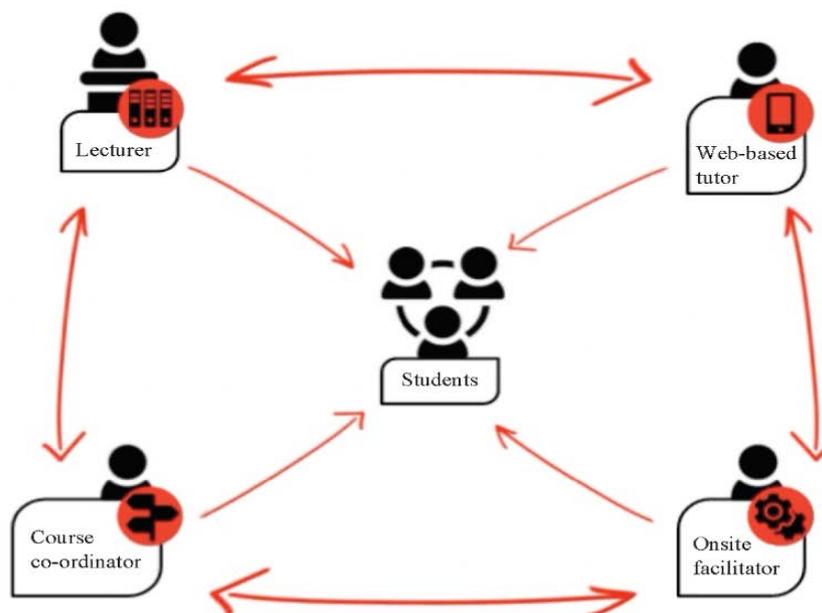


Figure 1. Key in InZone's Collaborative Blended Learning Ecosystem.

- 1 The lecturer delivers the course material over a learning platform (e.g., via MOOCs freely available on Coursera or EdX), encourages the generation of new knowledge, and evaluates the students' learning. In the ecosystem, the delivery of knowledge via a web-based platform enables the transmission of information to the students, who through discussions, group work, and so on acquire and develop new knowledge.
- 2 The web-based tutor is a subject matter expert or peer with a more advanced level of subject knowledge. The tutor plays a pedagogical role in this collaborative learning ecosystem by meeting the students regularly over an information communication technology platform (e.g., WhatsApp) to stimulate new knowledge acquisition, discuss the student's progress, and offer advice on being a successful learner. The web-based tutor also travels to the camp to meet the students in person and deliver face-to-face classes toward the end of the course.

- 3 The onsite facilitator provides onsite technical and guiding support to learners, helping them access the learning platform on location and navigate the physical learning space. The onsite facilitator is a critical contact point in the educational relationship among students and other members of the collaborative learning ecosystem as they are in frequent physical contact with the students.
- 4 The course co-ordinator has the overall responsibility for the day-to-day running of the course and liaises with other members of the learning ecosystem to ensure a smooth operation.
- 5 The student is the focal point of the learning ecosystem. This means that they are central to the collaborative learning model, and the entire learning ecosystem is designed to support their optimal learning by meeting their educational needs and promoting progressive learner autonomy.

Working with colleagues based at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, InZone's refugee-led management team oversees the daily administration of the programme in Kakuma where various accredited university courses have been delivered since 2017. In total over 200 students have successfully completed accredited courses in medicine, global health, economics, engineering, law and ethics. Fig 2 illustrates a basic overview of InZone's programme management structure.

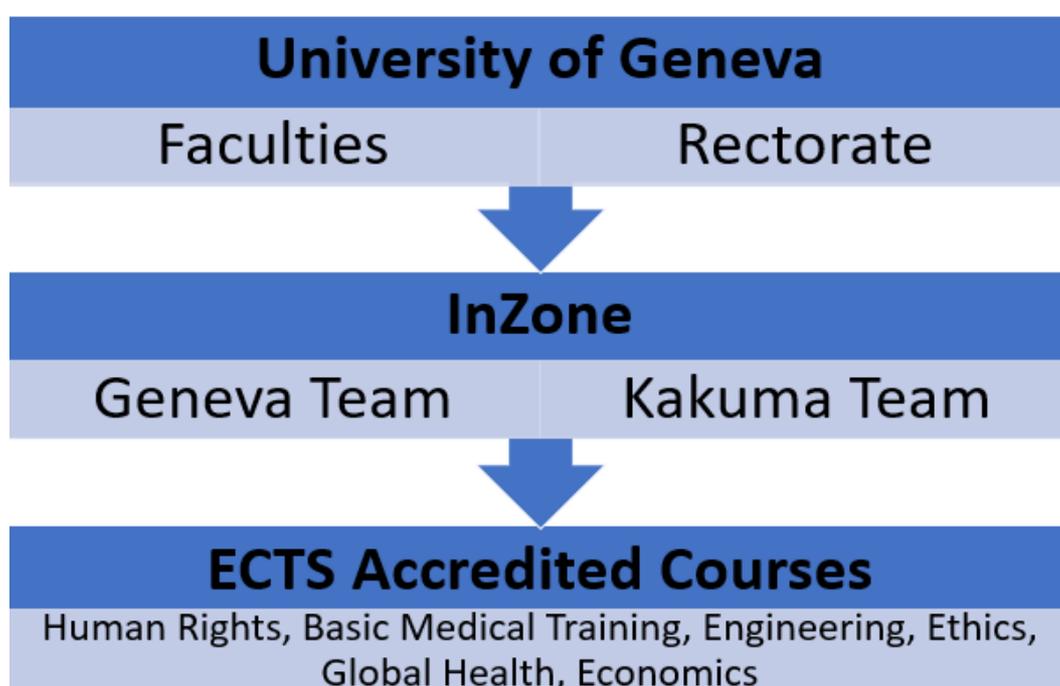


Figure 2. InZone's Management Structure.

## 1.2 Reconfiguring the InZone model during the Covid-19 Pandemic

In 2019, UNHCR released its Refugee Education 2030 strategy, an update of its earlier 2012-2016 Refugee Education Strategy, which pledged to 'ensure that refugees are increasingly accounted for in education sector planning goals and action plans; that refugee and host community students are prepared equitably to succeed in national systems wherever they live; and that the particular learning needs of refugee and host community students are addressed by expanding existing programmes and partner investments in support of innovative local solutions' [14]. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, and the continued uncertainty of its impact, has dealt a blow to strategists and implementing partners attempting to follow this strategic lead, resulting in the widescale cancelling/postponing of programmes in refugee camps and other refugee contexts.

Like elsewhere, the pandemic has impacted heavily on higher education in Kakuma. Lockdowns, social distancing requirements and other restrictions on movement into, within, around and out of the camp, have resulted in many programmes calling a halt to their operations until further notice [15]. For those that have tried to continue through the pandemic, the rush to purely online approaches, while not the most effective education solution in the best of circumstances [16], has proved difficult in conditions where computers, internet access and electricity are the exception and not the rule [13].

For InZone, the impact of the pandemic on its operations in Kakuma was further exacerbated by the disbanding of its founding refugee management team in early summer 2020. While the situation was far from ideal, the Covid-19 -related slowdown afforded InZone the opportunity to evaluate its refugee-led management model approach and build a new team from the grassroots up and emanating from their grounded experience of life and education in the camp.

## **2 CAPACITY BUILDING METHODOLOGY**

In August 2020 a ‘transition team’ comprising of 3 former InZone students, who together had a wealth of higher education and programme management experience, was engaged to build a new refugee management team and to lead the way forward for the future development of the programme. From September to December 2020, the transition team received intensive online bi-weekly education programme capacity building and academic research training from InZone academics based in Geneva. In addition, they participated in a week-long face-to-face management and research training in Nairobi in September 2020 (due to Covid-19 restrictions on non-refugees’ ability to enter the camp, it was necessary for the team to travel to Nairobi to meet with the trainers), led by one of the InZone academics from the online capacity building training.

The capacity building process was grounded in transformative pedagogical principles and drew on the InZone academics’ long experience of working in refugee camps and the transition team members’ extensive experience of living, working and studying in Kakuma. The transformative approach combined constructivism with pedagogies to empower people to examine their own beliefs, values, and knowledge with the goal of developing a reflective knowledge base, an appreciation for multiple perspectives, and a sense of critical consciousness and agency [17]. Over the course of the 4-month long capacity building process, the team and academics delved into the academic discourse surrounding HERC, developing and delivering operations training, carrying out research with refugees and devising a unified approach to chart the way forward for a more effective refugee-led management approach.

Throughout the capacity building period, systematic observation and feedback was taken in order to document the process. The bi-weekly training session occurred online via Zoom calls. These were recorded and notes were taken. The face-to-face training session in Nairobi was not recorded but handwritten notes were taken by all participants and systematic feedback was collected throughout the process.

## **3 RESULTS**

Developing a refugee management team to lead their own higher education programme in a refugee camp is no small feat. In addition to gaining the capacity to manage the day to day running of the programme in the camp, the team gained a thorough understanding of the camp’s administrative procedures in their capacity building sessions and adapted well to demands of working in a cross-cultural setting that requires them to, not only work with a variety of nationalities and ethnicities in the camp, but also to communicate effectively with a Western university located thousands of miles away. The Covid-19 pandemic, which has resulted in (and continues to) lockdowns and other measures limiting interactions and communication in the camp, further complicated the roll out of the team’s project planning and implementation. However, in a testament to their abilities and determination to place refugees at the center of learning in the camp, the team has accomplished many key successes in their short time leading the programme. The following is a selection of the key successes they have accomplished since being convened in August 2020.

### **3.1 Defining their own job functions**

A key output of the capacity building process was equipping the transition team with the ability and authority to determine which roles were necessary to populate a well-functioning management team and which functions they would individually and collectively play in the team. The three main roles identified by the team were Director of Operations, Course Coordinator and Outreach Manager, which they individually occupied. While these are distinct occupational roles within the management structure, the team also made provision in their project management planning for working together as and when the need arises in particular projects.

### **3.2 Opening a new learning facility**

In November 2020 the refugee management team organised and presided over the opening of a new learning facility in Kakuma. This new facility has extra space and resources for classes to take place and is managed entirely by the new team. A main consideration of opening this space for the team was to organise the layout of the space and draw up a schedule for students to access the facilities according to a Covid-19 precautions plan.

### **3.3 Hiring support staff**

Following the inauguration of the new learning facility in November 2020, the transition team led the hiring process for 4 security staff to man the learning facility. They developed a hiring procedure according to the needs of the programme and recruited fellow refugees into these positions. The team developed their own management plan to coordinate the schedule of the security guards, devised roles and responsibilities plan and employment contracts for the new members of staff.

### **3.4 Implementing and managing 2 new courses**

In November 2020 the team oversaw the delivery of a new pharmacology course and a new global health course for InZone students in the camp. These courses required students to access technology and the learning facilities on a frequent basis. In addition to course scheduling and working with courses leaders in Geneva to roll out the courses, the management team developed a coordination plan which included Covid-19 precautions such as social distancing, handwashing and supplying the students with masks.

### **3.5 Writing academic articles using co-creation principles**

As InZone is primarily an academic university programme, publication of research and academic thought is fundamental to its success. Working with InZone's senior academic researcher the team produced two high level academic articles based on their own experiences of higher education in the camp. The first of these looked at how resilience is developed through participation in higher education and was published in February 2021. The second looked at empowerment through education and will be published in the Journal on Education in Emergencies in Autumn 2021.

### **3.6 Developing and carrying out higher education needs assessment research**

Central to the transition teams' capacity building training was equipping them with the knowledge and skills that they need to understand the education needs of refugees. With the guidance of InZone's senior researcher and academic, the team was trained to carry out an education needs assessment in the camp. Following a transformational framework, it was determined that the team, as refugees living, working and studying in Kakuma, were best placed to determine the research parameters to be employed in the needs' assessment, the aims and objectives of the needs' assessment, the generation of the research tools to be used for collecting the data, the data collection procedure and the reporting of the findings. Between October and December 2020, the team developed and carried out the higher education needs assessment in the camp with 200 refugee participants taking part. A final report was presented to the University of Geneva in February 2021 with the aim of shaping the future of InZone's work.

## **4 CONCLUSIONS**

For too long, humanitarian-development has side-lined refugees as passive recipients of aid and development projects. The culture of dependency between refugees and humanitarian-developmental organisations who serve refugees has deep roots and obvious implications for maintaining inequities and reinforcing the power dynamics between the world's 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the world. As InZone's refugee management-led approach shows, refugees, given the right support, are capable of determining their own needs and actively leading their own education development programmes.

The 6 key successes listed in this article highlight what can be achieved, given the right support is afforded to refugees. While it is early days in the refugee management teams' formation, these successes help to establish a base for their future endeavours. In addition, these successes can serve as inspiration to other actors in the field of HERC to allow refugees to take the lead.

As actors in the humanitarian-development space struggle to cope with the increasing demands of a troubled world, a shift in thinking away from the traditional 'north-south' 'powerful-powerless' mentality is needed if progress is to be made. The study of HERC is beginning to shine a light on refugee capacity and can chart the way forward, if humanitarian-development organisations and agencies are willing to embrace a new approach. To do this will require an in-depth examination of existing practices, a reconfiguration of the power dynamics that shape these practices and an openness to putting refugees in control of their own lives. As challenging as change is within the forced migration management system, it is long overdue and necessary as we all move forward.

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