GOING GLOBAL to Meet the Needs of Refugee and Displaced Learners

By Chrystina Russell and Nina Weaver
The rapid acceleration of technological advancements over the past decades has sustained hope that new innovations in the US higher education sector can be leveraged to extend access for marginalized and hard-to-reach populations. In recent years, online and connected learning initiatives—including MOOC-based solutions—have sought to mobilize technology-based offerings to extend opportunities for higher education for one of the world’s hardest-to-reach groups: refugee and displaced learners.

However, according to recent evidence, solutions that rely solely on the availability of online resources or self-directed learning can struggle to meet the needs of vulnerable learners. Additionally, the delivery of higher education to vulnerable learners in resource-deprived settings is notoriously challenging. In particular, initiatives that seek to reach refugee and displaced learners must contend with technical and operational challenges in resource-deprived and insecure environments, which can prevent even the best-intentioned projects from achieving key outcomes. Yet we believe that competency-based higher education can help to overcome the common technology-related barriers and challenges for learners affected by displacement and conflict in the Global South.

SNHU’s “College for America” Degree
Competency-based learning has become a notoriously amorphous concept in higher education, to the point that the lack of a shared definition can limit the usefulness of the term in broader discussions. When we talk here about competency-based higher education, we are referring specifically to three critical characteristics of the Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) competency-based degree program, known as College for America (CfA): direct assessment; self-paced; project-based. These components are not exclusive to CfA, but they are the three elements that we consider to be necessary and critical for facilitating access for refugee learners.

1. Direct Assessment
Faculty (referred to as “reviewers”) give direct feedback on student projects, highlighting how students have mastered a project or what should be improved in resubmission. In the CfA model of direct assessment, a competency is the capacity to apply skills, knowledge, or abilities to a real-world situation. A mastered competency means the student has demonstrated knowledge or skill in a real-world or simulated context.

2. Self-Paced
In the CfA degree platform, students can work on projects when and how they want, without externally imposed deadlines. Completed projects can be submitted at any time, and feedback is provided within a 48-hour turnaround time, after which students can resubmit the project if they have not achieved mastery. Theoretically, a student can resubmit work unlimited times before achieving mastery. The two-term structure does not include any required breaks or between-term gaps, which means that students can earn competencies towards their degrees at any time of day and on any day of the year.

3. Project-Based (with Workplace Relevance)
In the competency-based degree, students demonstrate competencies (i.e., earn course credits) by successfully completing projects that prove their mastery in predetermined competencies or tasks, organized within the platform into broader goals. The project-based approach
means that students do not have traditional credit hours, direct instruction, examinations, or grades; instead, students are assessed through their project submissions to determine whether they have mastered a competency. Competencies are framed as “can-do” statements and are designed to mirror the learning outcomes gained from doing “real-world” projects, such as writing a memo for a company or using a spreadsheet to make a budget and perform calculations. Goals and competencies within a degree program are determined based on market research, input from industry leaders, and guidance from academic and subject matter experts.

**Higher Education for Refugees: Opportunities and Challenges**

Why is increasing access to higher education opportunities for refugee populations important? There is overwhelming evidence that education—and, in particular, higher education—can dramatically transform the life prospects of displaced people by building transferable skills and social capital, improving quality of life, and expanding livelihood opportunities. An economic analysis of refugee populations in Uganda shows that each additional year of education correlates with a higher average income, with tertiary education giving the highest income returns. Relatedly, the World Bank and other independent research shows that refugee populations can make significant economic contributions to national economies, highlighting the importance of expanding educational and training opportunities for refugees in the Global South.

And yet, globally, fewer than 1 percent of refugees are able to access higher education. In the 21st century, being a refugee means being categorically denied access to higher education and meaningful livelihood pathways. The cumulative impact of these denied opportunities is far-reaching. Disenfranchised youth are not only vulnerable to poverty and radicalization; their communities are also deprived of capable and qualified leaders with the potential to transform and rebuild their societies and countries.

In recent years—in response to repeated demands from experts, advocates, and refugees themselves—UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, has begun to prioritize tertiary education as a solution that “enhances the protection of youth and facilitates integration.” In part due to the high costs and the academic barriers that most refugees in the Global South face for access to local colleges and universities, online-based programs with open educational resources have become a key part of this strategy.

However, in contexts with significant academic skill gaps—most notably, English-language levels—and with extreme resource constraints, online-only learning programs struggle to support displaced learners. A 2016
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A report on online higher education for refugees found that language, gender, sociocultural and religious background, disability, age, location, and legal status and documentation are all significant impediments to access for refugee learners. Lack of connectivity and access to technology—especially in remote refugee settlements—exacerbate these challenges. And even among higher education programs that do serve refugee learners, evidence suggests that they still fall short of achieving “relevance to the labor market and the employability of refugees upon graduation.”

Finally, higher education institutions that seek to serve refugee populations are limited in their ability to offer full degree programs, most often due to US institutions’ high per-credit costs that make traditional scholarship-based models impossible to scale. This has led to a flood of short courses and one-off certificate programs that do not lead to full undergraduate (or graduate) degrees and, in some cases, do not even offer course credits. In such cases, the questions of whether such certificates will be recognized by foreign governments and institutions or will have any measurable impact on graduates’ lives are difficult to answer.

Although there are many challenges, we believe that leveraging new technologies with the goal of increasing access to higher education and employment opportunities for people who are facing conflict and displacement around the world is possible. We also believe that lessons learned from existing programs should be shared widely and that institutions of higher education should collaborate to build an evidence base of best practices for serving refugee learners.

**SNHU’s Global Education Movement (GEM)**

The Global Education Movement (GEM) is an SNHU initiative to expand access to higher education for refugees and others affected by displacement. Students in the GEM program pursue US-accredited bachelor’s degrees through SNHU’s competency-based CTA program while gaining professional skills and work experience. At its core, GEM is a blended-learning model founded on partnership. In collaboration with on-the-ground partners at each site, the GEM program is able to combine SNHU’s low-cost, cutting-edge online competency-based degree with robust in-person resources and services for students, including academic instruction, internship and on-the-job training experiences, individualized coaching, psychosocial support, and career counseling. Through GEM, students earn an internationally recognized undergraduate degree and equip themselves with transferable technical and professional skills that are desired in both local and global job markets. This enables graduates to become leaders in their workplaces and communities as professionals working across private, public, and humanitarian sectors.

Most importantly, using data and quantitative analysis, GEM programs have been able to establish a track record of successful learning and employment outcomes for students. SNHU has partnered with Kepler since 2013 in Kigali, Rwanda, since 2015 in the Kiziba refugee camp. In 2018, GEM launched programs in South Africa, Kenya, Malawi, and Lebanon as part of a Series A expansion plan. Across sites, over 90 percent of GEM students are on track to graduate with a bachelor’s degree within four years. GEM’s commitment to gender equity has resulted in a student population that is 49 percent women. In addition, independent evaluations show that GEM students and graduates outperform college/university students from a match control group at statistically significant levels across critical thinking, cognitive skills, math, logic, English reading and writing, and computer literacy. Most critically, findings show that GEM graduates earn more than double the income of their peers in a matched control group and are more likely to both find and keep full-time employment.

How has SNHU’s GEM been able to achieve such robust learning and employment outcomes in notoriously difficult operating environments? A primary factor is SNHU’s competency-based degree, which enables partners and students to navigate key barriers facing learners in conflict- and displacement-affected populations:
■ **Infrastructure barriers**, such as lack of reliable internet connectivity and electricity

■ **Social, economic, and political barriers**, such as insecurity, poverty, family and employment responsibilities, gender inequality, legal and/or social discrimination

■ **Skills- and academic-related barriers**, such as low levels of English language skills, low levels of computer and technology literacy, and lack of exposure to academic environments

The project-based nature of the degree means that instructions and resources can be uploaded to local area networks (LANs) at partner sites, allowing students to study offline for a majority of the time, with internet access required only for submitting completed projects and receiving reviewer feedback. This mitigates bandwidth and connectivity challenges in refugee camp settings that limit access to online-only resources, especially video streaming. Installing solar panels at sites and providing students with individual laptops with longer battery life are also essential in facilitating technology access.

In addition, the self-paced nature of the degree’s project-based work mitigates many of the challenges that refugee students face in their daily lives and that negatively impact learning outcomes and graduation rates. In traditional online learning programs, students may be required to repeat an entire course (and delay graduation by additional terms) if they miss a deadline, fail an exam, or are forced to take a leave of absence—regardless of whether their studies have been impacted by factors beyond their control, such as serious security threats, electricity or internet failures, weather disasters, family emergencies, maternity leave, or illness.

With SNHU’s competency-based degree program, students can pick up where they left off with their projects, at any time, without being penalized or forced to wait to restart or repeat a course in a future term. This is especially important for GEM students who are working full-time outside the home or in the home to support their families and is particularly important for female students with children. Similarly, if students return to their home country, are resettled, or move to a new location, they can continue in the degree without interruption, supported by online tutors and coaches.

After students submit completed projects, the direct assessment of student work enables them to receive
As more US colleges and universities begin to develop accredited competency-based degree programs, they could take creative approaches to leveraging new degrees to expand access to learners in different contexts in the Global South. However, learning from the successes and failures of existing programs is critical for identifying best practices and effectively scaling opportunities over time. Evidence from SNHU’s GEM programs shows that some elements of competency-based higher education have the potential to effectively address the significant contextual challenges facing refugee learners. Drawing on some of these findings, higher education institutions seeking to serve learners in conflict- or displacement-affected contexts, including refugees, could consider ways to increase the flexibility of their delivery models. In addition, as more US colleges and universities begin to develop accredited competency-based degree programs, they could take creative approaches to leveraging new degrees to expand access to learners in different contexts in the Global South. In addition, higher education institutions could consider joining consortiums (e.g., the Connected Learninging Consortium, co-led by UNHCR) that offer a platform for knowledge exchange and collaborative conversations among higher education providers serving refugee populations.

Toward a Global Movement

In spite of significant challenges, online innovations and technological advancements in US higher education have significant potential to increase access to college/university-level education for people facing conflict and displacement. With more than 65 million displaced people worldwide, governments and humanitarian agencies are scrambling for solutions. A global crisis of this magnitude requires concerted social, legal, and political action. In addition, a global movement among higher education institutions serving refugee learners could hold the key to an alternative future of possibility.

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By working together, higher education leaders and institutions have the potential to transform the lives of thousands of refugee learners and their communities through access to recognized credentials and employment. Ultimately, we can enable refugee graduates to emerge as instrumental leaders in the search for solutions to the global refugee crisis.