

InZone ThinkPiece 2016* and Discussion

Participatory Innovation – *Mobile and Connected Learning as a driving force in Higher Education in Emergencies*

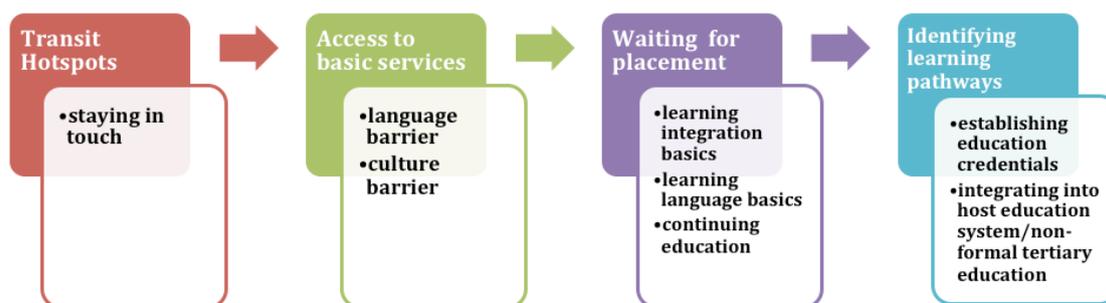


Fig. 1 *InZone's perception of the gradual integration of refugees into the European higher education system*

Mobile learning...

- Provides *access to basic language learning* for survival in host countries
- Creates normalcy in adversity as *continuing education* bridges interrupted education pathways
- Offers *non-formal tertiary education* opportunities that are relevant to refugee needs
- Allows for (re)establishing tertiary education credentials that were lost (portfolios in the cloud)
- Allows for continued *knowledge creation and skill-building* as refugees await integration into formal tertiary education systems

Of the more than four million Syrian refugees, the Institute of International Education (IIE) estimates that as many as 450,000 are aged 18-22. Pre-crisis higher education enrolment rates (UNHCR 2015, Redden 2015) suggest that 90,000 to 110,000 of these refugees are qualified for university studies. According to Tarvainen (UNHCR in WENR 2015), Syrian displacement is characterized by a well educated population suffering from a disruption of their education trajectories. This has generated significant demand for higher education in host societies.

However, on a broader scale, it is known that only 1% of refugees worldwide have been able to access higher education over the past few years. The traditional focus remains on the provision of scholarships as the solution to integrating eligible refugees into the higher education systems of

their host countries. Alternatively, scholarships are awarded for travel to, and study in, a foreign country where refugees are sponsored for a limited period. Such opportunities do not usually cover an entire degree program, and refugees are generally expected to return to their country of origin, often before they have the chance to obtain a university degree. Clearly, however, return to the country of origin is usually not a realistic option. Whereas such schemes certainly contribute to easing the situation of a number of eligible refugees (O'Malley 2015), they are only part of the solution.

Refugee learners face enormous challenges: their lives have been upended and their own families' futures are uncertain. Those on the move, without any knowledge of their ultimate destination, let alone where the next meal will come from, have little to no control over their lives.

The 21st Century skills - critical thinking, creativity, innovation, personal and social responsibility - are all essential to knowledge creation. However, conflict and crisis, violence and human rights violations do not offer a solid foundation for the acquisition of these skills. On the contrary: they erect cognitive barriers to deep learning and understanding.

How can refugees learn in such situations? How can communication be established with institutions of higher education, or with the organizations and authorities that are willing to support refugees' access to higher education? How can language barriers and cultural divides be bridged? How can higher education systems escape the established models and recognize that a participatory approach will engage and empower students to co-design solutions? How can learning become a two-way process, whereby the beneficiaries are both students in host countries as well as refugee learners?

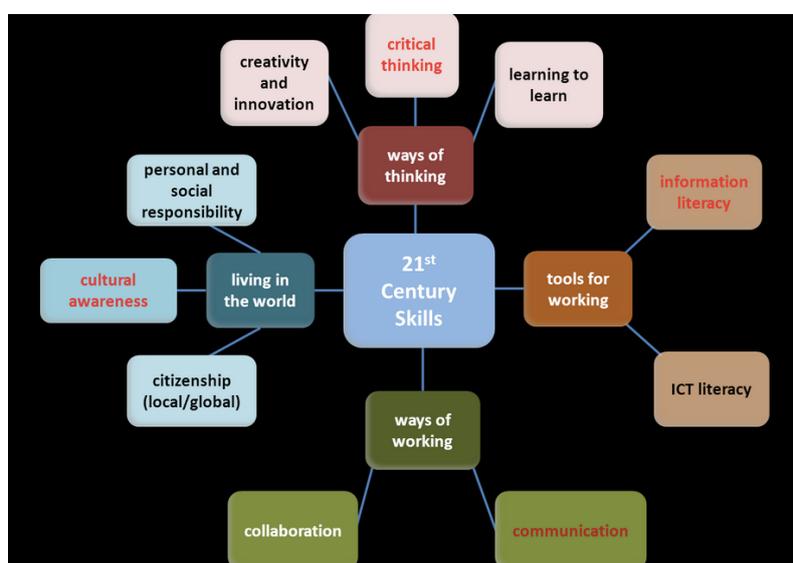


Fig. 2 21st Century skills

While scholarships can provide access to higher education in certain conditions, they cannot guarantee that learners will have the required

cognitive preparation, or readily overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. There is, however, a natural tendency to prioritize quick integration, rather than to nurture diversity of culture and thought. And yet it is the latter that holds the promise of durable and rewarding long-term integration, together with natural resistance to violence and ethnic conflict.

Hence, the road to academic success for refugee learners (and their potential to make substantive contributions to their new host societies) depends upon their ability to make sense of their new and often volatile environments. Language proficiency, social integration and new technologies all foster that process. They help to make each moment a moment of learning, of observing, recording, sharing experiences and insights with other refugees and with host country citizens. Dialogue becomes possible, stories are told of harsh experiences as well as of times of profound relief and happiness. All gain a deeper understanding of the predicament of others, with the potential to establish trust and durable relationships between refugees and host country citizens.

Mobile learning offers the opportunity to observe, to record and collect data on the world around us. Its special power stems from its multi-modality, its creativity and innovation: stories come to life, they can be shared and re-told; images trigger off conversations or are transformed into powerful texts that dismantle linguistic and cultural divides between refugees and host country citizens. Sharing promotes the thinking skills that allow communities of learning to emerge. Furthermore, mobile technology produces educational material that reaches beyond what can be offered by a static, often outdated textbook. Refugee learners who harness these technologies become the producers of educational materials instead of remaining the passive recipients of information designed to prepare them for the host country's higher education system. They participate in transforming societies to meet the challenges of a mobile world, in which knowledge and thinking have "gone global" and where physical and intellectual boundaries need to be broken down rather than reinforced.

Participation in education is among the most powerful ways of discouraging extremism and fundamentalism which reduce individuals' understanding of the world to an intellectual minimum. Even then, education is no ultimate bulwark against terrorism. However, for the persons fleeing conflict, their search for a haven of safety should not end by their becoming passive recipients of aid, economic or intellectual. They should be empowered to participate actively in the creation of knowledge.

Mobile learning - if it is understood not merely as a tool for host societies to "deliver" information or ready-made courses, but as a meeting place for non-formal and formal learning - has the potential to be a major force in averting conflict and in fostering peaceful co-existence of languages and cultures that remain remote from one another. The ubiquity of mobile learning offers opportunities for intellectual growth irrespective of physical location, as well as for life-long learning as a natural component of personal development. Generally, no tangible academic credentials result from mobile learning, but it opens minds and builds the social and intellectual bridges required for access to higher levels of study and integration.

References

- Barakat, S., & Milton, S. (2015). *Houses of Wisdom Matter: The Responsibility to Protect and Rebuild Higher Education in the Arab World*. Doha: Brookings Doha Center.
- Gallagher, M.S. (2014). *Incessant Motion Through Space: Mobile Learning Field Activities in the Humanities*. Last accessed 15 January 2016 http://michaelseangallagher.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Incessant-Motion-Through-Space.pdf?utm_content=buffera6e01&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer
- Guerrette, R.T., & Freilich, J.D. (2013). *Migration, Culture Conflict, Crime and Terrorism*. London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- O'Malley, B. (2015). Global fund needed for higher education in emergencies. *World University News* 371. Last accessed 12 January 2016 <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20150613072938934&query=syrian+refugees>
- Herrington, J., Herrington, A., Mantei, J., Olney, I., & Ferry, B. (2009). New technologies, new pedagogies: Using mobile technologies to develop new ways of teaching and learning. In J. Herrington, A. Herrington, J. Mantei, I. Olney, & B. Ferry (Eds.), *New Technologies, New Pedagogies: Mobile Learning in Higher Education* (pp. 1-14). Wollongong: University of Wollongong. Last accessed 12 January 2016 <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1077&context=edupapers>
- Lowe, R., & Yasuhara, Y. (2013). The origins of higher learning. Time for a new historiography? In M. Feingold (ed.), *History of Universities XVIII* (pp. 1-19). Oxford: OUP
- Redden, E. (2015). The refugee crisis and higher ed. *In InsideHigherEd* 25.09.2015. Last accessed 17 January 2016 <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/09/25/syrian-refugee-crisis-and-higher-education>
- WENR (2015). The importance of higher education for Syrian refugees. In *World Education News and Reviews*, 07.12.2015, Last accessed 17 January 2016 <http://wenr.wes.org/2015/12/the-importance-of-higher-education-for-syrian-refugees/>

Questions considered by InZone's International Advisory Board and invited discussants:

How could we re-imagine higher-level learning for refugees on the move?

1. How can higher education re-imagine the notion of humanitarian “assistance” and empower refugee and non-refugee learners to co-design educational content and thus make learning a participatory process?
2. What public-private partnerships would be needed for refugee learners on the move to benefit from higher education?
3. Mobile technology offers particular assistance to women and the disadvantaged by broadening their access to information and connecting them with other people. How would we imagine the empowerment of female refugee learners on the move?
4. How can mobile devices be leveraged to customize educational content for refugee learners on the move?

Question 1: How can higher education re-imagine the notion of humanitarian “assistance” and empower refugee and non-refugee learners to co-design educational content and thus make learning a participatory process?

Considering the history of the emergence of modern universities, starting with the first European universities, we conclude that nothing that was taught in these universities was exclusively European. Instead, knowledge was transmitted from insights and practices that had developed earlier in the Greek, Persian, Indian and Arabic worlds and that had reached Europe through Spain and Italy, largely in the form of translations from Arabic (Lowe & Yasuhara, 2013). Given that in the current refugee crisis a large share of the refugees reaching Europe transit through Greece and Italy and are Arabic-speakers, history could offer important pointers as to how communities of learning emerge and how different intellectual cultures contribute to new institutional forms of knowledge creation and transmission. Following Barakat & Milton’s (2015) plea for rebuilding institutions of higher learning in the Arab world, we could imagine a return journey for knowledge, this time with the help of refugee learners.

Hence, promoting higher education for refugee learners cannot be seen merely in terms of “assistance” or “aid”, but as an investment in the continuing diffusion of knowledge and as a major contribution to the global knowledge society. In this way, humanitarian action does not merely “serve” a community, but embraces the concept of learning communities. The latter could be likened to “peoples’ universities” offering non-formal higher education, with the potential of being transformed into fully-fledged universities dispensing formal higher education. These community-based initiatives may go well beyond the notion of education helping learners to find a job: they promote the idea that education empowers learners to shape their own lives, to become resilient and integrate socially. Such initiatives could become the subject of funding by public-private partnerships, a topic explored also by another group of discussants.

Question 2: What public-private partnerships would be needed for refugee learners on the move to benefit from higher education?

As the humanitarian system is strained to its limits, the public sector, as the primary funding source for humanitarian action, is in dire need of increased support from the private sector. While such joint funding mechanisms create their own set of problems with regard to respect for humanitarian principles (accountability, do-no-harm...), the needs far surpass available public resources and such tandem funding becomes essential.

There are different models for public-private partnership tandems in higher education: institutions of higher learning can partner with IT companies, banks, international and non-governmental organizations, with private education providers, potential employers, venture capitalists and start-up companies, to name but a few. Such partnerships can provide seed funding for innovative projects in higher education in emergencies, can contribute to rebuilding the higher education system in conflict-ridden countries, provide for scholarships for migrants, and encourage refugee initiatives to contribute to developing higher education options while on the move and in their host country. Given the multitude of migration contexts, models will vary considerably, and creative solutions are of prime importance, as standard models fail to adapt readily to the challenges posed by mass migration. Such partnerships could also support the idea of an exchange, a platform accessible via a mobile application where youth on the move can access information relevant to their higher education options. Universities in Europe will need to understand that they, too, are engaged in higher education in emergencies and that it is expected of them to prove their ingenuity, agility and creativity to design, together with migrants, a range of optimal solutions for higher learning. This collaborative approach will go a long way towards accountability to all beneficiaries and guarantee quality of service delivery.

Question 3: Mobile technology offers particular assistance to women and the disadvantaged by broadening their access to information and connecting them with other people. How would we imagine the empowerment of female refugee learners on the move?

Accountability to all beneficiaries is a requirement of humanitarian ethics. While it is easy to imagine young people on the move depending on their cell phones for everything, from navigation to information access, this stands in stark contrast to realities for women and disadvantaged migrants – children, the sick and elderly – whose access to information and ability to communicate while on the move is largely restricted to face-to-face encounters. Being largely cut off from the most basic services provided through ICT, these more vulnerable populations continue to fall further behind with regard to potential integration into the knowledge societies to which they are migrating. This reinforces the poverty and marginalization cycle, and re-establishes the conditions that were dominant in their cultures of origin. Reaching women and disadvantaged migrants through mobile learning should thus become a top priority for humanitarian action. Special support should be focused on moving these populations into the electronic age.

Content needs to be appropriately contextualized, made available with subtitles for easier access, and be designed for specific age and education-level categories. It should be conducive to community-based learning: when one person learns, the community benefits and thus the community learns and is mutually supportive of its members. Such communities can act as safe havens for women, as islands of normalcy in a sea of adversity. They help women to become proactive in physical and mental health, and encourage them to pursue their learning, which is of direct benefit to those they care for, their children and the elderly.

Communities on the move still embrace learning as a survival mechanism. It enhances their resilience and enables them to become responsible actors and contributors to their future host communities. They will also be more likely to advance the education of their dependents, thus increasing their chances of breaking the cycle of poverty, and of contributing to the creation of knowledge relevant to their communities.

Question 4: How can mobile devices be leveraged to customize educational content for refugee learners on the move?

Relevance and accessibility of content are two prime considerations in the customization of educational content for refugee learners. As suggested in the ThinkPiece, language and culture can be obstacles to such access to video content, on a par with connectivity and bandwidth. Creating content and learning applications that can be used both on and off-line are essential for learners on the move; producing learning materials that still work in areas with low bandwidth and interrupted connectivity motivate learners. Building applications that also run on older versions of operating systems and are multi-platform further encourage continuous learning.

The relevance of material for migrant learners on the move changes as they progress from their country of origin, through hotspots and transit centers to their country of destination. Upon arrival, eligibility for access to higher education is a priority issue for refugees as well as for higher education institutions. The ability to provide evidence of prior learning is, however, severely constrained for refugees who may have fled without being able to take important documents with them, or who lost them along the way, travelling over land or sea, or who may even attempt to return into a conflict zone to retrieve them. Creating e-portfolios, fast-tracking applications with appropriate assessments of prior learning, engagement in non-formal higher education prior to arrival in the formal education system can all be supported by mobile devices and applications. While it is a challenge for migrants to maintain a long-term vision of their education pathways, it is not just the destination that is important, but the learning journey itself. Understanding the needs of mobile learners in fragile contexts, as well as customizing devices and content for them and with them, may thus be viewed as one of the most promising humanitarian actions we can engage in.

Barbara Moser-Mercer, Director InZone, January/February 2016

The original **ThinkPiece sketches out a participatory approach to knowledge creation, integrating contributions to InZone's response to the European refugee crisis by InZone staff members Carmen Delgado Luchner, Erin Hayba, Joshua Goldsmith and by InZone IAB member Ian Newton.*

*The **Discussion section** evokes a participatory approach to knowledge creation, integrating contributions from a diverse community of discussants who shared their ideas, on the occasion of InZone's International Advisory Board meeting in Geneva (5 February 2016). InZone gratefully acknowledges their important contributions which provide evidence of the value of collaborative learning.*