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Connected Learning as Collaboration and Psychosocial Support: A Critical Reflection on a Bridging Programme for Refugees in Uganda

COLLECTION:
CONNECTED LEARNING IN CONTEXTS OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Uganda currently hosts approximately 1.7 million refugees (93% fully registered refugees, 3% asylum seekers and 4% stateless persons), the most in sub-Saharan Africa. Most refugees come from South Sudan (57%), Democratic Republic of Congo (32%), Burundi (3%), and Somalia (3%). Refugees largely live in rural based settlements within 12 districts alongside host communities and only 8% reside in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. This has posed challenges related to refugee access to economic, medical, and social services including education. These challenges are often addressed in education through connected bridging programmes, which are designed to provide refugees with instruction to help them access and succeed in higher education. This paper explores one such bridging programme and the research that accompanied it, Foundations for All, which was a blended programme designed to provide access to higher education for refugees. Through critical reflections of the overall programme gleaned from interviews with teachers and students, we focus on two discrete elements of this project – the collaborative practices of the disparate project partners and the embedded psychosocial support – and discuss how these two elements might inform the further conceptualisation of connected learning in refugee education contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Connected learning is frequently portrayed as a promising avenue for delivering tertiary education in contexts marked by fragility, violence, and forced displacement (e.g. Dushime, Manirafasha & Mbonyinshuti 2019). The rationale is appealing in contexts where education providers, especially public education providers, are unable to operate normally; remote, digital, and hybrid teaching models could provide solutions in the same way that they provide solutions in remote communities in various parts of the world. An emerging literature base has nuanced and sometimes challenged this optimistic narrative in recent years (Menashy & Zakharia 2020; Akello et al. 2024). Existing research points out practical challenges in implementing and scaling-up overly 'tech-based' solutions. It also identifies key conceptual issues that need to be addressed for connected learning to effectively support all forcibly displaced people (henceforth referred to as 'refugees').

Connected learning is conceptualised in different ways but is generally positioned as an educational approach for marginalised populations, combining in-person education with online learning for broader engagement. It does not reduce education "to a phenomenon that takes place exclusively in the restricted spaces of formal education, neither does it focus exclusively on the online learning phenomenon" (Prestridge et al. 2021: 2171), but rather defines a blended model that is responsive to the specific needs of refugees in particular educational contexts. As such, it explicitly foregrounds both the school or learning centre and the digital technologies needed to engage in online learning. Much of the connected learning research surfaces the necessity of face-to-face instruction and the relationships that develop between teachers and students (Kim, Stella & Hiticha 2023), a point that is echoed in the experiences of Foundations for All (FFA). Foundations for All is a blended learning programme designed to provide access to higher education for refugees. This paper builds on these conceptualisations of connected learning, to foreground two discrete parts of our approach to connected learning within the FFA programme – the embedded psychosocial approach and the collaborative practices of the disparate programme actors – and appraises their relevance for future connected learning strategies.

Researchers highlight technical connectivity issues that can only be remedied with human interactions (Dridi et al. 2020); language challenges in connected learning (Kim, Stella & Hiticha 2023); and the importance of addressing refugees' mental health due to their vulnerability (Taftaf & Williams 2020). Refugee populations disproportionately present significant psychosocial trauma, which is a well-documented barrier to meaningful learning (Elkins et al. 2023; Streitwieser et al. 2019). Refugees' experiences may have included "detention, torture, war, encampment, exploitation, and a lack of essential resources" (Martin & Stulgatis 2022: 36). This article examines how blended bridging programmes for refugees can integrate mental health care and dedicated mental health support provision into their curriculum. It explores the conditions to meaningfully integrate psychosocial support, and the role of partnerships in the design and delivery of psychosocial support provision.

This comes against the background of the often very substantial asymmetries between the well-intentioned, largely Global North-based funders of connected learning and Global South implementers (Kukovetz & Sprung 2019). These asymmetries can reinforce colonial and imperial power dynamics, which Arat-Koc's (2020) critique extends to the larger field of refugee studies. Power asymmetries can emerge from the symbolic disempowerment of those who receive *help* (expressed in the form of education here but equally applicable to access to social services and opportunities for civic participation) and the organisational culture of humanitarian organisations where that help is expressed as *charity* (Kukovetz & Sprung 2019). Further, Global North actors may overlook their role in forced displacement, driven by an often unjust global economic order that benefits them (Storen 2024).

WHAT DOES THIS PAPER DO?

This paper provides a critical appraisal of FFA's connected learning action research project, carried out with refugee learners in Uganda between 2019 and 2022. FFA sought to prepare 40 refugee and host community learners with disrupted education journeys for a high-stakes mature-age entrance exam at Makerere University in Uganda. Due to their increasing reputation as viable mechanisms for providing post-secondary education in contexts of forced

displacement (Moser-Mercer 2016), connected learning approaches were foundational in our course design and delivery. In this paper, we critically reflect on two distinct yet related parts of our experience, both of which speak to connected learning.

First, we describe our connected learning journey, focusing on why we trialled mental health care integration into FFA. We discuss our decisions of what to include in hybrid or in-person form, and how these choices worked out in practice, including during COVID-19 lockdowns. Second, we examine FFA's collaborations, reflecting on key stakeholder contributions and their impact on the psychosocial support delivery. We appraise our early engagement with (potential) learners and other stakeholders that led to the decision to align FFA to a key achievement within the Ugandan context – namely the Mature Entry examination that represented a potential pathway to higher education. This resulted in a more rigid, and possibly less connected, approach to the English, Maths, and General Knowledge components of the programme.

The debates on collaboration concerning both refugee students and refugee education are abundant, and approach collaboration from different viewpoints: as a supply chain (Adem et al. 2018), as an everyday practice that is renegotiated (Fehsenfeld & Levinsen 2019), or as an alliance of like-minded organisations (Libal & Harding 2011). Our contribution emphasises that collaboration involves ongoing renegotiations and key decisions with significant consequences that reflect a particular balance of power. We highlight the personal and institutional dispositions crucial for a successful international connected learning project, and the challenges of changing often entrenched teaching and assessing methods.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR REFUGEES

Existing research strongly advocates that educational programming for refugees should include psychosocial support, and that this is necessary for successful integration and retention in higher education, including connected learning programmes (Najjuma, Gallagher & Nambi 2022; Nambi, Najuma & Gallagher 2023; Streitwieser et al. 2019; Stewart et al. 2019). Our paper adds to this growing pool of literature exploring the integration of psychosocial support in refugee education (Stewart et al. 2019), in higher education (Jack, Chase & Warwick 2019), and with teachers in protracted crisis contexts (Ahmed 2017).

Once refugees arrive in the host country, their living situation may continue to be precarious, due to protracted conflict or unsafe circumstances in their host country (Im, Rodriguez & Grumbine 2021). In addition, in host countries refugees continue to "experience discrimination, harassment, and social exclusion that can further affect their mental health generally" (Martin & Stulgatis 2022: 36). The fate of family and friends who were unable to flee conflict zones also creates "huge mental and emotional pressures" for refugees (Avery & Said 2017: 107). Such traumas have implications for both refugee students' mental health and their capacity to navigate a new country and system of education (Martin & Stulgatis 2022; Stewart et al. 2019).

The significance of our contribution is in showing the various dimensions of implementing psychosocial support in practice. We thereby complement existing literature on interventions such as staff training and hiring consultants (e.g. Martin & Stulgatis 2022; Elkins et al. 2023). We argue that, with refugee populations, addressing potential trauma necessitates substantial in-person contact, especially during the initial weeks of classes, when mental health issues often emerge and can be identified by qualified staff.

Connected learning cannot avoid considerations of mental health, and this necessarily means re-evaluating academic achievements, success, and learning experiences along the way. Throughout this paper, we argue that blended and connected learning must be driven from the ground up, with international partners playing a useful role as potential mentors rather than distant instructors.

THE CONTEXT OF FOUNDATIONS FOR ALL

This research is set amidst the broader landscape of forced displacement. In 2023, the number of forcibly displaced people crossed the 110 million mark (UNHCR 2023). Many host countries have managed extended, even seemingly intractable, displacements. One such country, and indeed the focus of our paper, is Uganda. Uganda has the largest forcibly displaced population

in sub-Saharan Africa, at 1,786,293 as of October 2024 (UNHCR 2024) mainly from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi. Over 80% of refugees are hosted in settlements in 12 districts in the North and South-Western regions and in the capital Kampala. Education is increasingly seen as a necessary driver for national assimilation, repatriation, or relocation for refugees, yet is often fraught with barriers, whether economic, sociocultural, administrative, or linguistic (Tulibaleka 2022; Nambi, Najuma & Gallagher 2023; Najjuma, Gallagher & Nambi 2022). International organisations, such as UNHCR, aim to enhance enrolment of refugees in higher education to 15% by 2030 (UNHCR 2019). Some gains have been made – as of 2023 7% of refugees have access to higher education compared to only 1% in 2019 (UNHCR 2023). FFA can be seen as contributing towards this 15% target.

The key actors involved in FFA include the Refugee Law Project (RLP),[1] the American University of Beirut (AUB), and the University of Edinburgh. RLP has extensive services for refugees and was already implementing a successful English for Adults programme for refugees (discussed in Marino & Dolan 2021). AUB had already implemented a successful bridge programme called PADILEIA[2] in Lebanon that serviced refugees. The third actor, the University of Edinburgh, was eager to develop opportunities for refugees to study at university. The fourth actor the student contributors – were all refugee scholarship recipients from the three institutions. They assisted with the design, data collection, and analysis of the FFA curriculum, with each course having a dedicated design team, drawn from the three institutions, that included a student.

Further partners included the Uganda Business and Technical Examinations Board (UBTEB) who provided guidance on the options for accrediting the programme and who surfaced ways in which admissions procedures for higher education institutions (HEI) in Uganda could be redesigned to better support refugee scholars (discussed in Nambi, Najuma & Gallagher 2023; Najjuma, Gallagher & Nambi 2022). The Makerere University Academic Registrar advised on how FFA could fit into the Mature Entry structure of the university. These discussions revealed that the Mature Entry exam would be the best option for refugees in Uganda to access quality higher education, hence this became one of the priority goals of FFA. Noting some of the constraints around the exam, however, RLP continues to dialogue with the Academic Registrar about how to amend these processes.

The co-designed curriculum involved six modules: English for Academic Purposes, Maths, Digital Skills, Understanding Myself and Others, and Learning/Study Skills modules. These modules were situated within a 30-week connected learning curriculum designed by the project team. The curriculum explicitly emphasised psychosocial support both as a taught subject and pedagogically woven throughout the student experience.

Two purpose-built learning centres were created and equipped with laptops, connectivity was acquired, and additional equipment was procured (printer, projector). At the onset of the pandemic when the learning centres became unavailable, additional resources were used to purchase mobile phones for students to continue their studies through remote learning. One learning centre was in the capital of Kampala and the second in Kiryandongo, which is situated 225 kilometres to the northwest of Kampala. Kiryandongo is also home to a refugee settlement that houses ~80,000 refugees; Kampala has ~120,000 refugees (UNHCR 2024). As the FFA project team was distributed across three institutions and countries – and the learning centres were in Kampala and Kiryandongo – technology had to play a key role in the overall design and delivery of the project. Still, Ugandan refugee settlements are often characterised with poor infrastructure, where makeshift and temporary mobile masts sit in tension with intermittent power grids and uneven (mobile) technological ownership, access, and use (Akello et al. 2023). The infrastructure supporting the two learning centres therefore varied considerably.

Beyond infrastructure issues, and related to points raised earlier in the paper, poor mental health negatively impacts refugee students' academic outcomes. Mental illness may impair the student's concentration, productivity, motivation, and the cultivation of social relationships. Many FFA students, having faced conflict and persecution, are vulnerable to these issues. Right from the interview panel to recruit students, the programme offered an avenue for the potential students to address their mental health challenges by providing access to onsite counselling

1 The website for the Refugee Law Project can be found here: https://www.refugeelawproject.org/.

2 The project website for PADILEIA can be found here: https://padileia.org/.

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from RLP. The psychosocial component of FFA, 'Understanding Myself and Others', helps learners process experiences of forced migration, and fosters self-awareness and appreciation of their challenges.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology presented in this paper is primarily qualitative and draws on accounts from students and teachers involved in the FFA project from 2019 to 2022. It presents the programme's collaborative practices and psychosocial components, as recounted by the authors and team members from the three main implementing organisations. These reflections were collected through interviews with FFA teachers and students conducted in 2023.

Data from these interviews was transcribed, and open and axial coded into thematic categories. The authors of this paper, many of whom took part in the programme as teaching staff, acknowledge the ethical complexities of involving participants from vulnerable populations, especially the importance of capturing accurate data relating to their experiences and careful research design to avoid harm (Daley 2022). Formal ethical review was approved by the University of Edinburgh's Institutional Review Board.

FFA was designed to reflect the ideals of participatory research (PR) methods, emphasising mutually beneficial partnerships and collaborations between a range of actors. In the context of this study, these actors were academics and community members with tacit knowledges and lived experiences of forced displacement. All actors contributed iteratively to the research to drive societal action or change (Vaugh et al. 2020). To advocate for greater inclusion of refugee learners at Makerere University, the project team believed PR was the most ethical and pragmatic approach (Simonsen & Robertson 2013).

The PR approach has the potential to transform societies for the better, as those involved can start (or continue) to address power imbalances in certain contexts where misinformed and poor horizontal decision-making have led to underutilised outcomes or "solutions" to challenges within that community, as well as to the disempowerment of individuals and communities leading to alienation from their own contexts. PR seeks to address these negative legacies by influencing researchers to honour and value participation, with the principle that those impacted by the research (and who may have been 'subjects' of the research) can better inform the research contextually. They can then better translate the results of the research in non-academic or community settings, which in FFA's case, would be the broader goal around the development of a sustainable pathway for refugee learners to enter Uganda's higher education systems.

The project team – comprising RLP, AUB, and Edinburgh University and the scholarship students who contributed to the research informing the design of the programme – was made up of individuals with different backgrounds and experiences. The members were a mix of the following areas of diversity: age, gender, religion and beliefs, including many intersections, as well as other characteristics, such as socio-economic backgrounds, race, education and localities.

The rest of this paper is structured in three sections. The first one describes and discusses the blended learning system that was put in place in FFA and how psychosocial support then fit into it. The second focuses on collaborations in FFA, and the third one brings together the two sections. This article is first and foremost a reflexive piece, findings and discussion are fully integrated, and we focus on the key elements from FFA rather than on a 'thick description' of the experience.

CONNECTED LEARNING AS EMBEDDED SUPPORT IN BLENDED LEARNING

Advancing techno-optimist 'solutions' and 'digital proficiency' are often presented as game changers in global education provision for the most vulnerable, including refugees (Rushworth & Hackl 2021). Yet, research points to shortcomings in technologically driven education delivery, particularly ready-made 'plug and play' approaches developed in Global North institutions that forefront self-led learning and open educational resources (OER) (Wallis & Rocha 2022). Such

approaches are often contextually irrelevant for refugee students (Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter 2018), can reinforce epistemic divides that prioritise Global North forms of knowledge (Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter 2018; Wallis & Rocha 2022), and marginalise local pedagogic practices (Wolfenden & Adinolfi 2019). These were at odds with the organisational ethos of FFA, and its emphasis on psychosocial support and holistic care.

Such contextual factors resulted in an aborted attempt to use the Learning Management System (LMS) at the University of Edinburgh, before moving to Kolibri,[3] an open-source platform designed for making online educational content available offline. This functionality has proven critical in establishing learning continuity during Covid lockdowns (Toquero 2021). Kolibri can be set up on a range of hardware including Windows, macOS, and Linux (including Raspberry Pi) computers (Koomar, Moss Coflan & Kaye 2020). It is installed onto a local device, and imports channels of content at intervals or when connectivity is at its greatest. Learners can interact with Kolibri offline, directly from that device or from a nearby client device that is connected to it while replicating an online LMS user experience (Nanyunja et al. 2022). It has been used to educational effect throughout Uganda in refugee education contexts (Nanyunja et al. 2022), and in selected government schools (Kabugo 2020). Thus, this platform met the needs of the distributed FFA project team and could help address connectivity issues that frequently arise in the learning centres.

Preparing students for blended learning is essential because they are often not accustomed to the format nor the pedagogy behind it (Akello et al. 2023). The use of technology had a curricular imperative in terms of familiarising the students with digital technologies for use in their professional or academic lives post-FFA. Connected elements were built into curriculum design where possible, including integrating baseline assessments with students selected for the programme to produce learning that was engaging and relevant to the students' experiences, and to foster the social inclusion of groups who are often excluded from knowledge production (Jhangiani & Biswas-Diener 2017). The baseline survey had allowed a first understanding of the students' digital practices and familiarity and helped identify which technologies would be likely to be quickly taken up and which ones would likely require more work.

The thirty-week bespoke curriculum had built-in psychosocial support, both as a taught subject (Understanding Myself and Others module) and pedagogically woven throughout the other courses and the overall student experience. Examples of this include having RLP staff on hand to address issues that required counselling, as well as RLP teaching the Understanding Myself and Others course itself. The curriculum was designed collaboratively among three institutions and dedicated teachers from RLP taught these subjects face-to-face at the two learning centres. RLP's affiliation with the School of Law at Makerere University also presented the students with valuable insight into the university's admissions and administration processes. The learning centres were open all day: in the morning they were used for FFA classes and they remained open in the afternoons to provide students with an opportunity to use technology for independent study. On Fridays, when there were no classes, the learning centres were open from 9am-4pm for students to work on their assignments independently, and access peer and technological support.

Unexpectedly, the curriculum had to be drastically altered during delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns that occurred throughout 2021. This resulted in the closure of the two learning centres and a rapid move to mobile technologies for instruction. Dedicated to continuing the programme, the project team purchased mobile devices for the students, used student stipends partly to buy mobile data to facilitate the courses, and utilised WhatsApp, Google Drive and Zoom as technologies of instruction.

At best, this alternative technological approach was evidence of the FFA team engaging in bricolage practices that 'privilege making do with available materials to engage in problem-solving and innovation' (Risam 2018: 43). Yet, this created discrepancies between the two sites with cellular coverage in the capital of Kampala comparatively greater than Kiryandongo. The lockdowns problematically bound the programme, both discursively and materially, into a digital space where analogue technologies may have otherwise proven more viable. Despite

3 Kolibri can be found here: https://learningequality.org/kolibri/about-kolibri/.

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such drawbacks, the project team remained faithful to a 'thick' model of blended learning: one where teachers were physically present, the larger project team were available for any support required by the onsite teachers in adapting the curriculum to be contextually relevant, and where psychosocial support remained embedded throughout programme delivery.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING

Tailored psychosocial support was fundamental to the FFA curriculum and the programme's overarching design and ethos. The Understanding Myself and Others module, taught onsite by RLP teachers, helped students manage stress, both at home and through learning, and allowed learners to critically engage with the differences between them, how these affected their learning experiences, and provided a safe space to share traumatic experiences. Exit surveys and interviews showed positive student evaluations, praising the content as appropriate and relevant, and delivered through a variety of methods including group work, role plays, lectures, group discussions and independent study. The students have also shared examples of how they have translated discussions from the course into their own lives, such as through allocating more time to friends and families and employing strategies to communicate more effectively with others.

Counselling sessions were also offered throughout the duration of the programme. During the recruitment process, this need manifested quickly as prospective students in interviews were presenting with heightened anxiety due to a missing parent, trauma due to war, divorce and minimal family support, academic distress, and worries for the future. The counselling sessions were either flexibly organised around the teaching, or the teaching delivery was modified to accommodate the in-person counselling sessions. The counselling techniques utilised were culturally sensitive and trauma-focused, and included cognitive behaviour therapy, person-centred approaches, solution-focused grief therapy, and mental health first aid which have proven effective with refugee populations (Mitra & Hodes 2019; Moosa, Koorankot & Nigesh 2017; Uribe Guajardo et al. 2016; Warr 2010). This embedded and tailored psychosocial approach was resource intensive as it relied on tutors prioritising building trusting and empathetic relationships to provide tailored responses and resources to match student needs (Nanyunja et al. 2022). The relevant previous experience of the RLP with refugee students was critical in the co-design and implementation of the programme.

CONNECTED LEARNING AS COLLABORATION AMONGST DISPARATE INSTITUTIONS

The FFA team were reliant on global connectivity to practically sustain the collaborative efforts of this PR project. Frequent Zoom and MS Teams calls were organised to discuss issues, as well as to share formal project updates across teams. These were also spaces where sub-teams could meet to design the curriculum, as well as the place where online classes were hosted for learners. File hosting sites such as OneDrive were places where teams could also work together on curriculum design, and WhatsApp was used heavily as a space where project members could share their latest project and life updates, and where researchers could also connect with learners, sharing course material and updates, and collating feedback. The use of WhatsApp as a mechanism for connection created an almost ambient co-presence (Madianou 2016), a sense of forming a 'transnational professional family' through digital media. The project team members were connected through voice notes; text sharing of project and personal updates (particularly in times of crisis); pictures updates of progress and challenges being made on the ground for the learners in Uganda; online cards as encouragement for students as they sat their exams, and emojis of consensus or discontent.

In theory, if they had access to the internet, the FFA team were always directly and indirectly connected. Digital spaces are sometimes depicted as 'equalising' and 'neutral' spaces amongst people working in disparate physical spaces and contexts. Yet this is only to a certain point: there is ample research on the ways in which the speed and efficiency of online collaborative platforms can belie the complexities of maintaining authentic and consistent participation of researchers and learners. The digitisation of collaborations can create online spaces of marginalisation and exclusion if they do not acknowledge, or if they obscure, people's material realities (Tsatsou 2022). In this context, the insights from FFA suggest how the nature of collaboration through connected learning projects might be designed.

First, the project invites reflection on whether connected spaces of collaboration are participative or observational in nature. Common online platforms such as MS Teams, Zoom and WhatsApp (Fadda, Osman & Metwally 2020) can expedite ambivalence in project team members who may feel their contributions are scrutinsed because of gender, language proficiency, role and seniority. Most FFA meetings were held online, requiring sensitive and creative facilitation through structured and thought-through agendas, so attendees knew what to expect and could contribute to the setting of this agenda equally. Obvious demonstrations of participation were not possible for all project team members; for instance, some may have had their video or audio switched off for personal or bandwidth reasons (a common occurrence with the Global South partners of FFA). However, using chat functions (Kreamer 2023) and polling tools (Karl, Peluchette & Aghakhani 2022) to build trust and confidence were key conditions for meaningful discussion on the difficult psychosocial issues that were emerging from FFA.

Greater trust came from individual interactions, which created greater traction in FFA, and a better sense of connection. The consensus format of WhatsApp groups, and large Zoom and MS Teams rooms can indeed exacerbate 'groupthink' (May & Margolis 2006), especially when the time to connect online is relatively short, and/or is being recorded. In FFA, one-to-one check-ins and calls, as well as 'side' chats, often preceded and succeeded team meetings, allowing us to see how everyone felt about the direction of the project. In hindsight, we note that feeding the substance of these individual discussions into the larger discussions would have been beneficial in terms of developing further trust in the overall project and promoting transparency when possible.

Second, our collaboration underscored the need to understand individual researchers' preferences for connecting digitally, shaped by factors such as personal choice, data access, and digital literacy skills. Throughout the project duration, preferred communication methods included voice notes, calls to landlines, emails, and long text messages. This took much time and effort to understand and then adapt to this. Finding a secure, universally accessible file-sharing platform proved challenging due to institutional data sharing policies of respective institutions, which created information imbalances between the researchers. To address this, we shared updates through multiple secure channels to ensure all researchers could access the latest updates.

Third, conversations concerning the researchers' positionality can be encouraged through digital collaboration, helping to foster a space where psychosocial issues are taken seriously. Like pedagogues in classrooms, researchers in teams can often evade sensitive topics and discussions out of fear of causing friction and divisions within research processes (Freeth & Vilsmaier 2020; Lozano Parra et al. 2022). Yet, our experience found these conversations to be helpful in aligning all researchers to the project. Due in part to the decolonial turn in social research, there is now an expectation that such reflections will happen between Global North and South researchers as a way of potentially atoning for (neo)colonial harms (Ewing 2020), and especially so when the research context is located in the Global South (Herman et al. 2022).

Yet, in practice, we found such explanations reductionist as these often assume only Global North researchers hold positionality and merit self-reflexivity (Smith 2013). Our experience underscores that all researchers, regardless of their context, can think about their positionality and how this might contribute to the outcomes of the research. Positionality and privilege are not fixed, and the interplay and intersections of these were met with curiosity and frank discussion throughout the project to build transparency and trust within the research team. This enabled the potential for a stronger awareness around evolving researchers' identities and complexities. It is hoped that such discussions encouraged the larger project team to feel "right there" and connected to the collaborative work, rather than "out there" (Le Dantec & Fox 2015) geographically, socially, or as a member of some extractive research mission, or representing groups or organisations of privilege or power.

The final lesson was the need to be flexible and understand when it was time to connect. FFA's ambitions were wide and broad, with the researchers required (or intended) to serve all expectations learners had of the curriculum. FFA's implementation was an iterative process over several years and, as the project drew to a close – in tandem with global and national crises

escalating – the iteration became more influenced by, and reactive, to crises which were not envisaged in the early curriculum design workshops of 2019 and 2020. This forced researchers to balance original ambitions with real-world conditions, such as the stringent lockdown measures in Uganda, economic upheaval in Lebanon, the frequent change of members of the larger project team, and the challenges of identifying accessible and viable education and employment pathways for learners.

CONCLUDING REMARKS – CONSIDERATIONS AROUND CONNECTED LEARNING

In this section we conclude by exploring the implications of the discussion presented in previous sections of this paper, particularly on how connected learning, and refugee education more broadly, may be more readily shaped by the collaborative practices of the teams involved in its design and implementation, and the importance of psychosocial support in the FFA programme.

The FFA programme offers insights into designing connected learning. While blended learning designs are valuable in providing a robust educational offer to refugees, in-person instruction played a crucial role in the programme. Online tools and capabilities can foster connections, but they cannot override the time needed to "develop relationships, and demonstrate commitment [to a project], overcome personal barriers and institutional barriers" (Le Dantec & Fox 2015: 1348), and that time is need to "move slower and protect people", protecting people from overambitious and unsustainable outcomes (Benjamin 2019: 8). This extends to the necessity of psychosocial support being offered in connected learning programmes and how the balance between in-person and online instruction is negotiated.

Addressing our second research question, FFA's collaborative practices are instructive for connected learning insofar as they emerge from both digital and discursive spaces that are often rife with power asymmetries between partners within a project. This is more broadly bound in the decolonising critiques of what might traditionally be considered humanitarian or philanthropic work (discussed in Chaka 2022; Shringarpure 2020). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, we, as authors, recognise that FFA is to some degree both resisting and reinforcing the "contemporary world order which is deeply rooted in colonial history" (Rottier 2023: 7). We resist the marginalisation of this world order in developing pathways to higher education and consider a holistic provision that focuses on well-being for refugees. We, however, reinforce that same world order through our adherence to preparing these refugee students for university over other trajectories more readily available to them, e.g. preparation for employment or skills training. Through our design decisions to emphasise university and our curricular decisions to emphasise skills necessary to succeed in university, we acknowledge that we are bound in these structures but can also shape and potentially transform them.

Yet, our collaborative practices offer valuable insight into connected learning design. They deliberately fostered trust, shared spaces for collaborative digital educational design, and ultimately a camaraderie that provided resilience in challenging times. This level of collaboration is rare given the resources necessary to create and maintain it, e.g. meetings, workshops, consistent communication across WhatsApp and Zoom, teaching, curricular adaptations, and more. Many team members volunteered their time to participate over the project's duration. While resource-intensive, it generated collaborative practice that allowed disparate project members and institutions to find a shared ground, though it may have unintentionally disadvantaged some team members.

The digital aspects of our approach to connected learning complicate this significantly, particularly in our attempts to create a digital space for curricular work that complemented the in-person teaching at the learning centres. However lofty the ambition, we sought to create "a productive, dialogic, and reflective space that engenders new possibility to redress past inequalities and injustices, to challenge the dominance of western knowledge and pedagogy, and to question the colonial roots of university practices and curricula" (Wimpenny et al. 2022: 281). To some degree, the curriculum reflects this attempt with learning outcomes, teaching activities, and teaching content all couched in the language of empowerment. Towards that

end curricular design imperatives included: "1: curricula must be developed in contextualised and collaborative ways that are responsive to learners' strengths, aspirations, and agency; 2: curricula must understand students' migration experiences and their expectations for and realistic outcomes of education… and 3. curricula must enable learner and teacher autonomy and responsibility creatively utilizing available and accessible tools and resources, including digital tools" (Akello et al. 2023: 72). Whether or not these design imperatives facilitated any sort of redress of "past inequalities and injustices" or the "colonial roots of university practices and criteria" is open to question and further study.

We assert that these collaborative practices, and their expressions in digital technologies, are key outcomes of the programme. This was more tangibly expressed in our digital technological choices: we quickly moved away from university supported spaces due to accessibility issues and into more accessible alternatives, ones reflective of the contexts the students would be immersed in. University-supported learning management systems gave way to Kolibri; email gave way to WhatsApp; Zoom remained persistent throughout. These shifts were necessary for effective collaboration, making connected learning agile and responsive to constraints and preferred ways of working.

From an individual programme perspective such as FFA, this is illustrative of the priority of the blended learning model that maintained a deference to the face-to-face instruction, particularly in relation to psychosocial support. The learning centres and the teachers there were the locus of the programme. Yet we acknowledge the role that digital technologies have beyond the curriculum and the classroom: the skills associated with these technologies are increasingly critical in further assimilation into Ugandan life (Gallagher et al. 2024). These technologies, contingent as they are on access to the learning centres, or in rare cases on the ownership of mobile technology and the capacity to afford mobile data costs (Njoya 2022), are increasingly seen as critical elements in moving beyond protracted displacement into an assimilated life.

For FFA, incorporating psychosocial support into connected learning is essential. We posit that connected learning, and all educational design, should prioritise mental health considerations as poor mental health negatively affects refugee students' academic performance and social interactions. FFA addressed these issues from the recruitment stage by providing access to onsite counselling through RLP. The Understanding Myself and Others module helps students process experiences of forced migration and enhances their self-awareness. It is our belief that such an explicit emphasis on psychosocial support is necessary for the connected learning programme being designed and also contributes to a more holistic integration into broader society for these same students.

We are not making any claim as to the scalability of connected learning programmes like FFA, particularly as a vehicle for psychosocial support. This was a resource-intensive programme requiring considerable institutional support, both in terms of overall funding and dedicated time from the programme team, much of which was provided on a voluntary basis. Resources for self-care were limited. There was a need to factor in games, retreats, and other non-curricular activities to explore other ways of self-care and connecting and interacting from outside the formal aspects of the programme, yet these were costly and resource intensive. These resource limitations suggest the need for a greater networking of related actors that might account for these activities that FFA failed to realise. We suggest that programmes like FFA should deliberately seek out further programme involvement from universities themselves, from employers, and from INGOs and government agencies working towards refugee education (as discussed, in the Ugandan context, in Najjuma, Gallagher & Nambi 2022). Ultimately, we posit that one aspect of connected learning is being actively embedded in a network of actors working towards the deliberate development of collaborative practices that, ultimately, will provide educational opportunities and robust psychosocial support for refugee students.

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