

Actions for Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia to Promote Access to Higher Education for Youth with Refugee Backgrounds

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Content

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary..... | 3 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Background | 8 |
| Refugee Communities in Malaysia..... | 8 |
| Primary and Secondary Education in Refugee Communities | 9 |
| Higher Education for Youth with Refugee Backgrounds..... | 10 |
| Benefits and Barriers to Higher Education in Malaysia | 12 |
| Benefits of Higher Education | 12 |
| Barriers to Higher Education..... | 13 |
| Developing an Access Programme for HEIs in Malaysia | 19 |
| Distance Learning to Deliver Higher Education | 28 |
| Barriers to Online and Remote Learning | 29 |
| How can HEIs in Malaysia Support Online Learning? | 32 |
| Conclusions | 35 |
| Summary of Recommendations..... | 35 |
| Appendix 1 – Stakeholder Mapping..... | 37 |
| Appendix 2 – Guides for HEI Personnel | 39 |
| Appendix 3 – Selected Additional Resources..... | 43 |
| References | 46 |

Executive Summary

The aim of this report is to outline ways that higher education institutions in Malaysia can contribute to improving access to higher education opportunities for youth with refugee backgrounds. The two primary avenues that are discussed are developing access programmes for on-campus learning, and ways that higher education institutions can support access to distance higher education through online and blended learning programmes.

The recommendations are not intended to be prescriptive but rather provide guidance to inform access initiatives implemented in distinct institutional contexts. The guidance suggested also aims to compliment other efforts to improve access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds. Three notable examples are a white paper presented to the Government of Malaysia that seeks to inform legislation that would formalise more legal routes to access higher education; the Fugee HiEd scholarship, which tackles financial barriers; and the CERTE Programme, which offers skills training for making applications to higher education.

Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which means there is no formal way to register refugee status with the Government of Malaysia. Consequently, access to public services, such as formal educational, are limited for refugee communities. Youth with refugee backgrounds must therefore complete primary and secondary education in refugee learning centres run by community groups, NGOs, and religious organisations. However, these learning centres are not able to provide formal certification, they lack quality learning resources, and they cannot provide enough places to fill demand.

The benefits of providing access to higher education for youth with refugees in Malaysia includes motivation to complete primary and secondary education, facilitating a level of integration with the host society, and furnishing students with social and cultural capital relevant to operate in Malaysian society or resettlement countries. Students also develop social networks and a sense of belonging, which can promote psycho-social wellbeing. In addition, access to higher education can help refugee communities become more resilient and can contribute to post-conflict resolution in countries of origin.

Benefits for higher education institutions include diversifying campuses, which promotes valuable academic exchange within the student body. Students with refugee backgrounds may also maintain positive relationships with higher education institutions, which can facilitate global exchange in the future. Finally, evaluating programmes based on the needs of youth with refugee backgrounds can lead to improved programme delivery more widely, benefiting local and international students.

Besides prohibitive legislation, barriers to accessing higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds include lack of funds, difficulty proving educational credentials, and knowledge gaps as a consequence of interrupted learning. Students may also lack an awareness of opportunities to study and access procedures in Malaysia, and may not have a suitable study environment at home. Finally, students may fear discrimination on campus based on their refugee status and intersectional issues such as gender, politics, and race.

To develop an on-campus access programme, higher education institutions in Malaysia should consider the following:

- Connect with organisations that support refugees and refugee communities to share available study opportunities

- Support refugee-led organisations that help students prepare for higher education
- Develop procedures for admitting students who have no proof of formal qualifications
- Provide more scholarships, fee waivers, and in-kind support for study
- Prepare remedial support to help students fill gaps in skills/learning
- Establish a committed team within the institution to coordinate access programmes and conduct monitoring and evaluation
- Seek wider institutional buy-in
- Link programmes to potential future pathways for youth with refugee backgrounds

Higher education institutions in Malaysia can support access to distance learning in the following ways:

- Develop online and blended programmes in-house that circumvent the need for a student visa
- Partner with local organisations to implement blended components of online learning
- Provide space and facilities on campus for youth with refugee backgrounds to complete distance learning courses provided by overseas institutions
- Help NGOs and refugee-led organisations develop and deliver training in computer literacy and preparedness for online study
- Recognise online learning, such as MOOC programmes, for access to higher education
- Contribute to research in pedagogy to deliver remote higher education to refugee communities.

In addition to these recommendations, higher education institutions in Malaysia should also consider the following:

- Form a network of concerned stakeholders to better coordinate actions and share information to improve access
- Put the concept of belonging at the heart of initiative to widen access
- Foster the development of, and integration with, academic communities for youth with refugee backgrounds
- Consider access to higher education within a broader framework of becoming for youth with refugee backgrounds
- Support establishment of a tertiary RLC where youth with refugee backgrounds can connect to HE opportunities

Introduction

Every day, young people are forced to make the difficult decision to abandon higher education programmes to escape war, persecution, or conflict. For many of these young people, higher education is a personal investment to pursue their dreams and establish a firm footing in their adult lives. Being forcibly displaced from their homes and learning therefore means putting these dreams on hold, without knowing when, or if, they can continue their learning journeys. Younger children may also be taken out of school, away from their friends, home, and a familiar routine, without knowing why they have to leave. Failure to complete primary and secondary education seriously impedes their chance of accessing higher education, which can affect work and social opportunities available to them later in life. Having educational pathways ruptured as a result of forced migration can therefore be a traumatising experience, and often leaves youth with refugee backgrounds¹ feeling disoriented and disconnected from their future.

Education is considered an essential component of humanitarian and emergency response because it allows young people to start rebuilding their lives and achieve a sense of normality (Gangale, 2012). Higher education has a particularly important role to play in this regard because it is a powerful means through which to restore dignity, security and hope (Lenette, 2016). Participation in a system of higher education underscores a sense of belonging somewhere and helps displaced youth reconnect with hopes and dreams that they had before being subject to forced migration. There is therefore a clear incentive for nations that host refugee populations to widen access to higher education and prevent swathes of youth with refugee backgrounds becoming a “lost generation” (Newman, 2019).

More recent refugee crises have seen a marked shift in the demographics of forcibly displaced people, with larger number of ‘university ready’ students amongst refugee population than ever before. For example, after the events of the Arab Spring in Syria, the Institute of International Education estimated 150,000 of the half a million university-aged Syrians who claimed asylum abroad were qualified for university admission (Kiwani, 2017). The last two decades have seen a rapid increase in higher education participation globally, with numbers increasing from 19% of university-aged students enrolled in 2000 to 38% in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019a). However, the number of university-aged students with refugee backgrounds enrolled in higher education programmes stands at a stark 6% (UNHCR, 2023c).

Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which makes addressing access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds more challenging. Those who come to Malaysia to seek asylum are not given leave to remain and must instead await resettlement to another country. Such contexts are referred to as protracted refugee situations (PRS), defined as a situation in which a person remains displaced for “five or more years after initial displacement, without immediate prospects for implementation of durable solutions” (UNHCR, 2009, preamble). There is no domestic legislation in Malaysia that recognises the existence of refugees and asylum seekers, instead grouping them into a broader category of ‘irregular migrants’. Those seeking asylum therefore have limited legal apparatus to make claims for public goods like education (Ahmad et al., 2016), making the prospect of accessing higher education more elusive.

Malaysia is not alone in facing this challenge since it is estimated that 74% of the global refugee population (or 15.9 million people) live in PRS. To address the crisis in access to higher education,

¹ The term youth/students with refugee backgrounds is used throughout this report as an umbrella term to refer to those with experience of forced displacement, but who might be categorised according to a variety of labels, such as ‘refugee’, ‘asylum seeker’, or ‘stateless’.

UNHCR and its partners have set a goal of raising the global rate of enrolment for youth with refugee backgrounds to 15% by the year 2030. This 15by30 challenge is hugely ambitious and will require the combined efforts of a variety of stakeholders around the world, including governments, higher education institutions (HEIs), NGOs, refugee populations, and wider civil society. Although setting targets like this can be a powerful call for action, it is important to look beyond numbers and view access to higher education not as simple exercise of getting students through the door. Ensuring higher education achieves the desired emancipatory aim for this marginalised population requires a careful analysis of context-specific barriers and ways to support students so that they can thrive through higher education.

This report aims to outline ways in which HEIs in Malaysia can contribute to widening access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds. HEIs in Malaysia have a fundamental role in facilitating access, not just by opening their doors but also by fostering a more holistic sense of inclusion. For many students with refugee backgrounds, entering a HEI is the first opportunity they have in Malaysia to study alongside their local and international peers. Access to higher education therefore facilitates a degree of integration within Malaysian society as well as allowing youth to develop valuable skills and empower refugee communities. With this in mind, this report and its recommendations are built on a conceptual approach that understands inclusion and integration as facilitating a sense of *belonging* within a Malaysian higher education community. Further to this, *belonging* provides a foundation upon which youth can imagine pathways of *becoming* the types of people they want to be (more details about the conceptual grounding can be found in Box 1).

Although at present it is only practically possible for some HEIs to permit admission of very small numbers of students with refugee backgrounds, it is hoped that in the future legislation will be enacted that will allow a more formal route into higher education in Malaysia. In recent years, several organisations have stepped forward and voices from within Malaysian civil society have called for improved access to education for youth and children from refugee communities. Among these voices is the ruler of Negri Sembilan, who in his address at the Human Rights Day 2022 Forum advocated for greater inclusion in education to help refugee communities support themselves (The Star, 2022). This is a positive sign that change may be possible in the future and that students with refugee backgrounds will be allowed to join Malaysian and international peers in higher education.

While change is in motion, there are meaningful steps that can be taken by Malaysian HEIs to support students access higher education. The first chapter will describe the situation as it is today, highlighting the issues that refugee communities face and the challenge of access to quality education. The second chapter will look more closely at the benefits and barriers to higher education. Following this, the third chapter that will outline some key considerations for HEIs in Malaysia for developing access programmes to mitigate these barriers and fully realise the benefits. The recommendations made here are not intended to be a prescriptive guide, but rather a resource that can be adapted for the specific context of individual HEIs. They are also intended to be scalable, so HEIs can rapidly implement access programmes when legislation is more favourable. The fourth chapter will explore the possibility of supporting distance learning initiatives for higher education through online and blended learning approaches. The report will then conclude with a summary of recommendations.

Box 1: From Access to Participation and Success in HE

What we mean when we talk about access to higher education can vary. In its most simplistic sense it means getting students through the doors of HEIs and enrolling on higher education programmes. It is clear, however, that for higher education to be accessible then students should be able to successfully complete the programmes they are enrolled on. If they have to leave courses before completion due to their specific circumstances as students with refugee backgrounds, then is higher education truly accessible? In addition, access to higher education should enable students to achieve goals in their lives that pertain to successful completion of higher education. If gaining a HE qualification doesn't substantively change their position, then it could be argued that the qualification remains in a metaphorically locked box, with the benefits still inaccessible.

How then can these more abstract perspectives on access to higher education be understood for students with refugee backgrounds? Gidley and colleagues (2000) offer some insight through their model for social inclusion in quality higher education through the nested components of access, participation, and success. Access refers to the development of human capital, which for students with refugee backgrounds can be problematic given their limited access to the workforce. Participation expands beyond this to see HE as a means to facilitate social inclusion, extend rights, and promote dignity. Going further, success sees HE as a vehicle for empowering individuals by allowing their experiences in HE to transform their lives in ways that are salient to their dreams and aspirations for their lives.

This report will consider access as an entry point to achieving success in HE for youth with refugee backgrounds. A key element to achieving success is taken to be facilitating a sense of belonging within a HEI community, so students don't feel like outsiders moving through a HE system that doesn't feel like it is truly for them. In addition, success is taken to mean enabling students to feel a sense of hope about their futures, and underscoring a sense of becoming the types of people they hope to be; future versions of themselves that have been put in jeopardy as a result of forced migration. These considerations are at the core of the suggestions that are made for developing access programmes that seek to extend an emancipatory HE to youth with refugee backgrounds.

Background

Refugee Communities in Malaysia

Malaysia plays host to around 182,990 forcibly displaced people, the majority originating from Myanmar (158,160, including 106,120 Rohingyas), and an additional 24,820 from 50 other countries affected by war and persecution, including Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Palestine (UNHCR, 2023b). Despite having a history as a refugee receiving country spanning 5 decades beginning with the Vietnam crisis in the 1970s, Malaysia is not a signatory of the UN 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. Consequently, there is no formal legal distinction that separates “refugees” or “asylum seekers” from other groups of migrants. They are therefore subsumed into the broader category of “irregular migrants” and there is limited legal apparatus to make claims for rights to work and education (Ahmad et al., 2016). The previous coalition government stated an intention to ratify the Refugee Convention in their 2018 election manifesto, however since then no significant steps have been taken to do so by any ruling government (Yi, 2019).

The ambiguous legal status of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia limits their access to public services, including state run education. It also leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and coercion, with evidence of raids, arbitrary detention, violence and discrimination against refugee communities (Crisp et al., 2001; Don & Lee, 2014). Upon arrival in Malaysia, individuals can make a claim for asylum with UNHCR Malaysia. While awaiting a decision, UNHCR issue an appointment letter explaining the individual is awaiting a decision, and successful claimants receive a UNHCR-issued identity card while they await resettlement or repatriation². Either of these documents can be used to ensure protection by law enforcement and the identity card allows individuals to claim a 50% discount on the international rate for medical services. However, a UNHCR appointment letter or identity card cannot be used to gain access to local Malaysian or International schools.

Unlike more familiar protracted refugee settings, Malaysia does not operate any refugee camps. Refugee communities instead live amongst the local population in predominantly urban areas, with significant numbers in peninsular Malaysia residing in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang, Johor, and Kedah (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNHCR, 2023b). Due to a predominantly pejorative political narrative and a media discourse that portrays refugees as “illegals, threats and victims” (Don & Lee, 2014, p. 688), many people in refugee communities fear discrimination and restrict their movements to their local vicinity. Refugee communities therefore tend to sink into the background, making them less visible and less likely to challenge negative images that have been constructed about them.

The main approach to dealing with the refugee situation in Malaysia is resettlement to countries that have signed the Refugee Convention, such as the US and Australia (see Box 2). However, to date very few individuals and families have actually been resettled. As a result, thousands of people in refugee communities struggle to live day-to-day in the face of profound uncertainty about their futures. In response to this situation, there have been calls from activists and humanitarian practitioners to change approach and facilitate more local integration, ensuring access to work and more robust mechanisms for ensuring rights for refugee communities (Crisp et al., 2012). For example, the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), a think tank based in Malaysia, published a report outlining the positive economic impact of allow those from refugee communities to participate in the

² Although often viewed as the preferred option among the durable solutions (see Box 2), the idea of repatriation being voluntary is a contentious issue. It has been argued that repatriation has been exploited as a means to circumvent the non-refoulement principle (Selim, 2021), to which all nations are bound even if they are not signatories of the refugee convention.

formal workforce (Todd et al., 2019). These suggestions highlight the potentially positive contribution that refugees can make to Malaysian society. Proposal like this from organisations working within Malaysia illustrate a shift from perceiving refugee communities as a threat to safety and national sovereignty, and a growing sympathy towards facilitating a greater degree of integration.

Box 2: Durable Solutions

UNHCR provide assistance to individuals in PRS through a variety of activities and interventions but the primary goal is to pursue **durable solutions** that allow those subject to forced displacement to rebuild their lives. The three solutions promoted by UNHCR are **repatriation**, **resettlement**, and **integration**. In cases where the causes of forced migration have been mitigated, **repatriation** allows individuals to return to their country of origin. This has the benefit of facilitating family reunification and giving a feeling of returning home. Unfortunately, in many cases it is unsafe for people to be repatriated and there may no longer be any semblance of home after the effects of war and violence. **Resettlement** refers to avenues for relocating individuals to a safe third country where they can gain leave to remain. This allows them to participate more actively in civic life of the host nation. This is currently the preferred route in Malaysia, however, there are very few opportunities for resettlement. **Integration** refers to approaches taken to more actively include individuals into the PRS host society. Although this may not be a preferred option, it allows those subject to forced displacement to begin rebuilding their lives, and as this report argues, access to higher education can play an important role in this regard.

Primary and Secondary Education in Refugee Communities

With no access to formal education in state education or private schools, youth with refugee backgrounds that arrive in Malaysia before completing primary or secondary education can enrol in one of the 128 Refugee Learning Centres (RLCs) based within refugee communities. Many of these RLCs were established by local or international NGOs, while others were founded by community groups or religious organisations (Diaz Sanmartin, 2017). UNHCR does not run any of these RLCs, however they do work with a range of implementing partners to support a teacher compensation scheme, teacher trainings, grants for rents and maintenance, and connections to other organisations that can help with running and delivery of education or skills-based programmes.

Of the 23,823 children of school-going age registered with UNHCR, 44% were enrolled in primary education and 16% in secondary education in RLCs (UNHCR, 2023a). These RLCs operate with varying degrees of formality. There is no centralised control, so each uses a different syllabus, often drawing on international models such as those taught in Singapore, the US and the UK. Many are based at residential addresses or rent office spaces above shops. These are generally not the best environments for study, with students crammed into small classrooms with 4 or 5 sharing a double desk, or even having to work on the floor.

The RLCs are mostly reliant on donated materials, such as out-of-date textbooks and old technology. Some of the larger RLCs with stronger backing have better equipment, such as libraries, computer rooms and interactive whiteboards, but these are accessible to relatively few children and young people. Only a small number of the RLCs have the resources to provide a secondary programme, which contributes to the lower enrolment rate compared to primary. In addition, secondary programmes are generally more expensive to run as they require more subject specialist teachers and resources.

Many centres struggle with a high turnover of staff as volunteer teachers come and go and paid staff move on to better paid jobs, and teachers with refugee backgrounds may be resettled themselves.

Despite the hard work and efforts of those involved in providing education through the RLCs in the face of huge operational challenges, only a small number of students are likely to reach the standard of education required for success on a higher education programme. Consequently, those who have already completed secondary education before arrival in Malaysia, or have partially completed degree programmes, are more likely to be in a position to take advantage of places available at HEIs. More equitable access to higher education is therefore dependent on finding solutions to help support younger children in refugee communities adequately prepare for post-secondary education, as well as identify and support those with potential to fill gaps in their knowledge as a consequence of disrupted learning.

Box 3: Access to Education in International Frameworks

A number of global agendas, compacts, and frameworks assert a political imperative for governments to provide educational opportunities for individuals with refugee backgrounds. For example, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UNESCO's Education for All initiative (EFA) and the aforementioned 15by30 commitment. None of these commitments are legally binding and so only serve to structure approaches to providing more equitable access to education at multiple levels, as well as provide indicators and benchmarks to track progress towards these goals.

The 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education states that education is not a luxury but is rather a fundamental human right. Article 3(e) of this convention explicitly requires states "to give foreign nationals resident within their territory the same access to education as that given to their own nationals" and discrimination based on status as an asylum seeker or refugee is prohibited (UNESCO, 1960, art. 3(e)). Although not mentioning higher education explicitly, the 1951 Refugee Convention states, "with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships" (UN General Assembly, 1951, art. 22).

Malaysia has yet to ratify either of these conventions, however, Malaysia has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This convention lays out a commitment to make education accessible to all children, with Article 28(c) stating that higher education be made "accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means" (UN General Assembly, 1989, art. 28(c)). Article 22 extends this commitment to children with refugee backgrounds, stating they should "receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties" (*ibid.*, art.22)

Higher Education for Youth with Refugee Backgrounds

Although youth with refugee backgrounds are formally barred from enrolling in Malaysian HEIs, some private institutions have been able to work around restrictions to allow some of these youth to study. For example, it may be possible to allow students to attend classes in a short course format and then have these converted to full degrees awarded by an overseas campus. There is no clear data about

how many students were enrolled on tertiary or TVET³ programmes, but in 2016 UNHCR were aware of 48 who were pursuing studies in higher education institutions (Tan, 2016). To remove some of the administrative barriers to applying for higher education programmes, UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding with 6 private/international higher education institutions. This MOU committed the participating HEIs to find ways to support students with refugee backgrounds studying through initiatives such as fee waivers, providing accommodation, lowering English language requirements for entry, and validating alternative or non-standard entrance qualifications. Although some students benefited from this initiative, very few of the participating HEIs still provide this support. Some formally closed these programmes for fear of having their license to operate in Malaysia revoked for allowing non-standard admissions practice.

In 2020, a group of concerned stakeholders presented a white paper entitled Towards Inclusion of Refugees in Higher Education in Malaysia to the Education Ministry, Foreign Ministry and Prime Minister's Office of the Government of Malaysia (Sani, 2020). It was suggested that formal legislation be put in place that would allow HEIs to accept UNHCR cards as a formal admissions document to circumvent the need for a student visa. The white paper was endorsed by six HEIs in Malaysia, that as part of the initiative would participate in a pilot programme that would allow them to enrol students with UNHCR cards over a 5-year monitoring period. It is hoped that this will provide evidence for credibility of enabling access programmes and provide further insights in how to coordinate such programmes effectively. The white paper was presented to the Pakatan Harapan coalition government in 2018, who had a positive reception and seemed likely to take the initiative forward. Progress was delayed, however, due to the change in government and COVID pandemic. Since then, high level round table discussions were held with representatives of the current Barisan Nasional government and it is hoped that some momentum can be re-established for the initiative.

Few organisations in Malaysia have been able to support students to pursue higher education beyond providing informal financial assistance. One organisation more recently, however, has taken a more comprehensive approach to supporting youth with refugee backgrounds access higher education. Fugee.Org has launched a Higher Education scholarship programme, which helps youth on higher education programmes or with offers to study, both in Malaysia or online, to cover tuition fees and living expenses while studying. This scholarship programme also supports students with skills workshops and mentoring, as well as fostering an academic community among their scholars. Alongside the scholarship they are also compiling a guide to opportunities available for youth to pursue higher education. Additionally, they run an intensive bridging course known as Connecting and Equipping Refugees to Tertiary Education (CERTe) in partnership with Opening Universities for Refugees (OUR). This programme helps students to develop soft skills for making applications to HEIs, including writing personal statements, exploring options for study, and interview skills. An overview of stakeholders in the field of higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds can be found in Appendix 1.

³ Technical and vocational education and training – programmes that are linked to work-based training in fields such as hospitality and catering, sometimes with additional elements such as numeracy and literacy training.

Benefits and Barriers to Higher Education in Malaysia

In PRS settings, providing access to higher education facilitates a level of integration into both the host society and wider global community for students with refugee backgrounds. Meaningful participation in higher education helps students to ground themselves in their current situation, facilitating a sense of belonging that allows them to start to reconnect with life trajectories they imagine before forced migration. The benefits of facilitating such integration through widening participation can be felt by both students and HEIs. However, there are barriers that must first be overcome before the benefits of inclusion can be fully realised. This chapter will firstly highlight these benefits, and demonstrate the value inclusion can have for individual students, refugee communities, and the wider Malaysian higher education sector. The barriers that need to be overcome will then be explored. This discussion will lay the foundation for the following chapter, which will outline considerations that need to be taken for designing an access programme for youth with refugee backgrounds, and how to maximise the positive impact of access.

Benefits of Higher Education

Access to and participation in higher education has been shown to have a number of much needed benefits for youth with refugee backgrounds, such as providing motivation to complete primary and secondary education (Gladwell et al., 2016; Tamrat, n.d.). In addition to providing skills for access to the job market, higher education can promote social integration into the host society (Ager & Strang, 2008). Students can therefore develop social capital to participate more meaningfully in Malaysian society or potential resettlement countries, providing a firmer platform upon which to construct a sense of belonging and positive feeling identities (Grüttner et al., 2018; Lenette, 2016; Streitwieser & Brück, 2018).

Expanding social networks through participation in higher education also increases psychological health and well-being (Grüttner, 2019; Lenette et al., 2019). Participating in higher education has the benefit of alleviating trauma that has been experienced as part of forced migration (Baxter & Triplehorn, 2004; Smith & Vaux, 2003) and can protect vulnerable youth from exposure to sectarian or violent ideologies (Gladwell et al., 2016). Additionally, having the opportunity to continue to post-secondary education often affords respect to those in refugee communities (Zeus, 2011) and allows students to feel they are making progress towards life goals.

Beyond the individual benefits, participating in higher education can promote social, economic and gender equality, empowerment, and post-conflict resolution (UNHCR, 2015). Obtaining a degree gives students access to higher paid, less exploitative forms of labour, including remote working online, which can help them to support their families in exile or in their home country (Harris & Marlowe, 2011). In cases where students are repatriated, they may also use the knowledge and skills gained through higher education to rebuild their home countries after conflict (Avery & Said, 2017; Karipek, 2017).

There are also a variety of benefits to higher education institutions in host nations that results from opening their doors to students from refugee backgrounds. This demographic group usually have high aspirations and are motivated to study, which has a positive impact on their wider cohort (Abamosa, 2016; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Students with refugee backgrounds can also bring diverse experiences and alternative viewpoints to higher education classrooms, which has the mutual effect of developing more culturally sensitive global citizens throughout the student body (Abamosa et al.,

2020). Having a diverse set of alumni is also an opportunity for future diplomatic and international relationships that may benefit the host nation and its individual HEIs (Ergin et al., 2019).

Developing access programmes for any marginalised group of students provides scope to re-evaluate institutional structures and policies, which often brings with it benefits for the wider student body (Sontag, 2018). Considering how students with refugee backgrounds experience admissions processes, for example, can therefore lead to changes that make admissions procedures more accessible for all students. There is sometimes a perception that offering university spaces to non-Malaysian citizens takes away opportunities for deserving local students (Low, 2022). However, in the case of non-quota⁴ programmes, adding another capable student beyond those already admitted can usually be done with very limited additional cost and without sacrificing a place that could be taken by someone else.

There are therefore powerful incentives to extend participation in higher education to youth with refugee backgrounds from both a philanthropic and institutional perspective. Many Malaysian academics recognise these benefits and have made calls for a relaxation on restrictions to admissions for youth with refugee backgrounds so they can enrol in higher education (Sani, 2020). However, the benefits afforded by widening participation are not a given and cannot be achieved by a change in national policy alone. Access programmes require careful planning and management to ensure inclusion is not tokenistic and that both individual students and HEIs can reap the rewards that are afforded by success in higher education.

Box 4 – Success Stories

When given the opportunity, youth with refugee backgrounds have proven the ability to succeed in Malaysian HEIs. Some of these inspiring stories are recounted, along with the difficulties faced by each student, in the book, “Access to Higher Education: Refugees' Stories from Malaysia” (Bailey and Inanc, 2019). Some managed to overcome overwhelming odds to access higher education, which provides hope for others. For example, a Somali student who was the first in her family to attend university at the age of 20 having only had her first experience of formal education at the age of 16 (Tan, 2016). Another student, Zahra (name changed) from Pakistan, was awarded her class’ valedictorian upon graduation and has used her experiences to help support other students in refugee communities gain access to Malaysian HEIs (Low, 2022). These examples demonstrate how students can not only succeed but also thrive in Malaysian higher education, which can motivate and inspire other vulnerable students to seek access.

Barriers to Higher Education

There are unfortunately many barriers to students with refugee backgrounds successfully applying for a completing higher education programmes. Some of these are structural, such as prohibitive policies for inclusion and lack of financial support, while others are more abstract and complex. It is important to consider how students might be affected by the less straight-forward barriers to access to ensure they are successful in study and can reap the benefits outlined in the previous section (Birtwell et al., 2020). Other institutions have produced reports that explore barriers to participation in higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds in more detail, some for PRS and others with a more

⁴ Non-quota programme refers to courses that do not have a strict cap on the number of enrolled students. Quota programmes are usually competitive or resource demanding subjects like Medicine and Architecture.

global perspective. A list of these additional resources can be found summarised in Appendix 3. This section will therefore briefly summarise the barriers that pertain specifically to the Malaysian context.

Policy and programming:

The primary barrier to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds is the restrictive policy environment in Malaysia that means universities that accept applications from this demographic operate in a legislative grey area. Connected to this are policies that blocks access to skilled employment. Students must consider the opportunity cost of pursuing higher education if they might not be able to access skilled employment related to their area of expertise for an unknown period of time upon graduation. They may therefore feel discouraged from applying for higher education and instead pursue other options that fulfil more immediate financial goals.

Legislative change has been slow, partly because of the change in the Malaysia Government in recent years and partly due to challenges presented by the COVID pandemic. In addition to this, legislation that would change admissions processes for higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds has a wider impact on other areas of the government. The Ministries of Education, National Security, and the Home Ministry must work together for a coordinated approach to any issue that pertains to migration, which can be a lengthy process. Access to HE for youth with refugee backgrounds may not be a priority concern for the officials in this ministry, which further protracts the time spent in developing necessary legislation to allow HEIs to admit students.

Policies at HEIs may also make it difficult for students with refugee backgrounds to gain access and remain in programmes should they successfully enrol. Programmes that group them into the broader category of international students fail to address the specific challenges faced by PRS students, which could lead to students failing to meet the demands of their programmes and dropping out. An example could be restrictive policies that do not allow a semester break if needed, or alternative ways through which to submit assignments⁵. Students may also struggle to keep pace with programmes that have not considered their specific needs. This can result in developing feelings of being a failure for not being able to adapt and they may not consider that their programmes have actually failed to adequately accommodate their needs (Baker et al., 2020).

Finance:

A fundamental barrier to accessing higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds is the prohibitive costs associated with studying (UNHCR, 2019b). In addition to course fees and application costs, which are often charged at the higher international rate, students must consider the cost of books and study materials, traveling to HEIs, living expenses while studying, and potentially supporting family. Several of the universities that initially signed an MOU with UNHCR Malaysia offered partial fee waivers on the international fee or provided full scholarships and additional benefits such as housing. However, many students still consider that financial constraints while studying are a significant burden and a major reason for attrition.

When choosing to pursue higher education, students must consider the potential impact of a loss of earnings due to time taken out of work while studying (GEM, 2019). Many students who have a responsibility to support family or who have not secured sufficient funding to cover living expenses may also need to work part time while studying. Part time work, particularly in an industry related to

⁵ These could, of course, be issues that affect any student, but it has been noted that students with refugee backgrounds are much more likely to require this kind of flexibility due to demands placed on them to support family in PRS. Such considerations do, however, highlight how changes made to better accommodate students with refugee backgrounds could benefit the wider student community.

their field of study, can be beneficial for students. However, most part-time work taken by students are unrelated to their course, for example in coffee shops or restaurants. These roles can be time consuming and cause considerable stress when trying to meet study deadlines. For students in refugee communities in Malaysia it is also illegal to work, so they have the additional stress of potential immigration raids and time spent incarcerated.

Proof of credentials:

Evidence of educational attainment, such as high school completion certification or academic transcripts, are often lost, damaged, or left behind in countries of origin when people are forced to leave suddenly to avoid war or persecution (Anselme & Hands, 2012; Bajwa et al., 2017; Crea, 2016). Some students also abandon partially completed higher education programmes and are not able to retrieve transcripts or other proof of academic performance because HEIs in conflict affected areas are closed or have suffered damage (Fricke, 2016). Malaysian HEIs may also not be familiar with certification from some countries, particularly countries that do not typically send international students to study in Malaysia. This may also be true in cases where prior learning was completed in a regional or state level system rather than a national education programme. It is therefore a challenge for students to prove their capability to study on higher education programmes according to standard policies set for admissions of international students.

As outlined in the previous chapter, many students with aspirations for higher education in Malaysia complete their secondary schooling in a RLCs. These informal learning centres, even those that are relatively well resourced, cannot issue any recognisable certification for their students' learning (Zeus, 2009). Some centres support students to access international qualifications like IGCSE or GED, however exam entry fees are high, and only a few RLCs are suitably well resourced to deliver programmes to ensure success in these exams. There is also the question of transferability of credits when continuing education following resettlement. Credits awarded through higher education programmes may not be valid in countries of resettlement or in countries of origin in the case of repatriation (Crea, 2016), which could mean having to repeat years of learning and further protracting educational journeys.

Interrupted education:

A lack of resources and suitably trained teaching staff makes it difficult for students to reach the required standard to effectively participate in higher education. There is less funding for secondary education compared to primary education in protracted settings, reflecting commitments made in UNESCO's *Education for All initiative*, meaning there are less opportunities for students to pursue quality secondary education. This is manifest in the smaller number of students with refugee backgrounds enrolled in secondary education in Malaysia, and the fact that only 36 out of the 143 RLCs registered with UNHCR have secondary programmes (UNHCR, 2023a).

RLCs use a variety of international syllabi, for example from Singapore, UK, or USA, and rely mostly on donated books and materials for teaching. These may change during a student's time in the RLC, or they may transfer to another RLC that teaches a different syllabus, leaving a scattered patchwork of learning with conceptual gaps. Students may also have had disrupted learning before they arrive in Malaysia and can spend long periods out of school while waiting for a place at an RLC to become available. In addition, some RLCs are only able to provide a half day teaching programme across a limited set of academic subjects, and extra-curricular or enrichment activities cannot be guaranteed. Students therefore often arrive at HEIs with gaps in their learning, particularly related to maths and critical thinking skills, that make it difficult for them to keep pace with teaching in higher education.

The change in language medium is also a challenge for students to continue their learning. Most of the RLCs in Malaysia teach using English, although a small number may use community languages for all or some of their teaching. Students often find that they must cover familiar topics again in English so they can demonstrate their understanding of subject content, which slows down their learning progress. Many also lack digital literacy because they have not had enough opportunity to develop computer skills through their education in RLCs. They can therefore struggle to navigate online application forms and follow higher education programmes that have content delivered through virtual learning environments (VLEs). Many capable students therefore miss out due to not receiving adequately targeted support.

Understanding of the Malaysian HE system:

Different systems and procedures for applying to higher education in Malaysia compared to a student's country of origin can be a barrier for seeking access. Entering a new academic environment and navigating a new set of norms and procedures can be disorienting. Students may not know what is required in an application form or an entry essay, and the structure and pathways offered may be completely different to what they are used to and can vary across institutions. This lack of familiarity with Malaysian higher education can also extend beyond achieving initial access and cause misunderstandings in requirements and expectations during the course of study.

Seeking access to higher education is also embedded in a broader context of navigating new social expectations of a host society. For students in PRS this is often coupled with experiences of discrimination, harassment, and marginalisation, particularly within the broader education system. Many are still coming to terms with traumatic experiences associated with forced migration and likely lack a robust support network or access to resources to process psychosocial and mental health problems. This combination of difficulties upon arrival in a new and unfamiliar country makes students with refugee backgrounds more vulnerable to institutional barriers (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022) and in need of targeted support to help them understand access procedures.

Sharing Information:

A key difference with international students or economic migrants is that students with refugee backgrounds have limited time to gather information and plan ways to continue educational trajectories upon arrival in a host nation (Bajwa et al., 2017). This includes understandings of courses available, pathways to desired careers, and ways to finance higher education. A lack of understanding about the specific context or needs of students with refugee backgrounds when applying to higher education can also present barriers to ensuring students have the right information and support to make an application.

Since students with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia do not have valid student visas and often don't have the necessary documentation to place an application through a standard route, HEIs that accepted their applications in the past have developed alternative entry procedures. Given the discretion with which these HEIs have had to operate under in these cases, information about how to apply was not shared widely and so required students to reach out to staff in HEIs directly. In many cases, these HEIs have only one member of staff who directs applications from this group, and other staff may not have any knowledge about accepting students with refugee backgrounds. Gathering information about where to apply and how is therefore challenging. Misinformation and rumours are also spread within refugee communities, and NGOs, embassies and other agencies may have out-of-date or incorrect information, which could exacerbate the situation further (Bajwa et al., 2017; UNHCR, 2020).

Connectivity and study environment:

Not all students live close to their university campus and travelling each day may take a significant amount of time or be prohibitive cost-wise. Many students with refugee backgrounds also live in shared houses and lack a quiet space where they can study and focus on their work. This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic when students were forced to return to their homes for lockdown. Although there was an overall extension of online provision and resources made available for remote access at this time, some students in refugee communities struggled to access these due to the cost of maintaining a reliable internet service. This makes it particularly difficult to study courses that are provided fully online. Finally, many students access online resources through a smartphone and have limited access to a computer or laptop. Many online resources are not optimised for use with a smart phone, and a small keyboard and software with reduced features are awkward for completing written assignments such as essays.

Identifying as a refugee on campus

After accessing higher education, most students choose to keep their refugee status secret for fear of persecution or a backlash from within HEIs. This can lead to a lack of awareness among staff about how to handle private information related to a student's situation, and how to accommodate their needs in a discreet manner. Instances such as students being registered to classes or modules in a non-standard way, or not appearing on examination lists, can cause confusion and anyone addressing this without suitable discretion can inadvertently expose a student's refugee status. This is also true in day-to-day interactions. Students may encounter international students from the same country of origin during their course of study. Conversations around topics that affect international students and not those with refugee status, such as validating or updating visas, can highlight a difference in circumstance. Keeping refugee status concealed can therefore be a considerable source of stress for students, and fear of, or actually having their status unwittingly exposed, can negatively affect their campus experience, or in extreme cases lead to withdrawing from study.

Intersectional Concerns:

Youth with refugee backgrounds are not a homogenous group, and different communities or demographics within these communities may have specific challenges when seeking access to higher education. Some ethnic groups come from countries with education systems that are more closely matched to the Malaysian system, which removes some of the barriers in adapting to new norms and expectations of study. Other groups may have had a more interrupted educational trajectory due to the specific contexts of conflict from which they have escaped, or as a result of more protracted migration journeys. For example, Rohingya students, who form the largest ethnic group among refugees in Malaysia, tend to have received all of their former education in a PRS setting, whereas Pakistani students might have had fairly comprehensive formal education prior to arriving in Malaysia. One should not to essentialise the experiences of any particular ethnic group since not every member of this group will experience the same barriers to learning. However, it is important to ensure any specific needs can be accommodated so that there are not groups of students that are more disadvantaged in seeking access to higher education than another.

Women and girls may face specific challenges to accessing higher education. This could be due to attitudes within their community that favour boys being educated, or that might put limits on a woman's freedom to pursue higher education because they will not allow her to use public transport alone (Anselme & Hands, 2012; Crea & Sparnon, 2017). Women and girls may also have additional fears about harassment as a result of the intersection between their gender and refugee status, which

could discourage them from leaving the perceived safe space of their community (e.g., Crea, 2016). These concerns may also extend to other groups who face discrimination, such as race, disability, or identifying as LGBTQIA+. Issues faced may be further compounded by negative attitudes towards any of these characteristics within Malaysian society, real or perceived, and can significantly shape students' experiences in higher education.

Developing an Access Programme for HEIs in Malaysia

Overcoming the barriers to access outlined in the previous chapter requires a comprehensive access programme that not only mitigates structural barriers but also facilitate a sense of belonging within a HEI's academic community. Integrating students more meaningfully into the student body in this way will have a much more positive effect on their study experience and will help prevent students leaving courses without completing. In this section, suggestions will be made for actions that could be taken by HEIs to promote access, and also actions that other stakeholders could take to support HEIs in these endeavours. Each HEI in Malaysia has its own institutional policies and approach to higher education, so the suggestions made in this section are not meant to be prescriptive. Instead, they highlight important areas for consideration when designing an access programme for teaching on campus. These suggestions can therefore be reviewed in light of each institution's individual context to inform the design of a bespoke programme.

Sharing information about opportunities:

To widen participation in higher education amongst refugee communities, information about the programmes that are available must be shared clearly. In addition to the basic details about the programme of study, it should be clear what kind of support would be available to students to address their individual needs, information about funding, how to apply (especially if this doesn't follow the standard procedure) and how students will be assessed in the absence of standardly recognised credentials. It is also important that pathways to employment or further study are highlighted, including the possibility of working in resettlement countries and how credits or qualifications gained in Malaysia could be recognised overseas.

Knowledge about specifics of admissions for students with refugee backgrounds should be available to staff that manage admissions. When a student contacts a HEI they should be able to speak to someone who will be able to give clear and unambiguous advice about how they can apply for courses. It is also useful to have a lead member of staff who can keep up track of changing legislation or conditions related to admissions of students with refugee backgrounds so that they can report any changes to those that need to know. Maintaining the timeliest and most accurate information in this regard is possible if a HEI maintains a close information sharing relationship with UNHCR Malaysia.

It would also be beneficial to engage more meaningfully with RLCs and refugee communities to share information about opportunities available and promote access to higher education. This could be in the form of open days or visiting RLCs to talk about what courses are available. Fugee.Org are also compiling an online guide to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds, so it would be useful to stay in touch with them and communicate any updates or changes to admissions so that potential students have access to the most up-to-date information.

Suggested actions for HEIs:

- Identify programmes that will be made available for students with refugee backgrounds and decide what additional information should be provided for these students in addition to existing course details.
- Collate information for each programme into an accessible guide for students with refugee backgrounds.
- Share information with UNHCR and Fugee.Org, or any other organisation that share education opportunities among refugee communities.

Suggested actions for other stakeholders:

- UNHCR – maintain an active email bulletin to share information regularly with interested students regarding higher education opportunities available. It should be simple for students to register to receive these kinds of updates, e.g. through a link on the UNHCR Malaysia website.

Pre-access considerations:

Many students with refugee backgrounds have gaps in skills and knowledge they need to both apply for and thrive in higher education programmes. In some cases, students may benefit from studying a foundation degree that covers a variety of skills targeted on success in bachelors and masters studies. However, some students might not need to study an entire year-long foundation degree to top-up their knowledge and skills, so other kinds of pre-access programmes that bridge the gap from secondary provision available in RLCs to tertiary studies could be useful.

A programme of this nature that already exists is the CERTE Bridging Course (see Box 5). The advantage of short programmes like these is that they target a specific skill and don't require long periods of time for students to complete. CERTE also supports applications at multiple levels, so students can use these skills to apply for foundation degrees, bachelors, post graduate or TVET programmes. To gain the most benefit from this kind of access programme, they should be aligned with actual application requirements and procedures. HEIs can help support these kinds of programmes by making these details clear so targeted interventions can be developed. HEIs can also contribute in short workshops to help put skills from courses like CERTE into context so students are clear about what will happen when they make an application.

In addition to knowledge of access procedures in Malaysia, students may have gaps in critical thinking skills, numeracy, and language. In terms of language, it could be the case that a student is able to communicate with academic competence in their own language, but struggles to articulate this in English. These concerns might be addressed for some students in wrap around support during study, but some may also benefit from having short skill-building courses. The benefit of this is that students could build a portfolio of short courses targeted to their specific needs and complete these in their own time to fit around other commitments. This might save completing a demanding full-time foundation programme if students already have skills and knowledge relevant for higher level study. HEIs could assist in developing programmes like these that target the demands of their programmes, or support RLCs and NGOs to deliver this kind of short format training.

Finally, students with refugee backgrounds would benefit from targeted counselling regarding options available to them, in addition to the reality of study | higher education before applying. Many students opt to fit their ambition to the opportunities that are available and abandon the study goals they had before being subject to forced migration. Although students' interests may naturally change through the course of their lives, they should have the opportunity to pursue genuine interests rather than study any course just to achieve access to higher education. Guidance before applying would help students to consider their ambition and how best to achieve this. Such guidance would also help with laying out expectations of higher education. Many students struggle to keep up with demands of full-time courses, so it could be that they need some support to reconsider what success means to them in terms of study so that they are not demotivated by poor results, taking time out, or having to re-sit exams.

Suggested actions for HEIs:

- Be clear about the requirements for studying various programmes and the procedures through which students with refugee backgrounds can make an application.
- Build partnerships with RLCs and programmes such as CERTE to communicate these access procedures so students can be best supported in developing the skills they will actually need to make an application.

Suggested actions for RLCs and Refugee Communities to take in partnership with HEIs:

- Collaborate to identify the gaps in skills required by students to succeed in higher education that RLCs and other education initiatives are not currently able to address.
- Collaborate in developing educational programmes, short courses, or workshops to help fill these gaps.

Suggested actions for other stakeholders:

- UNHCR could take a coordinating role on connecting HEIs to RLCs and other community education initiatives to develop such programmes.

Box 5: The CERTE Bridge Course

The CERTE Bridge Course emerged as an outcome of the 2016 C3 Fourm (Collaborate, Create, Change) hosted in partnership between the organisation Opening Universities for Refugees (OUR) and UNHCR, in Kuala Lumpur. The forum sought to bring together a variety of stakeholders to identify the challenges faced in supporting youth with refugee backgrounds to access higher education. One of the major barriers that was identified was a lack of knowledge about higher educational application procedure and opportunities available to study in Malaysia. The CERTE Bridge Course was therefore developed a short, intensive course to bridge this gap from secondary to tertiary and higher vocational education.

The course helps students to develop skills in finding opportunities, completing application forms, writing personal statements, interviewing, and gaining some understanding of the expectations of higher education. Participants have the opportunity to meet admissions staff at universities that accept applications from youth with refugee backgrounds and tour campuses to gain more familiarity with a higher education environment. Each participant is also paired with a mentor for 6 months to continue honing their skills and gain support in making an actual application. At time of writing the CERTE Course has graduated 8 cohorts totalling 120 participants, and is preparing for a 9th. Of the graduating students, 41 are known to have successfully enrolled on A-Level, foundation, and degree programmes.

Entry Standards:

A clear policy regarding selection of suitable candidates in the absence of formally recognised qualifications should be made to avoid any ambiguity in access procedures. HEIs should first be explicit about the kinds of skills that are required for a given programme of study in addition to presupposed academic knowledge, then consider alternative ways of demonstrating these skill or knowledge. For example, students who cannot show a secondary completion certificate could complete a test during the application process to show their academic ability. Such an assessment could also form part of a

diagnostic process that could be used to plan any remedial support for students during study if they have demonstrated potential for success.

Some students are able to present a portfolio of certificates they have attained while studying and participating in short courses and projects in Malaysia. These kinds of certificates can demonstrate transferable skills, such as leadership and character development programmes, that would be useful when studying in higher education. More targeted details about these could then be explored at interview, for example demonstrating what kinds of skills were learned at a coding camp or through an informal work placement. Such a portfolio could be considered as proof of eligibility in the absence of formal qualifications.

An alternative way to validate credentials is to review evidence that is available to support claims for a candidate's suitability. HEIs can work with students to construct an educational history and use a variety of resources to corroborate educational experience and achievements. For example, students may not have transcripts and their former schools may be closed, but there could still be evidence of activities online such as local news stories about activities or competitions, as well as guidance on equivalency of locally issued certificates (See Box 6) (AACRAO, 2019). Documents like bank statements could also be used to show receipt of scholarships or tuition/exam payments to prove previous enrolment in previous courses. This may be a large undertaking for an individual HEI. However, HEIs could come together to establish or support the creation of an organisation that can validate students' academic history in support of applications to higher education.

Suggested actions for HEIs:

- Compile clear criteria for the knowledge and skills that would be required for each course that is open to students with refugee backgrounds.
- Develop policy for how students can prove competence in each of these areas in the absence of formal qualifications.

Suggested actions for other stakeholders to take in partnership with HEIs:

- Establishing an organisation that can validate alternative credentials or evidence of learning. This could be done in partnership between HEIs with assistance or guidance from other stakeholders, such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency.

Box 6 – Validating Credentials

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) is a not-for-profit organisation that offers guidance on best practice in admission, programme delivery, and student retention and completion to HEIs in the United States. Having pledged to support vulnerable and displaced students access higher education, they have produced a guide on inclusive admissions policies (AACRAO, 2019). As part of these policies, they propose steps that should be taken when working with non-verifiable or incomplete admissions documentation. Firstly, they suggest working on a case-by-case basis with students to determine their needs and what steps would need to be taken to demonstrate their eligibility to study. Following this, admissions officers should help the student to reconstruct their academic background, and then use as much corroborating evidence as possible to validate their claims. Students may have student ID cards, evidence of work experience, non-formal certification. All of this evidence can help to build a case. They also suggest providing flexible forms of learning assessment through the admissions process. This could take the form of an exam, a skills audit, oral examination during an interview, completion of a project or paper, reviewing a portfolio of sample work, or developing a system to validate out-of-classroom experience in lieu of formal qualifications. Each of these approaches would help students to prove their ability to study on a higher education programme without having to repeat learning or sit for costly verifiable examinations.

Finance:

Any access programme must consider how students are going to be able to finance their studies. There is a clear need for more fee waivers, grants, and scholarships to widen participation since students with refugee backgrounds are not able to cover international fees as well as living expenses while studying. Even a partial fee waiver can be helpful as it reduces the amount of money students need to secure through other grants and scholarships. Each HEI should carefully consider what to include when putting together financial support. If the campus is far from a city centre and public transport, then it might be necessary to provide accommodation. Students might also need assistance to get essential course materials, such as core text books or a lab coat, and some may need to borrow a laptop to enable them to complete assignments.

Students with refugee backgrounds would also benefit from training in financial management. For many, attending a HEI is the first time that they have lived alone and had to manage their own daily expenses. They might not have skills for budgeting day-to-day expenses or managing finance over their course of study. Some may have only been in Malaysia for a short time so might not have local knowledge about ways to budget, for example where to get the cheapest rent or discounted goods. Having support to manage finances in this way will reduce the stress that students feel about studying and help them to be financially secure throughout their course.

Suggested actions for HEIs:

- Share clear guidance regarding the cost of pursuing higher education, including additional costs such as materials, travel and living expenses.
- Use this financial guidance on cost to develop grant and scholarship programmes that target the needs of students with refugee backgrounds.
- Fundraise for scholarship and grant programmes specifically for students with refugee backgrounds.

Suggested actions for other stakeholders to take in partnership with HEIs:

- Work with HEIs and RLCs to develop financial literacy programmes that will inform students about the best way to manage their finances while studying.

Support during the programme:

As has been discussed already, participation doesn't end with access, but requires ongoing management to ensure that students are getting the best out of their experience in higher education. The kinds of remedial support that would be best to offer should be thought about in advance. Each student will have individual requirements as their educational backgrounds and experiences can vary widely. A one-size-fits-all model of support will not be suitable, but having a range of additional support available to exploit as needed will be helpful. This kind of support should be discussed with students early on so they can be signposted to the right places in time to make best use of support on offer.

A key advantage of face-to-face learning is that students can take advantage of being part of a more tangible higher education community. This underscores the benefit discussed earlier regarding international campuses and the opportunity to develop cultural competence from interactions with classmates. Students with refugee backgrounds may be apprehensive about interacting with classmates because they might fear having their refugee status exposed and experiencing backlash. They should therefore be supported to interact socially with other students and explicit opportunities to do this should be made available. Having a peer mentoring scheme or organising social activities for cohorts of students could be a good way to encourage them to interact more widely.

Given that students with refugee backgrounds will likely have had traumatic experiences in transit and may have suffered acts of discrimination in Malaysia, HEIs should have a plan for how they can address mental health issues. When given the right support, students with refugee backgrounds have shown that they are able to thrive in higher education. HEIs should therefore not view the potential for experiences of trauma as an institutional burden or liability. Many HEIs already have counselling provision available to all students, some of whom might have had similar experiences of trauma. It is essential that access to professionally trained therapy or counselling is available, either internally or externally through partnership with an experienced organisation. Counsellors who already work with a HEI could also be consulted regarding any specific training that might be required to best support this particular student group.

Experiences with students with refugee backgrounds in higher education have shown that they are often reluctant to seek support when it is needed (see box 7) (Baker et al., 2018). They may be distrustful of institutions based on previous experiences of discrimination, may come from backgrounds where seeking certain kinds of support is taboo or uncommon, or might be uncertain about how to seek support. Students should receive a comprehensive orientation to sources of support before beginning study so that lack of information is not a barrier. They should also have an opportunity to discuss support that they feel they need with a course tutor, mentor, or similar contact in the HEI and develop an individual plan with targets to seek support based on preliminary needs assessment.

Suggested actions for HEIs:

- Make a list of the relevant support services available in the institution and collate this into an easily accessible guide for youth with refugee backgrounds.

- Make a plan for how to assess students' needs, e.g. any language or academic support that might not be a standard part of their current programme.
- Identify a key contact for each student that has responsibility for monitoring support, e.g. a personal tutor.
- Partner with organisations that have suitable expertise to deliver support that is not available at the HEI.

Box 7 – Support Seeking Behaviour

Research into the support-seeking behaviour of students in higher education categorises sources of support on a scale of formality. Formal/institutional, or “cold” sources, are those provided by HEIs. Informal, or “hot” sources, are found in families or communities (Baker et al., 2018). The appeal the “hot” sources is they are embedded within a safer feeling and more familiar social context. In-between these are “warm” sources, which are characterised as being institutionally based but come from individuals or groups that a student has built some rapport with. This could be a course tutor or peer support network, for example. Baker and colleagues (*ibid.*) propose that increasing “warm” sources of support in HEIs can encourage students with refugee backgrounds to seek support and be directed to the “cold” sources if necessary.

Management and Implementation:

An issue that can face the implementation of any new programme in a HEI is ensuring that the right infrastructure is in place to ensure longevity and potential scaling up. Programmes that have previously been established to help students from refugee backgrounds access higher education in Malaysia have been led by one or a small number of staff who champion the cause. Inevitably, when these staff leave the institution or switch position the programme also ceases. Programmes need to establish a firm foundation with support across the institution, particularly those in leadership positions. Each person on campus needs to be clear about what their role is with respect to integrating students with refugee backgrounds successfully, and roles with more central responsibility in the programme need to be clear so that if a key member of staff is not able to continue, another staff member can quickly take on these responsibilities. A checklist of key information for different kinds of position can be found in Appendix 2. There should also be regular dates set for how the programme is running so that adjustments can be made to address any ongoing challenges.

Information management is very important for developing an access programme for students with refugee backgrounds so discretion can be ensured. Careful consideration should be paid to who needs information about a student's status, in what circumstances, and how that information should be stored. It could be the case that these students are registered in a non-standard way, for example working around current systems to manually enrol students on courses. Information related to their enrolment could be missing from information that is shared with lecturers and support staff, such as documents students lists for individual courses. All staff should be made aware of the potential for irregularities in the information stored about some students and instructed to handle this sensitively. Questioning a student during a class, for example, about why they don't have the correct enrolment information might expose them to other students and cause them to question their presence on campus.

Attention should also be paid to courses that require internships, work placements or travel. Students with refugee backgrounds might not be able to participate in these course requirements due to restrictive labour laws and they might feel at risk if they have to spend a long period of time outside of their community base. It would be very disheartening for a student to have to withdraw from a course of study because of these practical arrangements, and this may also negatively impact their motivation to study in the future. Course leaders should therefore consider whether there might be opportunities to meet requirements within refugee communities, such as working on project activities with RLCs, community centres or NGOs. There might also be a possibility of gaining working experience for credit through online remote working.

Suggested actions for HEIs:

- Establish a team that will have an explicit role in programme implementation and management. This can be through dedicated job profiles or as additional roles taken alongside existing positions.
- Make a plan for monitoring and evaluation of the programme.
- Identify any course requirements that may conflict with limitations imposed by refugee status and decide on alternative means to fulfil these elements.

Preparing for the future:

Another issue that needs to be addressed is how students with refugee backgrounds can benefit from completion or partial attainment of any higher education qualifications in the future. It is important to be clear whether credits gained are transferrable to typical resettlement contexts so that students do not have to repeat learning after they have left Malaysia. Some students may also leave higher education programmes during study. HEIs should therefore have a system in place that would allow students to gain a transcript for any modules or examinations that they have completed so that they can transfer to an equivalent level of study when they are settled in a new context. Some students may also have a change in immigration status during their studies. This could potentially be a very distressing experience, particularly if it means that UNHCR has removed a student's refugee status. HEIs should have a plan in place for how they can manage these changes in terms of the affect they have on continuing study and be ready to support students throughout this process.

Since students with refugee backgrounds are not able to utilise higher education qualifications to participate in the formal work force in Malaysia, they require more tailored career advice. Many of these students who have already graduated, work in their communities with NGO and community-based operations, such as the running of community centres and RLCs. This can be a very rewarding way for students to use their higher education qualification to give back to their communities. There may also be specific projects and industries that are open to applicants from refugee backgrounds as legislation changes, however these are more likely targeted at TVET type qualifications such as hospitality or catering. There are also opportunities to find work online, particularly in technology and media related industries. Students with refugee backgrounds could therefore benefit from advice and guidance in how to find work online in line with their career aspirations.

Suggested actions for HEIs:

- Prepare guidance for transferability of credits to common resettlement countries, e.g. USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.
- Ensure transcripts can be made available in the case of partially completed programmes.

- Make preparing for the future an element of support available to students with refugee backgrounds.

Suggested actions for other stakeholders to take in partnership with HEIs:

- UNHCR – work with HEIs to help develop a strategy to manage the potential transition out of refugee status during study.
- UNHCR Livelihoods Unit can also work with HEIs to identify potential avenues for employment upon graduation.
- Any organisation that can hire graduates with refugee backgrounds can liaise with HEIs to highlight potential pathways to employment that utilises skills developed in HE.

Distance Learning to Deliver Higher Education

A recent policy paper commissioned by both UNHCR and UNESCO suggests that improving access to host nation HEIs has the most potential for achieving UNHCR's 15by30 challenge (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). However, given the challenges faced by students with refugee backgrounds to access higher education in host nation HEIs in PRS, delivering higher education remotely online has also been suggested as a valid alternative to enable more students to gain higher education qualifications (Gallagher & Bauer, 2020; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021; Reinhardt et al., 2018). Barriers to HE in different national contexts, whether PRS or countries of resettlement, may fall under similar themes but can be manifest in profoundly different ways. Although it is hoped that policy in Malaysia will change and a greater number of students with refugee backgrounds will be allowed to attend local HEIs, until that point facilitating greater access to distance learning opportunities could be a viable approach for the specific PRS context in Malaysia.

Distance learning can refer to a variety of approaches to education, but this chapter will explore the use of distance learning using technology, either by connecting online, or organisations sending devices that have course content pre-loaded for students to complete. Literature exploring online learning also refers to the more specific concept of "connected learning", which is explained in more detail in Box 8. Online courses range from massive online open courses (MOOCs), through to credit-bearing micro-degree and full degree programmes delivered completely online. MOOCs have the advantage of being free, however they usually focus on specific topics without being embedded within a larger certification programme. Some distance learning programmes are also delivered in a blended format with online and face-to-face elements.

Learning online has the advantages of overcoming the need for a student visa, connecting students to quality education that is relevant to their learning needs, and providing flexibility to continue learning if students have to move (Taftaf & Williams, 2020). It can also be implemented quite quickly where technology is available and connects students with a range of subject specialist teachers and support staff (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017). However, despite the perceived benefits of learning online it is not necessarily a reliable approach to delivering higher education. The technology itself is only a means through which education is delivered. Like in-person teaching, distance learning programmes come with their own barriers and need to be thoughtfully designed if they are to successfully reach learners in PRS. Students with refugee backgrounds have also expressed dissatisfaction with online modes of learning, instead preferring blended and face-to-face options (Fincham, 2017; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Read & Martín-Monge, 2021).

This chapter will firstly explore potential barriers to distance learning, whether online or blended. There has been very limited research into the delivery of online courses to deliver HE in Malaysia specifically, so this discussion will engage with broad ideas and consider how they may be manifest. Following this discussion, I will consider what opportunities may exist for Malaysian HEIs to promote access to online and blended learning programmes so that a greater number of students with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia can benefit from distance HE.

Box 8 – Connected Learning

The Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium (CLICC) “aim[s] to promote, coordinate, collaborate and support the provision of quality higher education in contexts of conflict, crisis and displacement through connected learning” (CLICC, 2023). They are a group of organisations and universities that utilise information technology to bring higher education to the most remote and vulnerable students who are learning in potentially fragile environments. The *connected learning* approach goes beyond provision of online connectivity to provide dedicated support to student and build interconnected networks of learning communities. In doing so, this approach seeks to nurture critical thinking skills and development of self-knowledge that is embedded in local and global contexts. Within the connected learning approach, technology is merely a means through which to deliver a more empowering and emancipatory educational agenda.

Barriers to Online and Remote Learning

Access to technology:

A key barrier to being able to participate in online learning is having access to a device with a reliable internet connection. Students within refugee communities in Malaysia are unlikely to have a computer or laptop at home, and if they do, they often share it with other people living there. While at home, students may also not have a quiet place to study where they can focus time on pursuing online learning courses. This limits the amount of time that they have access to complete online learning tasks, and distractions make it more difficult to focus on study. The internet connection for urban refugee populations is generally much more reliable than for populations based in remote camp settings (Taftaf & Williams, 2020). However, households may not be able to maintain a consistent connection if they have periods of time when they are unable to pay the internet bill, which interrupts online learning.

With smartphones becoming more affordable and widespread, many students opt to connect to online learning through their mobile device. This could be suitable for a short-term MOOC style course, but students will likely face considerable difficulty completing a full degree programme through a smart phone if they are required to write essays, prepare presentations, and use subject-specific software. Some courses are also not optimised for use on a cell phone, which makes them difficult to navigate in a low resource context (Moser-Mercer, 2014). The use of smartphones is also restricted by access to affordable WiFi and mobile data connections, and learning may be disrupted due to periods where students have no online connection. This is exacerbated when online courses require large downloads or data-heavy streaming, such as recorded lectures (Murugesan et al., 2017), so students may not be able to access all parts of a course reliably.

Intermittent connectivity is also an issue for instructors trying to tailor online learning to meet the needs of students. Due to low bandwidth connections students often connect to online lessons without video. It can therefore be difficult for online instructors to gauge whether a student is facing difficulties in understanding and they may have to repeat information if a student’s connection fails. However, some of these issues can be overcome in blended learning that allows instructors to build some rapport and understanding of the context in which a student is learning (Dridi et al., 2020).

Digital literacy:

An issue related to access is a low level of digital literacy found amongst students with refugee backgrounds. In times of crisis and transit, many of these students have not had the opportunity to use computers and laptops to develop competence in using them for work or study. Some may have an opportunity to develop digital literacy through teaching in RLCs, however many RLCs lack up to date ICT equipment so cannot deliver quality training to prepare students to access learning online. This issue is compounded by the fact that many MOOC courses are designed based on the assumption that learners typically fit the profile of adults in affluent societies, which is clearly evident in the fact that most learners who complete MOOC programmes are educated males (Russell & Weaver, 2019). There are programmes designed specifically for refugee populations that engage with both digital literacy and access needs. For example, the Global History Lab MOOC course developed by Princeton University and delivered in PRS settings by InZone at the University of Geneva through the platform edX (Dridi et al., 2020). However, these are relatively few, which diminishes the advantage of choice that is associated with online learning.

In addition to digital literacy, disrupted educational trajectories could mean that students with refugee backgrounds have not developed self-management skills and motivation to succeed in online learning (Halkic & Arnold, 2019). Distance learning can give students a feeling of isolation and require a high level of organisation and motivation to complete, especially if it fits around other commitments. Some students, especially those who are in a process of dealing with trauma, may need support in developing the skills that are required to organise themselves personally to complete online courses. Like digital literacy, these kinds of skills are often assumed by distance learning programmes, which can undermine students' study efforts.

Accreditation of online learning:

Although there are many MOOC courses available, most of these are not accredited, or credits gained are not recognised by institutions in resettlement countries (El-Ghali & Ghosn, 2019; Halkic & Arnold, 2019). This can be a demotivating factor for students with refugee backgrounds, particularly when study goes alongside other commitments such as work or family. Finding that hard work done is not recognised upon resettlement can also be a major drawback as students need to repeat learning and further protract their educational endeavours. Even where credits are officially recognised, the process of having these recognised can be complicated and unclear (DAAD, 2017), and policies about recognition can change. Learning online is therefore more appealing if students with refugee backgrounds can see a clear path to qualifications they gain being transferred easily in likely resettlement contexts.

Negative perception within refugee communities:

A barrier to buy-in to online learning is a lack of awareness of programmes that are available and a generally negative view of learning online within refugee communities. Some believe that technology can only be a tool to assist learning and that online courses are not a suitable substitute for face-to-face teaching (El-Ghali & Ghosn, 2019). There may also be some cultural conflict with requirements of online learning. For example, it has been noted that it may be deemed inappropriate for women from some countries to appear on camera in online classrooms (*ibid.*) which can impede participation.

Generally speaking, students with refugee backgrounds prefer blended learning approaches to those that are taught exclusively online. Some face-to-face teaching or other support, such as peer mentoring or remedial classes in skills to help access online learning, help students to more fully engage in the online aspect of learning. In-person elements can also bridge gaps between periods of poor or no internet connectivity. In addition, face-to-face meetings between online tutors and their students allows tutors to better assess the needs and understand the context in which learning is taking place. For example, the University of Geneva's InZone project, which delivered a Global History MOOC course online in 2 refugee camps and one urban PRS setting, included a site visit during the programme (Dridi et al., 2020). This gave the instructors an opportunity to get to know the students and better assess their needs and preferences so the programme could be more responsive to their needs.

Isolation of Online Learning:

Blended learning initiatives in higher education with refugee communities that are led by universities overseas have noted the importance of having a robust, on-the-ground implementing partner organisation (Dridi et al., 2020; Russell & Weaver, 2019). As noted in the previous section, these partners can help motivate students through in-person support and provide spaces for students to study and access computers or other devices for study. It can be difficult for online tutors to build rapport with students through remote learning, especially when they don't use cameras or miss parts of lessons because of poor connectivity (Dridi et al., 2020). Implementing partners can assist with conducting needs assessments and providing feedback to online tutors from face-to-face reviews with students, which can help make programmes more engaging.

As highlighted in the previous chapter (see Box 7), students with refugee backgrounds prefer to seek assistance from people they are familiar with, rather than access institutional support structures (Baker et al., 2020). Although this was first noted for face-to-face teaching in HEIs, Halkic and Arnold (2019) propose that these patterns of support-seeking also influence engagement with online learning. Students are unlikely to reach out to a distant foreign teacher that they only connect to online. It is therefore suggested that avenues for seeking support are embedded in a supportive on-the-ground community so that problems that occur can be addressed by suitably qualified and less distant-feeling support staff.

Lack of an appropriate pedagogical approach:

There is an assumption that provision of suitable technology to access education online is enough to transform learning, however this must also be accompanied with update pedagogies for teaching material remotely (Mirra, 2018). The COVID pandemic saw a proliferation of tools that can facilitate learning online, as well as somewhat normalising online learning as a viable approach to delivery of mainstream education programmes. However, the rapid and unprecedented shift to online learning was not accompanied by a synchronous shift in pedagogy adapted for engaging students remotely. This style of learning can leave students feeling isolated, and instructors may struggle to build rapport in the absence of non-verbal cues that often infer meaning during face-to-face communication (O'Keeffe, 2020). Consequently, many still see online and remote learning as inferior to face-to-face classes, which could account for the relatively low completion and engagement rates associated with online programmes.

Cultural expectations related to education are also manifest in online provision that might make it more difficult for teachers to facilitate learning. Many approaches to learning online assume not only that students have the digital literacy of those from affluent societies, but also that they will approach online learning with the same expectations of learning seen amongst more privileged learners (Halkic & Arnold, 2019; O’Keeffe, 2020). Delivery of remote learning grounded in these assumptions can reproduce patterns of inequality seen in higher education, so rather than expanding participation of youth with refugee backgrounds, it can actually leave them more marginalised (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021). However, with careful design, planning and implementation, online higher education programmes have the capacity to challenge elitism in higher education and transform its provision to achieve more emancipatory goals.

It is therefore imperative that any programme that aims to reach learners from refugee backgrounds develop a suitable pedagogical approach to engage this demographic of learner. Such pedagogy is likely to require teachers and instructors to develop a more pastoral element to their teaching as they may be the only expert contact a student has outside of their immediate situation. Teachers may also have to accommodate and respond to issues of trauma that results from experiences of forced migration, which can influence a student’s capacity to participate in learning since trauma can affect cognitive faculties such as memory and recall (Palanac, 2019). This kind of learning therefore needs a carefully planned pedagogical framework to ensure students receive the most benefit from their participation. Online or blended programmes also need to be flexible towards learners, for example providing alternative means of assessment that suit the context in which the learning is taking place.

How can HEIs in Malaysia Support Online Learning?

Although online and blended higher education is fairly new as a method to deliver higher education programmes to youth in PRS, there are several avenues that Malaysian HEIs could pursue to support students access to and success in pursuing such programmes. Each of these suggestions relate to the barriers outlined above and seek to improve access by facilitating a sense of belonging within a higher education community, even if students participate remotely. However, given the lack of research in this area, particularly in the Malaysian context, a caveat is that any initiative would best be delivered as a pilot programme. In addition, an explicit means of monitoring and evaluation should be put in place to record learning from programme implementation, as well as ways to share best practice so other institutions can improve online or blended delivery also.

Developing accredited blended programmes

A key way to improve access would be to develop more accredited blended learning programmes that are designed with the needs of students with refugee backgrounds in mind. These online programmes need not be full degree programmes, but could be delivered as stand-alone credit-bearing units that could eventually be converted to full degrees. This would allow flexibility while also taking advantage of the benefits associated with online learning, such as reduced need to travel to learning sites with the associated costs. Delivering blended programmes would also allow students to meet with professors face-to-face for some elements to build rapport and better facilitate analysis of learning needs. To pursue this route, it is necessary to ensure that students have access to a suitable study environment outside of the HEI. This may require lending suitable IT equipment or partnering with local organisations that have spaces where students can study.

Partnering with local organisations

As mentioned above, local organisations, such as RLCs, refugee community centres, or other NGOs and businesses that support students with refugee backgrounds within or close to their home community can help facilitate access. This could be to provide study spaces, access to technology, and access to reliable internet connections, or they could also provide spaces for teaching or support as part of face-to-face elements. An advantages of forming such partnerships is that these organisations are likely to have a better understanding of the learning needs of students with refugee backgrounds, and can provide more of the “hot” and “warm” sources of support (Baker et al., 2018) to improve retention and completion. These kinds of partnerships could also be used to foster an academic community within refugee community settings. For example, providing skills workshops for higher education, student mentoring, or opportunities to mix socially with local students pursuing similar academic disciplines can reduce a sense of isolation. These kinds of partnerships could also improve learning by facilitating academic exchange and broadening perspectives not just of students in PRS, but also local students who participate.

Partnering with overseas institutions

Malaysian HEIs can help support students with refugee backgrounds access online programmes that are provided by overseas HEIs. This could be simply through providing spaces for students to come and study on campus and access reliable technology to pursue online courses. As well as alleviating some of the physical barriers, this could facilitate social mixing and academic exchange with local students that was discussed above. This kind of partnership could also involve some teaching or on-the-ground support being provided by Malaysian HEIs, such as lab sessions to complete practical components of course, support to get internships locally, or access to support services provided by the Malaysian HEI. Awarding qualifications through overseas institutions can also get around any legislative difficulties in validating qualifications in Malaysia.

Helping students develop skills

Malaysian HEIs could also help students to develop the skills necessary to make the best use of online and blended learning in higher education. Specific skills that could be targeted are computer literacy, academic and language skills, self-regulation skills such as planning and motivation, and also ways to take advantage of opportunities available through connecting online. Facilitating these kinds of skills building workshops could be done in partnerships with RLCS, or initiatives such as CERTE (see Box 5). Connecting with refugee communities in this way has the additional advantage of sharing information about opportunities that are available and supporting pursuit of online higher education where provision of accredited programmes by the HEI is not possible.

Recognise online learning

Malaysian HEIs can also support pursuit of online higher education by developing ways of recognising works completed in non-accredited learning for access to in-person or blended/online degree programmes. Some free MOOC programmes help students to develop valuable skills for learning, as well as some content knowledge that is relevant to degree programmes. It could therefore be possible to award course credits for completion of relevant online learning that could then be used towards completion of a full degree programme.

Research

Finally, Malaysian HEIs could contribute to efforts to improve access to online and blended remote learning through research. Providing funding and establishing research units that explicitly focus on learning for youth with refugee backgrounds, or online learning more generally, can help contribute

to developing best practice in pedagogy and understanding the barriers to accessing online learning more clearly. Hosting such research units and initiatives in Malaysia has the added advantage of ensuring research outputs are better aligned to the specific Malaysian PRS. Ensuring relevancy and applicability of this kind of research requires partnering with refugee communities and developing participatory research approaches that capture and lift up the voices of students with refugee backgrounds. Doing so can promote the emancipatory aims of higher education, in-person or online, and provide a firmer basis on which to foster a greater sense of belonging within, and becoming through access to Malaysian higher education.

Conclusions

The challenges of widening access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds in Malaysia are multifaceted. However, Malaysian HEIs can play a pivotal role in overcoming barriers that would otherwise prevent some of the country's most marginalised learners fulfilling their potential. Some of these barriers are practical, such as limited financial resources, restrictive access policies, and lack of a suitable framework to assess alternative proof of learning credentials. Some barriers relate to difficulties that arise from experiences of forced migration, including interrupted learning, language barriers, lack of opportunities to pursue quality primary and secondary education, and isolation within urban refugee communities limiting access to and knowledge of opportunities to learn. Finally, there are more abstract barriers that limit the ability for students to develop a sense of belonging or perceive pathways for becoming through higher education. These include a lack of understanding about procedures and norms in Malaysian higher education, stigma attached to being labelled as a refugee learner, and intersectional concern relating to beliefs and customs of Malaysian society and their own refugee communities.

At time of writing this report, the legislative barriers to facilitating access are the primary concern to widening participation. However, over the last few years there has been a shift in perception from refugee communities being a threat to national sovereignty, to a more philanthropic mood within Malaysian society that appreciates the benefits that could come from greater integration. There is therefore much that could be achieved by Malaysian HEIs to facilitate greater access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds. Until higher level legislative change is enacted, this may be on a smaller scale. However, work done now to develop scalable access programmes that engage with the barriers outlined above would mean that HEIs could hit the ground running when the government formally permits issuing of student visas to youth with refugee backgrounds. As noted in this report, reflecting on the difficulties that are faced by marginalised students can also highlight ways to provide a better service to students more generally, bringing benefits across the student body and wider institution.

HEIs in Malaysia can also contribute to widening provision of online and blended remote learning. Although it has been noted that widening access to host nation HEIs is the best way to achieve the 15by30 goal, many students could benefit from greater support and improved access to online higher education. Online learning has the potential to provide solutions that can be more rapidly implemented, are flexible, and can reach a greater number of learners. This could also help fill a gap in the number of opportunities that are available to pursue higher education while advocacy efforts continue for the enactment of higher level legislative change. However, issues in access to technology and reliable connectivity, as well as preparedness to take advantage of online learning and a lack of suitable pedagogy are still barriers. However, by building relationships with refugee communities and the organisations that support them, Malaysian HEIs can contribute to meaningfully to improving access to online and blended remote higher education.

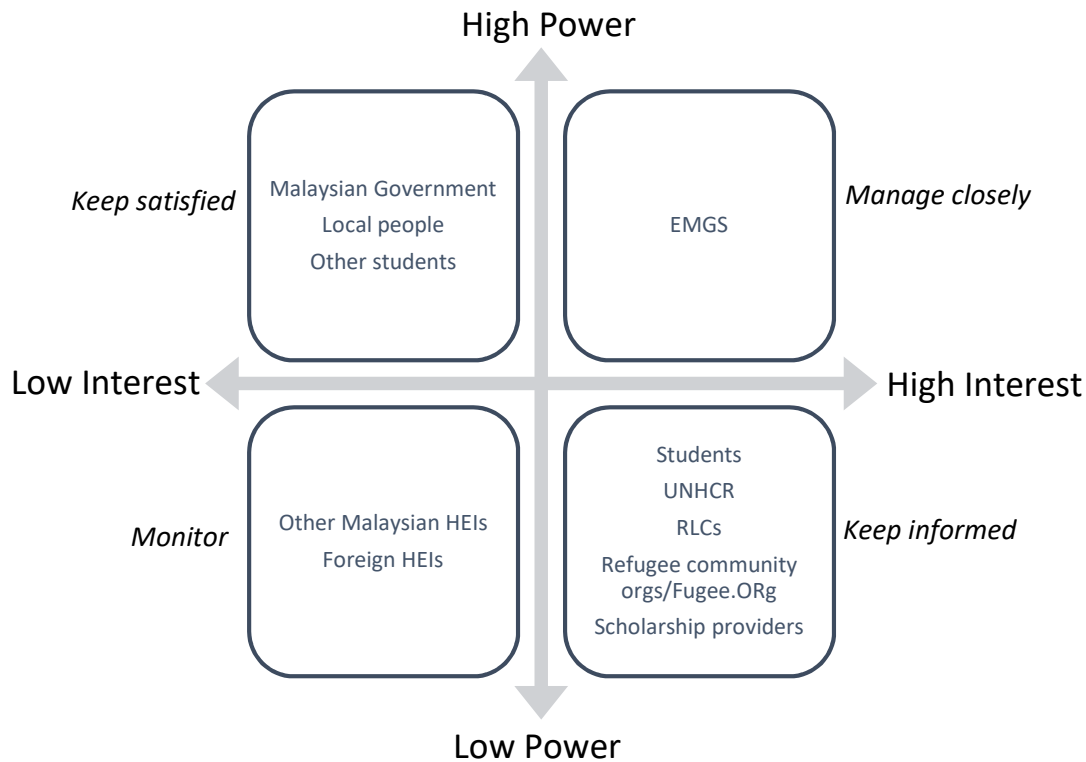
Summary of Recommendations

Throughout this report, recommendations have been made for specific actions that could be taken by Malaysian HEIs to develop access programmes or help facilitate online learning. Obviously the responsibility for each of these actions does not fall with any individual HEI and it is not expected that a HEI fulfil all of these recommendations. Each HEI can use the recommendations in this guide and consider them in terms of their institutional context and position within the field of Malaysian higher education. However, no organisation works in isolation and so any programme or action that is

implemented by an HEI must consider how these decisions fit into the wider network of stakeholders that promote access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds. A summary of the broader recommendations for HEIs and organisations that work with HEIs is therefore provided below:

- **Form a network of concerned stakeholders to better coordinate actions and share information to improve access.** This can include HEIs, RLCs that provide secondary education, and other NGOs and organisations that are working to widen access. HEIs could play a leading role in initiating such a network, and steps have already been taken to do so through the white paper initiative.
- **Provide more financial support to students.** HEIs can fundraise to provide more scholarship opportunities, grants, fee waivers, and in-kind support. External stakeholders can also work with HEIs to develop financial support packages that are aligned to the demands of specific programmes.
- **Establish a team to lead refugee access programmes in each HEI.** Experience has shown that programmes championed by one or a few members of staff cannot provide the necessary scope or sustainability. There needs to be formalised leadership and buy-in across the institution.
- **Share information about opportunities.** HEIs should reach out to refugee communities to provide information about programmes available, for example through the Fugee HiEd guide.
- **Develop learning programmes to help students become university ready.** HEIs can develop these programmes in house, in partnership with RLCs, or they can provide a consulting role in developing such programmes and workshops.
- **Consider ways to provide blended programmes to circumvent the need to provide a student visa.** Embrace online learning as a tool to provide delivery of innovative higher education initiatives that can meet the unique needs of youth with refugee backgrounds.
- **Make an explicit plan for monitoring and evaluating programmes, and conducting research into access to higher education.** HEIs should be committed to using their position as knowledge producers to think of new ways to solve the problem and share best practice in reach youth with refugee backgrounds, particularly as the situation regarding access in Malaysia evolves.
- **Put the concept of belonging at the heart of initiative to widen access.** Students are much more likely to remain on a programme and reap the benefits of higher education if they feel a sense of belonging and integration with a HEI community. Such a sense allows students to reconnect to pathways of becoming and imagine how higher education fits into their current situation and plans for the future.
- **Foster the development of and integration with academic communities for youth with refugee backgrounds.** Open campuses to students with refugee backgrounds even if they are not enrolled on degree programmes and build partnerships with refugee communities to provide opportunities to engage with Malaysian academics and students in higher education.
- **Link access to future pathways.** Think forward to how students with refugee backgrounds can use the skills and knowledge they have gained from their programmes, for example through work online, in their communities, and upon resettlement.
- **Support establishment of a tertiary RLC where youth with refugee backgrounds can connect to HE opportunities.** HEIs may not take a role in the running or management of such an institution but could help initiate its foundation and provide financial and in-kind support for its operation.

Appendix 1 – Stakeholder Mapping



Students – Students have a very clear interest in higher education access programmes. Their power could move upwards once they are enrolled if they are asked to take a more participatory role in development of any access programme. Students can be split into two groups based on avenues through which to communicate with them – those currently in CLCs, and those who are not studying.

UNHCR – UNHCR has a clear interest in activities that could promote the integration, wellbeing, and life chances of individuals registered with them. They can potentially have a positive impact as a partner in a programme by providing expert insight and linking other stakeholders, however their advocacy role is somewhat limited.

Refugee Learning Centres – RLCs may be interested to hear about higher education access programmes so they can advertise them to their students. They may also benefit from any inclusion in initiatives that help prepare students for study in higher education, or some may be able to provide space for students to study remote elements of their courses.

Fugee.Org – This organisation has a clear interest in access programmes. Although they don't have an advocacy role they provide advice, training and guidance for higher education, and keep students informed through their higher education guide.

Higher education institutions – There is the potential for other HEIs to influence access programmes. This could be via competition for the best students, or could be more collaborative in coordinating efforts to have a better reach and sharing best practice.

Scholarship providers – This is a loosely defined group of stakeholders. They could be formal organisations or private donors. They will have a natural interest in students being successful and

finding ways to make tuition payments to university, but are unlikely to influence the organisation and planning of a programme.

Government/EMGS – Government agencies, particularly the ministry of higher education, and organisations under the purview, e.g. EMGS, may not have an interest in the aims of an access programme, but have considerable influence in dictating the outcome of any such initiative. EMGS have the power to decide if students should be issued a visa and the Ministry of Higher Education can remove the license to operate for any institution that does not follow their rules.

State HEIs – State run HEIs may have some limited interest in access programmes if they wish to make some philanthropic contribution to students pursuing options for higher education. However, since they currently not able to accept students they do not have the same influence as private HEIs.

Foreign HEIs – Foreign HEIs may have some interest in access programmes from a research point of view. They will have a stronger interest and level of influence if students are enrolled on programmes that they award through a HEI with an access programme.

Local people – Local people may have a variety of opinions regarding access programmes. Some will be supportive and may fall into the category of scholarship provider. However, others may have a feeling that offering places on higher education programmes to youth with refugee backgrounds takes opportunities away from local people in need, which could play into a negative rhetoric that threatens successful implementation of an access programme. Careful communication is therefore required so as not to exacerbate any of these tensions.

Media – Like local people, the media can either be supportive or critical of attempts to integrate youth with refugee backgrounds into higher education. Some media outlets are more influential than others but each has the capability to positively or negatively influence the success of an access programme.

International students – International students might not have much interest or influence over an access programme, but there may be tensions between those from refugee sending countries if they are socially or politically aligned to fractions that might have influenced another students decision to flee.

Refugee community organisations – Refugee community centres, women's groups, and leadership programmes may not have an explicit education role, but they can reach potential students and encourage them to apply for higher education programmes. They may also be interested in hiring graduates, so may be important partners when guiding students in future pathways.

Appendix 2 – Guides for HEI Personnel

Lecturer:

Teachers and lecturers are likely to have the most regular interactions with students. Interactions between students and lecturers are therefore likely to be important in shaping experiences that students have in higher education. Depending on the way that enrolment information is managed within your particular HEI, you may or may not know that there are students with refugee backgrounds in your class. They may not be distinguishable from international students from the same country, and coming from a typical refugee sending country, like Myanmar or Somalia, doesn't necessarily mean a student has refugee status. You will find many of the suggestions below are already part of your pedagogical practice with any student. However, here are some key areas to consider if you teach a course that might be open to enrolments from students with refugee backgrounds:

- Remedial support – some, but not all, students with refugee backgrounds may be taking advantage of remedial support offered by the HEI, particularly in the early stages of their course. They may therefore have gaps in their knowledge and be working simultaneously to gain new knowledge and build a foundation to support this knowledge. Students may therefore be confused or have some misunderstandings. It might be helpful to have a list of resources available, such as key readings, that students could consult to strengthen any assumed knowledge required for the course.
- Familiarity with format of HE – All students will likely be unfamiliar with a lecture/tutorial style of education, as well as knowledge of how to navigate large HEI campuses and manage expectations for having more autonomy in their learning. This can be exacerbated for students with refugee backgrounds because they might not have had any preparation or orientation that local students might have had during their secondary education. It is therefore important to be patient with students adapting to this new environment and be very clear about expectations for learning from the beginning.
- Discretion – You may know or suspect that a student in your class comes from a refugee background. It is important to show discretion and maintain each student's privacy by not drawing attention to this fact. A student may also inform you of their status. This demonstrates that a student trusts you, which is obviously a positive thing, but this information should not be shared with other students or staff at the HEI.
- Processes – Depending on the particular systems or processes at your HEI, students with refugee backgrounds may be enrolled differently on your course. For example, students may not appear or be late additions to the class list, or may have missing or irregular details registered. For courses that require placements or visits, students with refugee backgrounds may be exempt or have alternative arrangements made. If this is the case then it would be best not to draw attention to this in front of other students as it may cause them to raise questions about their classmate, and put them on the spot to explain why they aren't following a course in the same way.
- Boundaries – You may build rapport and have a strong bond of trust with your student, however, you should not attempt to address issues related to migration, status, or refugee communities with students. If a student approaches you with a problem then you may be supportive in a sympathetic way, but you should refer the student to relevant avenues of support, or to the refugee admissions coordinator if you are unsure.

Personal tutor:

As a personal tutor you will most likely have the closest contact with students with refugee backgrounds. There aren't necessarily any specific differences to how you will conduct a tutor role with students who have enrolled through a refugee access programme compared to other students, however, here are a few points to consider when managing this relationship.

- **Building trust** – Most students will be very welcoming of having a personal point of contact to support them with any problems. However, some may have had negative experiences with authority figures and so will approach this relationship with caution. It is important to keep this in mind and not be discouraged if students don't seem receptive at first. Remember that students are likely to pursue "warm" sources of support within HEIs, which is where a personal tutor role will fit. Being friendly and warm will therefore help to facilitate referring students to other support services where necessary.
- **Discretion** – As a personal tutor you will have access to much more personal information about the student than other members of staff at the university. When helping to direct students to support services or discuss their needs with others it is therefore important to be careful about what information is shared and keep knowledge of a student's status to a need-to-know basis. If you need to share this information, then this should be discussed first with the student so they are aware of who knows what about them on campus.
- **Special arrangements** – Be aware of any special arrangements, such as changes to fieldwork or placements, so that you can best advise the student and liaise with faculty as required.
- **Orientation** – Students are likely to be overwhelmed when they first join a HEI. For many it is their first time learning alongside local students and they may have difficulty in making the transition from an RLC. In the early stages of their courses they may therefore need more intensive support to help them settle in and then phase this out the standard contact time.
- **University/community** – Many students experience a sort of "double life" when they enrol in a HEI because they gain a level of integration with Malaysian society that many in their community do not have access to. Their parents and elders in their community are also more likely to have a firmer connection to the culture of their homeland, whereas youth are more likely to have a more hybrid cultural experience as a member of exiled diaspora. This has the potential to cause some personal conflict as the students have vastly different home and study lives. A part of your role may therefore be helping students to explore this divide and make sense of it whilst also trying to achieve success in study.
- **Failure** – It has unfortunately been the case so far that many students with refugee backgrounds fail their early courses, get grades below what they expected, or have to pursue educational paths that were different to their initial expectations. Some students may therefore need support in rethinking how they view success and personal feelings they have about overcoming what may seem insurmountable barriers to success in HE.
- **Boundaries** – You may build rapport and have a strong bond of trust with your student, however, you should not attempt to address issues related to migration, status, or refugee communities with students. If a student approaches you with a problem then you may be supportive in a sympathetic way, but you should refer the student to relevant avenues of support, or to the refugee admissions coordinator if you are unsure.

Course/Programme coordinator:

Course or programme coordinators will likely be informed of the presence of students with refugee backgrounds on the courses they oversee. They will therefore be aware of any specific arrangements that are made for these students and communicating these on a need-to-know basis to lecturers of support staff. In previously run refugee access programmes, course coordinators have been assigned as the personal tutor for students with refugee backgrounds so that they can engage with and resolve any issues related to progression within a programme without needing to share students' personal information with other people. Within this role it is important to observe issues of discretion and boundaries noted for the previous roles so that students can conduct their studies with peace of mind and be directed to relevant sources of support.

Admissions/marketing staff:

- In the admissions or marketing team you may get a "cold call" from a student with a refugee background enquiring about an access programme that is available. It is important to remember that this is a significant step for the student to take as they don't know if their attempt at access will be dismissed outright from the beginning. Being warm and open will help put the potential student at ease. Try to gather as much information as possible about their status, for example if they have registered with UNHCR and what qualifications they might have, so you can best advise them. Keep these enquiries limited to information that might affect studies. Asking about reasons that students have for leaving their home country will likely cause them to have to remember traumatic incidents, which discourage them from pursuing access.
- Have a plan for how admissions should be managed and ensure that admissions and marketing staff have information available to help them advise students with refugee backgrounds and any alternative arrangements that might be in place.
- It may be necessary to communicate with scholarship payment organisations. These will likely be managed in the same way as any grant or scholarship that is external to the HEI. Make sure to communicate clearly any deadlines for payments and discuss any limitations or alternative arrangements that might be in place.
- Be aware of legal arrangements for access and who to contact at UNHCR or EMGS should there be a change in a student's status or policies for admissions.

HEI Management:

- Ensuring sustainability – establish an access programme team that will take responsibility for the day-to-day coordination of the programme, not just one member of staff to "champion" of the cause.
- Management are responsible for ensuring an institution-wide strategy is in place with systems for processing registrations in line with wider policy. It is essential to work closely with the access programme team that is put in place so that connections can be made across the HEI more broadly. The access programme team should also be supported to conduct monitoring and evaluation activities.

- Acknowledge that the need of refugees is distinct from those of international students. Try to avoid the temptation to deal with both groups as a homogenous category.
- Management will be responsible for liaising with external organisations, like UNHCR and Government agencies, and passing essential information on to relevant parties in the HEI.

Access Programme coordinator/administrator:

The access programme coordinator and their team will have primary responsibility for the day-to-day running of the programme. They will know which students have been enrolled through the programme and will have access to all of their private information. They will also liaise with organisations outside of the HEI that support access for youth with refugee backgrounds. The precise nature of this role will depend on specifics of how the programme is structured within an individual HEI, however, there are some common issues to be aware of:

- Establish a system and set of policies to maintaining discretion and for communicating information to lecturers and other staff on a need-to-know basis.
- Be aware of what additional support is available and how it fits into individual programmes of study for students enrolled through an access scheme.
- It is likely that the access team will take some role in coordinating applications and registration on courses if this needs to be done through non-standard procedures. IT is therefore important to work with other administrative staff to ensure information is collect, stored, and shared appropriately so that a student is not impeded in their studies.
- Be clear about norms of the HEI and how this might be unfamiliar to students with refugee backgrounds. It is best to encourage support to be sort at early stages in a student's studies so they do not encounter avoidable problems late into the course of study, or encouraging personal tutors to facilitate this.
- Maintain awareness of changes in law and information about visas and other access requirements so that students can access accurate information and be responsive to change. Part of this might involve managing rumours within the HEI or that may have been spread through refugee communities. Encourage students to be open about these and share any concerns so that any potential misinformation can be handled at an early stage.
- Don't go it alone – have a team and build support across the HEI.

Appendix 3 – Selected Additional Resources

United Nations reports on access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds:

- UNHCR. (2015). Education Brief: Higher Education Considerations for Refugees in Countries Affected by the Syria and Iraq Crises.
- UNHCR. (2017). Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis. <https://www.unhcr.org/59b696f44.pdf>
- UNHCR. (2019). Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Education. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>
- UNHCR. (2020). WUSC, UNHCR and UNESCO, Doubling our Impact, Third Country Higher Education Pathways for Refugees, February 2020. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/events/conferences/5e5e4c614/wusc-unhcr-unesco-doubling-impact-third-country-higher-education-pathways.html>
- UNHCR. (2022). World Higher Education Conference 2022 Agenda: Refugee Higher Education in Situations of Conflict & Fragility. UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/events/conferences/62849bf94/world-higher-education-conference-2022-agenda-refugee-higher-education.html>

Reports on access to higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds in other countries:

- DAAD. (2017). The integration of refugees at German higher education institutions: Findings from higher education programmes for refugees. DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service).
- Fricke, A. (2016). Regional opportunities and challenges for Syrian students. In N. Feldmann & C. Lind (Eds.), *Supporting Displaced and Refugee Students in Higher Education: Principles and Best Practices* (pp. 10–13). Institute of International Education.
- Gladwell, C., Hollow, D., Robinson, A., Norman, B., Bowerman, E., Mitchell, J., Floremont, F., & Hutchinson, P. (2016). *Higher Education for Refugees in Low-resource Environments: Landscape Review*. Jigsaw Consult.
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- Naidoo, L. (2015). Educating refugee-background students in Australian schools and universities. *Intercultural Education*, 26(3), 210–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2015.1048079>
- Sherab, D., & Kirk, K. (2016). Access to Higher Education for Refugees in Jordan: Protection and Sustainable Development. *Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) - Legal Aid*.

- Unangst, L., & de Wit, H. (2021). Refugees and Higher Education: Selected themes and research questions (Working paper no. 61; Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper Series). Centre for Global Higher Education, University of Oxford.

Distance, online and blended higher education for youth with refugee backgrounds:

- CLICC. (2023). Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium. Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium. <https://connectedlearning4refugees.org/>
- Moser-Mercer, B. (2014). MOOCs in fragile contexts. European MOOCs Stakeholders Summit, Lausanne, Switzerland.
- Reinhardt, F., Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, O., Deribo, T., Happ, R., & Nell-Müller, S. (2018). Integrating refugees into higher education – the impact of a new online education program for policies and practices. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 2(2), 198–226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2018.1483738>
- Russell, C., & Weaver, N. (2019). Reaching Refugees: Southern New Hampshire University's Project-Based Degree Model for Refugee Higher Education. In E. Sengupta & P. Blessinger (Eds.), *Language, Teaching, and Pedagogy for Refugee Education* (Vol. 15, pp. 157–180). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2055-364120180000015012>
- UNESCO. (2018). A Lifeline to learning: Leveraging mobile technology to support education for refugees. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/ULTW4494>
- Witthaus, G. (2018). Findings from a Case Study on Refugees Using MOOCs to (Re)enter Higher Education. *Open Praxis*, 10(4), 343. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.10.4.910>

Validating Credentials:

- AACRAO. (2019). Inclusive Admissions Policies for Displaced and Vulnerable Students. American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO). https://indd.adobe.com/view/publication/354a37f5-bac5-4964-97f8-1f0a5920a6fe/pu93/publication-web-resources/pdf/Full_Paper.pdf
- Kirk, J. (2009). Certification counts: Recognizing the learning attainments of displaced and refugee students. UNESCO International Institute for Education Planning.
- Kohlenberg, B., & Loo, B. (2020). Assessment and Recognition of Refugee Credentials. *International Higher Education*, 101, 29–31.

Refugees in Malaysia:

- Bailey, L., & Inanc, G. (2019). *Access to Higher Education: Refugees' Stories from Malaysia*. Routledge.
- Birtwell, J. J. (2019). Understanding education and understanding yourself as a refugee learner seeking access to higher education in Malaysia: Insights from a pilot project. *CORERJ*, 6, 15.
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- Abamosa, J. Y. (2016). *When Refugees Get the Opportunity, They Can Learn...but Barriers Need to Be Removed: Refugees' Path to Higher Education in Host Countries*. 9.
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