



## **Bridging the Distance in Distance E-Learning: Lessons from Dadaab and Kakuma Refugee Camps in Kenya**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organisations now categorize the provision of education in emergencies as a humanitarian response to disaster. However, the very nature of an emergency situation makes the provision of education a daunting task. When entire populations are displaced and forced to live in camps as refugees in a host country, they are unlikely to have access to the physical infrastructure and other resources required for education, especially higher education. An innovative way of availing higher education opportunities to refugee populations is through distance education programmes, particularly those delivered through online e-learning platforms. As universities continue to embrace the role of humanitarian actors, they are increasingly recognizing that distance education programmes, more so e-learning ones, have the potential of reaching a wider population of refugees, enabling them access to education without requiring institutions to have a physical presence in a refugee camp. The actualization of this potential in a refugee camp setting, however, is not without challenges. Drawing on experiences from facilitating and managing a joint online certificate course targeted at refugees living in the Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya, this paper seeks to show that the challenges, ranging from physical distance to lack of computer skills, are doubly pronounced in refugee settings. Further, the paper highlights the

innovative solutions that were used to mitigate the said challenges and shows how they can be adopted when designing distance e-learning programmes for both emergency and non-emergency situations in Africa.

**Key words:** Kenya, refugees, emergency situations, e-learning

### **1.0 Education for Refugees**

According to a UNHCR, report on refugee education (UNHCR 2016), as of September 2016 there were 16.1 million refugees worldwide under the UNHCR mandate and an additional 1.5 million Palestinian refugees registered under the United Nations Relief Work Agency (UNRWA). The report also indicates that on average refugees spend 20 years in exile, a period that is more than an entire childhood and a significant portion of the refugee's productive years. As such, provision of education to refugees in such protracted situations has become an increasing concern. Education is not only a means for survival but it also helps the refugees thrive. It is argued that providing education to refugees will be central to peace and development as well as in helping the refugee children realize their full potential.

Unfortunately, the education situation for the refugees is rather wanting, and the situation is exacerbated by the fact that 86% of refugees are hosted in developing regions with more than a quarter in the least developed countries. In these countries, host governments are already struggling to educate their own children (UNHCR, September, 2016). The statistics on refugees' enrollment in schools paint a sad picture. According to the UNHCR report, out of the 6 million primary and secondary school age refugee children, only 50% have access to primary education and 22% to secondary education compared to the global 90%

and 84% of non-refugee children respectively. With regard to university education, only one (1) percent of refugees gain access compared to 34% global figure for non-refugee population.

Perhaps these dismal figures can be explained by the fact that provision of education to refugees is awash with challenges. Among them is the lack of enough spaces for the ever increasing numbers, language conflicts, lack of trained teachers, poverty and different education systems in host countries. Another major challenge is the lack of finances largely because refugee education is financed through emergency funds and is often not featured in national development plans and education sector plans. In fact, when looked at against other more pressing needs such as food and shelter, education for a refugee is considered a luxury and is therefore, many a time, given a non-emergency status.

Challenges notwithstanding, provision of education for refugees has begun to gain support globally from humanitarian agencies, development partners, governments and the private sector. Most providers of education have the realization that SDG number 4, “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and lifelong learning”, cannot be achieved without providing education to vulnerable populations, among them refugees (UNESCO, GEM & UNHCR May, 2016). Additionally, it has been realized that refugee children need more flexible and innovative education opportunities if their potential is to be harnessed and developed for the betterment of individuals and communities. One innovative avenue that has been employed is the use of E-learning. E-learning, however, also comes with its challenges. This paper discusses some of these challenges in relation to a programme offered in Daadab and Kakuma refugee camps in Kenya

## **2.0 Defining E-learning**

A comprehensive understanding of e-learning requires an appreciation of interrelated concepts that are, arguably, the foundations of growth for this mode of learning. These are distance learning, computer based learning, distributed learning and lifelong learning. The California Distance Learning Project (CDLP) defines distance learning as an instructional delivery system that connects learners with educational resources without requiring them to be physically present at a learning institution. On her part, Lord (2000, p. 217) views distance learning as ‘any approach to education delivery

that replaces the same-time, same place, face-to-face environment of a traditional classroom.’ Distance education depends on available resources and technologies to connect learners to teachers and to learning resources which may be separated from them by both time and space. To achieve this, distance learning has, over the years, always made use of emerging technologies from audio and video cassettes to computers.

This leads to the concept of computer-based learning. This is the use of computers to help learners access and manage huge amounts of information. The computer, then, is a tool that gives facilitators means of availing information to students in novel ways and gives learners autonomy and variety in the ways they discover new information. Computer based learning is learner centered in that the learner is at the heart of discovering new facts on the basis of computer based applications (Candy et al., 1994; Lord, 2000). It needs to be noted that computer based learning need not be based on an online platform. It could be done through stand alone computers using software and other materials stored in USB sticks or CDs.

Reid (1999, p.4) defines distributed learning as learning which ‘integrates a number of technologies to enable opportunities for activities and interaction in both asynchronous and real time modes. Distributed learning, therefore, involves blending a choice of technologies with aspects of campus-based delivery and distance education.’ The last statement in this definition is of particular significance as it marks the way distance education has, over the year, evolved by adopting new approaches and technologies. Here, the traditional on-campus mode is blended with technology that facilitates access to learning off-campus.

Lifelong learning is a broad concept grounded in the belief that people continuously go through the process of literacy as they engage with various sources of information. Throughout life, one not only encounters information but actively reflects on information, investigates, interrogates, probes and questions both the information one encounters and its sources. Therefore, the process of learning is unending: it is a lifelong process. Whether driven by changes in society or the workplace, people are always in search of knowledge and this is a need that institutions of higher learning need to meet. Jenkins and Hanson (2003) define e-learning as

learning that is facilitated and supported through the use of information and communication technology (ICT). Sangral et al. (2012) contend that e-learning is a product of the evolution of distance learning given that e-learning emerged when distance learning adopted the internet as a platform for delivering education. Lord (2000) contends that e-learning is 'distributed learning enabled by the internet' (p. 217). They see the internet as a multifunctional platform that allows for 'the provision of student access to learning resources, the facilitation of communication and collaborative working among and between students and academic staff, the assessment of individual students, and the provision of administrative and student support' (p. 217).

### **3.0 ICT and E-learning in Refugee Contexts**

Refugee contexts are very complex and therefore require non-conventional approaches to the provision of education. Educators and technologists have since realized that ICT may be one way to provide rapid and effective solutions for education among refugees. A report on ICT and the education of refugees in the MENA region (July, 2016) indicates that humanitarian and development agencies, NGOs, tech sectors are increasingly searching for new ways to use ICT to meet the educational needs of the refugee population in the MENA Region.

According to a UNHCR report; *Missing out: Refugee education in crisis*, (September, 2016) universities around the world are increasingly using online learning to facilitate students from different backgrounds and countries, including those from refugee camps, to learn together. For example, the UNHCR, University of Geneva, other universities, donors and other organizations formed the Connected Learning Consortium for Higher Education for Refugees. The initiative facilitates the offering of connected courses using the blended mode of learning that combines digital access and face-to-face learning. The UNHCR report indicates that since 2004 the initiatives have provided accredited programmes for more than 5000 refugee students in nine countries. The report further notes that in 2016 alone it was expected that over 350 new students would benefit from connected learning degree and diploma programmes with accreditation from institutions in Australia, Canada, Germany, Kenya, Switzerland and USA.

One such programme implemented through connected learning is the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) offered in Dadaab refugee camp by the University of York in collaboration with Kenyatta University, and Moi University, Kenya. The BHER programme has provided E-learning to over 600 learners since inception in 2013 (UNHCR, Kenya Operation fact sheet, August, 2017)

Another example of the innovative use of e-learning in the education of refugees is seen in a partnership between Vodafone Foundation and UNHCR. Through this partnership refugee classes in Kenya, South Sudan, DRC and Tanzania have been equipped with instant classroom kits that provide localized digital contents, tablets, projectors and audio systems powered by solar batteries and using satellite or mobile networks (UNHCR, 2016) Furthermore, Jesuits Commons Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM), Strathmore University and Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology have all utilized E-learning to provide higher education in Kakuma camp. Masinde Muliro has been conducting diploma teacher training sessions to enhance pedagogical competencies of refugee teachers ([www.unhcr.org/ke](http://www.unhcr.org/ke))

### **4.0 Statement of Issue**

Online teaching has been hailed as an innovative way of delivering education unencumbered by limitations of time and space. E-learning is therefore seen by many as a cost effective way of achieving the goal of education for all in Africa, a continent with marked disparities in access to education. While these potential benefits are not imaginary, it is important for universities implementing e-learning programmes not to be swept away by a compulsive enthusiasm about technology. The foundation of e-learning programmes should be the identification of unique learner characteristics and relating these to the 'e' in e-learning. Without this, e-learning can create other types of 'distances' that would still hinder access to education.

E-learning has been embraced as an innovative approach to the provision of education to refugees. While all these efforts are laudable and bearing fruits, it must be noted that there have been numerous challenges. For the ICT to benefit the displaced populations it must be tailored to their specific needs and circumstances. It has been argued that education technology, even in stable

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environments has often not led to the achievement of the intended educational objectives due to myriad challenges. The challenges are even greater in the widely varying and typically unstable situations of refugees. Though ICT has the potential of bridging the gap in the provision of education to refugees there is a risk that it can create other gaps that impede the achievement of the envisaged outcomes. This paper reports other ‘distances’ encountered by refugees in an e-learning programme in Daadab and Kakuma refugee camps in Kenya and suggests ways of bridging those ‘distances’

## **5.0 Literature Review**

We now present a review of literature to show the growth of distance and e-learning in Kenya as well as the attractiveness of e-learning programmes. This section ends with a review of literature on the challenges of implementing e-learning in African and specifically in the Kenyan refugee camps context.

### **5.1 The Attraction in E-learning**

E-learning has become an accepted part of educational delivery systems and coexists with the more traditional face to face delivery mode. The growth in distance education is linked to a variety of societal factors. Nyerere, Gravenir and Mse (2012) identify some of these as being family commitments of adult learners which have to be balanced with the need for continued upgrading of skills due to rapid technological advances and other changes in the work place. This makes it impractical to insist on programmes that require the physical presence of learners in campuses. Another factor is the growing awareness about and embracing of the concept of lifelong learning. People want to continue learning without having to drop all their other engagements in order to do so. Moreover, this goes hand in hand with the growing autonomy of learners. Learner’s desire programmes that provide them with tools that enable them discover and build knowledge at their own pace.

The other force behind the growth of distance learning is conflict. All too often, conflicts lead to massive displacement of entire populations, many of whom end up living in host countries as refugees (Nyerere, Gravenir & Mse, 2012). This factor is of specific significance in this paper given its focus on refugee populations. Displacement of people comes with the disruption of their normal lives and

institutions, part of which is education. Refugees, like everyone else, deserve education as a basic human right and this makes education providers to be humanitarian actors in times of crises.

Kenya has, over the years, played host to hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring war-torn countries like Somali, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan. The Government of Kenya continues to pursue an encampment policy with regard to refugees. This means that the majority of the refugee population in Kenya is required to remain in camps and their freedom of movement out of the camps is heavily regulated. The Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps complexes are thus what the majority of refugees living in Kenya call home, and it is here that education, and other services, are provided.

The obvious challenge of providing higher education in a camp setting is that it may not be cost effective for a university to put up a campus in a refugee camp. In the Kenyan context, both Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps are located in remote parts in northern Kenya, a region that has suffered neglect by successive governments and therefore lags behind the rest of the country in terms of infrastructural development. As a region, northern Kenya has one full fledged public university, the Garissa University and one public university constituent college, the Turkana University College. Garissa University was shut down for one year after the 2015 a terror attack that killed 149 students. This university is located in Garissa Town which is over 100kms from Dadaab. Turkana University College, which is located near Lodwar Town, is about 130kms from Kakuma. All the other public universities in Kenya are located in other regions of the country with the majority being based in the capital city, Nairobi. As already noted (cf.3.0) there are several local and international institutions offering various joint and individual programmes to the refugee population in the Kenyan context. The local institutions include Kenyatta University (which has a campus in Dadaab), Moi University, Strathmore Univeristy and Masinde Muliro University. The focus of this paper is a joint programme by Kenyatta University and the University of Geneva.

On a broader scale, e-learning can facilitate the expansion of education and thus minimize the lagging behind of certain populations, institutions

or even regions. Gunga and Rickett (2010) echo this by asserting that 'e-learning has the potential to enable Africa achieve education for all' (p.1). This, they note, is because e-learning allows for the provision of borderless education: unbound by both time and space whether for on-campus or for off-campus students. An added advantage is that it allows for collaboration between universities in the development and delivery of programmes. Such collaboration, be it between universities in the same country, on the same continent or in different parts of the world, helps bridge the knowledge gap by encouraging the sharing of best practices. Further, Gunga and Rickett (2010) note that e-learning enhances both collaborative and self-learning among learners.

Lord (2000) identifies the major reasons why universities have embraced e-learning. First among these is the need to expand access to higher education. Universities see e-learning as a means of catering to the needs of underserved populations such as refugees. Connected to this is the fact that traditional university calendars do not cater for populations with family and work obligations and, thus, such potential learners are locked out. E-learning allows for their inclusion.

The second motivating factor is alleviation of capacity constraints or what Lord (2000) terms as the 'brick and mortar capacities of universities'. As students' numbers increase, many universities find it a challenge to expand their physical infrastructure at a similar rate. In Kenya, for example, the admission of students to public universities is largely tied to physical infrastructure such as lecture halls and student hostels, especially for the government sponsored students. It is costly for universities to put up accommodation facilities even as they meet the cost of building teaching infrastructure such as lecture halls, libraries and laboratories. E-learning programmes help minimize or do away with such costs.

The third reason for adopting e-learning is that it allows universities to capitalize on emergent market opportunities. Higher education is no longer a preserve of the 18-24 age bracket. Among those seeking higher education is a growing population of people in need of capacity building, or who desire career growth and change. In addition, technological dynamics in the work place as well as emerging best practices require retooling wide sections of the workforce. These are populations

that universities have to cater for and, given their job commitments, universities can only reach them through distance e-learning programmes.

The fourth reason for universities to invest in e-learning is that such programmes are seen as catalysts for institutional transformation (Lord, 2000). Despite increase in demand for higher education and an emerging population in search of higher learning, universities have to contend with decreasing public funding. The world over, managers of institutions of higher learning are being forced to come up with innovative ways of carrying out their mandates in cost effective ways. Universities see e-learning as the modern way of delivering higher education to ever expanding categories of learners in a cost effective way.

It is against this background that the advantages of e-learning as a cost effective way of delivering higher education to refugees living in camps has to be understood. To start with, it comes without costly physical infrastructure. Secondly, in the Kenyan situation, it allows universities to reach a population whose movement is restricted. Moreover, this mode of delivering education minimizes the need for providing security to members of academic staff who might be targets of terror attacks if they travel to the sites of the two refugee complexes.

## **5.2 Challenges in Implementing E-learning Programmes**

It would be wrong to present e-learning as a panacea to all the challenges that face the delivery of quality higher education. Despite its appeal and the potential benefits outlined in the previous section, it must be acknowledged that e-learning comes with its share of potential challenges. Several scholars have written about these challenges on the African continent. Gunga and Rickettes (2007) identified several ICT related factors as major challenges. They noted e-learning depends on more than just an online platform. Internet based applications develop on the backbone of existing ICT related infrastructure such as electricity, telecommunications, computers and trained technicians to install and service this infrastructure. Moreover, the setting up and maintenance of learning platforms, not to mention the development of interactive online content, needs ICT related expertise which may not be within the domain of academic personnel who facilitate specific courses. It is at these levels that Africa lags behind and this affects both the quality and expansion of e-learning

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programmes.

Njenga and Fourie (2010) pick on this and point out that there is a widespread and erroneous assumption that e-learning is less expensive. Whereas in the long run this may be the case, the starting point for universities in Africa is to lay very expensive infrastructural ground work and the training of staff to support this infrastructure. Thus, when a university provides gadgets such as tablets and laptops to facilitate access of preloaded content, it is important to factor in other costs such as availability of the internet, the cost of such internet, and learner support in form of maintenance and repair of the said gadget. In other words, the provision of a physical gadget, while key, by itself cannot be equated to enabling learners to access education. If all the other related needs are not addressed, then the gadget remains just that: a gadget, rather than an educational tool. Given the remoteness of the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, the poor physical infrastructure in the area where the camps are located and the poverty levels among the refugees living in these camps, such challenges are doubled.

Another challenge identified by Njenga and Fourie (2010) is the assumption that providing learners with volumes of online information will lead to its transformation into knowledge. Some programmes are designed so that learners are provided with pre-loaded modules and active links to other online sources. Beyond this, the learner receives little or no support on how to sift through information, evaluate sources and synthesize information from multiple sources.

The very foundation of e-learning should be teaching learners how to construct knowledge from multiple sources of information. This is more urgent in Kenya where learners join universities from secondary school where the majority of students learn by memorizing sets of 'facts' which they then reproduce during exams. Such learners are totally unprepared for university education which expects them to read a variety of sources and from these synthesize a different outlook on a given phenomenon. Such learners are easily overwhelmed by information from online sources.

On their part, Tarus, Gichoya and Muumbo (2015) identify seven different challenges in the implementation of e-learning in Kenya.

Their findings are based on analysis of data from 127 respondents. The top three challenges identified include inadequate ICT and e-learning infrastructure, financial constraints and lack of operational e-learning policies. The other challenges include the amount of time required to develop e-learning content, lack of affordable and adequate internet bandwidth, lack of technical skills on e-learning and e-content development by teaching staff and lack of interest and commitment among teaching staff to use e-learning.

To put all these challenges into perspective, Webster and Hackley (1997) propose four areas that need evaluation for one to comment on the success or otherwise of e-learning. These are teaching effectiveness, technology, instructor characteristics and learner characteristics. It is the interplay between these factors that determines the success of e-learning as a mode of delivering knowledge to learners. To these, we add the administrative framework within which e-learning programmes are conceived and mounted. These are the broad areas within which we will discuss the challenges of e-learning programmes targeting refugees in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps.

## **6.0 Methodology**

This paper focuses on e-learning programmes targeted at refugees living in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps in northern Kenya. The programmes were offered by Kenyatta University in collaboration with the University of Geneva. The programmes were under Kenyatta University's School of Digital and Virtual and Open Learning (hereafter DSVOL). The School is mandated to oversee all aspects of e-learning at the University. These include content development, uploading of course modules, training of teaching staff and students on the use of the e-learning platform as well as providing various forms of student support.

The data for this paper were collected from multiple sources. These include document review, interviews and introspection. The documents reviewed included criteria for admission into DSVOL, DSVOL brochure and the Digital School User Guide. Three groups of people were interviewed namely students, lecturers facilitating the language based courses and persons in management positions at DSVOL. Starting with the students, there were 17 in total, 6 in Kakuma and 11 in Dadaab. Of those in Kakuma, five were male and one female. In Dadaab, 8 were

male and three female. Given the small number of students, we aimed at including roughly half of them in the study sample. We sampled six male students, four from Dadaab and two from Kakuma. Among the female students sampled, two came from Dadaab and one from Kakuma. In total, we had nine students in the sample which was about half of the target population. As for the lecturers, out of the eight who teach for DSVOL, four that were directly involved in the programme were sampled. The researchers excluded themselves from this cohort of respondents.

Among the DSVOL administrators interviewed were the:

- 1) Dean
- 2) Director of E-learning
- 3) Coordinator- in-charge, Content Development
- 4) Coordinator –in-charge, Teaching and Quality Assurance

The interview questions were open ended to encourage an in depth discussion of issues of interest. The students were interviewed on their degree of competence in the English language and ICT skills on joining the programme, the quality and length of training to use an online portal and the availability and adequacy of infrastructure and facilities in the camps. There were also questions on the level and nature of technical support received. The facilitators interviewed on their training on preparing digital content and teaching online. They were also asked to provide information on their experiences in teaching refugee students. Concerning the DSVOL administrators, the interview questions hinged on the management of collaborative partnerships, orientation of both staff and students on the use of the platform, reliability of the hardware and software enabling learning and the mitigating technical support offered. Other issues of focus were the interactiveness of content, variety of instructional materials and monitoring of online teaching. There was also interest on whether special considerations are made for language courses given that areas like phonology have technical aspects .

Apart from interviews, introspection by the authors was another rich source of data. The three authors teach in the Department of English and Linguistics of Kenyatta University. They facilitate face-to-face programmes as well as the online ones. In addition, one author was part of the team managing the collaborative course offered between Kenyatta

University (hereafter also referred to as KU) and the University of Geneva (hereafter referred to as UniGe). Thus, the experiences of the authors were also an invaluable source of data on the challenges of implementing language based courses online.

## **7.0 Findings on the Challenges Identified by Students and Course Facilitators**

As mentioned (cf. 4.3) the broad areas for measuring the success of online programmes proposed by Webster and Hackely (1997) were adopted for analysis. These are technology, student characteristics, instructor characteristics and teaching effectiveness. To these, the authors added administrative framework to capture the practical aspects of managing e-learning as well as collaborative programmes. In addition, the authors collapsed instructor characteristics and teaching effectiveness into one factor.

### **7.1 Technology**

As mentioned in the literature review, online teaching is founded on an infrastructure that goes beyond the provision of computers. The actual shelters that UNHCR has built in the Dadaab and Kakuma camps for the refugees do not have electricity. At the time, when the certificate course was offered, various organisations offering services to the refugees were using diesel run generators or buying power from a privately owned power generator to run their office activities. This made electrical power expensive and at times erratic.

Two challenges arose from this. First, only three out of the nine students sampled had regular access to the internet. Of the three, two were in Dadaab while one was in Kakuma. The other six had no access to the internet as they were neither not employed nor did they live in environments where there was ready access to the internet. In any case, even among the three who had access to the internet, the two from Dadaab (who were working with the same organization) said their employer prohibited the use of the internet for personal undertakings like learning. The student from Kakuma was able to obtain permission to use the internet at the workplace for study purposes, but this access was limited to tea and lunch breaks. As such, the lagging behind in course work by six of the nine sampled learners could be attributed to this fact. For these learners, accessing the internet meant buying data bundles

from various internet service providers. This proved costly given that most refugees are dependent on rations from the UNHCR. Moreover, downloading or streaming videos is rather expensive if one uses data bundles and most could not afford to. To save the situation, the coordinator from the University of Geneva had to use her own financial resources to buy the bundles for the students. This was a cost that had not been factored in when the course was being planned and funding for it was being sourced.

Secondly, of the nine sampled learners, six said they had challenges charging the tablets KU had provided for them to access course content. They said this was so because their shelters in the camps did not have electricity. Again, only three (two in Dadaab and one in Kakuma) could readily access electricity in their respective workplaces. Whereas the tablets are supposed to be pre-loaded with content, the students are expected to participate in various online activities which require internet connection. Specifically, students were required to participate in chats with course facilitators. A chat requires synchronous access to the platform by all the participants. This became very difficult to organize given the variations in internet access among the students and the unreliability of the internet connectivity.

Coupled with this was the fact that no provision was made regarding timely support for learners whenever their devices malfunctioned (which was very frequent). Given the remoteness of the camps, the process of airlifting malfunctioned devices to Nairobi for repair or replacement and returning the same to the students would take about two months. The University of Geneva had provided learning hubs in both Kakuma and Dadaab. These were solar powered metal containers equipped with ten computers and had internet access. The learning hubs could, ideally, work in tandem with the tablet devices to facilitate internet access to the students. The challenge with the hubs proved to be lack of qualified technical personnel willing to work in Dadaab. Another was that the solar panels could not power all the computers for the larger part of the course. Moreover, access to the Dadaab hub by the students proved a challenge. Dadaab consists of four separate camps (Ifo 1, Ifo 2, Hagadera and Dagahaley). Movement from one camp to the other is restricted and the six sampled students said it would cost at least two hundred Kenya shillings for the return journey. To ease the movement challenge,

KU provided the learners with student with IDs. It was only in the second semester that UniGE facilitated transport costs to enable them visit the hubs at least once a month. The consequence was that the learning hub in Dadaab did not serve its intended purpose as had been envisioned.

## **7.2 Student Characteristics**

The students who enroll in online courses are diverse. The diversity could be based on ethnicity and gender but also on knowledge and skills base. Thus, the language courses that are the focus of this paper had learners with varying language and IT competencies. Four out of the sampled nine said they had basic knowledge of computers. Indeed, two, of the four, said they had formal training in computer applications and packages at certificate level. In addition, three out of these four had jobs that involved the use of computers. The remaining five students said they had no training at all on computers. Four of them said they had email addresses prior to the commencement of the courses but only one said he used the email 2-3 three times a month. The other three, said they did not use the emails for communication and had only opened them when applying for training. One student said he did not have an email address prior to the course and did not even own a smart phone. Training for the use of the InZone platform (the online platform by the University of Geneva for delivering education in emergencies) was mainly done remotely: the students were sent an instruction kit and then all were required to be online at a given time to be taken through the registration, login and platform navigation by the course coordinator based in Geneva. Even when the coordinator did a face to face follow up, it was a one day affair that hardly had impact because the learning hub was not running as had been anticipated. The students also went through a face-to-face orientation on the use of the KU online platform although, it had been agreed that the teaching would be done on the InZone platform.

It soon became clear that a one hour orientation on the use of a teaching platform was not enough for most of the students. Five of students could not locate course materials, assignments and could not even submit assignments online. The course ran on a tight schedule where each facilitator had four weeks to interact with students. This meant that language enhancement units (listening and speaking for semester one) had to be done before students



could embark on the interpreting units. By the end of the time allocated to the language enhancement units, five of the students had not submitted a single assignment. The major reason for this was that they had not been able to access the assignment in the first place and/or did not know how to upload their responses.

This challenge arose from the assumption that the two universities made: that all that learners needed was orientation on using learning platforms; that the learners already had adequate ICT knowledge and skills. It was the assumption that anyone who can send an email is equipped to do almost anything using a computer, including undertake a complete course. It was a disregard of the 'e' in e-learning. It was failure to make a distinction between 'teaching with' and 'teaching about' technology and determining which the prerequisite is. Our interviews established that implementation of e-learning programmes is not based on an assessment of students' ability to learn with technology. One student said, 'Yes we were trained. But if it is something you have not done before. It is very difficult. It is hard to remember because you are told many things on the same day. You cannot remember everything when you are left alone.' Indeed, it merged that profiling of student characteristics before they enroll for online courses was non-existent. A look at the Digital School brochure showed that basic IT and computer applications knowledge are not listed as entry requirements for courses to be offered online. The qualifications that apply for the various programmes are the same as those for campus based face-to-face programmes. Universities expect students to come to an online course equipped with all the requisite ICT skills. Thus, the orientation by the two universities was premised on this assumption. In addition, the Digital School User Guide, which explains to the students how to navigate the platform users terms which presuppose knowledge of computer platforms. Examples of such terms and expressions include 'home screen/course screen' 'icon' and '...click on link highlighted and move ahead to check the checkbox...' Moreover, the 2016 version of the Guide does not have a glossary that defines technical terms used.

The solution for this challenge of varied technological know how was to open up other communication channels with the students, other than the teaching platform. Instructors began interacting with the students via phone calls, text messages and e-mail.

This helped as students who were inactive and unresponsive on the platform were able to receive assignments via email and send their responses the same way. In addition, there was an attempt to pair up students so that those with better developed IT skills were partnered with those lacking in such skills. This form of mentorship proved beneficial but only to a small group. As already explained, the students were located in different camps and movement between camps is restricted. Moreover, the students would have to incur an additional traveling cost. Thus, pairing them could only have worked effectively if students were in the same camp.

In retrospect, it would have been best to invest more in establishing the IT competencies of the students. This would have helped identify those that needed some training in computer application packages before beginning the course. The popular assumption that if one can send an email then they can do anything on a computer is wrong; more so for adult learners in a refugee camp who may have minimal exposure to computers.

The other challenge stemmed from the pedagogical approach adopted by the facilitators in the course. The teaching of the course was to be a hundred percent online and learners were not to have a physical contact with the facilitators. The concept of collaborative learning was thus the pedagogical approach embraced. Learners were expected to form groups that would facilitate the creation of knowledge. Using the learning platforms and physical meetings, the learners were to collaboratively go through course materials and, through discussion of the same, construct knowledge. In addition, the learners were expected to discuss various course tasks with a view to deconstructing them to arrive at similar best approaches in solving them. However, each learner was ultimately expected to do the task individually, applying the knowledge that had been generated by a group. This concept was understood variously by the learners. Mid way through the course, the facilitators discovered that learners were basically submitting similar or identical responses to tasks. This made the facilitators question the kind of collaboration that the learners had adopted.

Connected to this, it also emerged that the learners were not ready or even equipped with the kind of learner independence envisaged by collaborative

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learning. Having come from a teaching tradition that places the teacher at the center, the learners yearned for teacher control; they demanded for teachers' notes. This proved quite difficult to deal with, given that the course was being offered by two universities, each with very different approaches to on line teaching. Online facilitation on the KU facilitation is founded on preloaded content in the form of teaching modules. Thus, for the units that the Department of English and Linguistics of Kenyatta University was offering, the fallback position was for the students to access the teaching module for the relevant units on the KU platform. The same solution could not be found for the units offered by the University of Geneva whose platform does not include a module. The Geneva facilitators insisted on providing audio, video and written materials on a topic by topic basis. It is from the guided interaction with these materials that learners were expected to discover and generate knowledge.

The challenge that emerged was that most of the students were susceptible to information overload. Moreover, they had no skills in evaluating different texts provided and synthesizing the information from such texts. Students were required to discover similarities, contradictions and patterns from various online sources. This proved difficult for most. As Guri-Rosenblit (2015) observes, the internet may be a gold mine of information and skills but without guidance, undergraduate learners are likely to get overwhelmed by information and end up not constructing any knowledge.

The solution found for this was to make the course blended. This meant moving away from the hundred percent online teaching and learning originally envisaged to creating time for face-to-face interaction between facilitators and learners. The budgetary implications of this shift were pronounced given the location of the collaborating foreign university.

### **7.3 Instructor Characteristics / Teaching Effectiveness**

At the time of the certificate course under focus, none of the facilitators from KU had undergone training on the development of interactive online content. The much the instructors had done in readiness for the course was develop modules which were loaded onto the KU platform. With teaching being done on the InZone platform, the instructors from the local university had to undergo a half day

training on navigating this platform. The approach on the platform was radically different. Topics were approached on the basis of tasks to students. It is through solving tasks that students were expected to discover concepts and acquire skills. While this is indeed the modern way of teaching, it requires elaborate preparation on the part on the instructor. According to the InZone coordinator who took the KU facilitators through the platform, more time is spent developing online tasks based on interactive content than on the actual teaching of the course.

Course offerings in universities are tied to semester dates and the course had to proceed. A lot of time was spent by the KU facilitators adapting their content to the new platform as the course went on. Ideally, there should have been adequate training of facilitators on the workings of the new platform as well as on how to develop interactive language content.

### **7.4 Administrative Challenges**

*i) Choice of Platform for certificate joint course:* the course in question was Certificate in Community Interpreting. Kenyatta University offered the students English enhancement units in the areas of writing, speaking, reading and listening skills, vocabulary and grammar. On its part, the University of Geneva offered interpreting units such as consecutive interpreting, and interpreter ethics. The course was to be offered online, and it was agreed that the students would be registered as Kenyatta University students but would receive a joint certificate.

Through DSVOL, Kenyatta University offers blended online programmes so that each such programme has both online and face-to-face components. The face-to-face component has two parts: students are required to attend on-campus two-day tutorials where they physically meet with course facilitators. Secondly, the students are expected to sit for one continuous assessment test as well as the final examination on-campus. The University of Geneva has 100% online interpreting courses where both the teaching and evaluation of students is done via the online platform. It later emerged, that this was the mode of delivery they had envisaged for the refugee learners.

The first major challenge was that whereas the two institutions agreed to offer the course jointly, it was never fully discussed on which platform the

offering would be: the Kenyatta University one, the University of Geneva one or on both. A choice of one or both had potential disadvantages. If each university was to offer its units on its platform, it would have meant that students would have to learn to navigate two platforms. This could have posed a major challenge for students, more so those with low ICT skills. The alternative was to use the platform of one of the universities, and indeed this was the option taken. It was decided that teaching would be done on the University of Geneva InZone platform. The reason for this decision was that the InZone platform was better suited for the high levels of interactivity required given that the course was on interpreting. In addition, the University of Geneva was offering the majority of the units in the course. However, content for the KU units was also uploaded onto the KU platform in the form of modules and students were shown how to access the platform. The challenge in implementing this decision was that the KU facilitators had to learn to use the InZone platform. With training and support from the University of Geneva, this was done. With hindsight, the details regarding the platform(s) should have been thrashed out in an Memorandum of Understanding (MOA) before the course began.

*ii) Monitoring of Teaching and Learning:* As noted, facilitation was done on the InZone platform. Indeed, the KU staff who facilitated language support units were trained on how to teach on the InZone platform. This is the platform on which they availed interactive content to the students, offered support, evaluated and graded the students. This meant that DSVOL would not be in a position to monitor the teaching of the students much as they were KU registered students under DSVOL. Collaborations work effectively only if one party knows what the other is doing, and therefore it became necessary to find a way of enabling both universities monitor the teaching. This was done by giving access rights to the Chair of the Department of English and Linguistics of Kenyatta University, this being the host department of the course. The Chair could access the InZone platform and view the interaction between students and facilitators. This meant that she was in an informed position to inform the KU management about the progress of the course for both the components taught by KU and Geneva. In addition, at the end of the course, the course coordinator from InZone prepared comprehensive digital files for DSVOL, capturing all the interaction that went on between facilitators

and students in all the course units.

## **8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations**

The benefits of distance e-learning programmes for populations without access to the traditional face-to-face higher education are not in doubt. E-learning allows providers of higher education to overcome both physical and distance hindrances to education. However, as the preceding discussion has shown, distance e-learning does not exclude investment in physical, human and e- resources. There has to be access, not only to both the requisite physical gadgets, but also to other determinants of access such as electricity and data bundles. There is also need to invest heavily in the training of personnel who ensure the success of programmes. Such include course facilitators and technicians on whom the students depend for learning as well as technical support. The initial investment in the infrastructural and human resources required to run successful distance e-learning programmes can be monumental. Managers of intuitions for higher learning should be disabused of the notion that e-learning is less expensive. Decisions to start such programmes should be based on sound budgetary planning.

In addition, the quality of e-learning programmes is dependent on proper planning. This is especially so for programmes offered through partnerships. Partnering institutions should invest a lot of time in understanding each other's pedagogical approaches and interpretations on online teaching. This is critical where one of the partners comes from the Global North and the other from the Global South. The starting point should be the recognition that there is no universal approach to pedagogy and to teaching online. Points of divergence, especially those that are likely to impact on the teaching-learning process, should be addressed before the commencement of programmes.

Finally, institutions of higher learning should invest more in identifying and analyzing learner characteristics. The emerging data should be fed in the programme design. Learners who need upgrading in general ICT skills should be identified and assisted outside the time limits for given courses. For learners in remote locations, different ways of availing learner support should be identified in advance to minimize reactionary solutions to challenges once courses commence.

Without investment and proper planning, there is a real danger of higher education providers doing more harm than good in emergency situations. Refugees need education that can empower them and help them deal with the challenges of their immediate situation, even as it prepares them for relocation back home when conflicts end. Only quality education can do this.

## 9.0 Suggestions for Future Research

Many institutions of higher learning in Kenya have embraced e-learning in an attempt to reach populations for whom the on-campus mode of delivery is not practical. We argue that it is imperative for the proliferation of online programmes be informed by research. To this end, there is need for comparative studies on achievement levels of learners enrolled in similar courses within the dichotomy of face-to-face and online delivery modes.

There is also need to investigate how different universities have conceptualized online learning and the training they offer to their staff and students to prepare them for this mode of delivering higher education.

The demographics of learners who opt for online courses need to be mapped out. Only a data driven understanding of the people who are pushing up the demand for distance e-learning can lead to the development of programmes that meet their needs.

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