

Introductions:

I want to begin this blog post by stating that collecting school enrollment data for refugees and asylum-seekers is difficult and often with a large margin of error and inconsistency. Because of the high amount of on-going projects, there is at times an insufficient capacity and research collecting methods used by global refugee non-governmental organizations, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The lack of reliable data can reduce forming policy and developing programs for refugee children and their education into a bit of a guessing game.

Past experiences affect how school-aged children navigate school and the relationships they form with teachers and peers – such is the case in particular with refugee children, where pre-resettlement history can have significant and dramatic ramifications to academic careers. Gaps in understanding this history in the education system of refugees can negatively affect refugees' children's sense of belonging and identity; relationships with peers and teachers; and the correct academic experience, psychosocial services, and future of the child.

Background – Refugee Education: The Malaysian Context

Most refugees experience frequent disruptions and limited access to schooling. Enrollment rates of refugee children are quite low and this disruption leaves many behind the 'age appropriate grade level' (*The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum*. Sarah Dryden-Peterson. Migration Policy Institute: October 2015 page 1). Secondary school enrollment rates are less than 2 percent in Malaysia. Several factors impede refugees' enrollment to these schools, including "living amid acute conflict, legal restrictions on enrollment and frequent moves with first-asylum countries, and fear of exposure to immigration enforcement and other authorities." (*The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum*. Sarah Dryden-Peterson. Migration Policy Institute: October 2015: page 1).

Along with the above, refugee children often encounter language barriers in school and struggle to access instruction content taught in a language other than their own (or are faced with the difficulties of different and difficult educational environments). Refugee students also face various different forms of discrimination in first-asylum country schools. These schools often have curricula emphasizing the host country history and culture and often neglect refugees' origin countries. Refugees may be singled out and even teased due to their nationality – even hostility and bullying.

Case Study:

One student described a typical day as studying from 8am to 4pm and then working until 2am to earn sufficient income for school. Each day would include a lengthy bus journey to and from the school.

Many refugee children in Malaysia face legal restrictions to schooling as Malaysia is a country that has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol. Most refugees from the Middle East do not have the legal status of refugees and consequently do not have access to education or any other form of aid. In Kuala Lumpur, refugee children are described as being hesitant to journey to school (even with the over eight community-based refugee schools registered with UNHCR) because of the distance and the danger of exposure to the authorities or those with unsavory opinions and dangerous attitudes towards refugees (*The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum*. Sarah Dryden-Peterson. Migration Policy Institute: October 2015: page 8).

3C Forum – OUR and UNHCR:

An ‘unconference’ was held in early August 2016 at Open Universities for Refugees (OUR) to combine all knowledge, resources, ideas and submit to UNHCR (who will approach the Malaysian government about these issues).

OUR - Open Universities for Refugees - is designed to help meet the higher educational needs of communities in protracted refugee/displacement situations globally.

HOWEVER - How real is the opportunity of university?

- It is very difficult for refugee students to support themselves through university in regards to: food, accommodation, social services, and education
- Must have flexible entries (normal entry standard) – University of Nottingham
- Financial problems and grading requirements are the two most difficult barriers to entry
- Time is a huge factor (travel time to university and home and jobs)

Personal Opinion

First, I think we need to ask refugee students if they want to go to university and what they would like to study. Sitting in on meetings with the IGSCCE students and monitoring classroom attendance, it is clear that most students have other priorities besides education including working, family and friend relationships, and health concerns. This is on top of the tumultuous nature of being a refugee and living illegally in Malaysia.

Background: Refugees and Access to Education in Kuala Lumpur

The UNHCR office in Malaysia indicates that as of the end of April 2016, there are some 154,140 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with them in Malaysia. Of these:

1. 139,780 are from Myanmar, comprising some 53,410 Rohingyas, 43,660 Chins, 11,530 Myanmar Muslims, 6,100 Rakhines & Arakanese, and other ethnicities from Myanmar.
2. There are some 14,370 refugees and asylum-seekers from other countries, including some 3,060 Sri Lankans, 2,260 Pakistanis, 1,510 Somalis, 1,460 Syrians, 1,410 Yemenis, 1,320 Iraqis, 740 Afghans, 650 Palestinians, and others from other countries.
3. Some 68% of refugees and asylum-seekers are men, while 32% are women.
4. There are some 34,600 children below the age of 18.

Although Malaysia did not sign the 1951 Convention and its Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Malaysian Government continues to cooperate with UNHCR in addressing refugee issues on humanitarian grounds. As there are currently no legislative or administrative provisions in place for dealing with the situation of asylum-seekers or refugees in the country, UNHCR conducts all activities related to the reception, registration, documentation and status determination of asylum-seekers and refugees. The legal status of refugees in Malaysia has significant impact on their opportunities to access education.

Despite these efforts, those attending primary and secondary education represent a significant minority of those eligible. UNHCR figures indicate that:

1. In Malaysia, there are some 33,640 refugee children below the age of 18 registered with UNHCR;

2. Some 21,880 of these children are of school-going age. However, it is estimated that only approximately 28% of these children have access to any kind of education. This means over 70% of refugee children of school going age are not in school;
3. Unable to access formal education, refugee communities establish community-based schooling for their children, and these are often held under resource-scarce conditions.

In terms of higher education, potential students from refugee backgrounds are required to meet the minimum entry requirements. These vary according to institution but fairly typical examples minimum scores in secondary school examinations; English Language Proficiency, usually to at least year 12. Several institutions also accept applicants whose previous study was at an institution in which English was the language of instruction. It is also possible in some instances to take in-house English proficiency tests and/or bespoke Bridging courses; a minimum of 17 years of age.

These discussions out of the 3-C Forum focused on three key themes:

1. The level and demand for higher education amongst the refugee population in Kuala Lumpur;
2. The view of higher education providers on the provision of higher education to refugees and the issues it raised in terms of admissions procedures and criteria, the delivery of courses and the provision of certification and accreditation;
3. Issues around the delivery of secondary education at the identification, preparation and support of students at the secondary level including the current level of infrastructure available to support refugee education, in terms of access to IT, the internet, and appropriate and effective study space.

Demand for Higher Education amongst refugees in Kuala Lumpur:

UNHCR representatives indicated that previous surveys have identified almost 1,000 refugees who are interested in entering higher education – they are in direct contact with approximately half. In the context of a total refugee population of over 150,000 however, this figure represents only 0.7%. Moreover, those institutions which currently offer places to refugee students report that in the previous academic year, 2015/2016, not all of the available places have been filled.

Students were offered subjects in the following:

1. English
2. Business and Law
3. Arts and Humanities
4. Health and Social Sciences
5. Science, Tech, Engineering and Mathematics

There are several reason for this relatively low level of demand and uptake of places are several. With only 28% of the eligible school-age population in primary or secondary education, the large majority are effectively excluded from accessing higher education.

Student Visa Complications
 The fact that refugee students are not able to obtain student visas and therefore do not have the same legal status as either Malaysian students or ‘international students’ also is problematic. It is not possible to enroll refugee students into any programs leading to the award of a Malaysian accredited certificate. Instead students are regarded as taking a series of short courses for credit learning to the provision of a student transcript acceptance by other institutions or employers.

Secondary Education Provision and the Support of Potential University Students

Representatives of community based learning centres that serve the KL refugee population were met with.

It was deduced that:

- The curriculum that would be followed is unclear. Several schools follow the Malaysian curriculum in effect before 2012 when the language of instruction was changed from English to Bahasa Melayu and using photocopies of textbooks were provided by UNHCR. Some use American curriculum.
- Demand for education is rising as the reputation of the community and UNHCR supported schools throughout the refugee community in Malaysia – some schools have doubled their classroom sizes in two years. Dropout rates remain high (especially among school-aged children who are required to earn income)
- Recruitment of the appropriately qualified teachers is difficult – there is a strong need for more.
- There is a need for a more coordinated approach, across UNHCR-supported and community-based schools within KL to identify and target students who are likely to complete secondary education and apply to enter higher education.
- It is difficult for these students to have or find new study spaces. Therefore, it would be necessary to provide appropriate study space, possibly in existing schools.

The Next Steps:

Hopefully, I have presented a brief overview of the current situation in terms of providing opportunities to access higher education in Kuala Lumpur. Here is a small list of considerable measures that arose from the 3C Forum:

- The need to alleviate the current legal status of refugees in Malaysia to enable greater access to education opportunities – state, private and international
- Expansion of the current provision of primary and secondary schooling, teachers and resources
- Enabling refugee children to enter and continue to attend school
- Lower the dropout rate
- Enable better identification and support of secondary students whom are likely to apply for higher education across secondary level provision
- There is a need to speak more about requirements policy, protocol, scholarships and bridge program.
- Universities must develop guidelines first and should present information to students (at a booth at an education fair)
- Organizations must meet again and develop strong and collaborative goals towards the structure and scope of university programs and availability of secondary education for refugee students