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Hopeful futures for refugees in higher education: cultivation, activation, and technology

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Abstract

This paper discusses hopeful futures for higher education and the use of technology in realising those futures through the lens of refugee education in Uganda. Through an analysis of qualitative research done with refugee students and teachers participating in a blended bridging programme designed to prepare students for entry and success in higher education, this paper explores the interplay between contingency and positions of hope for refugee students in relation to higher education and further assimilation into civic society. Two themes emerged from the analysis that suggested a prioritarian orientation for higher education to realise a more hopeful future. First, hope renders as an act of cultivation as refugee students become exposed to new concepts and develop confidence in relation to them. Second, digital technologies broaden the cultivation of hope towards greater civic participation, even if access to higher education is not achieved. Third, hope correlates to action not necessarily as a linear progressive trajectory but as a diligent watchfulness for positive possibility. The implications for higher education are that taking a prioritarian lens for refugees in educational design engages with the contingencies that impact all, placing the sector deliberately in search of positive possibility in its orientation and design.

Introduction: hope as prioritarianism

This paper takes as its position that assimilation into higher education (HE) for refugees in Uganda, and the narratives of perseverance and struggle that accompany that assimilation, are nascent expressions of a hopeful future for the sector overall. Refugees are often trapped in a state of 'stuckness' (Dryden-Peterson & Horst, 2023, p. 3), a liminality that carries with it attendant experiences of transition and tentativeness, their futures often subject to a myriad of closures consistent with stasis. This stasis is often received as a non-future, or an arrested one, a perpetual present where movement towards a progressive trajectory is not possible.

Barriers often exist that stall efforts at assimilation or reinforce the dominant social structures, languages or ideologies. These barriers in the Ugandan context include the language of instruction (Woldegiorgis & Monari, 2023), financial barriers associated with tuition or the confluence of gender on access to financial services (Asire, 2023),

the social capital required for successful navigation of higher education (Najjuma et al., 2022; Nambi et al., 2023), and even the increasing reliance on digital technologies to participate in higher education (Gallagher et al., 2023). For those able, workarounds are created, adapted, and discarded to circumvent these barriers and move refugees away from the margins. Some are successful and assimilate or repatriate, many don't and remain 'stuck' in protracted positions. It is in this liminality that we situate our discussions of hope. Hope in this context is often presented as the inverse of liminality and the stasis that identifies it; hope is movement, however slight, towards assimilation, repatriation, or inclusion in this case into higher education. This is often presented in the media or through the humanitarian networks that increasingly service refugee populations in contradictory terms: on one hand refugees are portrayed as victimised and voiceless masses, in a precarious and particularly vulnerable state reliant on the protection of humanitarian systems (Clark-Kazak, 2014), while at the same time narratively constructed as empowered individuals (Ongenaert et al., 2023) collectively reshaping the landscape and bringing in resources and much-needed change to otherwise isolated and disconnected regions of the country (UNHCR, 2023a, b). The discourses around refugees as in a state of perpetual victimhood often devalue their agency to assert their narratives of strength, survival, and resilience (McQuaid, 2016). Rather than counter narratives of resilience and perseverance ("a refugee is someone who refused to be oppressed" via Clark-Kazak, 2014), we are often presented with narrative portrayals of stasis, strain, and victimhood. While we must not neglect the significant systemic and sociocultural barriers these refugees experience, these counter narratives, we argue, are the foundations from which hopeful futures might emerge. Their submergence under the discursive framing of victimhood is, we argue, an injustice, a theft of the salient and nascent features of a hopeful future.

The hopeful futures presented in this paper are situated amidst the landscape of forced displacement and the pronounced marginalisation that the above barriers and discursive framings suggest. Forced displacement is an increasingly visible fixture of modern society, crossing the 110 million mark in 2023 (UNHCR, 2023c). This is a number that is set to dramatically increase with continued political destabilisation, and with the acceleration of climate change (Faber & Schlegel, 2017; Woodworth, 2023). This latter acceleration is particularly relevant to the discussion in this paper, and working against development narratives of unfettered technological growth consistent with late stage capitalism.

Forced displacement presents significant strain for the host countries in which refugees are situated (Barman, 2020), and most assuredly for refugees themselves. This hosting is generally not a transient experience but rather a protracted one. This is the case of Uganda. As of 2023, Uganda hosts the most refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa at over 1.5 million, mainly from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi (UNHCR, 2023a, b). These are protracted displacements as the majority of refugees (92%) live in built refugee settlements in the Northern and Western regions of Uganda, areas that are generally poorly served with existing infrastructure, educational opportunities, and possibilities for assimilation.

Yet Uganda is known for its progressive refugee integration policies (Betts, 2021), allowing refugees to settle among the local population, enjoy the right to work and

free movement, and have access to basic services, including education. These policies have enjoyed continuity as progressive refugee policies have been used to 'assert political authority within strategically important refugee-hosting hinterlands' (Betts, 2021, p. 243). Policy towards refugee integration has evolved into a strategy emphasising self-reliance amongst the refugees themselves (Tulibaleka et al., 2022; Adepoju, 2019), a turn towards what Ilcan and Rygiel (2015, p. 333) might refer to as "responsibilizing" refugee groups to assert their own inclusion. Discursive strategies aside, this emphasis on self-reliance, and indeed the larger policy and legal frameworks that potentially enable this self-reliance for refugees in Uganda, point to again the nascent features of a hopeful future.

Education, and in particular higher education, is seen as a necessary driver for assimilation or repatriation, a core component of a hopeful future for many refugees. Access to higher education for refugees is problematic due to a range of interrelated and compounding barriers: language, social norms, economic and administrative barriers, and more (discussed in Nambi et al., 2023; Najjuma et al., 2022). Refugee students struggle to participate in higher education due to challenges relating to accreditation of their academic documents, their classification as international students, financial constraints, navigation of the entry requirements and actual participation in day-to-day university activities (Nambi et al., 2023; Najjuma et al., 2022; El-Ghali & Ghosn, 2019). For refugees, barriers to participation in higher education not only accumulate, but also interrelate and exacerbate each other.

Hopeful progress is being made in integrating refugees into higher education worldwide as 7% of refugees now have access to higher education compared to only 1% in 2019 (UNHCR, 2023a, b).Uganda implements the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), emphasising the inclusion of refugees into national systems, particularly in education. Uganda is committed to the 15×30 target. The first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) (2019) resulted in over 58 pledges from participating nations focused on the inclusion of refugees into higher education, including a target of 15% of college-eligible refugees in tertiary, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) or online and blended education programmes in host and third countries, often referred to as connected learning. Connected learning is framed as the use of digital technologies to connect learners to accredited courses of interest, peers, and trained teachers, mentors and facilitators (El-Ghali & Ghosn, 2019). Examples include Jesuit Worldwide Learning (JWL), which offers higher education programmes that are regionally accredited and certified, through blended learning that includes online and onsite support (JWL, 2023). Many other such examples exist, all enlisted in meeting these 15×30 targets.

Alongside these efforts, the articulated aspirations of refugees themselves in relation to higher education are clear and hopeful (Hakami 2016). It is often seen as a significant, perhaps the most significant, means of assimilation and moving away from the stasis they have experienced. As such, this paper presents hopeful higher education futures through the accounts of refugees themselves and their often explicit articulations of hope. The authors contend that these expressions of hope are indeed the foundations from which a more hopeful future can be expressed for higher education, where hopeful futures are seen as explicit acts of prioritarianism rather than utilitarianism.

Prioritarianism contends that the learning needs of the most marginalised are prioritised in educational design, or as Holtug (2017) suggests giving priority to the worse off in 'the distribution of advantages' (p. 8). The authors contend that if the most marginalised are not prioritised – or designed for – in these drives towards assimilation into higher education, then the marginalisation of refugees is inevitably accelerated.

Beyond this potential for marginalisation, prioritarianism offers an alternative to the utilitarian approaches most common to how higher education is structured and sustained, an opportunity to more convincingly address the social reproduction of injustice, marginalisation, and power asymmetries that commonly occur there (Schouten, 2012). We argue that educational design in higher education that prioritises refugees is beneficial to all; it offers utilitarian value for all involved. We argue this address and these prioritarian designs are explicit components of hope and indeed any hopeful future for higher education.

Digital technologies and access to higher education

Yet digital technologies, and the increasing use of them in higher education and more broadly for civic participation, complicate these expressions of hope significantly. In this section, we will briefly position the use of digital technologies in the broader spaces of Ugandan higher education, and more specifically amongst refugees.

Increasingly and often problematically, participation in higher education is being expressed in ways that make technology essential (Gallagher, 2019; Gallagher et al., 2023). While there exists a long history of Ugandan universities engagement with digital technologies (Lubaale, 2020; Mutebi et al., 2023; Ujeyo et al., 2022), as with many contexts, this was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the dramatically uneven ways in which the pandemic impacted those able to access education through digital technologies (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo et al., 2023). As discussed in Gallagher et al. (2023), the accelerated use of digital technologies are deeper than this recent crisis and are, in part, accelerated by Uganda's adherence to the scaled educational targets of international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to scaled targets of parallel activity such as 15×30, and the attendant networks of non-government organisations (NGOs) and commercial entities that might service them. These networks are linking the use of digital technology to education both materially and discursively. One illustrative example is how UNESCO (2021) supported the Ministry of Education and Sports of Uganda to hold its 3rd National Teacher Education Symposium under the theme: "A digitally competent teaching force for the 21st Century." Another can be found in the The Education Digital Agenda Strategy 2021—2025, which advocates for human capital development through the use of ICT in order to 'streamline, review, rationalize and harmonize the fragmented ICT initiatives' at work in Ugandan education (Ministry of Education and Sport, 2020).

Material investment follows on the heels of these digital discourses: a recent (2021) $200 million financing operation in Uganda from the World Bank acts on this framing by setting out to expand 'access to high-speed and affordable internet, improve efficiency of digitally enabled public service delivery, and strengthen digital inclusion in Uganda' (World Bank 2021). Extending this, the Ugandan government partnered with the World Bank to launch the Universal Digital Acceleration Program to provide Internet access

to Uganda's refugee communities alongside digital and language skills training (Fakiya, 2023). Since 2016, work on providing connectivity and digital infrastructure to Ugandan refugee settlements involved direct engagements with mobile network operators (MNOs) such as Airtel, Africell and MTN (UNHCR, 2023a, b); other organisations have provided free solar connectivity equipment, bandwidth, laptops, tablets, connectivity, and 'ongoing maintenance and support' to seven settlements and highlighted its impact to the 'on-going education' of refugee students (Avanti, 2023). Community organisations such as Community Technology Empowerment Network (CTEN) have emerged to help refugees with access to education, alongside training to participate with digital communities via social media (NetHope, 2018).

Yet, these discursive and material framings often sit in stark contrast to how, if at all, refugee populations use digital technologies. This is often problematic as more and more of what constitutes civic inclusion, educational or otherwise, is digitally bound. Access to education, to medical services, to banking, to broader socialisation with groups both in and outwith Uganda, to biometric IDs that act as a gateway to many of these services (Madianou, 2019). Participating meaningfully in Ugandan society increasingly is bound in digital technologies. Penetration of digital technologies is uneven; any hopeful future for higher education that explicitly engages with digital technology must contend with these divides. Refugees' use of digital technology, when available, is well documented in the literature (see Alencar, 2020) with mobile phones often the most accessible, if not only, digital devices with which refugees engage. As such, they occupy key roles in refugee lives and the attendant academic studies designed to understand these lives (Mancini et al., 2019). However, the three countries where most Ugandan refugees come from- South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi- are at the very bottom of most indexes on connectivity and internet penetration (respectively 170 (last), 167, and 168 (GSMA, 2023). So within the refugee settlements in Uganda, the penetration of digital technology is uneven, as is the availability of electricity and stable connectivity. This is often further complicated by a gender digital divide. In Bidi Bidi Settlement for example, the second largest refugee settlement in the world, as of 2018 73% of men own a mobile phone, compared to 44% of women (GSMA, 2019). While these numbers have improved since 2018, they are far from full digital participation and parity. Any hopeful future for higher education that explicitly engages with digital technology must contend with these divides.

Hope as theoretical frame

Any conceptualisation of hope involves, amongst much else, a desire for a possible but uncertain goal (Pleeging et al., 2022). Desire and uncertainty are inherent to hope, yet they are rendered in many different ways: 'Our hopes may be active or passive, patient or critical, private or collective, grounded in the evidence or resolute in spite of it, socially conservative or socially transformative' (Webb, 2007, p. 80). Alongside desire and uncertainty, any theoretical framing of hope must have capacity to account for this diversity of expression. The many modes of hope are manifest in the participant narratives presented in this paper and in the broader research, and contribute to the broader 'ethnographies of uncertainty' (Cooper & Pratten, 2015) that define both the refugee experience, and potentially the societies in which these refugees are hosted.

Hopeful futures as a frame for a discussion on refugee integration into higher education and its attendant digital discourse is one that acknowledges the 'permeability' of national borders' as 'thousands of refugees and migrants flee conflict and poverty' (Traxler et al., 2022, p. 509) and increasingly climate collapse. What we do in response to that permeability, that collapse, and the millions left displaced in its wake, discussed in previous sections of this paper and framed largely around increased access to higher education, is a collection of *discrete activities* bound in a broader strategic discourse. This discursive focus is around opening up higher education for those traditionally marginalised in relation to it. It is bound in the belief that access to higher education for refugees is a common good, benefiting both the refugee and the host societies in which they reside. This is a hope that *we* (HE) have for *them* (refugees).

The impact of these discrete activities is encouraging in the near term (in the aforementioned 7% participation in HE), but one largely unknown in the near and longer futures. This is to be expected as future disruptions and uncertainties are still largely unknown. Yet we persevere in these discrete activities knowing that 'we do, in effect, many 'things', even when we think we are doing just one, and these many things have varied and unpredictable consequences for the future' (Urry, 2016, p. 1). These 'unpredictable consequences' are 'a source of anxiety', but 'our contingency, is also the source of our greatest hope and dignity as beings because recurring conjunctures afford new possibilities and pathways' (Traxler et al., 2022, p. 500). It is hoped that these discrete activities will afford new pathways for refugee students in HE; it is hoped that future contingencies bend towards further HE inclusion for these refugees as a result; and it is hoped that the larger societies in which HE is situated will benefit.

Yet that well intentioned hope is tempered with a recognition that much of what is categorised as educational inclusion 'fails to recognize and reflect the limbo in which refugees find themselves: they are non-citizens unable to access the futures that education seeks' (Dryden-Peterson & Horst, 2023, p. 2). Hopeful futures for higher education must, in some way, engage with this constructed limbo and help refugees become *unstuck*, and to more effectively vindicate the assertion that education provides a mechanism for realising that aim (Aden et al., 2023) out of refugee settlements and into host society or repatriation. Tempered or not, hope itself is critical to reimagining these contingencies and the possibility of new pathways (Traxler et al., 2022), to bend them towards more 'durable futures' (Dryden-Peterson & Horst, 2023). For those in states of liminality, hope is correlated to meaningfulness, aspiration, and agency both in relation to education (Salem, 2023) and assimilation into larger society, and can be seen, tempered with an appreciation of the systemic barriers that impact these refugees, as an asset on which to more readily realise hopeful futures for HE. Hope is the theoretical frame we place on the study presented in this paper, noting the contingencies, aspirations, agency, liminality, and narrative structures therein and how this might all relate to the hopeful futures possible for HE.

Hope as methodological design

Drawing on qualitative accounts gleaned from students and teachers participating in the Foundations for All (FFA) project (2019–2023) which sought to explore pathways for refugees into higher education, the methodology presented in this paper is largely a

qualitative one, but with data drawn over an elongated timeframe, namely the four years of the project. FFA was a collaboration between the Refugee Legal Centre at Mampala University, the AUB, and the University of Eden designed to develop, and implement a blended bridging programme for refugee students to access and succeed in Ugandan higher education. The 30-week bespoke curriculum explicitly emphasised psychosocial support both as a taught subject and pedagogically woven throughout the student experience. Further taught subjects included English, Maths, Study Skills, and Digital Skills. The curriculum was designed collaboratively amongst the three institutions and taught by dedicated teachers from the Refugee Legal Centre (RLP), a community outreach project of the School of Law, Mampala University, in 2021 to 40 students. Upon completion of the programme, students took the Mature Entry Examination at Mampala University which is designed to provide non-traditional students a pathway into HE.

Two purpose-built learning centres were constructed in Kampala and the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement and equipped with laptops, connectivity, and electricity (Akello et al., 2023) a to support this instruction. Educational technologies used in this project included Kolibri, an openly available and connectivity-sensitive Learning Management System, WhatsApp, and mobile devices. These were used to supplement the analogue technologies such as paper copies of course materials, pens, and notebooks, that supported face to face instruction at the learning centres. 116 interested learners applied (58 in both Kampala and Kiryandongo) and 73 were shortlisted for interviews (39 in Kampala, 34 in Kiryandongo). 40 learners were finally selected based on a range of criteria: availability to attend FFA as travel to the learning centres is time consuming and subject to interruptions, existing language ability, and stated ambitions in relation to higher education. The students were 41% female, roughly the same proportion in both sites. Their countries of origin included Burundi (2.5%), DR Congo (22.5%), Rwanda (2.5%), Somalia (10%), Sudan (7.5%) and South Sudan (35%).

Yet what is presented in this paper emerged from discrete interviews conducted with 15 students of FFA and the staff that taught them. The sample for this study were selected largely through purposive sampling: all interviewed either studied or taught on the FFA programme in 2021−2022. Of the 15, 8 were male and 7 were female. The original sample of those who had successfully taken the FFA programme were not fully available for this research as some had lost contact or relocated. As such, the sample involves participants who still maintain a connection to FFA and more specifically the Refugee Legal Centre.

The interviews were conducted by author A, designed to last 60 min and explored a range of topics including student backgrounds before joining FFA, their evaluation of the project, and, most specifically for this paper, their hopes for their future in higher education, with digital technologies, and more broadly for assimilation or repatriation. Data was transcribed, and open and axial coded into thematic categories. The analysis draws broadly on narrative analysis, particularly Bruner's intentional state entailment (1991), the concept that characters within a narrative have beliefs, desires, theories, values, and aspirations that are arranged deliberately towards a particular wish fulfilment (or hope). Precedence was given as such in the analysis and in the passages presented in this paper to not only what participants said of what might constitute hopeful futures,

but how they arranged themselves narratively in relation to that constitution. These are the hopes that *they* have for *themselves*.

Ethical considerations

The authors recognise the ethical complexities associated with involving participants from vulnerable populations, especially the importance of capturing accurate data relating to their experiences, the need to interrogate the research design itself to ensure it isn't implicit in the production of harm (Daley, 2021), how to obtain fully informed voluntary consent, ensure anonymity, and provide reciprocal benefit to participants (Debs et al., 2022). These benefits were positioned as the FFA programme itself and their participation in it, as well as continued access to the Refugee Legal Centre (RLP) team and the learning centres after the duration of the programme. Ethical review was carried out and achieved at the University of Eden through an Institutional Review Board.

What we sought ethically above all else was to surface expressions of hope in our research design without stunting or unrealistically encouraging its cultivation or the contingencies that might allow for its cultivation by the refugees themselves. This is done largely through our broad adherence to narrative analysis and following the participant through their journey in relation to higher education in whatever way they sought to construct their narrative. As such, there are departures in the interviews into areas that might not on the surface seem related to higher education at all, but which inform how the participant constructed their narrative journey, such as navigating daily life in Uganda culturally and linguistically. We recognise that these decisions were made by the researchers in the research design and not by the participants. We acknowledge that this is 'asymmetrical and essentially unjust, regardless of researchers' personal attempts to offer hope through showing care' (Fox et al., 2020, p. 842). We feel these asymmetries were tempered to a degree by the education and care provided in the Foundations for All project, and more ostensibly through the dedicated work of the Refugee Legal Centre, who continue to support many of these students.

Presentation of the data

What is presented as follows are thematic categories that emerged from the open and axial coding, alongside representative passages drawn from the interviews themselves that speak to those thematic categories. It is important to note that hope was explored in these interviews explicitly, not merely by using related concepts like aspiration and accomplishment as proxies for hope. Participants were asked about hope in relation to higher education, in relation to digital technologies supporting that education, in relation to FFA and other bridging programmes designed to foster greater inclusion in higher education, and in relation to their overall assimilation into Ugandan life.

Participants were asked how these hopes were being tempered by their experiences in Ugandan society and in relation to FFA, and any difficulties or barriers they experienced and still experience. Surfacing these barriers in relation to hope, particularly in their experiences in relation to higher education, is critical to reimagining new pathways (Traxler et al., 2022), and to bend them towards more 'durable futures' (Dryden-Peterson & Horst, 2023) for refugees in higher education.

The active cultivation of hope was found in most of the participants, at times expressed in relation to FFA and seeming progression towards HE. Cultivation in this instance refers to expressions of hope in relation to what was being achieved in FFA as these students were exposed to largely unfamiliar concepts, technologies, and skills. Some of this was expressed in relation to the tutors themselves and the role they served in modelling success on the programme and in HE, as suggested in the following passage from Daniel, a refugee student on FFA based at the Kampala learning centre. Note how hope is expressed initially as something given which leads to hope emotively expressed as the capacity to act.

'*In fact, he (the tutor) took us through a lot with dedication. When you are home, it's not like your dream has ended. He gave us a lot of hope. It felt like yeah, things are not dead. I can still make it in life. The fact that I thought for me … Because somebody told me being an African, half of your life somehow is already gone. I felt when I joined here, I had a lot of hope. At least, in fact, I felt connected to people who are more exposed, who can guide here and there. At least, you start thinking in a positive light of what to do, so that you can achieve all your dreams. That is the most beautiful part of it I got from here.*'

Janice, a refugee student in the Kiryandongo learning centre, narratively positions this cultivation of hope as being awakened, of moving from quitting altogether to a more confident position expressed in relation to motivation, encouragement, and capability.

'*Foundation for All, at least, has awakened me, because when I was then in the village there, I was thinking "I give up," I said that, really. "Will I go back to school?" But then, Foundation for All came. At least, I was motivated, and also, I was encouraged. Yeah. But before... I could not even talk. But when I came to Foundation for All, I can talk, I can interact with people, and also, I can stand before people.*'

Henry, a mature student at the Kiryandongo learning centre, speaks to a similar cultivation of hope yet refers to it in terms of transformation: being uplifted and inspired, having a deeper understanding.

'*...And it was really, to me, the experience uplifted my knowledge in those areas. I never remained the same because it made me to understand deeper about people, how their approach life is, how they relate to one another. That's what it was, really something that inspired us so much.*'

Yet this cultivation of hope is linked to a progressive trajectory and the process of becoming 'unstuck'. If that trajectory is interrupted or unclear, then hope is diminished as suggested again by Henry in reference to completion of the FFA programme.

'*I think to me the design of the program was okay, except when the program, toward the end, it does not point you to another level where you are supposed to go. So that is, the design of the program was okay, the programs were well-delivered, but after that our expectation was maybe, probably after the Foundations for All, if someone has finished that level, there could be something that someone can keep building on to move forward. But at the end of it when it's stopped, so we're left just there.*'

These passages are instructive for any sort of prioritarian hopeful future for HE as it provides an understanding of how hope is cultivated in marginalised contexts in relation to educational opportunity. Otherwise, we are left with the situation that Elle describes where self-referential stand-alone opportunities lead to stasis:

> 'And then I remember when we went in one meeting, they were telling us refugees, yes, you have problems but even national have problems. So maybe you go somewhere and then get skills. But the thing that I need to tell you is that refugees have many more problems and also clarification when it comes to skilling...They get to know where they are telling them how to make bags, art and craft. They get a certificate. You tell them they're teaching English, they come, they get also a certificate. So you find yourself that with more than 10 certificates. But which are not helping you at all.'

These disparate educational opportunities, and the certificates that act as a proxy for them, don't speak to one another coherently, and their accumulation doesn't lend to a forward trajectory in relation to either HE or further assimilation into Ugandan society. Yet, the above passage countenances the position that some of these students maintain an an opportunistic position in relation to education, ready to act if indeed the opportunity presents itself.

The role that technology plays in the cultivation of hope in relation to higher education for refugees is multi-dimensional, balancing between supporting academic opportunity and progression on one hand, while providing capacity for professional growth and civic assimilation on the other. The FFA programme approached digital technologies and the teaching of digital skills cautiously; our approach is critiqued in Akello et al., (2024 Forthcoming). FFA was a blended approach designed to support the face to face instruction in the learning centres. First there was considerable instruction on the technologies themselves: how to use them, how to type, how to open a document, and so forth. Then, that instruction gave way to using digital technologies to further educational opportunities through working with open educational resource (OER) repositories, developing further digital skills, and identifying online study opportunities that were then shared with the student cohort. Each week questions were asked by the instructors as to how this instruction can help realise an aspiration in relation to education or employment. Hope, defined here as a progressive empowerment towards capability and confidence, was being cultivated.

Many had never interacted with a laptop computer before, nor had a mobile device. Some had both, particularly in the Kampala learning centre. There was a general divide between the two learning centres in terms of digital skills and experience, yet all were able to articulate some connection between the technology and a hopeful future. Henry presents a case that was representative of many, particularly in the Kiryandongo learning centre.

> 'I was introduced to technology, more especially using computer in areas like writing, that is Microsoft in areas of Excel and also partly in areas of PowerPoint..., which I had never before. I had never touched a computer before. It was my first time touch a computer through the Foundations For All.'

Yet fear was countered with inquisitiveness, bolstered by support from the RLP instructors, and this gave way, slowly, to confidence.

> *'You are very careful because the feeling that you may make a mistake, I would even fear touching some of the buttons on the computer because if something goes the other side, I may not be able to get myself back. So I was very inquisitive and very careful. But with the time, slowly, slowly, I started to pick courage and confidence and good enough effort, not the Foundations for All offered us some people who are helping us through those. And so with time we've got to know that even if you make a mistake, you can talk to those people. They can come and help you back. So that's where we started making some courage.'*

Abigail, an instructor on the FFA programme, presents this clearly in the following passage, noting how this extends beyond higher education.

> *'My hope for them (the students) was actually beyond higher education. Higher education was one of our hopes. Equipped with everything that they need to survive in the wild and the digital skills, but for digital skills in particular, I feel like everything is online now to get access to a job. It's online to apply for a scholarship. Most of these institutions are higher education institutions. The programs, the advertising, everybody are online and without that knowledge or even just the basics of how to navigate, then you're missing out on plenty of opportunity. And I feel like with such a skill as digital skills, you can learn almost anything, whether you made it into higher education or not.'*

This hope to 'survive in the wild' was echoed by several students, such as Agatha who notes that her digital instruction provided opportunities: 'even I can now work in the community through technology' or Elle who notes that 'after knowing how you can look for a job, adverts, internet, that's where I got to know that RLP was advertising for a job. So I applied. And then I was able to get that job.' In these passages, we see hope not only being cultivated, but acted upon successfully. What is being suggested here indicates a discursive and direct link between the skills associated with digital technologies and hopeful futures. These futures, as indicated, are not wholly dependent on higher education, even if higher education is the ostensible aim of the programme that this digital instruction was bound. Hope resides in the presentation of opportunity that FFA provided, one narratively bound to digital technologies and the 'openings' they provided. Elle expands on this position in the following.

> *'(We) came looking for support so that they can apply still online using the computers available. So meaning that it was not a distraction but it opened some doors for... Because they are those who successfully got scholarships and then those who still know how to look for adverts. And so I can say that it was a distraction but it was opening, like mind opener to most of us.'*

The previous passages have suggested the links between hope and action, but the following is more explicit in connecting the two, noting how a cultivated hope lends itself in some cases to concerted action. Note in the following passage from Agatha the narrative progression from the 'beginning' (leaving school) to completion of the

FFA programme and recoupling a hopeful future to education. This recoupling lends itself to action and agency in relation to Agatha's own future.

'Like how the whole program was running, from beginning to end, the course, the different courses that we had, the time that we had. The fact that we had blended and not blended. The fact that we did some things online. Anything. The way you experienced it from beginning, from when you enrolled to when you left…For my case, it has improved my life. Yes. Because I left school since 2004. So when I left school in 2004, I didn't know that I was going to have another hope with education. So when I came here in Uganda with an EFA (note: EFA refers to another English language training programme offered by RLP), from EFA now to level six, so I was at that level, now I can be able to apply for a job. Even I can express myself in the community. Even at times I can interpret for the community. That was an advantage I got.'

Bevan, a student in the Kampala learning centre, presents hope as a readiness to act. The following passage is suggestive of this, an attentive position in relation to uncertainty and opportunity 'right away we will accept it').

'We don't have option what comes around and if it is good, then it can make us earn a living in the future, we will accept it. We will accept it, which we want the knowledge. We are to enhance our knowledge. We will finish it there, our university quite a long time, but we can not make it due to some circumstances. And now we are here, looking for opportunities. Now we don't know what opportunity is going to come by? But if it comes, then right away we will accept it.'

Note that Bevan's position in relation to HE specifically countenances a more opportunistic ambivalence, a position that allows one to 'still feel hope when opportunities presented themselves, but this allowed for a hope in chance only; that is, there was a hope in testing one's luck, but not a confidence in things going to plan' (Cooper & Pratten, 2015, p. 55). The 'circumstances' that Bevan refers to are the contingencies, the uncertainties that can lead to stasis, or 'stuckness' (Dryden-Peterson & Horst, 2023, p. 3). This stuckness is evident in Agatha, who laments the completion of the FFA programme without a clear trajectory forward: 'what I'm also concerned for us now, we just don't know where we are going. We don't know where we are now. We don't know what FFA is planning for us, or RLP in general.' For Agatha, the capacity for hopeful action has been diminished specifically in relation to HE. Higher education as a mechanism for realising hopeful futures is tempered by the barriers that HE enacts, barriers that were keenly felt by the students themselves. Again, we turn to Agatha in her presentation of scarcity in relation to HE.

'…most of us, we be liking Mampala University. And then I saw that it is more than a thousand people come to apply for mature age (Mature Entry Examination). We be many, but they be wanting few.'

Elle contrasts that scarcity with the confusion associated with pathways and progress in relation to HE, a confusion that is exacerbated by the quantity provided online.

'Which resources? Where do I go? Which platform do I visit? I don't have money to pay for myself. Maybe for certificate, for a diploma. So as I'm preparing myself,

because maybe reading books, maybe not enough. Going for library may not be enough. And then to see, to get also a mentor, you need connection sometime, someone to connect you. And then also other people to give you their time to teach you. They be also wanting for payment or money, which means that now digital plays a role.'

Throughout the interviews, hope was most routinely expressed in relation to the capacity to act in society, rather than specifically in relation to HE. This is typified by the following passage from Isaak, a student in the Kiryandongo learning centre and echoed in many passages in this paper, many in relation to how digital technologies allowed them to interact in society.

'Actually my experience for Foundation for All have actually opened up my mind way I can explore life. So being away from FFA has actually, even if now as we are outside in the community, we are helping and we are resilient in mind. So in all FFAs actually have forced us. So the brain we have before is not the brain we are having now. So we can even actually explore much than we do before in term of technology, in term of thinking, in term of programming yourself, that thing was not there. But after we have enrolled, we have got it.'

Themes: cultivation, activation and technology

The thematic discussion as follows emerges from the data presented in the previous section. However, it is important to note that these chosen themes were several among many emerging from the data, most of which can't be considered in a paper of this length. The chosen themes carry with them a narrative coherence as they speak to hope in relation to higher education, and with digital technologies, hence their selection. Table 1 summarises the chosen themes.

Theme 1: cultivation and activation of hope

This theme, and the underlying participant narratives that informs this theme, presents a series of conceptualisations of the cultivation of hope. Yet all are instructive

Table 1 The themes of the study along with a description of the theme and a representative passage

Theme	Description	Representative Passage
1: Cultivation and activation of hope	This theme involves the cultivation of hope by refugees through personal connections and accomplishments, the impact of role models, and the role of coherent pathways in hope	I felt connected to people who are more exposed, who can guide here and there. At least, you start thinking in a positive light of what to do, so that you can achieve all your dreams Now we don't know what opportunity is going to come by? Exactly, yeah. But if it comes, then right away we will accept it
2: Technology and Hope	This theme explores the role that technology has in realising their hopes in relation to higher education and assimilation into Ugandan society	…with time we've got to know that even if you make a mistake, you can talk to those people. They can come and help you back. So that's where we started making some courage.'

for how to discuss hopeful futures in relation to HE. Cultivation in this respect can echo theoretical positions such as social and cultural capital, the idea that these forms of capital can be cultivated for use in some near future towards a beneficial outcome. Capital, once cultivated, can be converted into economic capital (through employment), institutionalised in qualifications (through education), or networked into further arrays of social relationships (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242) that can be drawn on in need. Yet how hope is manifest in these cultivations of capital is critical to understanding a trajectory within these contexts of refugee access to higher education. Rather than merely suggesting the *possibility* of employing capital to progress in the larger Ugandan society or specifically in relation to HE, hope suggests the active cultivation of that capital for likely and concerted action, even when that trajectory is unclear to the individual student.

How the cultivation of hope is narratively expressed is suggestive: in some, it renders as *being awakened* and movement away from quitting towards confidence, in others it renders as *transformation*, being uplifted and inspired, having a deeper understanding. Yet there is a strong indication in the participant narratives that this cultivation of hope is contingent on being associated with a progressive, coherent, and clear trajectory. If that trajectory is interrupted or unclear, then hope is diminished. In this theme, we see how potentially fragile that cultivation is in relation to contingent pathways into higher education: each educational opportunity must lead to another, each stage of the trajectory must coherently speak to the next lest hope is diminished, and stasis returns. This represents a challenge for HE overall in how coherently interconnected pathways are designed, presented, scaffolded, and reinforced.

Yet the cultivation of hope can be seen as an act of preparedness, where the individual maintains an opportunistic ambivalence in relation to educational opportunities that 'allowed for individuals to still feel hope when opportunities presented themselves, but this allowed for a hope in chance only; that is, there was a hope in testing one's luck, but not a confidence in things going to plan' (Cooper & Pratten, 2015, p. 55). This ambivalence is instructive for HE, particularly in the coherence and interconnectedness with which we design educational pathways, but also for how hopeful futures are defined and tempered through experience and ambivalence. Ambivalence remains, as presented here, a capacity to act towards a hopeful future however unsure the individual is of the result. As such, we see a further conceptualisation of the cultivation of hope to go alongside those of awakening and transformation: an opportunistic ambivalence that contributes to the ability of refugees to 'cultivate and actualize their hope in the broader social ecological contexts where refugees are placed' (Yıldız, 2020, p. 159). It is in this we see a posture of readiness to act if indeed the opportunity is presented, a 'continuous capacity' Umer et al., 2021, p. 969) to come to terms with the ambivalence of the present all while charting a trajectory into the future (Scioli et al. 2015). This opportunistic ambivalence is suggestive of these refugee students constantly looking for opportunity and 'readapting themselves to contingencies' (Massa, 2023, p. 697). There were numerous instances in the interviews where action was explicitly articulated, at times muddled by the incoherency of the opportunities being provided and at times diffused through the contingencies of the individual student. As such, action renders differently for many, countenancing the diversity of

hope expressed as 'active or passive, patient or critical, private or collective, grounded in the evidence or resolute in spite of it, socially conservative or socially transformative' (Webb, 2007, p. 80).

Theme 2: technology and hope

The role that technology plays in this cultivation of hope is diffuse, subject to a myriad of often political interpretations. It was clear in the interviews that digital technologies acted in some respect as a proxy for the cultivation of hope discussed in the previous theme. It is, or is seen to be, a proxy for opportunity for these refugee students, providing access to a range of educational and potentially economic opportunities. Yet the general unfamiliarity with digital technologies by many of the FFA students had the potential to throttle that cultivation, with uncertainty and trepidation being hallmarks of this initial phase of technological orientation. Yet that uncertainty was balanced with 'courage' and inquisitiveness, that desire to learn more despite an initial trepidation. So we see many of the same positions from the previous theme which are in this instance channelled through the promise of digital technology.

From an individual programme perspective such as FFA, this is illustrative of the priority of the blended learning model that maintained a deference to the face to face instruction: the technology was explored together, in person, and with significant support from both instructors and fellow students, a burgeoning community driving towards capability and the cultivation of hope. Yet this cultivation of hope *within* the programme was scaffolded by the keen understanding of how digital technologies and the skills associated with them are critical towards further assimilation *outside* the programme into Ugandan life. These technologies are seen as instruments of hopeful cultivation (Gallagher et al., 2023) into HE or employment. This cultivation is contingent on access to the learning centres, or in rare cases on the ownership of mobile technology and the ability. This requires a capacity for affording prohibitive mobile data costs (Njoya, 2022), or physically accessing learning centres equipped with internet connectivity (Ssimbwa et al., 2023).

As such, it ultimately carries with it a political dimension as it assumes a level of physical, temporal, and economic flexibility. Or as suggested by McCarrick and Kleine (2019), it reimagines these students as responsibilized and rational neoliberal subjects with great degrees of autonomy and flexibility at their disposal. This is a problematic positioning that potentially further submerges 'voices that are erased by the rules, norms and guidelines of dominant discursive spaces' (Dutta, 2020, p. 284). This includes not only the hopeful cultivation expressed linking digital technology to the *possibility* of opportunity, and its parallels in the broader digital discourses of HE and civic society (Gallagher et al., 2023); but also to the often opaque processes and practices of HE itself (Nambi et al., 2023; Najjuma et al., 2022). Even merely as a proxy for opportunity, digital technologies make the context of refugee access to HE even more complex, alongside the attendant acts of the cultivation of hope.

This is instructive for hopeful futures for HE, this parsing of hope expressed as the capacity to act in broader society rather than in relation to university. It is suggestive of the hidden curriculum of higher education and its 'reproducing implicitly the unequal opportunities, inequalities and exercises of power in the social order' (Edwards, 2015, p.

268). The pedagogic message that many receive is that higher education is not for them. The pedagogic message that many receive is that assimilation into broader Ugandan society is for them.

The limitations for this study and the broader implications for HE that are being extracted from it relate to the size of the sample and the diversity within that sample. The sample itself is small and limited in its broader generalisability; we are unable to posit any nomothetic generalisation about the Ugandan refugee population as a whole (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011). Despite most of the sample being refugee students, few will share a common narrative in their experiences of forced displacement and the trauma that generally accompanies this displacement. They come from diverse cultural, religious, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, 'experience different migration journeys and therefore tell very different life stories' (Abkhezr et al., 2018, p. 18). Generalising from this is challenging.

Implications for HE and conclusion

The implications for realising a hopeful future for HE based on these themes is bound in the difficult work of translating them into systemic action and advocacy. We do this by first acknowledging the call to action in hope itself. Hope is 'activated uncertainty' (Pelkmans, 2013, p. 17). It does not seek to eliminate uncertainty and contingency but positions it as a social resource to negotiate insecurity and to imagine the future (Cooper & Pratten, 2015, p. 2), called forth to change both 'the situation and the self' (Whyte, 2009, p. 213). As such, hopeful futures must involve advocacy towards systemic change, particularly in relation to the barriers that stall efforts at assimilation or reinforce the dominant social structures, languages or ideologies of HE.

We note that universities act as closed-loop systems, systems where feedback gleaned from institutional activity ultimately maintains an existing set of operating conditions (Gallagher and Lamb, 2023). Closed loops are essentially self-governing, codified in policy and practice, meant to run with minimal input. These closed-loops suggest that the work of the university can be seen as self-referential: each circuit travelled in the loop strengthens the closure. These closed-loops take many forms:

> *…stark delineations of who is inside and outside the boundaries of the university (Öztok, 2019); opaque institutional and disciplinary practices which allow for or stunt navigation within these boundaries (Aparna et al., 2020); power asymmetries in access to leadership and governance controls; a burgeoning administrative function; and an epistemic hegemonic, albeit loosening, grip on the means of knowledge production (Noda, 2020). The closures in these closed-loop systems are systemic. They regulate the operating conditions of institutions that have survived in many cases for decades and centuries (Gallagher and Lamb, 2023: 621).*

Further closed-loops with relevance to refugees include financial concerns in relation to tuition, administrative processes related to entrance examinations and movements into the university (Akello et al., 2023); the languages of instruction and language switching within the classroom (Nambi et al., 2023); and the social capital needed to navigate academic processes (Najjuma et al., 2022). For refugees, these closed loops create a state of 'stuckness' (Dryden-Peterson & Horst, 2023, p. 3), a non-future, or an arrested one.

We see evidence of this in the passages presented and throughout the interviews ('we just don't know where we are going. We don't know where we are now').

This is where the work of realising hopeful futures in HE can and perhaps must begin, in the reimagining of these closed loops towards *enabling closures,* or closed-loops that reinforce themselves in prioritarian ways, designed from within to support the most marginalised and reinforced systematically in each circuit, or what Hussain et al. (2020) refer to as 'infrastructuring hope' (p. 1). This infrastructuring can be likened to two ways: first in the individual refugee student cultivating hope through 'various artful practices of solidarity, leadership, and negotiation' (p. 1) and second in the institutions and sectors through their work on providing coherent opportunities and trajectory for these same students. If the former eclipses the latter, we are left with the discursive and disadvantageous position of 'responsibilsing refugees' (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015) without the systemic accountability for the HE systems that these same students are navigating.

Again, this is where we believe prioritarianism to be instructive, as it isn't merely a redistribution of resources, opportunities, and outcomes to favour one particular marginalised group over another. Rather it potentially provides a lens that allows for insights into how social contingencies (such as background) and natural contingencies (such as innate ability) (Ooghe, 2021) might both more meaningfully inform the systemic design of HE for refugees. As Ooghe (2021) correctly notes, prioritarianism carries with it inexorably the questions of whose education and whose futures are we prioritising:

> *'The answer to the question "priority of what?" leads to four normative views in the education literature, depending on whether the metric is educational or economic and whether one should provide outcomes or opportunities in these metrics.' (33)*

If we take refugees as a prioritarian lens for imagining hopeful futures for HE, we are engaging with the contingencies that impact all students: the advantages or limitations imposed by social background, the innate ability or predilection towards a particular subject(s), curricular responses to unforeseen or evolving topics like forced displacement itself. Our advocacy and design *around* these contingencies are prioritarian responses *to* them: pedagogic and pastoral design that acknowledges trauma and uncertainty and foregrounds psychosocial support (Akello et al., 2023); academic mentoring that encourages student development towards subjects and courses that reflect their own aspirations (not 'to develop a good plan and follow it but rather to respond effectively to the contingent, sudden, and surprising offers that life can make' (Johnson-Hanks, 2005, p. 376)); and curricular fluidity towards a multidisciplinary address of topical, seemingly inexorable, issues such as climate change and forced displacement.

We note however, the importance of maintaining contingency, indeed uncertainty itself, in this prioritarian design as uncertainty produces 'new social landscapes and social horizons'. It shows 'how patterns of interrelatedness and projections of the future are shaped by uncertain material and temporal contexts' (Cooper & Pratten, 2015, p. 2). Indeed the prioritarian responses mentioned above are all, to some degree or another, addresses of contingency. It is a part of any future, hopeful or otherwise, for HE. These responses ascribe to a hopeful 'ethos of contingency', which is 'more than taking an opportunity unexpectedly offered; it is being constantly on the lookout for opportunities', a 'kind of watchfulness for positive possibility' (Cooper & Pratten, 2015, p. 28).

This ethos was found in the passages from the refugee students at FFA, an ethos born of necessity but instructive for imagining hopeful HE futures, or as Bevan says 'what comes around and if it is good, then it can make us earn a living in the future, we will accept it'. This ethos can and should extend to all of HE and we posit, as does Houlden and Veletsianos (2022, p. 605), that hopeful futures in this context of uncertainty are shaped by "connection, agency and community and individual flourishment." We believe some of the work of realising these hopeful futures is underway in HE, work that is increasingly predicated on an understanding of how hope is cultivated in marginalised contexts in relation to educational opportunity. We hope to welcome more of it in the near future.

Declarations

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