

March 2019

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Connected learning makes use of digital technologies to connect learners to: topics and accredited courses of interest; their peers, both locally and around the globe; the internet and global discourse; and trained teachers, mentors and facilitators. It often involves blended learning, where students learn via electronic and online media but are also supported by face-to-face instruction.

The **Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium (CLCC)** is a 23-member organisation comprising universities, non-governmental organisations, international organisations and education providers, co-led by UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and the University of Geneva's InZone centre. Its aim is to promote and support the provision of quality higher education in contexts of conflict, crisis and displacement through

connected learning. The CLCC focuses on sharing knowledge, experience and evidence; developing good practice; and ensuring accountability to students and their communities in order to foster self-reliance and resilience.

In 2017 the CLCC published a **Quality Guidelines Playbook**, which details promising practices and lessons learnt across four themes: Access to Higher Education, Learning Pathway Design, Connected Learning Pedagogies, and Academic Support. The *Playbook* examines each theme with regard to connected learning provision in emergencies and crises, giving concrete examples from CLCC members' programmes.

In late 2019, the CLCC will produce a **Digital Playbook**, which will have the added functionality of allowing organisations to upload content of their own.

Access the *Playbook* and other CLCC publications at www.connectedlearning4refugees.org/publications.

Connected learning: the future for higher education?

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Higher education institutions in Lebanon should consider how connected learning can improve access to higher education for young refugees and members of the host community.

Lebanon hosts around 1.1 million Syrian refugees, many of whom are young people of university age who are struggling to continue their education in displacement.¹ Some young Syrians, however, are able to access higher education: 7,315 young people were enrolled in higher education institutions in the 2017–18 academic year in Lebanon, an increase of about 20% since 2014–15. This increase is due in part to a greater availability of scholarships but also to the availability of alternative modes of learning, among which is connected learning. 'Connected learning' refers to the teaching of students using information communication technology (ICT), which permits learning to be more flexible as it is not limited by time or geography, unlike traditional higher education.² This method enables learning to be more interactive and can provide access to education for a large number of students in different parts of the world at low cost.³

Lebanese universities already usually make use of web-facilitated learning in their courses but are beginning to move towards 'blended' learning (using a combination of

traditional and online teaching) to reach out to Syrian refugees and to students living in remote parts of Lebanon and overseas, with some even offering courses that are conducted entirely online. A recent mapping of connected learning in Lebanon showed that institutions of higher education usually use three types of connected learning: blended, fully online, and bridging (which focuses on language teaching).⁴ The virtual teaching methods employed can involve real-time interaction between instructor and students, such as video-conferencing or live chats, or non-real time interactions, such as posting on discussion boards or learning from video-taped lectures. The use of social media and other internet platforms facilitates a more informal interaction between students and their peers and between students and their instructors, which complements their formal learning.

Barriers to connected learning

Connected learning programmes are new to Lebanon and a number of structural,

pedagogical and technical barriers to their use have emerged.

Among the primary structural barriers is that there are as yet no policies recognising online learning in Lebanon. However, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education drafted a law in May 2016 which aims to determine the conditions and procedures of providing formal higher education programmes through non-traditional methods, including connected learning. This draft law reflects the Ministry's insistence on the need to maintain quality in online learning and lays down certain requirements – including a quality assurance team – for any organisation or institution wishing to provide non-traditional programmes.

A further structural barrier is the limited awareness and negative popular view of online learning. Lack of awareness often means people doubt the benefit and impact of connected learning programmes; many believe that technology can only be useful as a support tool for enhancing teaching and learning – not as a primary or exclusive means of delivery. Cultural resistance also extends to Syrian refugee communities; for example, Syrian female students refuse to appear on camera for video-conferencing as this practice is not culturally acceptable.

Pedagogical barriers have also emerged, including the challenges caused by institutional bureaucracy, which leads to delays in procuring resources as well as to limited autonomy to design and deliver connected learning programmes. Teaching staff have only limited skills in teaching connected learning courses and struggle to support students online. As a result, many faculty members still prefer face-to-face teaching rather than online courses. Although many (if not all) students have a smartphone, some lack the ICT skills needed to follow such courses. And assessment is a further barrier, with many institutions lacking validated means of assessing connected learning.

Finally, technical barriers such as slow internet connectivity, unreliable electricity supply and equipment shortages present significant frustrations for leaders,

faculty members and students engaged in connected learning programmes.

Opportunities

Many programmes, particularly those offered through local, national and international non-governmental organisations, are free or offered at very low cost. Meanwhile, the skills supplied by educational institutions in Lebanon which offer more traditional programmes seem disconnected from the demands of today's labour market. One-size-fits-all provision ignores increasing use of technology and the growth of the digital economy. Consequently, there needs to be enhanced advocacy combined with greater international collaboration in order to work towards the creation of more flexible domestic education policies that can accommodate developments in the economy through advancements and adaptations in higher education. We suggest that the collaboration efforts should be led by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, with local and international higher education institutions and other international organisations with relevant experience. Connected learning opportunities are a means of offering students an opportunity to learn – particularly for those who struggle to access traditional education, whether refugees or youth from the local host community.

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