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Initiative on Consortium &
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for Community Education

Site Report – Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 9-13 May 2016

Background: Refugees and Access to Education in Kuala Lumpur

The UN Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Malaysia indicates that as of the end of April 2016, there are some 154,140 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia. Of these:

- 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.
- 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.
- Some 68% of refugees and asylum-seekers are men, while 32% are women;
- There are some 34,600 children below the age of 18.

Although Malaysia is not a State Party to 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.¹

The legal status of refugees in Malaysia has significant impact on their opportunities to access education. Few are eligible to attend state schools, meaning that primary and secondary education is mostly delivered through UNHCR sponsored, or community based schools. These utilise Malaysian text book and focus on English, Math, Science and Bahasa Melayu. In some instances students are encouraged to sit accredited examinations such as that of the Cambridge Examinations Board.

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

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

¹ UNHCR in Malaysia, http://www.unhcr.org/my/About_Us-@-UNHCR_in_Malaysia.aspx retrieved 24 May 2016.



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- *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;*
- *Unable to access formal education, refugee communities establish community-based schooling for their children, and these are often held under resource-scarce conditions.²*

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 include:

- 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.

Key to providing access to refugees is that under the Malaysian system they are regarded as International Students. As such, in addition to the above criteria, they are also required to apply for and provide a Student Pass issued by the Malaysian immigration department and to pass a health check and take out health insurance. Some institutions are willing to cover the costs of this insurance.

As can be appreciated, collectively these criteria, combined with fees - full-time undergraduate courses can be anything between 35,000 RM and 106,000 RM per annum (\$8,500-\$25,770 US) - represent significant hurdles to those refugees seeking to access higher education.

OUR Initiative Visit

Between 9 and 13 May 2016, OUR team conducted a series of interviews with representatives of UNHCR, leaders of the community based schools, scholars and senior managers at three of the universities in Kuala Lumpur currently offering higher education opportunities to refugees. In addition the team was able to meet with a number of current refugee students studying at two of these three universities. A full list of the meeting schedule can be found at Appendix A.

These discussions focused on three key themes:

² Ibid.



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- The level and demand for higher education amongst the refugee population in Kuala Lumpur;
- 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;
- 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.

The results of these interviews are presented below and are intended to stimulate discussion of the issues identified with a view to developing practical solutions through the *OUR C3 Forum*.

In addition, with the support of colleagues at UNHCR and *Fugee School*, OUR conducted a survey of current and potential refugee students in Kuala Lumpur to understand better the nature and level of their demand for higher education. The results of this survey will be presented separately.

Demand for Higher Education amongst refugees in Kuala Lumpur

UNHCR representatives indicate that previous surveys have identified almost 1,000 refugees who are interested in entering higher education. Of these, it is in direct contact with 498. In discussion with providers of secondary education it was stated, perhaps unsurprisingly, that ‘everyone wants to go to university’.

In the context of a total refugee population of over 150,000 however, this figure represents just 0.7%. Moreover, those institutions which currently do offer places to refugee students report that in the previous academic year, 2015/16, not all available places had been filled.

The reasons 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. Moreover, the pressures on those in secondary education are considerable. There is an imperative to find paid employment and this leads many secondary school students to drop out before they complete their studies.

Full-time study, at either secondary or tertiary levels, is described as ‘impossible’ – an impression supported by the current university students interviewed. All had jobs in addition to their full



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

In terms of the nature of demand, current students were offered a range of subjects governed by the terms of the UNHCR MOU. Specifically:

- i. English;
- ii. Business & Law;
- iii. Arts and Humanities;
- iv. Health and Social Science;
- v. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics;
- vi. Other skills-based courses.

Further details on the nature of the demand for higher education amongst the refugee population in KL can be found in the survey the results of which will be circulated separately.

Higher Education Provision

The OUR team met representatives from three universities currently offering places to refugee students in Malaysia: the [University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus](#), the [International University of Malaya – Wales](#) and [Bricksfield Asia College](#). With the addition of [HELP University](#), the [Innovative International College](#) and [Limkokwing University of Creative Technology](#), these institutions are the signatories to Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)s with UNHCR to provide tertiary access spaces to refugee students.

It will be appreciated that all signatories to the UNHCR MOU are either privately funded or international institutions with significant links to institutions based in other countries.³

All the institutions to which OUR representatives spoke were keen to stress their ongoing support for this scheme and the high level of motivation amongst successful applicants. Several stressed the extent to which refugee students are treated in equally in terms of access to facilities and academic expectations and standards.

Ensuring equality poses several challenges however. Institutions indicate that refugee candidates struggle to meet the academic threshold for admissions. This reflects both the level of their secondary education, and the extent to which this led to certified qualifications. One institution in particular stressed that it could not accept new students without their meeting published

³ *The New Access Challenge is for Refugees, says UNHCR*, University World News, 9 October 2015 <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20151009190843472> retrieved 25 May 2016.



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admissions criteria and providing appropriate certificates. Another indicated that it recognised circumstances might mean applicants lack documentary evidence of successfully completing secondary education and/or need additional support to enter higher education with a reasonable chance of success. In the latter case, the institution's admissions process uses an in-house assessments and interviews and offers support to borderline applicants.

As such, both providers of secondary and tertiary education were receptive to the idea of a bridging course that would enable students to transition effectively from secondary to tertiary education. This might focus not on just the academic skills needed to ensure university admission criteria were met but on issues such as time management, IT skills, academic reading and writing, referencing and so on. The bridging course itself would need to address criteria such as:

- Level;
- Mode of delivery for example, on-line, classroom based, distance learning etc.
- Fee levels;
- Content;
- Teachers, support and supervision;
- Accreditation and credit rating (either within the context of Malaysia and/or international accreditation).

In addition, several interviews discussed the possibility of on-line learning. It was suggested that this might focus not only on a bridging course, as set out above, but in theory could be extended to Foundation and Diploma courses. These however would have to be developed separately – none of the current signatories to the UNHCR MOU were offering on-line courses or currently had the capacity to develop and deliver them.

The fact that refugee students are unable to obtain student visas and therefore do not have the same legal status as either Malaysian students or 'international' students, also raises issues. It is not possible for example to enrol refugee students onto any programmes leading to the award of a Malaysian accredited certificate. Instead students are regarded as taking a series of short courses for credit leading to the provision of a student transcript. Several students expressed concern about this in terms of the extent to which this transcript would be accepted by other institutions and/or employers.

The minor administrative problems to which this practice gave rise were also an issue – students mentioned that it was necessary to renew their access to university facilities at the beginning of each semester.



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Secondary Education Provision and the Support of Potential University Students

The OUR team was able to meet a few representatives of community based schools that serve the refugee population in KL namely: *Dignity for Children, Fugee School, Robingya Community School-Malaysia Relief Agency, Ruth Education Center* and *Ideas Academy*. As such, the team was able to tour the facilities and observe the delivery of some of the primary and secondary schools. The building in which these schools are located were well maintained with access to heat, light and internet. In two cases there were operational libraries and children had access to appropriate study space and learning materials.

In discussion, those involved in secondary education raised the following key issues:

- the curriculum to be followed is unclear. Several schools are following the Malaysian curriculum in effect before 2012 when the language of instruction was changed from English to Bahasa Melayu and using photocopies of textbooks provided by UNHCR. Others are using US and Canadian curricula as these are the most likely places to where students will be resettled. Still others prepare students between the ages of 14-16 for the Cambridge International Certificate of General Education (IGCSE)⁴.
- demand for education is rising as the reputation of the community and UNHCR supported schools amongst the refugee community in KL rises. Several indicated they had increased their provision by 50% or more in the last two years. If so, it is likely that the proportion of eligible refugee students in school will increase, with a likely increase in demand for higher education in due course. However:
 - drop-out rates remained high as school-aged children were required to earn income;
 - even before expansion, the recruitment of appropriately qualified teachers was problematic. All school leaders to whom we spoke stressed the need to increase the number of secondary teachers as a precursor to expanding access to higher education.

Discussions with the UNICEF funded *Tandemic* project described this lack of qualified teachers as a ‘black hole’ into which the majority of potential secondary and, by implication, university, students fell. Their advice was that if the longer term objective

⁴ *Mapping Alternative Learning Approaches, Programmes and Stakeholders in Malaysia*, UNICEF, November 2015, p24.



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was to raise the number of refugees accessing university level education, this was a priority.

Providers of secondary education were receptive to several suggestions. Specifically:

- a more coordinated approach, across the various UNHCR supported and community-based schools within KL, to identify and target those likely to complete secondary education successfully and apply to enter higher education through either the existing UNHCR MOU arrangement or other routes that currently exist or might be developed;
- the need to provide support to those seeking to enter higher education. The idea of a bridging course was welcome here too, as was the potential to deliver it on-line. However, several secondary education providers stressed that the majority of refugee homes made effective study difficult - it would be necessary to provide appropriate study space, possibly in the existing secondary schools. With additional support and funding, secondary education providers were willing to explore this possibility.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Discussion

The paper is intended to present a brief overview of the current situation regarding opportunities to access higher education in Kuala Lumpur. At the *C3 Forum* to be held on 5 and 6 August 2016, the issues highlighted here will be discussed with a view to building consortia and projects that, individually and collectively, will seek to increase that access. To initiate these discussions, those attending might wish to consider measures that might:

- alleviate the current legal status of refugees in Malaysia to enable greater access to education opportunities - state, private and international;
- expand the current provision of primary and secondary provision;
- enable refugee children to enter, and continue to attend, school and not be forced to drop-out prematurely to earn income;
- increase the number of qualified secondary school teachers available to teach in refugee schools;
- enable better identification and support of secondary student likely to apply for higher education across secondary level provision;



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- support potential higher education students in terms of:
 - bridging courses;
 - financial support;
 - appropriate study spaces;

- support existing and future higher education students in terms of:
 - admissions criteria;
 - financial support.



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Appendix A

List of Interviewees

Organisation	
Bricksfield Asia College	Brian Lariche
Dignity for Children	Natalie Tan
Fugee School	Jessica Chapman
Ideas Academy	Debra Tapscott
International University of Malaya-Wales	Prof Dr Hamzah A Rahman, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Latiffah Pawanteh Dr. Patrice Boursier
Rohingya Community School, Malaysia Relief Agency	Johari Kan
Ruth Education Center	Michael Moey
Tandemic	Lim Si Hao
UNHCR	Chong Yin Wei
UNHCR	Mimi Zarina Azmin
University of Nottingham Malaysia	Dr Lucy Bailey