



Online study scheme gives refugee students a degree of hope

Supported by the University of Geneva, the InZone project makes degree-level courses available to those for whom university is out of reach.

By Charlie Dunmore in Azraq refugee camp, Jordan | 26 September 2017

War brought an abrupt end to Qusai's efforts to become a lawyer. He had been in the first year of a law degree course at university in Dara'a when violence broke out in the southern Syrian city at the start of the country's civil conflict in 2011.

In 2013, he and his family fled to Jordan and ended up in the remote refugee camp of Azraq. There, Qusai's hopes of continuing his education seemed to evaporate.

Desperate to keep on learning, he signed up for every informal class he could find — English, computing, even mobile phone repair. Unable to afford the fees or secure a visa to study in a third country, the idea of finishing his degree remained out of reach.

That was when he heard about an initiative called InZone, backed by the University of Geneva and offering a degree-level history course devised by Princeton University in the United States.

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“I hadn't thought about studying history before but there were prestigious institutions involved

and I really wanted to take it,” Qusai said.

Enrolment in tertiary, or third-stage, education has been rising worldwide — 36 per cent in 2016, compared with 34 per cent a year earlier – but for 99 per cent of refugees, access to university and other forms of tertiary education remains out of reach.

The demand is clearly there: in 2016, more than 4,300 refugees received DAFI scholarships, the higher education programme provided by the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR and supported by Germany, to seek tertiary education in 37 host countries, an increase of almost 90 per cent compared with 2015. However, for tens of thousands more, fees, distance and the difficulty of completing secondary education conspired to shut them out.

InZone shows how higher education can be available to those who may not normally have access to it. First established in Kenya’s Kakuma refugee camp in 2010, the initiative reached Azraq in September 2016 with the Princeton history course.

Now an engineering course provided by another US institution, Purdue University, is also available. Classroom sessions are held in a computer lab funded by UNHCR and run by the non-governmental organization CARE International.

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James Casey, a doctoral candidate in modern Syrian history at Princeton, was one of the online tutors for the Azraq course. He says that, unlike normal online or correspondence courses where retention rates are often low, the InZone approach is to promote regular engagement between tutors and students, whether online, face-to-face or via social media. That is how to keep them “engaged and on track”, he said.

Course tutors and professors try to visit students in the camp at the start and end of term, in the first case to hold selection exams and introduce those selected to the course, and later to oversee an end-of-course workshop and final exams.

Besides the computer lab, students use mobile devices to study and can have access to material on USB flash drives when the Internet is unavailable. Tutor groups are set up on the WhatsApp instant messaging service to enable communication between students and teachers even when connectivity is limited.

The course kept Qusai intellectually stimulated and gave him hope. “Studying with top universities and being connected to the outside world of academia makes you feel part of something bigger — not just a number in a refugee camp,” he said.

It also opened fresh perspectives. “We learned about how the countries of Europe rebuilt after World War Two, and that gave me hope that we can do the same in Syria.”

See *UNHCR’s 2017 report on refugee education*, [Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis](#).

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