Chapter 18 Refugees in Neoliberal Universities

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Abstract:

Open Learning Initiative (OLIve) at the University of East London has been preparing forced migrant students for university in the UK since 2019. One of the main barriers for creating meaningful support for forced migrants is the hostile environment which shifts border control to educational institutions; ever increasing bureaucratic pressures to follow and document procedures; and the neo-liberalisation of universities wherein students are valued for their financial contributions to the university and the society through graduate employment. Creating meaningful support and inclusion is therefore limited in the current system, which is designed to exclude students and applicants who do not fit the nationalist, neoliberal agendas of states and institutions. An important aspect of this support is using creative, participative pedagogies and valuing students as participants, as holders of knowledge and creative experts, as this can help create educational and participatory spaces where knowledge production can coexist with a critical widening of the current HE agenda.

Keywords: Refugees, Neo-liberalism, universities, migrant students

Bio

Dr Aura Lounasmaa is a lecturer in social sciences at the University of East London, and the director of the Erasmus+ funded Open Learning Initiative (OLIve). The OLIve course started in UEL in 2017 and introduces forced migrant students to the UK Higher Education system. Dr Lounasmaa also worked on the award-winning Life Stories course in the Calais unofficial refugee camp 'Jungle' and co-edited a book of stories by students of the course with colleagues. Her PhD is in women's studies, and her research currently focuses on ethics and decoloniality in education and refugee studies. She is a research fellow at the Centre for Narrative Research.

Introduction

In 2015 myself and colleagues from the University of East London began to teach a university course in the Calais Jungle. The Jungle was known for its squalor, violence and its 'lacks': lack of food, sanitation, health services, warmth, shelter, safety, protection, and rights (Calais Writers, 2017). The rationale for offering this course was grounded in arguments about humanitarian necessity for education and higher education as a human right (Squire & Zaman, 2019). The course was loosely located in social sciences disciplines and took a 'Life Story' approach, designed to evoke students' lived experiences alongside biographical narratives that illuminate socio-political discourses to make sense of, and communicate more widely, their understanding of the Europe they found themselves in (Hall et al., 2019). This course finished in October 2016 when the French authorities finally received a permission from the courts to dismantle the camp and relocate all refugees in the camp to other areas of France. Since the camp was bulldozed, it has become illegal to put up or indeed offer shelter in the Jungle camp area.

Separate to the Life Stories course taught in the Calais Jungle between 2015-16, the University of East London, together with the Central European University in Budapest and University of Vienna, received funding from the Erasmus+ programme in 2017 to run preparatory courses in each of the

three countries for refugees hoping to study in university. This project, the Open Learning Initiative (OLIve) is funded until 2021. The programmes are required to include language tuition, academic tutoring and supporting university applications, but each partner is expected to tailor the courses to the needs of the particular students and the HE systems within each country. In University of East London, the course is also informed by the experiences of the Life Stories course, and the conversations, collaborations and testimonies with and of the students, partners and participants from Calais.

When starting the OLIve course at the University of East London, I was relatively new to UK academic institutions and still learning how its hierarchies, formal procedures and systems operated. The OLIve weekend and OLIve Up courses were also something that had never been tried in most universities and hence no procedures or best practices existed. I had to quickly learn UK-based immigration law and how it impacts higher education institutions; institutional procedures for introducing and validating new programmes; health and safety and other facilities management policies; the Universities internal funding systems; external metrics around university rankings and impact measures; media relations; and dozens of more skills, tasks and roles I did not expect when accepting the role. Three main issues came to the fore while trying to navigate these systems and create meaningful opportunities for refugee students who do not fit the existing structures and expectations around being a student: A spreading of border control issues and politics into educational settings; Universities' internal bureaucracy; and the impact of neo-liberalisation of universities. I will discuss these three points briefly in relation to the OLIve courses and offer some insights on what measures we have so far found helpful in navigating them and supporting the inclusion of forced migrant students in higher education. The main issue here is how a student-centred pedagogy can be designed, which values students' experiences and knowledge, and simultaneously challenges the restrictive boundaries put in place by the ordering, bureaucratic and neoliberal agendas which rule UK universities. I will begin by explaining the impact of the border regimes on refugee students and institutions trying to support them. I will then discuss some of the barriers crated by the heavy bureaucratic and administrative loads, and the ways in which marketisation and neoliberal agendas frame the current education system. With these barriers in mind, I will discuss how creative, participative pedagogies and valuing students as participants, holders of knowledge and creative experts can help create educational and participatory spaces where knowledge production can coexist with a critical widening of the current HE agenda. Life Stories, as introduced in our previous course in Calais Jungle, are part of this pedagogical and collaborative strategy. In addition, the approach reaches further to reject some of the hierarchies of what counts as knowledge and education and to question the role of knowers, experts and researchers in the process.

The Magna Charta Universitatum, signed by more than 800 universities, states that in order to 'fulfil its vocation [a university] transcends geographical and political frontiers' and that it must 'ensure that its students' 'freedoms are safeguarded'. Evidence suggests, that Brexit, as well as the rise of populist political discourse across Europe and the US, is part of the wider cultural backlash against policies of tolerance and diversity that were introduced in Western societies since the 1970s (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Brexit follows from earlier exclusionary political developments such as Theresa May's call for hostile environment and several immigration acts in the UK, which amount to what Yuval-Davis et al. (2017) call everyday bordering. In practice, this means that a university is liable for large fines and possible loss of license to operate if they are found to provide education to those who do not have the legal right to study in the UK. The Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 stipulate that any institution or private person that employs, or accepts as a student or a client for publicly funded services including health care or education, rents accommodation to a person who is

not in the country 'legally', faces personal criminal liability in the form of fines as high as £10,000. Universities also risk losing their license to sponsor tier-4 student visas if found in violation of the current policies, as happened to London Metropolitan University in 2012 (Meikle, 2012). In this way the state has shifted the responsibility of border control from the border agencies to public and private actors, such as universities. The consequences of this legislation spread far beyond migrant populations. As the current legislation regarding the right to work or study in the UK is very complex, a person or an institution is likely to deny services or employment to a person they fear might be; or perhaps one who 'looks like' an 'illegal' immigrant. In addition, asylum seekers are not eligible for state funding and hence the current fees of over £9,000 per annum are prohibitive. Similarly, language barriers, lack of previous certificates, difficulties in finding accurate information and the above mentioned issues regarding immigration status and right to study, mean that very few asylum seekers and refugees are able to make it to university in the UK (Murray, 2017).

Nevertheless, many universities in the UK are providing scholarships for asylum seeker and refugee students and making campuses more welcoming to forced migrants by turning themselves into Universities of Sanctuary[1]. The networks, knowledge and support demonstrate a great deal of interest across the sector in supporting refugees in higher education, by some institutions and by large numbers of individuals working within them. In this chapter I will concentrate on the Open Learning Initiative as it offers a unique perspective into the gaps that exist in the university sector in their provision of support for forced migrants, or indeed for any other students who are not easily able to navigate the expense and the demands of the neoliberal universities. The OLIve course has only been offered to those with established refugee status; in Hungary due to legal necessity and in Austria due to practicalities. However, in the UK the asylum system means many people wait for their decision for several years, during which time studying is high on many people's agenda and the programme is open to those without refugee status. With no right to work and limited access to public funds, occupying oneself with education and making efforts to upskill with a view of potential integration after receiving refugee status, asylum seekers value education highly. Establishing the right to study is a priority for us, when advising the students and trying to plan routes into education with them. Article 26 Network[2], in collaboration with immigration lawyers from Coram, have written a 15-page document summarising the main eligibility criteria and potential issues and exceptions.

Universities have evolved from their early incarnations as cradles of knowledge production into large bureaucratic machines. A programme validation requires a lengthy internal procedure with three sets of validation documents at different stages of the process, and a consultation with an external examiner. This procedure also comes with a cost, which needs to be justified to the universities finance team. In addition universities are asked to produce internal and external metrics and impact studies on programmes, student success, widening participation, research impact and various other metrics. Success is often measured in terms of an imagined, white, British student, whose grades are expected to follow a pattern of attendance and who, at completion of his degree will be able to compete for graduate jobs with equal chance with his peers. Refugee students' experience is difficult to place within these metrics. Right from understanding how to get started in their studies to defining what success looks like, the students on the OLIve courses fall between the measures of impact. In the UK there is a move, inspired by South African students (New Text, 2016), to decolonise the universities and dismantle these racial and class assumptions which largely govern

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[1] For more information on scholarships please see Student Action for Refugees resources http://www.star-network.org.uk/index.php/resources/equal_access_scholarships [accessed 17/09/2019] and for information on Universities of Sanctuary Network see https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org [accessed 17/09/2019]
[2] For more information please see http://article26.hkf.org.uk [Accessed 18/09/2019]

the bureaucratic systems. This process is meaningless without looking at the assumption of profit-making which these systems uphold.

UK-based universities have become private enterprises which need to make profit through student fees and private partnerships. Fee-paying students shop for best universities and courses using external metrics regarding student retention and salary after graduation (OFS, 2018). One result of this marketisation of the university is an increased precarity of its workforce, both academic and administrative, affecting women and those in care-giving roles disproportionally (Ivancheva et al, 2019). The negative effect on students and applicants – competition for places, grade inflation, lack of graduate employment opportunities – are also most urgently felt by students of black and minority background, working class students, and students who may require additional support. Universities draft customer charters for their students, and teaching staff are increasingly under pressure to maximise student numbers rather than support student diversity. The will exists with academics and administrative teams to support students from different backgrounds, including refugees, but the spaces for doing so are diminishing.

The individual passions to bring the focus of universities back to educational and knowledge producing mission is where we have found solutions to creating a programme like OLIve, which don't easily fit the existing structures. Constant engagement with external organisations, such as civil society partners, national media, student organisations and other bodies also help keep the focus on the need for a programme such as OLIve and create further internal incentive for universities to extend their provision to those who are currently left outside of the system. Universities can thus be motivated to support by high profile media attention and in some cases national awards and recognition, which is in turn employed in marketing strategies to attract new students/paying customers. Some of the metrics universities are measured on, such as widening participation, can also be successfully employed to construct a narrative that convinces management bodies of the rationale for this engagement. Those universities that are unable to compete in categories measuring research excellence or graduate destinations are especially keen to highlight their success in the categories measuring student diversity and support[3]. Harnessed by civic, public and media support and a widening access agenda, the University of East London circumnavigated some of the barriers to engaging forced migrants. Instead of enrolling students onto existing programmes, the University provided students with visitor access to the library, IT systems, university buildings and even to the many events and support services.

It is important to share best practice and experiences from a programme such as OLIve, so that other opportunities can be provided, and institutional policies changed to make universities more inclusive. Yet this requires us to consider, how such dissemination should be done and by whom. Talking about a programme such as OLIve cannot be done without reference to the students; their needs, their ambitions and their lived experiences. The difficulty and the ethical objection to narrating the experiences of 'the other' in this way or to pertaining to represent her has always created an ethical dilemma for me (Esin and Lounasmaa, 2020). I am reluctant to complete an ethics application and turn my students into objects of study. As an educator my first responsibility is for my students. Speaking and publishing about the course will always involve speaking and publishing the words and the experiences of my students. As an academic, the dissemination of our best practices also comes with specific rewards, such as career progression and public promotion. Yet, without sharing the knowledge we have accumulated, we are reducing the potential of a course like

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[3] See for example Times Higher Education and Guardian University Awards, where universities compete with each other for one-off recognition for student support of widening participation.

OLIve to sustain more systematic changes in the sector, including how the current metrics turn students into customers and values success in monetary terms only. Courses like OLIve can also help us rethink our pedagogies in line with decolonising our teaching and our institutions. When the course first launched in 2017, it was the first of its kind, bridging existing education and information gaps refugees had between their previous educational experiences and the UK system. Now there are at least 5 other pre-sessional courses in the UK, out of which at least three are directly inspired by the OLIve course.

As a director of the OLIve course for refugees and asylum seekers and as an educator in the highly classed and racialized UK HE system, I have struggle to balance questions of voice, agency and expertise with questions of coloniality, discrimination and exclusion in education. Refugee and minority students, who face barriers to higher education and whose experiences and expertise is devalued, wish to enter these spaces of privilege and fit in. Recognising that these spaces often exclude these students and perpetuate systems of discrimination, I wish to change and challenge them. One challenge I have employed is encouraging students to become authors and experts in their knowledge. This has meant working collaboratively with artists, such as the poet Sonia Quintero and theatre-maker Devika Ranjan, yoga practitioners OMPowerment[4], refugee workshop leaders and students, to co-create space, co-narrate stories and develop with new, critical knowledge. In April 2019 an article co-authored with 22 students of the course was published in the *Forced Migration Review*, (Lounasmaa, Esenowo et al. 2019) highlighting the issues students themselves wanted educators and policy makers to hear. Students and practitioners on the course have also written poetry, created performances, and written and spoken in other venues and platforms about our experiences. Where, in these processes, does agency, subjectivity, power, authorship and expertise lie? Who gains recognition from playing their part, and whose voice is valued? How can these problems be narrated in the process of co-creation?

The solutions I have tried to implement is closely linked to the pedagogy we have employed in the OLIve course. The UK has seen an expansive interest in decolonising teaching practices in the last two years, inspired by the South African student movements such as Rhodes must fall/fees must fall. As always with such fashionable moves, some universities quickly turn this to a new marketing strategy and dilute its potential to make real change[5]. However, the principles can offer some ways to put students and their experiences at the centre of both teaching and dissemination, and value them as the agents of change and the narrators of their own experiences. As the coordinator of the course I oversee the teaching programme and teach very little myself. I include conversations with students into the schedule, and usually include a session on reading *Paulo Freire's* 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970) together. In this session, early in the programme, I draw students' attention to the problematic hierarchies in the UK HE system, and invite them to think about the OLIve course differently. I ask them to tell all of the teachers and lecturers what they wish to learn and I ask them to think about what they already know and us, the instructors do not. I also ask them to think about how they can learn from each other, and finally, how we create a space for learning together. For some, decolonising and critiquing the existing system is not a priority – they may fear that if the current systems of hierarchy get dismantled, the education they receive will no longer give them the prestige that came with that hierarchy. Yet, some of the most popular sessions on the course are poetry and drama and yoga. The creative programmes are an important part of the course, as they

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[4] For more information about the OMPowerment project please see https://ompower.org [Accessed 17/09/2019]

[5] One Russell Group university notorious for its lack of inclusion advertised for a new position to manage the "business of decolonising the university" in 2019.

offer a different way to engage with education and are at the core of creating a space, that amidst the hostility of the society allows a short respite.

Life Stories are still offered through the programme, even though the course is run differently from the one in Calais. The experience of trauma, both the ones that brought the students to the UK, and the ongoing trauma induced by the immigration policies are present in every classroom. While students want to do well in their IELTS exams, the ongoing struggle often makes it impossible to concentrate. Their experiences are constantly at the centre and resurface at different times. How students choose to speak about this varies greatly. Students are asked to present on any topic they wish at the end of the course. Many choose topics that are academic, or of professional interest to them. Some will present on the events of their country, as the need to speak about their experiences is so great. Colin Davis discussed on Monday our right to forget trauma. He used the example of a man, who was pushed to answer questions he didn't want to remember the answers to, as it was too traumatic. We have made great efforts to reduce the number of questions to our students that could cause such distress. The application form asks what other languages students speak but not the country of origin or nationality, as sometimes this in itself can be an unanswerable question. We never request in writing information about a person's immigration status, as it can be difficult or dangerous to enclose. When asking students to do writing or speaking exercises, we avoid questions about family or particular memories. We ask them to write about their favourite city (many choose London) instead. All this is to allow those, who so wish, to forget the rest. Yet Life Stories and trauma come back at different times: writing university applications and outlining one's past, for example.

Student feedback is one place where the student voice is prioritised. One student noted in her feedback that she joined the course: "because I am bored and need somewhere to go". As she completed the course, she noted the quality of teaching and the range of topics covered and when finishing, she stated: "This course brought energy and make me focus and believe in myself that I can still get education". Dina Nayeri (2019) in her book *The Ungrateful Refugee* speaks about the requirement of the refugee to be grateful for every little piece of sympathy or bread they receive, for as long as they remain a refugee. In some cases this can be for the rest of their lives, or even their children's lives, while others manage to 'blend in' and leave the label behind. The feedback from our students is 90% positive, often celebratory. While I would like to think that the experience has been overall positive, and of course do not doubt my students' views in principle, the positive feedback must be placed in the context of the hostility of the world outside and the expectation of refugees to show gratefulness to anyone who shows them kindness. Many feel victimised by the UK immigration policies, and when co-writing about education, this was communicated strongly by students. Yet, the requirement for gratefulness resides alongside the violence of the UK immigration system and the current HE provision which values students for their current and future financial contributions.

When thinking about the student voice and the right to narrate, I have invited students to write together with me about the course, instead of being the only voice. An article written together with the course director, IT-instructor and students of OLIve Weekend course 5 was published in the *Forced Migration Review* (2019). In inviting students to collaborate in projects as authors, artists and co-designers, I offer them different standpoints to narrate from. I hope to move away from tokenising refugees as only valued for repeating their trauma/resilience/victimhood/transformation by encouraging them to choose a position and identity for themselves. I have also invited students to write on our blog, about anything they wish to discuss, but none have so far. I realise this is because the 'write anything' guidance I offered is too wide a remit for most students, and they would like to have more guidance and support in finding the 'correct' content or way to write. The students worry about their grammar and spelling and don't want to expose any weakness, and also want to check

the topic, as they find it unbelievable that their existing expertise on any given topic could be considered 'enough'. In contrast, there are others who are already political writers and activists in their own circles and choose different platforms to write on. Many have written about the fact that refugee is not a stable identity category, but rather a legal definition some are forced to use for a period of time. Some refugees do choose the refugee identity and state it loudly in order to ground themselves daily, such as Majid Adin, who uses his art to tell refugee stories and advocate for others[6].

Finally, because the course is rather well known in the UK, I often get requests from interested partners to come and deliver content to the programme. In these exchanges I always consider the diversity of the person offering the content, discuss the principles of mutual respect and student diversity and strive to make both the content and the teaching style as varied as possible. Contributors often include alumni of the course, art practitioners and students, as well as NGO experts and professors. Most students are highly motivated to apply for university and want to receive quality instruction in academic English and academic skills without compromising on the standard of education.

In the current climate, a university may be simultaneously acting as a humanitarian institution, a neoliberal space aiming to maximise profits, and a border guard acting on behalf of the state to monitor and control those without full citizenship rights. In this policy environment, institutions are challenging the cultural backlash and trying to make university education available to students regardless of their background. Scholarships have the power to provide full access of individual students into the system, and even allow them to rise into the position of privilege UK universities aim to create and uphold through its hierarchical and bureaucratic systems. We are aiming to challenge the structures further through programmes such as OLIve. These programmes are invaluable for the students who succeed against the numerous barriers put before them. The strategies adopted in the OLIve programme include opening up the academic space to those who are traditionally excluded because of immigration status or capacity to pay fees. The pedagogies adopted also play a crucial role in supporting inclusion of these non-traditional students: engaging a student-centred pedagogy which seeks to harness the life experience of students through adopting a 'Life Story' pedagogical approach. The approach aims to evoke students' lived experiences alongside biographical narratives that illuminate socio-political discourses to make sense of, and communicate more widely, their understanding of the Europe they found themselves in (Hall et al., 2019). A second strategy involves not 'officially' enrolling students on a validated university programme (which may mean having to enact a form of border control); and not *formally* validating the course, but instead providing students with visitor access to the library, IT systems, university buildings and even to the many events and support services. A third strategy involves sharing some of the good practice inclusive pedagogies that we employ in OLIve, so that other institutions might adopt similar programs. This has meant co-writing and co-disseminating works about the course with students and other facilitators, thus distributing agency, subjectivity, power, authorship and expertise. A fourth strategy involves considering the diversity of the teaching and facilitation team to offer a diversity of experience and support.

Most of these strategies can be integrated into other teaching and learning programs in higher education and in doing so extend the curriculum and the student population. Without systematic change that puts students' learning and support needs as well as academic freedom and knowledge production at its core, these initiatives will remain limited and continue to reinforce existing hierarchies and exclusions. Hence, for the institutions, and the individual actors within them, the goal of supporting these extraordinary students must be accompanied by the wider political goal of challenging the hostile environment and neoliberalisation in and out of the classrooms, so that not only the extraordinary, but also the ordinary students get the chance to succeed. This will help us to continue widening access to refugee students, and importantly, will also improve

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[6] Adin is one of the authors of the book, Voices from the Jungle, the animator of the music video of the Rocket Man by Elton John, which portrays a refugee journey into London, and a resident at the UNHCR pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale.

the experience and outcomes of university education to all those who are currently trying to succeed against the impossible standards set for success with a narrow demographic in sight.

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