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The role of institutional practice, non-educational actors and social networks in shaping refugee student lifeworlds in Ugandan higher education

Authors:
Rovincer Najjuma[1]
Michael Gallagher[2]
Rebecca Nambi[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Foundations and Curriculum Studies, College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

[2]Centre for Research in Digital Education, Moray House School of Education and Sport, Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Corresponding author:
Michael Gallagher,
michael.s.gallagher@ed.ac.uk

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Background: Participation in higher education can be empowering for refugees, yet this participation is contingent on a range of structures, practices and policies, many of which are not readily accessible.

Aim: Informed by Habermas' lifeworlds, this study examined higher education meso-level institutional practices and how non-higher education actors support access and participation of refugee students.

Setting: This research was conducted with (1) refugee students in three private universities and one public university representing several regions in Uganda, (2) administrative staff from these same universities and (3) staff from non-higher education support organisations that help navigate universities for refugee students.

Methods: Data were generated through desk research identifying policy language, a survey and 25 semi-structured interviews with students and staff at universities and staff at support organisations.

Results: Institutional policy homogeneously frames refugee students as international students, which in turn has a cascading impact on the lifeworlds of these students. The first theme includes university policies and administrative practices which structure the lifeworlds of these students. The second is the role of non-higher education supporting organisations that focus on refugee support and education. The third theme describes how non-academic structures, such as clubs and social networks designed to meet the students' social welfare, are contingent in structuring the lifeworlds of these students.

Conclusion: These themes interoperate and have a structuring effect on the lifeworlds of these students. The cascading impact of classifying refugee students as international students deserves further scrutiny, particularly in its impact on institutional and individual student patterns of participation.

Keywords: refugees; higher education; Uganda; social reproduction; lifeworlds; universities; communicative action.

Introduction

There are 89.3 million people forcibly displaced worldwide as a 'result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2022), and increasingly, this is a result of climate-induced change which necessitates migration (Scott 2020). As these displacements become protracted and displaced populations become more and more a fixture of societies, the political imperative tends to be less directed towards repatriation than towards integration into host societies. In this transition towards integration, the challenges for host countries are mounting. Refugees often compete with local citizens for resources, and their presence increases demands for education, health services, access to host infrastructures (Barman 2020) and access to employment opportunities. In lower-income refugee host countries, governments' ability to implement supportive and widening participation measures for its own citizens is often limited, and the situation is even more complex for refugees. One space where this is acutely felt is education. Although progress has been made in increasing access at the primary and secondary levels of education, only 3% of youth with refugee backgrounds are enrolled in higher

education compared to 36% globally. Refugees seeking higher education in the context of host countries face numerous and unique structural and individual challenges (Lambrechts 2020). These challenges are due to their culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Baker, Due & Rose 2021) and their presettlement experiences of instability, insecurity, trauma (Osmanovic 2021) and interrupted education (Baker & Irwin 2021).

For refugees, barriers to participation in higher education not only accumulate, but also interrelate and exacerbate each other, leading to what Lambrechts (2020) described as 'super-disadvantage'. This 'super-disadvantage' cannot be overcome without deliberate, strategic support and changes delivered by educational systems through contextually relevant policies, strategies and structures. The challenge is that the complex suite of specific needs that students from refugee backgrounds bring to higher education may not be recognised and met through existing institutional structures (Naylor et al. 2021). The super-disadvantage that refugees experience in the context of higher education, as barriers accumulate and intertwine, is a potentially rich line of inquiry in the literature.

Uganda hosts over 1.38 million refugees, the most in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2019). Most of the refugees have fled from the crises in Burundi, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. Except for urban refugees residing in Kampala, refugees are located in 12 districts scattered throughout the country. Roughly 66% of refugees are from South Sudan, 26% from the Democratic Republic of Congo and 3% from Burundi; 5% are refugees from Somalia, Rwanda, Eritrea, Sudan and Ethiopia, who have lived in protracted exile in Uganda for the past three decades (UNHCR 2019). The country has a long history of welcoming refugees within its borders and is known for its progressive refugee integration policies (Betts 2021), allowing refugees to settle among the local population and have access to basic services, including education. Furthermore, these policies have enjoyed political continuity as 'refugee policy has been used by Ugandan leaders to strengthen patronage and assert political authority within strategically important refugee-hosting hinterlands' (Betts 2021:243). Yet despite this political continuity and these progressive integration policies, significant barriers remain for refugee students' participation in Ugandan higher education.

Therefore, this study explores these barriers through a meso, largely institutional, level of analysis. It attempts to surface how particular institutional practices and policies, administrative and academic agents intertwine to create a context that refugee students must navigate to succeed in Ugandan higher education. In doing so, it situates itself between the micro, largely individual, accounts of practice for refugee students focused on access to education (Dryden-Peterson 2006b, 2003; Mugerwa-Sekawabe 2021; Paul 2022) and the broader macro layers of analysis of the higher education sector overall (Dryden-Peterson 2011). The study is designed to complement this existing research on refugee *access* to education, as well as the existing structural barriers that complicate this access, by focusing on *participation* in higher education and how that is structured by actors both within and outside universities.

The study was conducted throughout Uganda from November 2020 to July 2021, and included three private universities, one public university and one refugee support organisation in Uganda. The core research focus was to determine which non-academic actors are impacting how refugee students navigate higher education. Firstly, the authors performed a desk research to determine the actors involved in the support of refugee students in Ugandan higher education. Secondly, the authors conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with two different categories of participants: staff at support organisations or universities and students who identify as refugees currently participating in the study at Ugandan public and private universities. Thirdly, a survey was administered in an open call for those who wished to participate but did not necessarily want to be subjected to an interview. This survey was anonymous and yielded 50 responses.

To analyse this data, this study uses a theoretical framework combining Bourdieu's (1977b) social reproduction and Habermas' lifeworlds (1993) as a means of identifying the institutional actors that are structuring the access and participation of refugee students in the Ugandan context. In doing so, it presents the nexus of social reproduction as an ensemble of institutional policies and practices, a range of internal and external supporting organisations and actors, and a series of formal and informal communities ostensibly designed to support these refugee students. The lifeworlds of refugee students in this context are shaped, to some degree, by this social reproduction. Such an analysis posits that this ensemble, and refugee students' interaction with it, is sophisticated. It is defined as much by what is omitted in terms of policy, practice, actors and community as it is by what explicitly is present. Such an analysis identifies the specific institutional activity in higher education that impedes or permits participation by refugee students. It explores how these elements accumulate and begins to note how this might be more equitably imagined in Ugandan higher education.

Refugee education policy, noneducational actors and theorising the lifeworlds of refugee students in response

The debate on refugee integration in host countries in general and in higher education in particular is an enduring topic of discussion globally (Cleaver 2001; Dryden-Peterson 2011; Griffiths Sigona & Zetter 2005). The UNHCR (2019) advances the global framework for refugee education, and here they elaborate what needs to be done at different levels of education – early childhood development, primary, secondary and tertiary education – in order to meet the 2030

education commitments. The framework presents possible areas for action and highlights the areas that different stakeholders can focus on to mobilise and articulate educational policies and support for refugees. The inclusion of refugees in any education system is a matter of policy, and hence it is the responsibility of institutions and host nations to develop policies that support quality education to both citizens and noncitizens. Indeed, there are reports (especially in the Global North) where institutional policies appear to positively support refugee integration in higher education (Bacher et al. 2019; Ben-Moshe, Bertone & Grossman 2008).

However, some literature indicates that countries go to great lengths to develop inclusive policies, but they barely put them into practice, especially in developing contexts (Dryden-Peterson, Adelman & Chopra 2019; Hakami 2016; Morrice 2013). In such contexts, where access is limited due to a lack of formal or active policies, refugee students struggle to participate in higher education due to challenges relating to accreditation of their academic documents, navigation of the entry requirements and actual participation in day-to-day university activities (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019; El-Ghali & Ghosn 2019; Griffiths et al. 2005; Naidoo 2009). Hence, donor organisations and government agencies bridge the gap between refugee students and higher institutions of learning to assist them to access and participate in higher education by providing support for these complex processes, alongside a range of other support mechanisms such as counselling. Expanding the focus of participation beyond the higher education institution itself to include these additional organisations also broadens the study position of social reproduction to avoid the critique of the concept being 'strongly institutionalist, although often vague' (Cleaver 2001:40). Social reproduction in this context 'depends upon the character of the networks and the relations between the actors involved in those networks' (Griffiths et al. 2005:6). This emphasis on relations rather than the defining characteristics of an 'accepted' social order further describes the supporting structures and relations that allow for or limit participation for refugee students and other actors in this context.

The theoretical framework employed in this research is adaptable and can accommodate new concepts as they are introduced, noting how they are worked and reworked in a refugee context defined in some way by its liminality or 'radical uncertainty' (Horst & Grabska 2015). Theory provides a mechanism for illuminating the trajectories made possible by this uncertain future. The theoretical framework used to frame and interrogate this context draws on Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction (1977), alongside the theory of communicative action – specifically, Habermas' notion of lifeworlds (1993). Bourdieu's social reproduction identifies the actors involved in refugee education in Ugandan higher education and their impact on social reproduction, while the theory of communicative action provides a means for identifying the lifeworlds of the actors involved and what 'action' is indeed possible in these contexts. This theoretical framework provides critical utility at both the macro level (institutionally and within the sector) as well as micro levels (the lived experiences of individual actors) and allows for an interrogation of how and when 'the knowledge and experiences of refugees' past lives becomes negated and disqualified' (Morrice 2013:654).

Bourdieu's idea of social reproduction (1973) provides a critical lens for understanding how the social order is reproduced and potentially amplified across time, a lens that can potentially shed light on the role that both the pursuit of and the institution of higher education has in reproducing this social order. It is important to note at the onset that Bourdieu does not inherently position social reproduction as inevitable; indeed, change is possible within this context of social reproduction in higher education as this study attempts to demonstrate. Furthermore, social reproduction does not prioritise any actor in this process, but rather it 'affirms the primacy of relations' between actors (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:15). This focus on the primacy of relations rather than 'common-sense opinions' about social order surfaces the 'taken for granted' and 'self-evident' positions that attempt to make the arbitrary appear as 'natural' (Bourdieu 1977:164–167). This emphasis on relations rather than defining characteristics of an 'accepted' social order further surfaces the structures, the institutions, the rhetoric and the material that allow for participation in the existing social order. It further affirms that the substance of the social order is the relationality of these entities.

Social reproduction is 'linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu 1983:249). Within the context under investigation in this article, this is contingent to this durable network of institutions within and contributing to higher education. The availability of these resources for refugee students is potentially compromised by this issue of *mutual recognition*. Not all within this durable network acknowledge or are acquainted with these refugee actors in terms of classification, structure and support. As such, these potential resources are difficult to obtain and employ for refugee students and their support organisations – less so for the more established actors in these durable networks who ultimately participate in the social reproduction of the network itself.

An emphasis on social reproduction provides critical utility across two strands. Firstly, it presents the 'buried' structures of the social worlds and activities these refugee students participate in, particularly in higher education. Secondly, it recognises the ways these same structures are potentially replicating inequalities and constraining the ability of these students to act. This provides deeper consideration of the larger social inequalities and potential for reproduction of these inequalities that may influence outcomes, actions and experiences. These frameworks have been used extensively in this context to explore issues of identity (Refai, Haloub & Lever 2018), access to higher education for refugees in Uganda (Hakami 2016), the social space of refugees in higher education as they enter and

move through university (Morrice 2013; Naidoo et al. 2018), expressions of agency (Owen 2014) and the impact of socialising messages sent to refugee students via policies and practices related to higher education (Dryden-Peterson & Giles 2010), among others. Within this study, social reproduction provides a theoretical lens for identifying meta-level actors and practices on which refugee students' participation is contingent.

Furthermore, the study draws on Habermas' theory of communicative action to determine how this social reproduction is expressed in language. The theory of communicative action allows researchers to begin to privilege 'ways of knowing, being and doing' (Urquhart et al. 2020:2) that potentially sit outside the dominant discourses underpinning social reproduction. Within the theory of communicative action, criteria are presented in which to understand action as either rational or irrational, communicative or strategic (Habermas 1984) in relation to the cultural normativity of the social context in which it is being expressed. It is critiqued not by expression of facts in the objective world but rather by the reliability, insightfulness and 'normally right' qualities in the context of the expression (Habermas 1984). 'This provides a lens to reveal the manipulation and strategic distortions of communication through exposing the true, undisclosed motivations of teleological action toward system success' (Urquhart et al. 2020:4).

Within this is the lifeworld, a space where actions or consensus are arrived at through a communicative process. Habermas defined it as the 'the milieu where actors are taking part in interactions through which they develop, confirm, and renew their membership in social groups and their own identities' (Habermas 1987:139). These lifeworlds are complex intersections of 'shared norms, expectations, and practices of social actors that enable them (members) to communicate and coordinate their conduct' (Baynes 2015:22). Lifeworlds relate to the ability to act in a particular context in the present and future as 'the rest of the lifeworld is over the horizon, ready for use in other contexts, made up of a stock of ways of interpreting the world' (Fairtlough 1991:549).

Lifeworlds are, however, compromised when traditional forms of life are dismantled and when 'hopes and dreams become individuated by state canalization of welfare and culture' (Habermas 1987:356), as they often have been with refugee students trying to navigate Ugandan higher education. Language itself becomes a means of exploring these lifeworlds and if and how they have been compromised. Critically for this research, lifeworlds have been used as a frame to explore the role of civil society organisations on refugee integration (Aldea 2021) and as a means of analysing the divergent needs and aspirations of students and the structure and ethos of higher education institutions in developing contexts (Regmi 2021). Within this article, lifeworlds are presented as contingent on a range of meta-level, largely institutional, structures and practices. Students' engagement with these structures and practices is readily identifiable in the language they employ to describe these engagements.

These two theoretical positions sit together in an overall theoretical framework: social reproduction presents the actors and practices involved in reifying the social order in higher education, while lifeworlds indicate what action is indeed possible in these contexts, and how this is expressed in language. This pairing of theories provides critical utility along multiple lines of both meso (largely institutional) and micro (largely individual) inquiry.

Methodology

The methodological position advanced in this study utilises data collection methods that speak to this position and draws from the advanced methodologies from several discrete research projects exploring refugee education in Uganda and beyond (e.g. Awidi & Quan-Baffour 2020; Dryden-Peterson 2006a, 2006b, 2011; Stark et al. 2015).

The study was conducted throughout Uganda from November 2020 to July 2021, and it included three private universities, one public university and one refugee support organisation. Firstly, the authors performed a desk research to determine the actors involved in this nexus of support within higher education for refugee students in Uganda. This desk research involved identifying support organisations, alongside policy or guidance being issued by the institutions themselves, whether they were support organisations or universities that host refugee students routinely. This desk research was designed to begin to reveal, at least partly, the contours of the lifeworlds these students inhabit and interrogate what opportunities, if any, were made available to them.

Secondly, the authors conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with two different categories of participants. Five of these interviews were carried out with administrative staff and 20 interviews were performed with refugee students in public and private universities in Uganda. The administrative staff were at the level of deputy vice-chancellor in all universities that participated in the study, and they were purposely selected because of their advantageous positions of being close to and part of policy formulation and implementation at their institutions. The university administrators introduced the authors to the student leaders of refugee students, who in turn helped the authors to initiate other research activities with refugee students. For instance, the authors were able to hold introductory meetings with refugee students that were available on campus, taking into consideration that the study was largely carried out during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and subsequent total and partial national lockdowns.

The selection criteria for respondents to the interview schedule was based on respondents who could self-identify as refugee students and those who were actively registered and attending a formal course at a higher education

institution; as a result, a maximum variation purposive sample was achieved. Participants had a communicative level of English and were of varying ages between 25 and 40 years. Countries of origin were South Sudan (11), Somalia (8) and Rwanda (2), and male and female participants were included. They were recruited through a network of contacts from university administrators and refugee student leaders. The respondents to the survey questionnaire were also selected based on similar selection criteria; however, because of the national lockdown, they could not be accessed for a face-to-face interview. The findings from the survey questionnaire were used to corroborate the findings from the face-to face interviews and are not reported in this article.

Thirdly, a survey was administered in an open call for those who wished to participate but did not necessarily want to be subjected to an interview, as well as those students who were not at campus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey was anonymous and yielded 50 responses. The purpose of the survey was to explore perspectives and experiences of refugee students on their journeys of participation in higher education, and the survey questions were directly related to the interview questions. As such, the interview data formed the basis of most of the analysis presented in this article, with the survey data being used to corroborate the findings emerging from the interviews.

As a limitation, the universities participating in this study do not have a refugee student database to enable systematic sampling of refugee students. A refugee status declaration is not considered as part of the admission data. Available admission data are in de-identified aggregate form, showing only country of origin and gender. Therefore, a snowball sampling methodology was used to select participants (refugee students) for the study; for example, the administrators linked the researchers to refugee student leaders, and refugee student leaders linked the researchers to refugee students.

The data emerging from the survey and interviews were anonymised, transcribed and coded using an encrypted online application (Dedoose) and made available only to the authors. The authors performed open coding on the data, where interview transcripts were read holistically. Emergent themes emerged through a second round of axial coding. This process was repeated for all the transcripts and the results were discussed within the core research team (the three authors of this study). Pseudonyms are used in this article for the participants whose data is presented.

The research recognised the ethical complexities associated with involving participants from vulnerable populations, especially the importance of capturing accurate data relating to their experiences (Ellis et al. 2007; Jacobsen & Landau 2003). Ethical review was carried out and achieved at the authors' institutions through formal institutional review boards. The authors note, however, the distinction here between 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice', an instructive distinction for the research described in this article. 'Ethics in practice' involves identifying and responding to context-dependent circumstances and ethical contingencies – or 'ethically important moments' – that arise over the course of research projects (Block et al. 2013:70). In this regard, the authors were conscious to continue seeking both verbal and written permission from the different university contexts during the process of data collection. For instance, the authors approached their work in a hierarchical manner by first seeking permission from the university administrators before talking to the staff and eventually to the students. This multilevel approach eased communication channels and enabled various visits to meet different people for data collection. As 'ethical questions are not static', and need to be considered and reflected upon across the lifecycle of a research project (Bilger & Van Liempt 2009:13) as ethics in practice, the authors incorporated reflexive discussions at intervals to discuss the ethical implications arising from the work in the field to note whether informed consent was still applicable or needed to be renegotiated, as well as determining whether risk of any sort was being introduced to the participants and reviewing the data as it was being collected to ensure that no revealing inclusions that could identify participants were present.

Analysis: The categorisations of higher education, the role of non-higher education actors and the importance of social networks on the lifeworlds of refugee students

An analysis of the data revealed three themes of importance. First, it was found that universities are predictably complex systems where seemingly small decisions or omissions cascade through the lifeworlds of these students and in turn impact their capacity to navigate higher education. The study presents evidence of this theme from both the institutional (meso) and individual (micro) levels to note this cascading.

The second theme moves the frame away from the university to note the further structuring of these lifeworlds by support organisations. These are largely civil society organisations that provide a broad range of support to refugees, including counselling, scholarships and educational opportunities. They act as essential conduits to higher education and in some ways precipitate the practices of participation that many refugee students subsequently cultivate in their respective universities.

The third theme describes the social reproduction that exists within these universities and the broader systems that these support organisations have enabled, by which refugee students are in some ways bound. In the discussion of this theme, the study looks at the practices of participation that refugee students communicated in the data and the perceived impact these had on their evolving lifeworlds. Table 1 presents these three themes in summary form.

TABLE 1: A summary of themes impacting the lifeworlds of refugee students.

Theme	Description	Indicative passages	Significance
1: Universities as spaces of omission, access and local arrangements	The university carries many administrative barriers and policy omissions, beginning with the categorisation of refugee students as international students. Local arrangements are necessary to offset these barriers and omissions.	'[*W*]e do not have a specific policy that targets refugees per se, but I know in the University Act, of course there are provisions that support internationalisation of education'.	The implication of this categorisation generates further barriers: language difficulties, financial arrangements, opaque administrative practices and access to any bespoke support.
2: The nexus of support from non-higher education actors	The support of non-higher education actors makes higher education participation possible: the practices of higher education (financial, administrative, academic) are in part enabled by these non-higher education actors.	'[*Non-higher education actors*] visit refugee camps and provide information about available higher education opportunities for accessing and participating in higher education, courses, admissions and admission timelines and available funding for refugee students'.	The role these non-higher education actors play in refugee student higher education participation is a critical addition to any meso-level analysis. These actors mitigate financial and administrative barriers and begin to model the academic practices of higher education.
3: The role of social networks on participation in higher education	The structures internal to universities offer support to students, largely informal social organisations that cater to the welfare of refugee students or provide communicative agency to allow them to attend to their own welfare.	'Within us, because we are many. And we have also our association, and in that association, we help ourselves. If there is someone with the challenge, we come together and address it'.	These internal and largely informal social structures are contingent on the 'local arrangements' and support of non-higher education actors present in the first two themes.

Theme 1: Universities as spaces of categorisation, access and local arrangements

This theme describes how universities themselves act as spaces where both access and barriers are presented in institutional practice and policy. Often this is contingent on how these refugee students are categorically positioned within the larger university as international students, the multitude of languages presented in Ugandan higher education and whether institutional policy exists that caters to refugee students. These categorisations have a significant impact on students' capacity to navigate the university. 'Local arrangements' exist that mitigate the disadvantages posed by international student classification and language barriers, but there is a suggestion that a more comprehensive refugee student support structure would prove beneficial.

The enactment of national and institutional policy and commitments for ensuring refugee access and participation is dependent upon how individual institutions interpret their responsibilities to all international students. The absence of visible refugee higher education policy has created homogeneity in terms of classification: refugees are categorised as international students. This categorisation has a cascading effect on the lifeworlds made possible to refugee students in their conflation with international students. These institutional practices sit in tension with international and national commitments, such as the Comprehensive Refugee Policy Framework. For example, as relayed by Afiya, a senior staff member in the International Students' Office at University X, there is no policy in place that moves beyond broad efforts at internationalisation:

> '… Well, we do not have a specific policy that targets refugees per se, but I know in the University Act, of course there are provisions that support internationalisation of education.'

There is an indication that policy activity is being initiated, yet these efforts are in their infancy and are conflating international and refugee students:

> 'We have policies pertaining to academics, beginning with admission, examinations, graduation, name it, but not specifically for international students or refugees. Of course, we are preparing to begin working on it, but [*it is*] not yet in place.'

This policy omission and categorical conflation cascades directly to the refugee students themselves, both financially (being asked to pay international fees) and from a communicative perspective (being able to effectively negotiate potentially a rate commensurate with a refugee's financial status), as the following passage from Balondemu, a third-year male refugee student at University X indicates:

> '… [*U*]nfortunately, they have just put us under the same umbrella as international students. So whatever things they come up with, they rate us as international students and they don't differentiate us from the other students. Yeah. Also in accessing these offices, at times you are treated differently. You find most of the issues, they treat refugees also unfairly. Like you go to office and then you are told to pay certain things like you're an international student. You explain you're a refugee, like this – they said no. As long as you're from another country, you have to pay as an international student.'

This broad institutional omission is nominally mitigated by particular actors within the university, a mitigation that is most realised at significant barriers in the student experience, particularly with regard to language of instruction. Language barriers remain as one of the most significant challenges for refugee students, and these barriers were prevalent throughout the data, yet these are partially mitigated by 'local arrangements' within the broader university, as indicated by this passage from Dr G, a lecturer in the School of Education who works with refugee students at University Y:

> '… The department of English language has been very instrumental helping students of this kind, but this is just, I could say, local arrangement. Yeah. I wish we could do it at a higher level where we say when the students come we test their English … So I wish we could also reach there where we can assess these students …Yeah. They're being assisted by the department of English languages.'

The above passage notes the role of evaluation of students' capacities for participation in university study and overall university life, an evaluation that is taking place through 'local arrangements' within the university rather than at the onset of university engagement. The 'system' that the above passage refers to is a bridging programme of pre-sessional instruction designed to prepare students for university life, including but not exclusive to language instruction. Such programmes are increasingly being provided through the

support organisations discussed later in this article and serve to provide capacity for these students and to stimulate adaptations to the students' lifeworlds.

Refugee students also rely on online university systems for enabling access, as the following passage from the Dean of Students at the University of X staff relates:

> '… The courses at the university, most of them really – they get from our website. They then read and they know … they learn about it even if they're not yet in the country, not yet in University Z. But where they have queries, we have the e-mail address, which is there in the website … So any query pertaining to programs, admission, you send to that e-mail and they are assisted. Sometimes they send to VC, they send to the public relation office. But all the same, they send to the academic registrar for clarification. So that one is being handled, really.'

The above passage suggests firstly that there is some belief that refugee students are being supported to some degree within current university systems, particularly in the online spaces of the university. Secondly, there are potential expressions of communicative agency within these queries from refugee students as they learn to navigate the communicative and administrative practices of the university, even when not yet in the university or country. For some universities, there are additional layers of support provided for the students' 'social security', as the following passage from Dr M, a lecturer at the University Z, indicates:

> 'Well, we have the Office of the Dean of Students, which is in charge of students' welfare, and I think it takes it upon itself to ensure that these students are well looked after … So the Office of the Dean of Students looks after them. And then within the Office of the Dean of Students, there is a counsellor who should be able to talk to those students whenever they have any problems, if ever they have any problems, yeah. There is a warden who also is particularly concerned about the accommodation of the students and so on, so they usually called meetings with the owners of the hostel to ensure that they maintain a conducive environment for these students. I think those kinds of things are there. As I said, once you join now as a student, you should be having the same treatment, yeah.'

The above passage is indicative in that firstly, it identifies the cascading layers (dean, counsellor, warden) of support needed to ensure that these students are in a position where their basic welfare is being met, without which university participation is all but impossible. Secondly, there is significant complexity in these layers of support that is potentially made more challenging due to the classification of refugee students as international students, as the last sentence suggests ('once you join now as a student, you should be having the same treatment'). Throughout the data, there is a nominal equation of equality (all students being treated the same) with an unfairness (this equal treatment disproportionately impacting refugee students).

This last passage, and indeed this entire theme, casts doubt on whether these students are in 'possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu 1983:249), as what is presented as a network is contingent on an assortment of 'local arrangements' which are offset by a lack of mutual recognition as refugee students at the institutional level. There is a cascading effect on how this categorial omission impacts their capacity to engage with the lifeworlds present in the university and its 'shared norms, expectations, and practices' (Baynes 2015:22). Each negotiation to adjust fees, each attempt to engage with the language of instruction and each engagement with an administrative process is ultimately an engagement with university culture, which 'requires sufficiently valid knowledge to cover the need for mutual understanding in a lifeworld' (Standing Standing & Law 2013:490). A refugee student, in their categorisation as an international student (which mutes the characteristics of their educational experience), may not be in possession of such knowledge.

Theme 2: The nexus of 'support' from non-higher education actors

The second theme describes the range of actors that support the 'local arrangements' taking place within universities and notes their impact on structuring the lifeworlds of these students. A range of organisations have been working with refugees to assist them to access and participate in higher education by providing support for these complex administrative processes, alongside a range of other support mechanisms such as counselling. Broadening the focus of participation beyond the higher education institution itself to include these additional organisations also broadens the context of the lifeworlds of these students as they depend 'upon the character of the networks and the relations between the actors involved in those networks' (Griffiths et al. 2005:6). This emphasis on relations rather than defining characteristics of an 'accepted' social order further presents the supporting structures and relations that allow for or limit participation for refugee students and other actors in this context. Their access to the lifeworlds at university is predicated on first engaging with these supporting organisations.

Therefore, the study examines the structure and the practices of actors in brokering access for refugee students into higher education. Several types of organisations have undertaken activity to support refugee students, including international nongovernment organisations (INGOs), civil society actors, organisations with nominal or chartered association with universities and government agencies. These organisations provide conduits into higher education for refugee students; they routinely provide support across a range of processes that refugee students must navigate to participate in higher education.

What presented repeatedly in the data was the role these organisations had in raising awareness of the landscape, processes and promise of higher education itself by acting to disseminate information into refugee communities on available universities, admissions processes, funding and so

on. Tom, a counsellor from Institution Y, a civil society actor focused on refugee support, indicated that the roles that these organisations serve in mitigating the barriers to entry span a range of activity:

> '… [*A*]n international NGO visits refugee camps and provides information about available higher education opportunities for accessing and participating in higher education, courses, admissions and admission timelines and available funding for refugee students …'

From raising awareness of higher education, this work continues through to the identification and evaluation of academic documentation from refugee students, which in the data is routinely pointed to as being a considerable barrier to entry. The practices of these organisations in supporting entry to higher education reveal the complexity of barriers presented. All of them are interdependent to some degree and must be accounted for to participate in higher education.

Many of these organisations also provide English language instruction and bridging courses to enable refugee students to access higher education. These exist in parallel to the 'local arrangements' that universities themselves offer. It is within these bridging courses that a range of support could be seen that is being offered which potentially contributes to the students' increasing access to the lifeworlds of higher education, including English language instruction, psychosocial counselling and support, administrative and financial support and the modelling of academic practice that will allow them to participate in higher education. These bridging programmes (detailed in Abdelfattah Ahmed Younes 2020; El-Ghali & Ghosn 2019; Symons et al. 2021) are increasingly common in the landscape, partly to offset institutional support gaps in universities, and they serve to address a range of barriers to entry in one structured programme of activity. They also serve to proactively mitigate the feelings of confusion, inauthenticity and isolation that accompany entry into higher education (Gourlay 2011).

These organisations in some cases provide measures of support and oversight that would be difficult for an individual student to perform, particularly administratively. Financial support, when provided, can come with additional support to ensure that the student is engaging with their education; this additional support carries with it a degree of pastoral care and a nominal surveillance, as indicated in the following passage from Mr Mukisa, a head teacher at a secondary school that services many refugee students attempting to transition to higher education:

> '… We track their record. We have records of every refugee. And when a refugee doesn't turn up, most especially, we immediately inform the partner in charge of education … they do follow-up such refugees, up to home level. Actually, they must find out why that student has dropped, especially when he's on scholarship.'

While there is indication that these support organisations are crucial brokers in shaping access to higher education for some students, without the support provided by these organisations, refugee students have few or no means to access and participate in higher education. The role that both the universities and these support organisations provide in mitigating barriers to access to higher education is significant, multilayered and it involves a highly interdependent set of both problem-solving measures and more holistic student development activities. Barriers remain, predictably, yet there is significant effort in these spaces to be merited, efforts that allow for the participation of select refugee students.

As described in this theme, participation in universities for refugee students is contingent on first having access to the support structures provided by these largely non-higher education actors, who place the practices of the lifeworld of the university 'within the actual reach' (Habermas 1987:123) of these refugee students. These non-higher education actors provide these refugee students the possibility, even if not uniformly available to all (or even likely for all), to 'secure solidarity' (p. 124) within university. Without the brokering of these non-higher education actors, access to university is fragmented and ultimately 'disconnected from [*the*] local realities' (Pradhan 2019:86) of these students. Drawing on Habermas, Regmi (2021) notes the importance of this integration and the role these brokers play in reducing the complexity of 'systematic mechanisms that are out of the reach of members' intuitive knowledge' (Habermas 1987:149). The practices of these non-higher education organisations provide the possibility of 'a system that aims to recouple higher education with the lifeworld at cultural, social and individual levels' (Regmi 2021:51). Without this recoupling and the reduction of complexity, these refugee students' engagement with the lifeworld of the university remains fragmented.

Theme 3: The role of social networks on refugee participation in higher education

Often in discussions of social reproduction, there is 'an over-emphasis on formal organisations to the expense of informal networks' even though 'the latter may be more significant for the maintenance of support mechanisms in a community' (Griffiths et al. 2005:7). As such, the study turns its attention to the third theme, namely the nexus of social reproduction experienced by the students themselves within the intersections of universities, support organisations and the informal social structures that refugee students depend upon for navigating university. While the first two themes speak to largely formal administrative and categorical barriers, support structures and omissions, often encoded in language and often mitigated with the help of non-higher education actors, the third theme speaks specifically to the informal networks within universities to correct the 'over-emphasis on formal organisations' (Griffiths et al. 2005:7). In this section, the study looks at the roles that specific refugee students have in their respective student communities in engaging with and potentially actioning the efforts from universities and these supporting organisations. In doing so, the study presents the characteristics of the students' lifeworlds and the social reproduction that is being generated in this context.

In many cases, refugee students have taken on roles as student representatives in their respective institutions. The refugee student leaders expressed being empowered to act and develop the awareness of staff about their needs, a particularly revealing point in that it suggests some contraflow between universities and these students in terms of expressing where the university space of social reproduction sits within the lived experiences of these students. Some students spoke to purposive action, tacitly drawing attention to their own communicative action in this process as well as an awareness of the support mechanisms that exist within this nexus of activity. Several noted the positive impact of clubs on psychological well-being, a particularly prevalent theme in the data. Such clubs occupy a bridging space in these university contexts, allowing students a social and potentially therapeutic context to continue to participate in university life, as the following passage from Faith, a refugee student financially supported by an NGO, makes clear:

> '… Psychological problems, as you can hear, for the Peace Club it was … OK, they give you a device, something like that. Yeah, and you would be psychologically relieved, so that was so helping. But it ended.'

Some turn naturally to existing social circles for information; there was repeated reference in the data to the social nature of information-sharing and subsequent problem-solving, as the following passage from this same student reveals:

> '… [*W*]e just share ideas with my fellow friends in case of any opportunity or an advert concerning education.'

These social circles provide the students with the capacity to navigate unfamiliar processes more aligned with social welfare, but they are critical in providing the stability to subsequently engage in university life, as the following words from Muhumuza, a refugee student in his fourth year of university, suggest:

> 'I've made some good friends. Good friends from Central here. So if there's any other thing that I would like to buy from the market, I would call the person. We go to the market. And the person has tried also to teach me, when we go to the market, in Luganda [*the Bantu language of the Baganda people*] you will ask … So the person tells you the price.'

More formal associations of students are extensions of these social circles in many ways, serving a critical role in identifying barriers and strategically and communally working towards the mitigation of these barriers, as the following passage from Damba, a friend of Muhumuza (also in his fourth year at university), suggests:

> '… Within us, because we are many. And we have also our association, and in that association, we help ourselves. If there is someone with the challenge, we come together and address it. There are times where we're doing group discussion and I'll also take part.'

The social structures that allow for navigation of the university were identified ('you would be psychologically relieved, so that was so helping') and their absence noted ('But it ended'). These systemic expressions are significant insofar as they indicate both purposive action (by means of which the actor intervenes in the world through these social structures to achieve goals) and communicative agency (by means of which the actor wishes to reach understanding with another speaker about something in the world) (Habermas 1993:45). These organisations, clubs, informal social communities and other groupings allow for these interpersonal relations to emerge in 'weak-tie' heterogeneous groups (Almohamed & Vyas 2019:41:6) in a way that 'affirms the primacy of relations' between actors (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:15). The disruption of structure that allows for these interpersonal relations to emerge naturally erodes the capacity of refugee students to navigate the lifeworlds of university.

Many were able to identify the need for stable structures that could meaningfully allow for participation in higher education, suggesting a need to leverage existing institutional and national structures, systems and resources to facilitate refugee students' access and participation. A need for orientation arose quite routinely in the data, particularly as an extended, ongoing form of pastoral support, as suggested by Mrs Hanifah, a senior staff member in the Student Services office at the University of X:

> '[*N*]eed for an extended orientation that has both institutional and policy components. So they need a specific orientation system so that they really cope, because you don't talk to them one week and you feel they have orientated. No.'

Language again surfaced as a significant barrier in access to university systems. This barrier carries with it a policy dimension, as the following passage from the same staff member suggests:

> 'They also need English empowerment. Those who are coming from non-English speaking countries. Yeah. There should be a system. That one is being done in the university, but I wish we could have it more as a policy. As I told you, we don't have a policy yet, but if this policy can come really very clearly, it would streamline.'

Some saw these systemic issues being addressed in bridging programmes (detailed in Abdelfattah Ahmed Younes 2020; El-Ghali & Ghosn 2019; Symons et al. 2021). However, these programmes were paired with an attendant policy (to 'streamline'), as suggested by the following passage from the Dean of Students at the University of X:

> '… I wish we could come up with a bridge-up program where those with weak background of English can really be trained in a better way so that they can follow their programs easily. And we need a policy, a fully approved policy on that.'

While it is much more challenging to initiate and sustain these structures than to identify them, there are points here in this third theme that might provide guidance for broader university systems (universities, refugee support organisations and policymakers) to develop programmes of activity that provide meaningful access for these refugee students to university life. The first is to recognise the empowering role these social structures have on the students' ability to

meaningfully interact with the lifeworlds of higher education. Participation in education depends on these students 'creating and sustaining particular kinds of communicative relationships' in a way that allows them to participate in the structures of 'the shared social life' (Kemmis 1998:270) of higher education.

Discussions of the findings and implications for practice

It is important to return to the theoretical framework framing this study to further interrogate the themes as presented thus far. In this section, the study also looks to determine the utility of this theoretical model in providing a lens to understand how the nexus of individual and institutional actors, along with the artefacts employed within, contribute to a context in which refugee education is enacted in and around Ugandan higher education.

There were significant traces in the data of communicative agency being cultivated and expressed, mostly expressions of 'resources gained through participation in social networks' (Naidoo 2009:265). This is linked to membership in groups and 'provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital', a 'credential' for later use (Bourdieu 1986:249). This credential depends on 'the size of the network of connections an individual can mobilise for his or her social benefit' (p. 249). Routinely found in the data, these networks of connections included clubs, societies, groups of friends, mentors and interactions with lecturers, staff and fellow students at university. Many of these interactions are not academic at all, yet they allow for academic participation. Many are aimed at social welfare and the ability to navigate the larger societies in which these universities find themselves; many are aimed at developing social networks of mutual recognition and support; many, such as the non-higher education actors, provide glimpses of what life in university will be like, alongside measures of financial support. All of these influence the lifeworlds of these students in higher education and provide some measure of access to the 'durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu 1983:249) that other students might enjoy.

Returning to Habermas, the themes suggest that the lifeworlds of these refugee students are structured by a range of associations, policy artefacts and actors. The overall construction of the lifeworld – that 'milieu where actors are taking part in interactions through which they develop, confirm, and renew their membership in social groups and their own identities' (Habermas 1987:139) – is *dependent* in that it relies on the satisfaction of basic needs, such as the ability to communicate and to provide for basic welfare and financial security, and *relational* in that it is linked to mechanisms for communicative action, such as clubs, groups of friends, access to support organisations and mentoring. The authors would argue that both are necessary for refugees to access and meaningfully participate in higher education. The authors argue that both speak to the central role that non-higher education actors and activities have on academic participation.

Yet a distinction is made here between these students' *lifeworlds*, that is, 'those areas or aspects of the social world where action is coordinated by communicative interaction', and the *systems* in which these lifeworlds are enacted and which might be structured in opposition to these lifeworlds – 'systems are those areas or aspects where action is coordinated by the steering media of money and power' ('systemically integrated') (Tilak & Glassman 2020:230), 'over which have neither full control nor full consciousness in their everyday life' (Chernilo 2002:439). While this research does not engage in macro-level analysis suggested in this systems approach, it does explore meso-level (institutional) systemic practices that contribute to how lifeworlds are enacted and expressed. The study posits that the expressions of these systemic practices – in some cases the lack of institutional policy coordinating refugee students, classifying refugees as international students, financial restrictions and processes associated with universities and at times opaque administrative practices – have a structuring effect on the lifeworlds of these students and their capacity for communicative action.

Yet the relational elements of these lifeworlds that contribute to the capacity for communicative action can, in some cases, allow the student to address, divert or ignore the barriers presented in these systemic practices. These relational entities, particularly clubs, groups of friends and access to support organisations, provided a mechanism for refugee students to engage in university life. Initiating, sustaining or reinvigorating the mechanisms of the *lifeworld economy* – an economy that is coordinated by communicative interaction – can serve to partially address the barriers provided by the *systems economy* (Elder-Vass 2018:221) of institutional policy and practice. This lifeworld economy is framed through a range of support for refugee students, particularly clubs, associations, friends and mentoring programmes, as well as access to non-higher education support organisations and the provision of basic welfare needs.

How these economies become productive for refugee students depends, in some measure, on institutional policy and practice that explicitly acknowledges their lived experiences, acknowledges and supports the 'local arrangements' and non-higher education actors that have heretofore been providing help, and marshals institutional support accordingly. Without such an explicit approach, the lifeworlds of these refugee students, as recognised actors within the larger systems' economy of higher education, will remain fractured. There are implications for institutional practice in higher education that extend beyond this particular focus on refugee students as marginalised groups, or those largely underrepresented in higher education would conceivably require similar nuanced understandings of their lifeworlds and the relationality of actors, both higher education and non-higher education, that structure those lifeworlds.

Conclusion: Holistic approaches, mapping broader contexts and categorisations

The lifeworlds of these students seen at the meso level (institutionally) suggest that more holistic approaches are needed, ones that attempt to combine these meso-level findings with nuanced micro-level accounts of individual practice and broader macro-level analyses of the political economics of higher education. These holistic approaches are often difficult for distributed and complex institutions such as universities and any resource limitations they may be operating under, as was particularly the case for the universities engaged in this research.

Yet it is important to widen the focus on the broader 'primacy of relations' between actors (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:15) in providing a context in which these refugee students participate in higher education, a context that is structuring their lifeworlds in higher education. As much of this participation 'depends upon the character of the networks and the relations between the actors involved in those networks' (Griffiths et al. 2005:6), further work is needed to map these broader contexts, to note how their relationality potentially provides a contingency through which refugee students can participate in higher education. Within these maps, it is critical to note the role of largely noneducational actors and noneducational activity in providing bridges to university participation, whether through addressing basic welfare or through negating the muting effects of institutional social reproduction on the communicative agency being cultivated in students' lifeworlds. Partnerships are critical in this regard between universities and support organisations, and when possible, these can be extended and ties strengthened.

The cascading impact in classifying refugee students as international students deserves further scrutiny, particularly in its impact on meso (institutional) and micro (individual student) practices of participation. Further research might also explore how a less porous policy framework might work to further integrate these students into university life and signal the desire of the sector to fully integrate refugee students into higher education.

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Authors' contributions

R. Najjuma, R. Nambi and M.G. co-wrote this entire article. R. Najjuma and R. Nambi led the data collection in Uganda. All three authors worked together to code and recode the transcripts, and each author wrote significant sections of the overall manuscript. R. Najjuma is the principal investigator of this project and as such is the lead author.

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Data availability

The data collected for this project and this manuscript are available upon request.

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