Historical Context, Research Origins, and Funding

Across the period 2013-2016, I led a series of field research projects in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Greece in cooperation with the Scholar Rescue Fund of the Institute of International Education to assess the impact of the civil war in Syria (2011-present) on higher education, with a particular focus on higher education access by refugees and displaced young people. This research was supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the UC Davis Office of Outreach and International Programs (now UC Davis Global Affairs).

At the time, fewer than 3% of refugees had access to higher education. Our research, published in a series of whitepapers and articles in international higher education publications highlighted, amongst many issues, how the safety and security of educational documentation (transcripts, diplomas, professional certifications) was a major concern of refugee young people. Moreover, returning to Syria to access those materials exposed them to persecution, forced military service, and death. At the same time, problems with these materials made them vulnerable to continuing forms of humiliation and discrimination. Refugee young people also spoke of how disconnected they felt from the world of higher education and its opportunities for solidarity and support. They would often ask “why has the world forgotten us?”

In 2016, I was approached by the Open Society Foundations’ Higher Education Support Program to develop ways to address the access and equity dimensions of higher education and forced migration. With a $25,000 grant from OSF, our team, which included colleagues from the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, designed a human-digital ecosystem to lower the barriers faced by refugees in terms of the safety and security of their most critical academic and training documentation that was consistent with global best practices in international admissions and core humanitarian principles of civilian protection. The resulting creative work of engaged research and scholarship was named the Article 26 Backpack, in reference to the 26th article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which establishes the human right to education.

On the strength of the resulting whitepaper, the Ford Foundation Youth Opportunity and Learning Program awarded the project a core grant of $500,000 to develop the ecosystem and begin implementation. A critical principle of engaged scholarship is ethical participatory...
research and an active partnership with communities in need – more succinctly, in the practice of engaged scholarship, those with whom we work are not research subjects, rather they are partners in the development of solutions to pressing social issues. As a consequence, I travelled to Lebanon (Spring 2017) and met with displaced and refugee Syrian young people to explore and evaluate the need for Backpack, and how best to implement it. During that same period, I established a partnership with the Education and Youth Policy Program of the American University of Beirut’s Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. That Fall (2017,) I led a team implementing a prototype version in Lebanon. With AUB colleagues, we hosted a series of meetings with local NGOs, including representative of the UNHCR and UNESCO to build support for the effort. Following this work, we faced a serious setback: the platform as built by an outside vendor, failed to perform as required. That vendor was fired, and the project turned to work with UC Davis Instructional and Educational Technology.

Over the next several months, I directed work with IET on the design of the prototype. This meant extensive meetings and the development of “user stories” and continued oversight to
ensure that the platform met safety and security standards, as well as access requirements for the kind of conditions refugees face in camps where data is expensive and bandwidth limited. In addition, I consulted with UC Davis and UC legal teams and digital privacy experts to develop safety and security protocols and establish a privacy policy consistent with European and California data privacy requirements and UNHCR protection standards. Working with designers, I oversaw the creation of Backpack’s visual language, including social media and graphic tools, and a comic book. Throughout this period, I developed the “Backpack Guide” program in which refugees, university students and NGO representatives can be taught to help with enrollment in the platform and provide simple, yet critical forms of counseling, information about resources provide human rights education, and demonstrate solidarity. Among the items submitted in this review is the “Backpack Guide Training Handbook,” which I wrote and workshopped in English and Arabic.

Figure 2: Backpack Guides, Rima Jamaleddine, Seeren Banna, Sarah Nunnink, and Seena al-Naser, UC Davis Developing Training Materials in Arabic, June 2021

A new digital platform was completed February 2018 and includes all the core digital safety and empowerment tools of Backpack.
With the completion of Backpack’s new platform in late-Spring 2018 (in English) and the addition in Fall 2018 of Backpack’s Arabic language capacity, I worked with colleagues in Lebanon to train a group of refugee scholarship students at AUB and refugee teachers employed by the Syrian-American NGO, Jusoor, to help refugee young people create their Backpack and fill it. I made several visits to Lebanon, often staying weeks at time to work to improve the ecosystem, build connections with local NGOs and stand in solidarity with the refugees working as what we call, Backpack Guides. UC Davis Strategic Communications produced a documentary on our work that Fall, interviewing refugees and others on how Backpack works and its impact, that has been used extensively for the promotion of the university’s mission and in development campaigns. As planned, Backpack enrollment continued through 2018 and into 2019, though the severe economic collapse in Lebanon followed by civil unrest and then the pandemic brought much of this work to a standstill, including data collection projects.

The Backpack Platform: Safety, Security, Trust and Digital Dignity

The platform responds to the needs expressed by refugees and others to be able to tell the story of their achievements, academic development and goals in a way that can be seen, heard, and understood. It works by providing a way for refugees to safely curate and store their educational documents, research and creative works and an audio-visual statement of purpose on servers controlled by UC Davis with a level of security identical to those available to UC Davis students. As the data is stored on UC Davis servers (and protected by our IET security team), refugees and other users can access Backpack no matter where they are in the world. This a fundamentally important element of the civilian protection goals of the ecosystem. Refugees are often on the move, vulnerable to robbery, natural disaster and deportation and loss of documentation is common. Without documentation, refugees often must make an unsafe return to their homelands or find themselves at the mercy of consular officials of the governments that have persecuted them in the past. The knowledge that their document can be accessed anywhere at any time frees them from the discrimination and danger of these encounters. It helps defend the human rights to dignity, personal freedom and autonomy in the face of oppression and violence, while at same time growing equitable access and reducing discrimination in the pursuit of higher education.

A key innovation is the way empowers refugee young people to safely share selected contents directly with admissions officers, scholarship programs, employers and government and intergovernmental agencies. The design allows for the easy upload of materials onto the server under difficult circumstances using just smartphones or tablets. As part of the development of materials for the sharing of Backpack in Rwanda, UC Davis Global Internship Backpack Guides developed a simple instructional video under my direction showing these elements of the process.
Backpack more than just an “app.” Rather it forms the basis for the broader acceptance of holistic admissions and evaluation and takes a whole category of problems — document safety and security — off the table for the 1000+ young people in the ecosystem. It sits at the center of an emerging community of. It is unique and there is nothing else like it, especially as the

Article 26 Backpack: Educational Mobility Model

Figure 3. Backpack Academic Mobility Eco-system Model

Backpack does not view Backpackers as a commodity to be exploited: the individual’s data is never sold or used for commercial purposes.

In response to equity and access needs and recognizing the global potential of Backpack, using a small-grant from the Blossom Hill Foundation and my own research funds, through 2019 into Summer 2020, I oversaw the translation of Backpack into Spanish, French, and Persian, in addition to the original Arabic and English.

Backpack 1.5 was introduced in Summer 2020, and included supplementary information and best practices about how to use during the pandemic. The addition of Spanish has been critical to the Backpack’s US-based support of DEI and lowering barriers to higher education for
underrepresented groups, domestically. At the suggestion of former Associate Vice Provost for Academic Diversity, Prof. Raquel Aldana, my group is working with the UC Davis AB540 Center to share the tool with the larger community of DACA/AB540 recipients and their eligible family members. This work was significantly delayed by the pandemic.

Figure 4. Backpack Education Page in Arabic.
Figure 5. Backpack Education Page in English

Figure 6. Backpack Education Page in French

Figure 7. Backpack Education Page in Persian/Dari
**Figure 8. Backpack Education Page in Spanish**

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**Advocacy, Recognition and Impact of the Creative Work**

I act as Backpack’s chief advocate for use in higher education, international migration and human rights circles by attending conferences and symposia. It was the core of a meeting we hosted at UC Davis in cooperation with IIE, “Best Practices in Campus Internationalization” (3/2016); I was a member of the UC Davis delegation to the “Migration and Asylum Symposium” at the University of Geneva (10/2016); delivered the keynote at the (5/2017) Rhodes House, Oxford symposium on refugees and higher education; spoke on the ecosystem and its need 3/2018 as the Von Weizsäcker Distinguished Visitor at the American Academy of Berlin; and 2/2019 at the Institute of International Education Centennial Summit, where I received the IIE Centennial Medal for my work on Backpack and advocacy on behalf of refugee students; and most recently at the 10th Meeting of the Groningen Declaration Network, 11/2021. I also write articles, blog posts, contribute to podcasts, including most recently on UC Davis flagship podcast, “The Backdrop” and other materials to advocate use of Backpack as a critical equity tool and increase awareness, in part to raise money and built alliances to make forward progress and foster broader adoption.
The most critical recent demonstration of Backpack as a public good and artifact of public and intellectual value was its use to support the human rights of Afghan students, academics and researchers as the Taliban took over their country. Unique among universities around the world UC Davis was able to assist Afghan students, scholars, scientists, and human rights defenders safeguard critical academic documents and credentials at the very moment they may have had to destroy these documents to survive. At the same time, we provided Afghans with a pathway to reconnect with educational and employment opportunities once they had reached safety. Beginning just before the fall of Kabul (8/21), Persian-speaking Backpack interns and I mounted a massive social media campaign to raise awareness of the ecosystem (Dari — a form of Persian — is one of the official languages of Afghanistan.) This included hosting “office hours” through the night and emailing all Afghans who had had contact with UC Davis through our Fulbright and USAID programs.

By mid-August, Backpack’s information page, available in English and Dari, has been visited 4000 times. Member of Congress Garemendi’s Chief of Staff shared information about Backpack with all Democrat members’ chiefs to assist with constituent services. The mayor pro tem of Hayward, Aisha Wahab (D), herself an Afghan American, promoted Backpack through her social media and in international news interviews. Backpack was recommended for use by Afghans by several international higher education NGOs: the Institute of International Education, Scholar Rescue Fund, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, The Groningen Declaration Network, University Alliance for Refugees and at-Risk Migrants, and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. It received favorable coverage in the Higher Education press, including the Chronicle of Higher Ed, PRI/BBC’s The World, the PIE, and an extensive interview on CapRadio’s Insight. In the two and half months following the Taliban take-over, nearly 400 Afghans join the ecosystem.

Next Steps

With the support of $100,000 grant from the MasterCard Foundation, Backpack is being shared with refugees and at-risk young people in Rwanda, in a 2021-2022 pilot project to explore its use throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Other goals include, using Backpack as a tool to support student dissidents in Hong Kong and those young people fleeing violence and attacks in Myanmar.

The ultimate goal of Backpack is to transform the individual’s relationship with academic documentation so that it can no longer interfere with access to the broader human right to education.
Project Bibliography/Reference to Backpack in Scholarly Literature


Watenpaugh, Keith David, et al. "We will stop here and go no further: Syrian university students and scholars in Turkey." New York: Institute of International Education, available on