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Integrating refugee students into Ugandan higher education

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Integrating refugee students into Ugandan higher education: Language, othering and everyday enactments of participation

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Abstract

This paper examines the everyday enactments of participation of refugee students in Ugandan higher education emerging from a research project (2020–2022). Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action was used to determine how students responded to the dominant languages, further noting the acts of othering that occur throughout this process that impact this participation and inclusion. Data were collected from three public and four private universities beginning in 2020 and ending in 2021 through interviews with refugee students and administrative staff who worked routinely with these students. The findings reveal social spaces within universities that allow for participation that largely sit outside the formal curriculum. These include the networks of support for the refugees themselves, and their engagement with informal activity, such as city walks and galas. However, the catalyst that initiated interaction with these spaces emanated from their aspirations for the future and their sense of communicative capacity in relation to those aspirations. Recommendations include providing explicit communication to point them directly to events, spaces and opportunities that they can exploit to advance their integration process.

Keywords

Uganda, higher education, refugees, forced displacement, communicative action, nclusion, Habermas

Introduction

Uganda hosts the most refugees in sub-Saharan Africa. As of November 2021, Uganda had over 1.5 million refugees and asylum-seekers mainly from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi. Over 80% of refugees are hosted in settlements in 13 districts in the North and South-Western regions and in the capital Kampala (UNHCR, 2021). The Government of

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Uganda together with partners like the United Nations, national and international NGOs, host communities and the private sector document information about refugees and provide numerous services such as health care, education and accommodation. In particular, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in Uganda 2018–2020 highlights the provision of access to education as one of the main pillars of engagement with refugees. The CRRF is designed to support government policy and protect asylum space; support resilience of refugees and host communities; and support Uganda's role in the region and invest in human capital and transferable skills (UNHCR, 2021), which has surfaced the need for educational inclusion and stimulated a body of activity in Uganda to begin that inclusion. In parallel, international organisations such as UNHCR aim to enhance enrolment of refugees in higher education to 15% by 2030 (UNHCR, 2019).

Some higher education institutions in Uganda have put in place administrative structures to handle refugee matters largely under the umbrella of international student affairs; this conflation with international students can at times prove problematic for refugee students financially and otherwise (Najjuma et al., 2022). More broadly, however, very few studies have tested or documented the activities developed to address the context-specific avenues that are available to refugees to participate in higher education and the challenges that they may face and when available much of this research is conceptualised around access (Hakami, 2016; Bauer, 2020). Hence the need to move beyond access alone, to actual participation and the most effective and sustainable combinations of support, the resources that are available to overcome these challenges and the strategies these students employ to engage with these resources.

Refugee access and participation in higher education has been an ongoing issue of concern in developing countries such as Uganda (Government of Uganda, 2018). The challenges faced by refugees in education in Uganda have been widely researched and many of them echo the literature from other parts of the world. Hicks and Maina (2018) document the numerous ways refugees have impacted on schools in Uganda, and they particularly point out the challenges related to the language of instruction and the large class sizes. Sarah Dryden-Peterson has carried out extensive research on refugees in Uganda and the region and although she majorly focuses on primary school and urban refugees in some of her work, she provides a vivid picture of the challenges they endure as they settle into the education system. For instance, they must learn using the host country's language which in most cases is different from their former language of instruction, they compete for limited access to education with domestic applicants; uncertainty about their socioeconomic status and limited tuition support; the impact of negativity in public and policy discourses and backlash from host societies who sometimes regard them as intruders (Dryden-Peterson, 2003, 2015, 2006a, 2006b).

Hakami (2016) focuses on refugees in higher education and whereas they highlight some of the opportunities these students may have to succeed in higher education, they nonetheless concur that the barriers to access are still immense. Hakami (2016) while acknowledging that the data on refugees in higher education in Uganda is scant writes that the refugees in the settlement they researched on had access to scholarship awards for higher studies that were largely sponsored by organisations such as DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) and Windle Trust. However, these were more beneficial to refugees who attended secondary school in Uganda and thus had better command of English – the language of instruction than those who join the system at the higher education stage. Hakami (2016) continues to report other challenges that refugees in the Nakivale settlement face while trying to access higher education such as limited computer literacy, few access opportunities, lack of information, limited mobility and language barriers.

The refugee students' experiences at the higher education institutions are also explored in some of the literature but their agency and determination to succeed are aspects that are usually over-shadowed by the challenges of access (Hakami, 2016; Nanyunja et al., 2021). Further, limited spaces for refugees' participation in social activities in higher education is another challenge that is presented in the literature, but this is also done at the policy level without clearly establishing how they interact with other students to develop a holistic university experience (Najjuma et al. 2022i; Betts, 2021). Thus, this paper is part of a larger research project (2020–2022) where we tried to establish a deeper understanding of how refugees are integrated socially in higher education in Uganda and note those nuanced enabling factors that support or challenge their aspirations through interaction tools such as language.

What we mean by participation in education

Participation in higher education, particularly for marginalised groups such as refugees, has tended towards limiting positions equating participation with access to education (Ahmad, 2013). However, we wish to broaden its meaning further by identifying the different indicators of participation that can occur in a given context. Whereas there are several key players in the teaching and learning process, the concept of 'participation' is usually commensurate with students and their engagement in classroom and out of class activities (Bergmark, and Westman, 2018; Masika and Jones, 2016; Zepke, 2018).

However, Lysgaard and Simovska (2016) argue that participation means more than pedagogical implications 'to also include citizenship education, value studies, conflict resolution and so forth…' (p. 2). This suggests that by participating actively in class, students take away some values that are applicable to other contexts, which in the long run contribute to their personal and communal growth. UNESCO (2005) states that for participation to be meaningful, the views of learners must be incorporated to support inclusion in education. While successful participation is a desired goal in education, it is straddled by several challenges including limited resources, inhibitive attitudes and values, weak communication skills, inadequate teacher support and systemic inequalities (Mallman and Lee, 2016). Inhibitive attitudes and values for instance may hinder a student from actively engaging in discussions and hence they may miss the opportunity of learning with and from other learners. Nonetheless the strategies for participation vary among teachers and students and this study viewed participation in education as a multi-dimensional engagement (Hollenweger et al., 2011).

Dryden-Peterson et al. (2019) argue that although various policies of participation in education for refugees exist in different countries, they are barely observed given the difficult relationship between refugees and nationals. They argue that it is important to examine the educational trajectories of refugees especially at higher education to determine how their educational experiences impact (or not) on their futures. As such, the research we present here is largely about the different layers of possible participation by refugee students, how these layers collectively create enactments of participation, and how these students are expressing their participation communicatively.

Situating this theoretically

We draw from Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (1984) to note the motivations of refugees in relation to higher education, and to identify the everyday enactments of participation that can lead to educational inclusion and integration. 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 life in society, potentially allowing for the 'uncovering injustice and systemic mistakes whose victims are marginalized groups…in situations where exclusion cannot be explained through universal argumentation' (Pajnik, 2006: 395).

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). We note in this paper how refugee students cultivate communicative action and then begin to use that action towards systems success.

It is well documented that language is a major barrier to participation in education for refugee students (Aydin and Kaya, 2017; Toker Gökçe and Acar, 2018; Cranitch, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2015) and that the capacity for communication is vital for any type of interaction to be effective. Communicative theory provided a lens for interrogating refugee students' use of and attitude towards the language of communication in their universities.

Communicative action submits that language can empower the individual if used effectively (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Communication and its interpretation are constituted within a social world. Habermas defines communicative action as '… a circular process in which the actor is two things in one: an initiator, who masters situations through actions for which he is accountable, and a product of the transitions surrounding him, of groups whose cohesion is based on solidarity to which he belongs, and of processes of socialisation in which he is reared' (Habermas, 1991: 135). Here, action and language are combined to have an impact to change the individual in order to fit within a given society – in other words, the way in which refugee students understand and agree or disagree with the common discourse. For instance, what communicative actions do they undertake to reach consensus? What are the alternative actions they come up with to adapt to and participate within their 'new' contexts? The communicative theory of action allowed us to explore how language can be instrumental in supporting refugees' participation (or otherwise) in higher education in Uganda.

Within the Theory of Communicative Action 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 '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 to note the communicative action being expressed therein. The Theory of Communicative Action has been used in Uganda to conceptualising trust in the medical sector and what communicative practices can augment or erode that trust (Akello and Beisel, 2019); 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).

In this paper, we emphasise the processes of interaction and the consequent relationships (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) in the social spaces within selected universities in Uganda to examine how refugee students navigate their participation in university activities. There is a natural diversity to this navigation yet ultimately one that contorts or grapples with an institutional uniformity as 'the work of education is not clearly institutionalised as a specific, autonomous practice, and it is a whole group and a whole symbolically structured environment, without specialised agents or specific moments, which exerts an anonymous, pervasive pedagogic action' (Bourdieu, 1977: 87). There are many diverse practices associated with navigating higher education, yet all these students engage with 'the reception and assimilation of the specifically pedagogic message' (87) that universities put forth, one that 'underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences' of post-university life as a member of Ugandan society. When viewed through this lens, the work of universities in Uganda is, at least partly, about becoming Ugandan. The Theory of Communicative Action provides a theoretical lens to explore this becoming.

However, this becoming is problematic as refugee students have less access to the modes of participation. Their ability to marshal these modes into social relationships to advance their own agendas is not equally available to all members of a given institution, but rather each member should make some effort to play into acts of 'mutual acquaintance and recognition' in order to benefit from the social networks. Thus for 'outsiders' such as refugee students, they often struggle to penetrate the institutional spaces and resources due to several factors like barriers in communication or the bureaucratic nature of the admission process.

Therefore, we sought answers to questions such as: Who are the refugee students talking to? Who is guiding them? What clubs do they join? What social activities are they part of? Who do they turn to in case of an emergency? How do they navigate and participate in the often 'private, tacit, and largely text-based academic world' (Gourlay, 2011: 67) of universities? Answers to these questions are critical to understanding the nature of participation in higher education these students experience and potentially meaningfully participate in university life.

It was of interest to us to gain information about issues such as refugee students' expressions of agency, the extent to which they interact with other members in the institutions and the way they positioned themselves to benefit from these relationships. In the same discourse, we found this perspective relevant to the current study because certain themes such as social inequality and the need to regain power, as illustrated by this theory, are intricately interwoven into most spheres of the lives of displaced persons: education, health or financial regardless of age or gender.

Methods

The overall objective for this research was to establish how refugee students are integrated socially in higher education in Uganda and determine those nuanced enabling factors that support or challenge their aspirations through interaction tools such as language. To address this objective, we used several activities and methods to collect data in a chronological order from three public and four private universities beginning in 2020 and ending in 2021. The first activity included desk research whereby the researchers carried out an extended literature review to establish patterns in the literature and policy regarding refugee education in Uganda and globally. The desk research phase also included locating and contacting some key informants for an understanding of current reports and procedures for research on refugees in Uganda.

The second activity involved semi-structured interviews with two categories of participants. Five interviews were held with administrative staff at the selected universities who were at the level of deputy vice chancellor. The administrative staff introduced us to the refugee student leaders who in turn helped us identify the participating refugee students. We conducted 20 interviews with refugee students in the participating universities who were purposively selected. For the third activity, we conducted seven focus group discussions with refugee students who were present at the universities at the time of data collection. We collected data during the time of COVID-19 restrictions and hence we had to visit some universities several times because some students were not available at campus depending on the adjusted university calendars in Uganda.

We carried out a survey with 50 refugee students so that we could expand our sources of data and to cater for some of the students who could not attend physical interviews and focus group discussions. All these methods of data collection are rooted within the constructionist research paradigm, and they enabled us to repeatedly work within the research contexts for an extended period of time to gain depth about the phenomenon of refugee students' expressions of agency, othering and how they responded to the dominant language of communication (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2014; Schmidt, 2001).

The data were organised in broad categories according to the way they addressed the key concepts advanced by the social reproduction and communicative theories before it was coded using an encrypted online qualitative coding application. Interview and focus group discussion transcripts were read holistically and then axial coded using annotations and text highlighters as finer themes emerged from the data. The data from the survey guides and from initial meetings with stakeholders such as donor organisations were matched to the most suitable emerging themes and some of these data provided the literature and information that we present in this paper. Since we worked with various categories of participants – university administrators, lecturers, refugee students and personnel from refugee support organisations, several themes surfaced from the data that could not all be justifiably presented here some of which are captured in Najumma et al. (2022).

The authors acknowledge that refugees are a vulnerable group and hence there are various ethical complexities associated with researching them. The work by other researchers (e.g. Awidi and Quan-Baffour, 2020; Dryden-Peterson, 2006a, 2006b; Stark et al., 2015) and our interaction with stakeholders such as Windle Trust International and Refugee Law Project was instrumental in providing ethical considerations. For instance, we became conversant with the appropriate offices to approach to seek clearance such as the Office of the Prime Minister; we became conscious of the need to choose appropriate terms when interacting with some participants since it was clear that some students preferred being addressed as international students as opposed to refugee students.

We obtained written and informed consent from the participants after explaining the purpose of the project clearly to them. It should also be noted that all the participants were above the age 18 at the time of this study. We were cautious when formulating the interview questions to focus specifically on aspects concerning access and participation in higher education while trying to avoid causing unintended discomfort by discussing matters relating to their personal stories as a vulnerable group (Liamputtong, 2007), or their experiences of initial displacement. It should also be noted, however, that some of these personal stories are directly intertwined with the participants' social experiences in higher education and some voluntarily shared with the researchers. The authors sought and received ethical clearance at the university through the formal ethical review bodies. The formal reviews from both institutions sat well with the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018), particularly Clause 34 (harm arising from participation in research) and Clause 42 (anonymity).

Analysis and discussion

The open and axial coding identified three themes of importance. This paper focuses largely on micro-level thematic findings, particularly around how refugee students participate in higher education and the communicative action they cultivate and employ therein. As such, this paper is complementary to the further paper on mesa-level, largely institutional, structures that contribute to make that participation possible (Najjuma et al., 2022). The first theme relates to aspirations and expressions of agency by refugee students. This theme provides a useful starting point for identifying both student aspirations in this space, and how these actors respond to and communicate within higher education to participate meaningfully to realise these aspirations.

The second theme explores the social spaces for participation that structure participation and belonging in higher education. These spaces are not exclusively formally related to study, yet many exist within the social spaces of the university itself, and in many instances are initiated by the university. The third theme relates to language, accounts of othering and community. This theme proves a counter to the first two themes in that it notes how the practices of othering these students is most notably felt in the range of languages that these students must navigate to fully participate in higher education both academically and socially. We note throughout how these themes interrelate to create conditions for participation for refugee students in Ugandan higher education, and what implications that has for institutions looking to integrate refugee students more fully into their core work.

Theme 1: aspirations and expressions of agency

The first theme emerging from the data involved the aspirations of the refugee students themselves in relation to university participation. We believe the aspirational elements of this theme are critical in establishing a trajectory towards university study, one that suggests a desire to participate therein, and which is subsequently impacted by the spaces of social participation made possible in the university context. This thematic discussion is framed, as previously discussed, largely through the evidence of communicative action as a means for identifying the expressions of agency of the actors involved and what 'action' is indeed possible in these contexts. The theme of aspiration is advanced in the following passage provided by a refugee student X from South Sudan, a passage linked explicitly to livelihood:

> I can say that not only being a refugee, but being focused is what matters most, because you can be a refugee, but if you don't also have some focus in your life, you can't make it. The education program that I've seen with the refugee program is that it will do more better [sic] than the situation the refugees are in. So the more programs that are focused on education, the more the refugee get better livelihood.

Further aspirations hint at the desire for education that might facilitate a return to the country of origin and provide self-reliance, as indicated by the following passage from student Y who had left his country due to war:

> Because we have a bigger problem. Why conflicts, is because there was a high level of illiteracy, and that explained a number of issues when it comes to governance and politics, it comes to livelihood and so forth. So education will be able to help refugees when they return back home to back up on things that they can be able to do, rather than looking into one another as enemies or looking into one another in

such a way that will later on bring also more issues. So this will help them to be reliant and this will help them to really focus on also how they can develop the country.

This idea of a 'return' was echoed throughout much of the data, including from student S below who was finalising his studies in the School of Business Administration. The indicators in this passage revolve around the idea of identity or affinity to the country of origin (my people, my country).

A: I'd always put in my view to have something done in my country, and there's a bigger problem that my country is going through. I have to take part in pushing harder for better South Sudan. I would love to participate in the political system of the country, at least taking lead in some of the programs that are explicitly in the country.

Interviewer: So you see yourself going back and participating actively.

A: Not negatively, but positively, this I was saying, I will have to really participate positively by at least doing something for my people. Yeah.

These aspirations seemed to arise from some of participants' attitude towards the type of education that they were receiving in the host country. Some were of the view that the education in Uganda offered wider horizons for them to later participate in various sections which could be political or economic as pointed out by student Y below:

Also I look at the education system. The education system, the syllabus. Like in South Sudan, our syllabus are different from the one in Uganda. They are better than the ones of South Sudan. Here in Uganda, it is broad, in South Sudan, it's a bit what? Narrowing. You will study some particular areas of syllabus. So in Uganda I've found that there bit wide and it opens your brain politically, socially, economically. You learn a lot of things.

In the response above, it can be argued that some refugee students recognize and begin to employ their communication action in the form of the rich syllabi that can help them achieve their aspirations. Some students participating in this study were much more expressive of their own capacity in this process, as suggested in the following passage from student Z at one of the private universities where the study was carried out.

When I came, there is that leadership always, when I came in my first year the students there elected me as to be in the general secretary for the association, I worked for a year. When I was in my second year, then they said, "No." I also applied to be the coordinator now, I won, after winning it ... from these different universities they happen to go for international now where all the universities come together and they get a general leader for all those students of different universities.

The participants in the extracts above intentionally show self-efficacy when they choose to participate in leadership roles within the university. Hence despite the general assumption that refugee students need support to participate in higher education, some of them have the drive and ambition to take on roles in the institutions of higher learning by utilising the inbuilt practices that allow for any university student to take up leadership positions. It should be noted that student Z was the leader of international students at the time of this study. This agency is not limited to the

structures of the university only but seems to extend to the general well-being of refugee students as noted by the student T below when asked about the people who support his education:

> Majorly it was my sister and myself. When I go for vacation, I don't just sit back. I involve myself in doing some other things that could raise for me some money, that will top up onto what my sister gave me.

The participant above explained further that he took on odd jobs at construction sites to contribute to his maintenance before joining the university. This last passage, and indeed this entire theme, foregrounds the communicative expressions of aspirations and the discrete activities associated with those expressions 'I don't just sit back. I involve myself…' that suggest the cultivation of communicative action that might be 'used' for further enactments of participation in higher education with its 'shared norms, expectations, and practices' (Baynes, 2015: 22). We see evidence of aspiration being explicitly linked to activity I also applied to be the coordinator now, I won, after winning it…', and a general willingness to navigate ambiguity and complexity and to see these as possible opportunities for learning and acculturation 'So in Uganda I've found that there bit wide and it opens your brain politically, socially, economically. You learn a lot of things'. This assertiveness and openness is relational to the resources presented (syllabi, curriculum, leadership roles) as well as the personal capacities of these students within higher education (Kleine, 2013), yet it suggests that there is a 'reception and assimilation of the specifically pedagogic message' (87) that universities put forth, one that 'underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences' of either post-university life as a member of Ugandan society, or as agents of positive participation in their countries or cultures of origin.

Theme 2: social spaces for participation

The data revealed a range of available social spaces and events within which refugee students' interactions and overall participation occurred. The data suggested these spaces were key to the cultivation of social capital by these refugee students and functioned as a space where actions are arrived at, or consensus is reached, through communicative processes. These spaces varied in constitution: often they were initiated or enabled by other people or even sat within the formal university structure. Examples of these include support communities within the university, chaired administrative meetings for international students, cultural galas, which provided opportunities for these students to share their cultures through events organised by the university, and city walks and tours, which some universities organised and communicated widely in the settlements. Student R below explains how he participates in some of these social spaces.

> Yeah. We do participate. We have what's called a cultural gala here, where you go and present your culture. So we were happy that last year, not only last year, ever since we came we have been presenting our cultures. So personally I even dance…We presented two dances. One of them was the Kakwa, then the other one it was for the Dinka dance… Much as I'm not a Dinka, but I felt good to represent their dance…

When asked about the other presentations during the cultural galas, the student submitted that they also got a chance to show off their food for people from other cultures to taste. However, more importantly one of the participants, student X, thought that the cultural galas were useful for reasons he gave below:

> It is useful because you get to know other people, what they do in their culture. You get to know also how they... Maybe in terms of marriages, you also present that, how they do their marriage process. In case, you feel like also going to the other side to get someone, of course you now know the process.

The university hence becomes a space for cultural exposure and integration in addition to being an academic space. The refugee students appear to take up the inbuilt practice of cultural galas within the university and enrich them with their own cultural experiences. It is also noticeable that this social space is used to showcase the various cultures as they exist without necessarily merging them with the dominant local culture. At times, these spaces were managed by the refugee students themselves and were predicated on informal yet intentional interactivity, via WhatsApp groups or face to face. Regardless of their structure, they serve an important role for these refugee students either as a means of mitigating the complexity of university study or as cultivating nascent thoughts of leadership. Note in the following passage from student Z this aspect of mitigating complexity.

> As a coordinator, I always chair meetings, we have weekly meetings every Thursday. We have meetings to know what is happening, what are the challenges we're facing since we're all international students and there are always forms when we're reporting to school, we have to sign some verification forms.

It is important to note in the data the repeated references to the outreach activity conducted by support groups directly to the settlements themselves, activity designed to promote university study. This activity developed the preliminary conduits into higher education that many subsequently travelled. These support groups are often led, or voiced, by refugee students who have already moved into university life. Evidence of this can be found in the following passage from student Z who was involved in the international student support group at his university.

> For the refugees basically let me talk about this organisation, when there are functions, they will also support. We have admin seminars, we have some outreaches in our programs, we normally go to different settlements to encourage our brothers and sisters who are there. There is life though you're in the settlement, but if you can work harder, you can still get chances the way we happen to succeed in.

In some instances, the university organised city walks whereby refugee students together with international students were taken by selected national students to introduce them to the nearby city. It can be argued that for social spaces to be effectively utilised by the refugee students, they still need further support from the institution to guide them further as seen by the role of national students during the city walks. The general observation during this study was that the assigned person is supposed to help the refugee students to penetrate the system, however, in some instances as pointed out in theme one above relating to self-efficacy and by the student below, the students take it upon themselves to enter these spaces by reaching out to other students as noted by student T:

> For me, I have friends, my classmates. There was one we even went to their place up to Kamuli District. He lost the father. So because he's one of us, he's our friend, we have been good together. So we had to travel up to Kamuli District, we attended the burial then we came back. So our interaction with the students within Uganda, actually nationals, is good.

The informal and formal communities presented provide a mechanism that serves to mitigate the complexity of both university life and the larger social worlds in which these students inhabit. The capacity for communicative action is cultivated or not through these aspirations and their

articulation in these support structures and communities, many, but not all, of which are encouraged if not directly initiated by the universities themselves. These social spaces provide opportunity to engage in communicative action; they provide for the cultivation of interpersonal and leadership skills (Deutsch, 2017) and academic and language support (Mendenhall and Bartlett, 2018); and they should potentially be seen as contingent to other non-higher education spaces of learning such as libraries, social media, faith groups, sporting and clubs (Wilkinson and Lloyd-Zantiotis, 2017). In the research presented in this paper, these social spaces were critical instruments for cultivating communicative action.

Theme 3: Language, othering and community

Alongside these lived experiences and the expressions of aspirations and agency expressed therein were the numerous acts of othering and differentiation that students experienced because of their status as refugees. This othering is imposed (Udah, 2019) and sits in contrast to the normative national 'self' (Udah and Singh, 2018) that the refugee is, tacitly or explicitly, excluded from. Discourses of othering include stigmatisation, exclusion, and deviance; in contrast, discourses of belonging draw on empowerment, acceptance and community building (Koyama and Chang, 2019). The first and second themes of this paper suggested the role of aspirations, communicative action and spaces of participation as enablers of inclusion. This third theme reveals that these discourses of belonging are sometimes tempered or muted by the discourses of othering and the acts that accompany these discourses: as before perception, categorisation and language prove instrumental here. Despite this othering, however, this theme also demonstrates that expressions of agency exist and ultimately reveal a cultivation and expression of communicative action.

The perceptions by the host community of refugee students are instructive here as it carries beyond the porous boundaries of the university, and surfaces the tension that these students navigate in terms of their categorisations as refugees. Often this tension is expressed as fear as student X indicates, noting the lack of differentiating between different groups within a country of origin.

> There was also our history, the political history of our country, of course, had been of conflicts and so forth, so people fear. Wherever they known [sic] about the country, they always fear that these people are violent, but not also knowing there are also those ones who are peaceful.

This perception follows the student into the university, as indicated by the following passage from Student S who notes both this othering, its attendant emotional impact and potentially its resulting reduction of agency.

> There are challenges. I remember when I first came and then I entered class, when I introduce myself and then said I'm a refugee, there was kind of the whole class shivering how a refugee came to be amidst them. When I introduced myself and I said I'm a refugee, and then I mentioned my country, like, no, these people are bad. So that thing made me felt bad, like I'm mocked up by my classmate who looked into me as a refugee, but not looking into me as a student.

This same student quickly moved from this account of student othering, into accounts of university administrative othering, suggesting their close association as a larger *network* of othering.

> 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. At times they're high, their payments are high, which we hardly afford.

This is echoed in the following passage from student Z. Note the assertions made by this student, expressed as a right.

Because international students pay relatively higher fees. So they are put in that category and they are saying, "No, it's our right. We should have to pay like the local students and pay the same fees and so on".

Routinely returned to in the data was a categorical distinction that potentially sits in contrast to this comprehensive othering suggested in the previous passages: refugee students are often identified as international students specifically as an offset to the othering experienced due to their refugee status (discussed in Najjuma et al., 2022). This is done intentionally, as indicated in the following passage from Administrator 1 from one of the private universities.

Not as such as a separate group, simply because the university does not want to stigmatise them. So, they are supposed to be part of the community and if there is any special consideration, they are part of that international community. Not as a separate group. They are a subset and we don't usually try to separate them from the rest of the international students.

This categorization as international students, indeed this desire not to 'other', is felt in a number of both othering and empowering ways. The following passage from Student X from Administrator 1's university above indicates its negative implications.

The university, really, if they put it as a program, they will do much also in supporting refugee students. But unfortunately, they have just put us under the same umbrella. So whatever things they come up with, they rate us as international students and they don't differentiate us from the other students.

Yet sometimes this can be received as a positive due to the communicative action being engendered. The following passage from Student Z is indicative in this regard.

They were not segregating or putting them aside, like, "You know, this is South Sudan, they have to get a special what? A special kind of help." No. They took as what? As all students. So you find out... Like for me, the system they used was good. I was able to get more friends, I was able to communicate to others who are Ugandans. I was to share different knowledge with the... They didn't put us aside as a special what? People.

The data also revealed that in some instances othering and differentiation were not directly practised but rather they stemmed from the consciousness of the refugee students as they tried to fit within the context of the universities. The inner comparison with other students in terms of dress code, race and property seemed to cause discomfort as stated by students S and U below, respectively:

S: On arriving here, things were a bit hard. You feel you're very backward. When you look at student status, how they do things, you just feel in a total different environment. So starting to do whatever

you're supposed to, it will take time. Actually it took time for me and the rest to cope up with everything at university here. Carrying in mind I'm a refugee and this is what I've gone through. And you came when you don't have things, people put on different things, people live a different life. But for you, you are not there, you don't have resources to afford those things.

U: The way you can identify that so and so is from a very difficult situation. The dressing codes, yes, it can show. Two, the physical appearance we came in. Really someone would say, "I think this one should be having some stress or some problem somewhere." Physically people were not fine. And then thirdly, the race, the color we have, someone can always know that so and so is not someone from here.

In the data, language is often presented as a variable of 'othering' or 'belonging' depending on its expression. The analysed data revealed that some of the participants undertook a defiant stance against the common discourse and tried to arrive at a consensus with their lecturers and colleagues, indicating a degree of communicative action designed to both cultivate and exercise a degree of power in their communicative engagements. In the following passage, note the assertions from student T in response to the lecturer's use of the local language (Luganda) and the resolution that occurs as a result.

Actually, last week, when I went to see my Research Method lecturer. They say it in their language. Then I was like, "Sir, I don't know Luganda." Then he said, "Eh, you don't know Luganda. How do you communicate with other students? Because here, I know students all know Luganda." I said, "No, not all of us communicate in Luganda." So he said, "Okay, okay. It's okay." From there, he knew I don't know Luganda, he starts speaking to me in English. Now, we have started speaking English. For me, whenever I go to a lecturer, and he starts speaking to me in his language, I tell him, "Sir, I don't know your language." Then he starts asking me, "Where are you from?" I said, "I'm from Sudan." "Eeh, you're my sister from Sudan."

Note in the following exchange with a student the assertions of rights accompanied by the identification of a possible alternative (Kiswahili). Of further interest is how student S is articulating those rights as an 'international people', rather than as a refugee student, suggesting possible social capital in its use.

S: Yeah, within the university the same things happens also, at times but not in most cases. You find some lecturers they lecture, they like bringing words from the local language. Now, for someone like me who cannot understand, I will not know what it means. But with that personally I contributed with some things. We feel at least nowadays it is fair, we told them the rights of these international people have to be respected. Maybe Swahili, because somehow it is also a wider, people use it in different countries. But if we are here to study in English, we have to use the common language.

Throughout the data, language informed identity and helped groups to stick together. For instance, when asked whether he faced any challenges related to the language of instruction, student U from Somalia stated as follows:

Actually, there is not any difficulties there, but apart from the education, I don't have other colleague or other people from my country that we sometimes communicate [with] each other. When you see other nationalities, they have their friends. Example Congo, they're many. South Sudan they're many. But for me, I'm from Somalia. I am alone.

In this, we see an example of being othered even by fellow refugee students. The role that language plays in this othering is multi-dimensional. For example, there was evidence in the data to demonstrate that the language of instruction posed a major barrier to the participation of some refugee students in higher education. It was evident even during the process of data collection that students from countries where English is not the official language struggled to communicate fluently. When asked about this issue the refugee student leader Z had this to say: 'Yes, especially students from Congo. For them, they use French and Swahili. So, it is very hard even for others to get things in English, it is very difficult but they're trying'.

The students themselves routinely presented alternatives to this othering, expressed often in an aspirational fashion. The following passage from a student is suggestive in this regard and potentially indicative of Student R's evolving lifeworld, where they *might* 'develop, confirm, and renew their membership in social groups and their own identities' (Habermas, 1987: 139).

> I think it needs sensitization. Like a particular community, if they always talk about others, if someone tells them that, "Please, this one here and you, you're all the same. You're created in God's image like himself or herself. So don't need to look at the person in that negative way. You never know where life's going to take you next."...So if people are sensitised that they should not talk bad about others, that one I think it will help.

This sensitization, according to the following passage from student Z, ultimately leads to belonging, which in this case is presented merely as a state of equality.

> As a refugee, when someone just sees you like a normal person, does not talk about you, does not criticize you. That's more than enough. You just have that good feeling. If someone sees like just a normal person that God has created, you just feel good with that.

The findings from this theme affirm much of the research that demonstrates the barriers that both the language of instruction and the languages involved in social participation in Ugandan life within and outside of universities present (discussed in Tulibaleka et al., 2022; Wamara et al., 2021; Dryden-Peterson, 2006b), and the subsequent affect that has on the feelings of othering that occur (Bukuluki et al., 2020). Yet within these instances of othering that language barriers present, these students demonstrate considerable ingenuity in presenting how these barriers might be overcome or mitigated. Within this theme, there is evidence of strategic communicative action aimed at realising aspiration. These strategies are instructive for any higher education institution looking to adopt policy and strategy measures to integrate refugee students more effectively, or indeed students who might be otherwise marginalised by linguistic barriers, or the opaqueness of university practice.

Implications of these themes for higher education and conclusion

The themes that emerged from the data above are clearly in agreement with other researchers on the claim that participation in higher education takes on different shapes (UNHCR, 2019; Hollenweger et al., 2011). Indeed, as shown in the findings, the participants in this study took on various forms of engagement outside of the academic spaces but also within the university space. There is a natural diversity of communicative approaches within this sample which reflects the diversity of their geographical origin, their linguistic capacities, and their aspirations in relation to higher education.

Participation in any activity pre-supposes being part of a group and this could mean penetrating the established social networks in the universities and to allow them to cultivate communicative

action for further integration into university life. Whereas some of the participating refugee students were able to comfortably be part of the university system, it was evident that there was an acute awareness of the use of the plural pronoun 'we' in the data to highlight a particular group of people that stand separate from others. For many refugee students, they stand apart from, or are stood apart by, the communicative practices of higher education.

Most refugee students appear to remain in their own spaces and hence only penetrate the bigger space when they must collaboratively work towards a particular event such as presentation at a music gala. In other words, they create their own community within the bigger university community whereby they look out for each other – indeed they have leaders and in one university the researchers had to wait for the leader to be present before interviewing the students. Whereas this practice of participation has benefits, such as creating a sense of belonging, the refugee students may miss out on interacting with and learning about the hidden social networks that could advance their achievements in both the social and academic arenas.

That said, the individual and the power of agency within each participant was an outstanding factor that kept emerging within the findings above. True to Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) argument that the individual must have the ability to position themselves to access important information, many of our participants were able to survive within the system by either becoming leaders, dancers, or by befriending native students to help them get value for their money in the marketplace. A refugee student is not necessarily static in the status of being an 'outsiderc' (as pointed out by one of the participants and as shown by some of their aspirations). This is suggestive of the fact that despite the various challenges and characteristics that may be associated to refugee students in higher institutions of learning in research, it is also important to examine the individual traits and perhaps how this one person has changed from the time they got into the university. Understanding that their participation in the university revolves around a continuum of events and activities can help us design appropriate intervention guidelines.

Just as shown in the reviewed literature (Aydin and Kaya, 2017; Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Toker Gökçe, and Acar, 2018) our analysed data provided evidence that language remains a major area of concern amongst refugee students in higher education. However, even if several participants appeared to have challenges with English as a language of instruction, our data mainly revealed that they were more concerned about the local language Luganda which sometimes found its way to the lecture rooms, and presumably pervaded their social interactions outside the classroom. In some instances, participants disagreed with the common discourse (Habermas, 1991) and demanded consideration as non-native students. While this action illustrates further the expressions of communicative action on the part of refugee students, it also demonstrates a gap in the communication cycle and it is not clear whose responsibility it is to bridge this gap. More broadly in the sector, there is a turn towards what Ilcan and Rygiel (2015: 333) refer to as responsibilizing refugee groups to assert their own inclusion by addressing these communicative gaps themselves. This is problematic insofar as it assumes a capacity for understanding the 'opaque practices of higher education and the role these have on the lifeworlds of these students and their capacity for communicative action' (Najjuma et al., 2022: 10), an ability to navigate through acts or networks of othering, as well as a linguistic capacity in both English and the languages of Uganda.

It would be challenging for these refugee students to learn the local language and the language of instruction; as such it can be argued that an opportunity for effective communication is lost on both sides. This situation echoes the Ethiopian experiences by some refugee students in higher education who could not comprehend Amharic, the official language often used by students and lecturers to supplement English, which is the language of instruction (Tamrat, 2020). Further, although the literature showed that many universities have supportive language programmes for refugee students

(Hollenweger et al., 2011; Lysgaard and Simovska, 2016; Mallman and Lee, 2016), our data revealed the reluctance or structural inability on the part of Ugandan universities that participated in this study to offer formal language programs. This could be attributed to the fact that the language needs for refugee students varied depending on country of origin, for instance, students from South Sudan appeared more comfortable communicating using English language than students from Somalia.

The need for ongoing institutional support is prevalent throughout the data. The process of research and the analysis of data plus the presentation of findings above led us to believe that some refugees have clear and trusted avenues to approach in case they have challenges echoing the work of Baker et al. (2017). In the same way, the participants in our project appeared to lack specific channels and personnel to approach since they expected to participate in the usual activities like the other students. Music galas and city walks were some off events that could be boosted by other support programmes.

Communicative action has enabled us to understand that despite the challenges that refugee students may face *within* university, a big number of them are ably integrated within the university systems in Uganda and effectively work towards the completion of their degree programs. The result of this integration can be evidenced in the aspirations held by some of the participants for a brighter future when they return to their home countries and contribute towards rebuilding for stability and prosperity. Evidence of aspiration in this respect was readily apparent in the data.

Nonetheless, refugee students' participation in Uganda higher education carries with it significant encounters with 'othering', some of which is due to the opaqueness of university administrative practice, some to linguistic differences, and some to acts of social integration. As such, we recommend that there is a need for universities to provide documented guidelines (other than the ones relating to fees structures) to point them directly to events, spaces and opportunities that they can exploit to advance their integration process. This would give some assurance to the refugee students that their status is recognized within the said institutions. Relatedly, it would be useful to expound on how outsiders are expected to identify and penetrate the dominant institutional structures involved in both Ugandan society and higher education. Further studies can be carried out to establish the linguistic challenges that are common to refugee students in higher institutions of learning so that a support programme is developed that can be utilised by various institutions.

Authors' note

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