# The FFA Bridging Programme: Overview



Foundations for All is a university access programme designed to bridge the gap between disrupted secondary education and tertiary education. The programme aims to prepare students from disadvantaged backgrounds (including refugees and displaced people) for the academic demands of undergraduate university study. Aimed at bright and driven potential university students who have limited access to high quality educational materials, it offers an integrated programme that combines preparation in English language, which follows on from RLP's existing English curriculum, mathematics, digital skills, study and critical writing skills,

and an emphasis throughout on integrated psychosocial support. The main focus for the pilot was on learners who wished to pass the Makerere University Mature Entrance Exam to go on to higher education study in Uganda. The pilot programme was also intended to benefit those who wished to apply for scholarships and undergraduate study elsewhere, and expanding this will be a focus for future iterations of the programme.

Through online courses, self-directed study and tutor-supported teaching in small groups, delivered in dedicated study centres, Foundations for All introduced students to subjects at university level and fostered the academic, critical and reflective skills needed to perform well in class and in assessments. The blended nature of the programme depended on strong communication between course conveners, who in this case were largely based outside of Uganda, and tutors who were onsite in one of the two learning centres. The proposed programme therefore had two components: the development and delivery of courses via an online platform and tutors; and, the professional development and training of local tutors to support learners through both psychosocial aspects and course-specific teaching.

## Partners

The three main institutional partners for designing and implementing FFA were the University of Edinburgh, the Refugee Law Project in Uganda, which is based within the School of Law at Makerere University, and the American University of Beirut [further information on Partners can be found below], in a funding partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. The fourth pillar of the project team was the student contributors, including alumni of the PADILEIA programme, students on FFA, and Mastercard Scholars. Mastercard Foundation Scholars played a particularly important role in the research dimensions of the project, including in assisting with the design, data collection and analysis of the material for the Scoping Tool and in their contributions to the Literature Review process. The mentorship programme for FFA students was designed by a Mastercard Foundation Scholar, Hammed Kayode Alabi, with all the mentors being Mastercard Foundation Scholar Volunteers. Each course design team included a Mastercard Foundation Scholar to serve as a 'critical friend' to provide feedback on the content, structure and pace of the curriculum.

Beyond these partnerships, there were then two other 'types' of partnership that the FFA team recognised they needed; partners that could provide specialised expertise on areas of curriculum design and delivery that were missing within the core team; and strategic partners that FFA saw as being critical for the project to succeed long-term, including as it looks for accreditation and advocates for expanded pathways for refugee learners into HEIs. Key design partners included:

- Centre for Open Learning and Institute for Academic Development, both at the University of Edinburgh (UoE) – as discussed further here, we worked closely with stakeholders internal to the UoE to develop best practice on refugee and access education, and to be able to provide FFA students with resources to prepare for IELTS.

Key strategic partners included:

- The Uganda Business and Technical Examinations Board (UBTEB) – We sought to understand how the FFA programme might fit within the current higher education programme within the country. This was mainly because RLP was seeking to accredit the programme. UBTEB provided guidance on the options for the programme though unfortunately many of these options did not align with the needs of refugee learners. Ongoing conversations with UBTEB, however, are exploring ways in which admissions procedures for HEI in Uganda can be redesigned to better support refugee scholars.

- Makerere University Academic Registrar – RLP, as a project hosted within the School of Law at Makerere University (MUK), has a mandate to support the institution to do research that informs their practice on issues pertaining to access and inclusion of refugee learners. At the start of the programme, RLP reached out to the Mature Entry Unit of MUK and the Academic Registrar to inquire about how FFA could fit into the mature entry structure of the University. These discussions revealed that the Mature Entry exam would be the best option for refugees in Uganda to access quality higher education, hence this becoming one of the priority goals of FFA. Noting some of the constraints around the MEE, however, RLP continues to have a dialogue with the Academic Registrar about how to amend these processes, which will be strengthened through an Economic and Social Research Council Impact Accelerator Award project in 2022-2023 [discussed here].

- Refugee Education Stakeholders in Lebanon – During the two weeks of field research undertaken in Lebanon in August 2019 for the Scoping Tool, the project team conducted 15 interviews and six participatory focus groups in Beirut and Bekaa, led by Mastercard Foundation Scholars and PADILEIA bridge program alumni. Stakeholders engaged as research participants included representatives of scholarship programs, UNHCR, UNRWA, universities, online learning providers, refugee education programs, and refugee participants in PADILEIA. This network is a critical resource for further knowledge and support for FFA and its future iterations.

## History and Design of FFA

FFA started in three places: Kampala, where RLP was implementing a successful English for Adults programme and was starting to think about what could come after this programme; Edinburgh, where academics were eager to develop opportunities for refugees to study at university; and Beirut, where AUB was implementing a successful bridge programme called PADILEIA. As the Mastercard Foundation launched its call for proposals, the Edinburgh academics contacted Makerere and, soon, RLP. A meeting took place between the Edinburgh academics and representatives of RLP in Edinburgh on the back of a conference on access to higher education for refugees organised by the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and kickstarted the development of the action-research proposal. AUB soon joined the team as it had been identified as running a successful existing bridge programme, PADILEIA, that could provide inspiration.

After the funding was confirmed, the staff members of the three institutions met in Lebanon and, together with 15 Mastercard Foundation Scholars, conducted research and observation of the PADILEIA programme and started refining plans for FFA. The project really began to gain momentum in February 2020, when team members held a workshop in Kampala that was attended by key stakeholders including Mastercard Foundation Makerere, Refugee Law Project (RLP) staff and tutors, University of Edinburgh project team members, academic and administrative faculty at MUK, and learners from RLP's two project locations in Uganda. Key learnings from this workshop in relation to learner needs focussed on the importance of FFA offering an accredited programme or some sort of recognisable certification to students, the need for advanced English language training, the need for psychosocial support that was tailored to refugee needs, and the need for specific digital and study skills training to adequately prepare students for higher education. In particular, this meeting with prospective FFA students also highlighted that re-entering education systems would be more difficult for potential learners if their mental health and psychosocial needs arising from multiple traumatic experiences were not supported and tackled. The workshop also revealed, however, the substantial challenges in creating accredited bridging programmes for refugees.

Following global travel restrictions in March 2020, further planned in-person activities were adapted to use innovative online design workshops. We held a programme-level learning design workshop facilitated entirely online by the ELDeR team at the University of Edinburgh. ELDeR is a practical, team-based approach to learning design. It involves an intensive, collaborative workshop, at the end of which the academic team goes away with a detailed blueprint of the learning design for their programme and a comprehensive action plan. The workshop was attended by each partner plus the Head of the Centre for Open Learning at Edinburgh. We discussed our values and teaching philosophy, our programme learning outcomes, our student 'personas' (their profiles and learning needs), practicalities such as our e-learning design constraints, and an action plan for development of the individual courses. The main principles that informed this process, and that were consolidated through it, were drawn from AUB's experience running the PADILEIA programmes with King's College London, and from the inception workshops in Kampala in 2020, and were as follows:

(1) The need to provide education at a level that gives students a reasonable chance to access universities such as Makerere via the Mature Entry Exam, as well as potentially other Universities offering scholarships such as Edinburgh. While the involvement of academic authorities in Uganda (Uganda Business and Technical Examinations Board, UBTEB) and Edinburgh (The Centre for Open Learning, COL) are essential to providing accredited standards, we accepted that the pilot would not be able to run as a fully accredited programme due to bureaucratic obstacles and time constraints.

(2) The need for the programme to be context-sensitive, in terms of case studies and teaching materials that are used in classes, but also culturally sensitive to learning and teaching styles appropriate and relevant for refugees. This meant that the courses could not be developed without the involvement of teachers and tutors who knew the two contexts, and future learners who would be taking these courses.

(3) The need to protect learners and fully take into account their strengths and vulnerabilities. Helping students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and especially displaced people, was recognised to require extensive psycho-social support. There was a recognition that this would be best provided by the Refugee Law Project and third-party referrals if needed.

(4) The need for the programme to provide practical support for learners to navigate the complexities of higher education entry and scholarship availability. We wanted to support students to search for relevant scholarships, while seeking to advocate for more scholarships for refugees at institutions within the Mastercard Foundation Partner Network (including Makerere, AUB and Edinburgh) as a broader goal of the programme.

After the ELDeR workshop, we then conducted rapid hybrid course design workshops, and each course team focussed on developing course learning outcomes, a week-by-week topic outline, and integrated any student feedback from the Kampala and ELDeR workshops. At the same time, the team also agreed design constraints that would impact course design including semester timetable, technology and the amount of time that students could commit to the courses each week.

We then worked with existing stakeholders to inform the learning design. In particular, we developed the Mastercard Foundation approach to transformative leadership to include the importance of reflection and discussion, along with building opportunities for FFA students to lead in civic engagement in their communities. We also engaged the Institute for Academic Development and the Centre for Open Learning at the University of Edinburgh to develop best practice on teaching and learning for students from non-traditional backgrounds.

## Project Aims

FFA was designed with the following aims:

1. Develop, pilot and evaluate a best-practice bridging programme using blended learning that would:
    - Meet the educational and psychosocial support needs of its learners
    - Include refugee scholars in participatory course development
    - Provide professional development opportunities for tutors
    - Support Mastercard Foundation scholar development through research and course development internships
2. Develop and test a Toolkit to allow other institutions to inform the development of similar initiatives by detailing:
    - Evidence and learning to support Mastercard Foundation's (and wider audiences) attention on the educational needs of refugees and displaced people

- Evidence to highlight barriers to accessing higher education
- A viable model and design framework for the extension of blended learning and bridging programs in other humanitarian contexts
- Reflections on challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned from our collective experience in developing FFA and PADILEIA

## The Situation for Refugees in Uganda

Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees and has been praised for offering 'a very liberal refugee policy' (Idris, 2020), though some have contested just how much the country's approach should be praised, particularly given that the picture for South Sudanese refugees in the north of the country - the largest population in Uganda - is particularly challenging (Kigozi, 2017). Refugees technically have the right to work, to freedom of movement, they can own property and set up a business, and have access to social services such as health and education. Uganda has also adopted a 'no camps' policy whereby refugees living in the country can live freely in either rural settlements, which they are technically free to enter and exit as they please, or in urban areas, albeit without the right to access the humanitarian services provided to those in settlements such as free accommodation, education, healthcare and food rations. Uganda's policy is that refugees living in host communities gain access to two plots of land - one to live on and the other to cultivate, in addition to 'the means necessary to work the land.'

Below we present an aggregate picture of the situation for refugees in Uganda. It is worth noting, however, that there is significant variation among and between refugees within the country for reasons including: the refugees' nationality, as certain populations are accorded different access to services and the settlements; individual's displacement profiles e.g. those fleeing acute violence from the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan are likely to require a different response to populations whose arrival in Uganda may have had more planned dimensions; and the duration of their time in exile and the settlements, as camps such as Nakivale have been established for decades, providing more time for their inhabitants to build businesses and links with surrounding communities.

The allocation of land to refugees living in host communities is a cornerstone of Uganda's strategy to promote economic stability and self-reliance among refugees. Refugees in Uganda are expected to cultivate such land to meet their basic food needs, rear animals and to generate small incomes (Idris, 2020). Evidence nonetheless shows that refugee populations in Uganda experience various obstacles to taking advantage of such policies. These include: (i) the plot sizes have reduced in size as refugee numbers have increased thus current allocations are insufficient to meet basic food needs;[1] (ii) refugee communities have complained that they have been allocated less productive land than host communities, and the location is often

[1] Plot sizes vary by location in Uganda but, according to the UNDP (2018), the overall size is currently 30x30 metres or 0.22 acres.

more remote, which can impede income generation; (iii) refugee populations only have user rights to land thus 'they cannot sell it or use it as collateral for credit (Idris, 2020: 3)', and (iv) not all refugees have sufficient knowledge or experience in farming. For South Sudanese refugees in the north of Uganda, agricultural productivity is particularly low (Kigozi, 2017) and the relatively isolated nature of the settlements makes it hard for this population to access other wage-earning opportunities.

Secure and reliable access to food persists as a major concern for refugees in Uganda, particularly among refugee populations. The World Bank (2019) found that 7 out of 10 refugee households have experienced severe food insecurity, while the UNDP (2018) uncovered that an extremely high number of refugees were experiencing reduced numbers of meals because of such insecurity, with some populations spending at least an entire day without eating. Food insecurity is particularly precarious among certain groups. For example, the Development Pathways (2018) survey concludes that refugee households with more children and older people were more vulnerable to food insecurity as they were unable to work to subsidise family income. In the last few years, as humanitarian/development funding to refugees in Uganda has also decreased, UNHCR's food rations have reduced greatly.

Poverty levels among refugee populations across Uganda thus remain high. The World Bank (2019) found that 48% of the refugee population in Uganda are still living in poverty, with the highest levels found in the West Nile region. Development Pathways (2018) estimated the poverty levels among refugee populations in Uganda to be higher, closer to 70%, with 74% of the West Nile refugee population living below the national poverty line. As a result, refugee populations in Uganda are still heavily dependent on aid for income, with the World Bank (2019) reporting that around 54% of refugees reported aid as their main source of income. Poole's (2019; cited in Idris, 2020: 12) study similarly concludes that refugees in particular settlements (Bidibidi and Rhino Camps) in Uganda are still heavily reliant on aid, with almost 100% of participants receiving food aid and '60% indicated that aid organisations were their most important source of support when faced with regular shortfalls in household income.'

Uganda is nonetheless often regarded as a 'global leader' with its integrated approach to refugee management where refugees can, at least on paper, access the same jobs and services as host communities (Idris, 2020: 2). This approach is promoted as benefiting both refugees and host communities, where 'the latter benefit from improved services for all and the positive effects on refugees on the local and wider community' (ibid.). There is increasing evidence of refugees in Uganda positively affecting host communities through job creation, and increased demand as well as supply of goods (Betts et al, 2016). According to research, some refugee settlements are embedded into local Ugandan economies 'attracting goods, people and capital from outside to their active internal markets' (Idris, 2020: 21).

Refugees in Uganda can also technically access integrated services with host communities in health, education, water and sanitation, and community services. In 2018, however, UNICEF investigated the integrated service delivery that refugees and host communities in Uganda now receive, and identified two critical aspects: (i) access to good quality services is limited in refugee-hosting areas as these are amongst the poorest and least developed in Uganda, and

(ii) the saturation of refugee populations in these areas exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and makes these areas less resilient to economic and environmental shocks.

In practice too, even established relationships between refugees and host communities can be fraught with tension. Refugees struggle to find economic opportunities and host communities perceive refugees to provide competition for access to resources and services, though in Kampala it is worth noting that certain actors have reported wide income gaps between refugees and host communities with the World Bank/UNHCR estimating in 2016 that citizens earned roughly $250 USD in a month while refugees earned approximately $175 USD. Compared to Ugandan nationals, both male and female refugees are typically employed in lower skilled jobs in the informal economy with poorer employment conditions such as low and late payment of wages, and long working hours with no breaks (The Interantional Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2016). Buye (2021) nonetheless argues that host communities in Uganda face a number of challenges from the refugee influx, including insecurity, pressure and conflict. Core challenges are the dwindling availability of land, pressure on water resources, and environmental degradation in the areas to which large numbers of refugees have moved. It is this strain on scarce resources that often leads to increased tensions. Bjorkhaug (2020: 269) found that Ugandan nationals living and working in those areas earmarked for refugee populations 'live in a state of chronic insecurity, fearing eviction from the land on which they desperately depend on for harvests and their livelihood.' A scarcity of land is, in other words, affecting everyone.

In terms of how these dynamics have affected education, prior to the introduction of the 1998 Self-Reliance Strategy in Uganda, education services were separate for refugee populations and host communities, with interactions between these communities limited (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2016). Numerous sources state that the integration of host and refugee primary education '... has fostered amicable coexistence between refugee and local children' in Uganda (ibid.). Primary education is provided free of charge to refugees in settlements, albeit not urban areas, which is consistent with Uganda's Universal Primary Education Policy. Compared with other refugee hosting nations, the enrolment rate in primary education among refugee and host community populations is fairly high.[2] Yet, the drop-out rates for both populations attending primary education also remains high, with the World Bank (2019) estimating that only 14% of all refugee children in Uganda and 34% of Ugandan children complete primary school. The opportunities and likelihood for refugees to access HEIs in Uganda is therefore narrowed for them from a very young age.

This is compounded by the issue of language barriers. In Uganda, the official language of instruction is English. Ugandan refugee schools try to enable children to attend school by recruiting refugee teachers to teach grades 1-4 in the refugees' first languages, but this normally does not cover the diversity of languages spoken in each class. Dryden-Peterson (2003) found that refugees from DRC, Rwanda and Burundi are frequently disadvantaged when joining primary and secondary schools in Uganda because their previous language of instruction at school was not English, and they are encouraged to join lower or upper primary

[2] Estimated to be 65% for refugee populations and 68% for host communities.

grades until their English improves. Unsurprisingly, this contributed negatively to the social and educational development of refugees in this predicament and led to increased rates of drop-out. Both Dryden-Person (2003) and Callanan & Reynolds (2020) recommended that the UNHCR provides additional funding in refugee settlements to increase the provision of free-of-charge English courses outside of school hours. The British Council (2018) advocate that English 'functions as a link' between refugees, refugee organisations and host communities and that its importance to refugee population outcomes cannot be overstated. In integrated refugee populations and host community schools this language barrier can also affect refugee population-host community relations, leading to negative integration outcomes and increased pressure on refugee populations to drop-out.

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## PROGRAMME LEARNING OUTCOMES

Before drafting the Programme Learning Outcomes for FFA, we first established our Ethical Philosophy and Foundational Principles as a team. These were drafted by the literature review team following discussions among various members of the FFA team, including at the Kampala workshop, the ELDeR workshop, and a session to discuss the initial version. They also incorporated concepts and learnings from the literature reviewed for FFA, and were in part a response to observations made in the literature review group that the underlying philosophy of an educational programme has major implications for the way in which it is designed and evaluated, something that was particularly evident in analyses of programmes designed to prevent radicalisation within a broader securitisation agenda. The team therefore decided on the following Principles, though they stressed that, in line with the project's philosophy that teaching and learning is a process of 'continual growth', these foundational principles remain 'live' and open. The team thus aimed to accommodate new or alternative goals and approaches within them as the programme developed in order to take into account the experiences and knowledges of all those participating in FFA:

## Foundations for All: Educational Philosophy and Foundational Principles

We support the FFA initiative because we believe the role and purpose of education is to promote the following:

- ➔ Social justice and mutual respect: Education as the practice of freedom where students learn together to navigate reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries

  > "The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom."(hooks, 1994: 207)

- ➔ Enhancement of human rights: Education as a fundamental human right
- ➔ Equity and Inclusion: Equity between citizens and refugees of diverse backgrounds. Tertiary education should be accessible to all refugees: not just those who are resettled. Investing in people as global citizens and not nationals of particular states
- ➔ Protection and stability: For refugee and host student learners and their communities
- ➔ Stable livelihoods: To provide an incentive for student learners to continue through primary and secondary education
- ➔ Economic, social and personal development: Serving development goals in the host country and country of origin. Promoting conditions in which individuals and communities can thrive

As such, FFA has the following goals:

### PROGRAM LEVEL

1. To enable students to access and thrive in higher education, to become leaders and advocates for their communities, and to feel empowered to enact broader change in systems of higher education
2. To design assets-based educational programmes for refugee and host community learners built on mutual respect that celebrate diversity and do not pathologise difference
3. To provide spaces for refugee and host community learners that are inclusive, transformative, and effective
4. To evidence collaboratively-developed, holistic and contextually relevant higher education programmes

5. To support calls for structural change in how institutions of higher education and host governments respond to refugee learners, including through providing insights into institutional and administrative barriers to providing access to higher education at partner institutions, and to provide learning to help develop a sustainable and accredited foundational access programme for refugees at the University of Edinburgh and other relevant institutions

## Student Level

- Enhance students' self-confidence and transferable skills that they can use to thrive across different situations in education, work and life including, but not limited to, self-directed learning, problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, healthy communication, conflict resolution, collaboration, leadership, digital literacy, and character skills such as perseverance, coping, empathy, self-awareness, and emotional regulation.
- Prepare students to apply for and succeed in securing scholarships and admission to university, as well as providing a foundation for academic success in university studies.
- Enable students to achieve subject-specific learning outcomes for English, Mathematics, Digital Skills, Study Skills and Understanding Myself and Others (according to each course syllabus).
- By the end of the programme students should feel empowered to effectively and confidently express their knowledge, needs and skills in less familiar professional and personal environments, and should be prepared for development as ethical leaders committed to removing barriers faced by refugees and the betterment of their societies.
- Support positive interaction between refugees and host communities.

In order to achieve this, our curriculums and teaching are being developed according to the following principles:

## Curriculum Design and Development

- Curriculums must be culturally and socio-politically-relevant and gender-responsive, designed for and with students
- Curriculums must be developed in contextualised and collaborative ways that are responsive to learners' strengths, aspirations, and agency.
- Curriculums must understand students' migration experiences and their expectations for and realistic outcomes of education, and be honest about what they can deliver
- Curriculums must enable learner and teacher autonomy and responsibility

creatively utilising available and accessible tools and resources, including digital tools

- Curriculums must support learners and educational staff to identify and challenge practices and norms that marginalise refugee and other disadvantaged learners
- Curriculums must foreground psycho-social support as both a taught set of skills for supporting oneself and one's community, and as a service available to students
- Curriculums should include experiential learning opportunities to also aid community engagement and mutual learning with formal and informal avenues for reciprocal learning between families/communities and the program

"The role of the teacher, then, is as a curriculum developer who, together with his or her students, grows ever more competent in constructing positive educational experiences. The process of the enacted curriculum is one of continual growth for both teachers and students. If the mind is a fire to be kindled, the role of the external curriculum expert is a teacher of teachers – one who kindles the fire of teachers who then join their fire with those of their students, thus continually adding to the flame." (Snyder, Bolin, and Zumwalt, 1992, p. 418)

## Teaching and Learning Environment

- Educators should engage with students as co-participants in learning. Peer learning should be encouraged and learners must be recognised as expert knowledge-holders too, with student diversity seen as a key strength
- Classroom environments must provide a safe and supportive space where all students and educators are genuinely valued and respected, and where the roles and responsibilities of each group are clearly articulated
- Gender-based differences in access to and experiences of education must be recognized (including a mix of female and male teachers for trust and as role models)
- Recognition should be given to the ways in which the material conditions and external support mechanisms of students and their families will impact upon their learning experience
- Educators must be furnished with the information and support (including appropriate financial remuneration and professional development) necessary to enable them to engender a supportive and effective learning environment that is sensitive to the distinct needs of refugee learners

Drawing on these discussions and the educational philosophy, we then developed the following Programme Learning Outcomes:

**OVERALL PROGRAM GOALS** To equip students for progression to first year undergraduate study in other institutions by bridging the gap for those whose secondary education has been disrupted, who have lost the documentation proving their educational level, or who lack access to high quality educational resources. It also aims to support those whose national school qualifications do not reach a high enough standard to be accepted through university entrance qualifications.

## PROGRAM-LEVEL LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Knowledge and Understanding

Foundations for All aims to develop students' knowledge of English, Mathematics, Digital Skills and Study Skills up to the level required for entry to higher education. Students will improve their understanding of these skills and knowledge, which are prerequisites to successful study at undergraduate level. In addition, students will gain the skills necessary to undertake self-study in their chosen subject areas.

2. Research and Enquiry

Foundations for All will improve students' confidence and skills in finding, evaluating and using resources, particularly related to online study and digital resources. On completing the program, students will be able to explore and think critically through considering a variety of arguments and explanations, collecting and deploying information from a variety of sources, and have confidence in developing their own arguments in both spoken and written form. Skills of critical self-awareness and reflection will also be developed, particularly with respect to considering and reflecting on their own position as refugees.

3. Personal and Intellectual Autonomy

A key outcome of the programme will be building the confidence of the student to succeed in higher education. Through the psychosocial support component, students will be supported and encouraged to be confident in their abilities and in themselves. Students will also develop and apply their intellectual skills, including evaluating a range of beliefs in light of evidence and theory, constructing arguments, and assessing academic texts, and will develop the ability to reflect on and critique the views of others' in a respectful and constructive way.

4. Communication

On completing the program, students should be able to communicate confidently in written and spoken English at a level appropriate for entry into higher education. They will also use their communication skills to develop their own confidence and understanding, to engage appropriately with others, and to advocate for themselves

in situations. Students will develop their interpersonal skills including listening, speaking and communication via online tools.

5. Personal Effectiveness

Students completing Foundations for All will develop personal skills including time management and planning and organizing, and will develop the capacity to take advantage of opportunities in higher education such as searching for and applying for scholarships. They will be able to effectively design strategies and use available resources to meet their goals, and to reflect on their progress and skills as learners.

6. Technical/practical skills

On completing the program, students will be able to: Listen, read, write and speak in English at the level required for successful undergraduate study; demonstrate a level of mathematics sufficient for entry to undergraduate mathematics and science subjects; demonstrate knowledge of a range of digital and study skills, including the use of e-learning platforms relevant for on-campus, blended and online study, and understand and use key subject vocabularies in social sciences and humanities.

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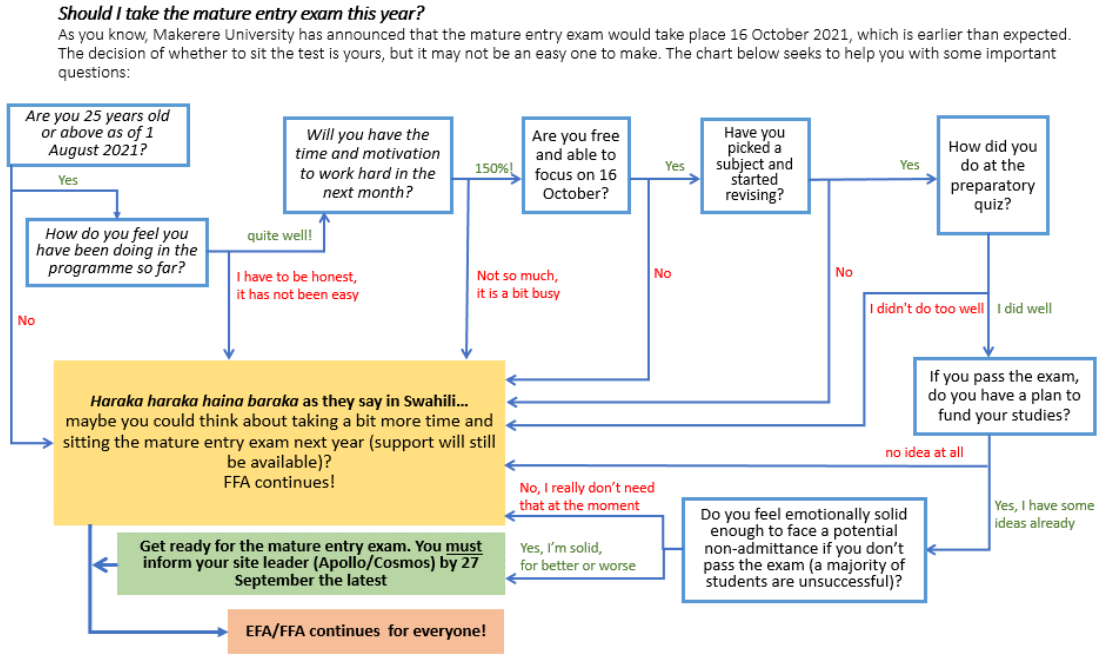
## University of Makerere Mature Entry Exam

Alongside these more principle- and pedagogy-oriented norms, the FFA team also responded to the challenges associated with getting the pilot project formally accredited by deciding to target an accessible, tangible route into Higher Education for the refugee learners on the programme. Given the Refugee Law Project's status as a project of the Law School at Makerere University, we therefore selected Makerere's Mature age entry exam as a pathway for the refugee learners into tertiary education within the country. The exam is designed for all students over the age of 25 at the start of the calendar year who seek admission to the University. This exam is one of very few routes to accessing a University education in Uganda that is open to individuals who either have not finished secondary school, or who have no documentation to prove this. In place of these grades, the admissions process invites students to sit two separate papers; the first is a complex series of aptitude tests and the second is an essay-based paper. The students who achieve the highest grades in these tests are then admitted into the University.

In the second semester of FFA, classes were thus largely oriented towards supporting students to master the skills needed to pass these exams, with a focus on the English language and comprehension, General Knowledge, and Mathematics sections, which compose the first part of the admissions test [for a discussion on the shortcomings of this exam see 'Advocacy'

section of the Design Framework]. The second part of the admissions exam requires students to write short essays on the subjects that they wish to study at University. These essay scripts are not marked, however, unless the student has received a high enough score in the first part of the test.

While prior to 2019 this exam was usually held in December, in 2021 the exam was unexpectedly announced for the 16th October, leaving tutors and students with two months less time to prepare. The team nonetheless decided to support students who wished to sit the exam in 2021 to do so while being clear that not all the key material had yet been covered. Roughly 75% of the students wished to sit it, but all the students were assured that they would also be supported to either resit or sit it for the first time in 2022. The students were provided with the flowchart below to support their decision-making:




Alongside the pedagogical challenges of re-orienting FFA on short notice to accommodate the October date for the entrance exam, the amended timetable also threw up significant logistical and financial challenges. Given Makerere's insistence that students needed to register for the mature age entry exam in person, all the students had to travel to the campus in Kampala to register their intent to sit the exam, which for students from Kiryandongo involved three days of travel, food and accommodation arranged by RLP at very late notice. The students also needed to receive individual approval from the Settlement Commander in Kiryandongo to allow their travel to Kampala given restrictions on refugees' unauthorised freedom of movement in Uganda. To then sit the exam a few weeks later, students from Kiryandongo had to once again be supported to travel to Kampala for two days, and provided hostel accommodation and financial support for this period. RLP staff also wanted to be on hand to accompany them throughout this travel and to escort them around the Makerere campus to make sure they were in the right places at the right times for their exams.

For those students who did not wish to sit the MAEE in October 2021, it was also a challenge to figure out how to keep them engaged with a curriculum that had largely pivoted to focusing

on the skills and knowledge tested in the MAEE. Though almost all the students will eventually sit the exam in 2022, no student were going to be engaged on the specifics of a test that was over a year away.

## Educational Aims

In the section below, we present the aims of, and reflections on, the five different courses that were provided as part of FFA: Maths, English for Academic Purposes, Study Skills, Digital Skills and Understanding Myself and Others. It is important to clarify, however, that the aims included below are the 'final versions', as our initial course by course objectives underwent quite significant revisions once the actual teaching had begun. In large part, this was because we overestimated the amount of material that could be covered in each class, as well as what students could be expected to do around the core study time. An example is that the English team originally hoped that students would be able to 'write short, analytical undergraduate essays on contemporary topics such as public affairs, humanities and social sciences'. This goal was largely based on the Edinburgh team's understanding of university courses being a mix of classroom and self-directed learning, with instructors introducing topics that students would then be expected to go away and further research and read about themselves. In the case of FFA, however, the delivery, elaboration and consolidation of material all had to be done in the classroom - in a format/model more similar to teaching in secondary schools than Universities - and thus there was not sufficient class time to put aside for lengthy writing tasks. This was also not something that it was realistic to imagine all students completing in their own time.

### English For Academic Purposes (EAP)

The Refugee Law Project has significant expertise in teaching English to displaced communities through its English for Adults (EFA) programme. Prior to the establishment of FFA, this programme extended to EFA Level 5. The English component of FFA was originally designed to provide EFA Level 6 and many of the students who successfully applied to join FFA were individuals who had successfully completed EFA Level 5, and thus through this could prove sufficient fluency in English.

Making English a core part of FFA was dictated by the fact that fitting into the education system in Uganda, particularly at tertiary level, requires fluency in English. One of the major barriers for refugees to access quality higher education in Uganda has been a lack of advanced English language skills, particularly given the geographical and linguistic diversity of refugees in the country. RLP also recognises that improvements in reading, writing, speaking and listening skills are necessary for refugees to compete at an international level for scholarships and employment opportunities as these often require evidence of English language proficiency, such as through IELTS or TOEFL. When FFA settled on the goal of students taking the Makerere Mature Age Entry Exam, this further elevated the importance of comprehensive English tuition for the FFA course. Not only is the entire exam in English but it also relies on a range of key skills (comprehension, multiple choice questions and essay writing) that are pitched at an extremely challenging level, even for those who speak English as a first

language. This then entailed a period of 'teaching to the exam' in the second semester of FFA, which put a slightly different emphasis on the knowledge/skills that were taught, moving the syllabus away from the rights-based English tuition that EFA otherwise focuses on.

The topics that RLP chose to focus on in this course were:

- Introduction to EAP
- Review of complex grammar and structure of english language
- Critical thinking, problem solving and argument skills
- Building english grammar and vocabulary
- Listening and reading practice as language receiving skills
- English speaking and presentation skills
- Writing and comprehension skills
- General language skills
- Analytical and critical academic writing

The staff and tutors at RLP, and the students enrolled on EFA5 and subsequently FFA, were also keen that the English curriculum contain tuition on one of the internationally-recognised English language certificates i.e. IELTS or TOEFL. For students hoping to apply for international degree programmes and scholarships, acceptance on these is often contingent on having been awarded a particular score in one of these exams. For staff and tutors at RLP, they did not have any experience of how to teach to/for these exams and thus hoped that by observing how a professional organisation taught the students, they would be able to provide similar teaching in the future.

We therefore signed a contract with a professional body who could deliver bespoke IELTS training over a month-long period as part of the FFA curriculum. We agreed that this would consist of four weeks of content delivery (covering how each of the core skills are assessed in the IELTS exam and how students can prepare for this) and then for each FFA student to have two one-to-one sessions with an IELTS tutor: the first to provide feedback on a short piece of written work and the second to practice their speaking skills.

We nonetheless overestimated how quickly the material could be covered, how easy it would be for staff from the professional body to deliver this material remotely to students with a very different background to those normally taught in pre-sessional activities, and how technical and specific the modes of assessment employed by IELTS are. The contract with the organisation was also signed for delivery within a particular time frame and though they showed incredible flexibility in adjusting to the operating style of FFA, this turned out to be during a period when FFA was severely disrupted by Ugandan domestic politics and Covid-19. The result was that students could not access the learning centres or tutors to check their emails and thus not all the students managed to arrange their one-to-one sessions to fall

during this period, which was a source of frustration for both the tutors - who were committed to providing a reliable service to the students - and the students. The students were also not necessarily accurately briefed on the purposes of the one-to-one sessions or what to disclose during them, which resulted in the tutors encountering lots of very personal stories and feeling that it would be inappropriate to comment on the quality of the students' English language when the content of their discussions was so shocking to tutors unfamiliar with the students' contexts. Across the board, we therefore realised that expectations of what this teaching block could deliver were misaligned and unrealistic. This was disempowering for students, the contracted tutors and the staff working on the English course.

A more fundamental point that discussions around the IELTS provision raised, however, related to who defines 'success' and 'appropriateness' in programmes with international partners based in different cultural contexts and educational traditions. For the team providing the IELTS training from the UK, they saw the scheme as a failure because they had not been able to cover all the material and they felt uncomfortable as educators from/based in Europe providing input on English language education to refugees in Uganda. Tutors at RLP, however, saw the IELTS provision as a success, despite it being incomplete, because 1) they had not been professionally trained to deliver IELTS teaching and thus appreciated the need to bring in experts to do this, 2) they observed that students felt inspired by the fact that the programme had included such an advanced training programme, which they saw as a reflection of the standard at which FFA thought they were performing/could easily reach, and 3) for many students, it provided an opportunity for them to speak one-to-one with somebody entirely new and from such a different context to their own. The fact that it was not comprehensive was for them less important than the fact that it had been arranged, which pointed to a mismatch between what those in the UK and those in Uganda felt was important. While the UK team therefore felt that they had been made to feel like 'white saviours' because of the model of remote content delivery, the team in Uganda saw it as a necessary division of labour. Building off this experience, in future iterations of the programme it was agreed that a budget should be allocated to train the tutors in Uganda to deliver IELTS training as a development opportunity for them and so that RLP can provide this teaching to students who are not enrolled on FFA.

Otherwise, we realised the challenges of orienting the English classes towards the mature entry exam because of how anachronistc and broad the questions were [see Advocacy section of the Design Framework]. There was too much specialist vocabulary for the English courses to focus on because of the sheer range of topics that come up in the comprehension exercises in the exam. Many of the comprehension exercises also contain highly specialised and technical vocabulary, which individuals who have grown up with English as a second language and in a non-European context are even less likely to be able to decipher e.g. passages on the nature and form of English country gardens. For future versions of the programme, thought will need to be given to how to best equip students to deal with these passages, such as through the integration of a weekly comprehension exercise into the English course. Even if the students will never be able to cover all the vocabulary, further emphasis can be placed on building their confidence in deduction for these tasks.

## Study Skills

The Study Skills course was designed to assist students to complete other courses in the FFA programme, as well as to develop the skills necessary to apply for entry into higher education (including when applying for scholarships and the MAEE). Alongside these practical skills, the purpose of this course was to encourage the students to develop inclusive, participatory, culturally aware and empowering skills for learning, and to empower them to recognise, reflect on and challenge the various barriers to access often presented to refugees who are seeking to enter higher education systems.

The rationale for this course was that a lot of the skills required for independent study and higher education are developed over time at school or at home, and that for refugees both of these spaces could have been and continue to be extremely disrupted. Rather than assume therefore that they felt confident with key study skills, we decided to create a course that would hopefully not only help them to thrive on the FFA programme but that would also assist them upon entering any future educational or employment setting. The modules covered included:

- Time management and personal organisation
- Making notes and active listening
- Understanding your academic strengths
- Studying at University
- Introducing academic reading
- Discussion and participation
- Peer learning and collaboration
- Introduction to academic resources
- Introduction to critical thinking and writing
- Researching scholarship and entrance opportunities
- Presentation skills

The course had a blended delivery, with most of the content designed from scratch using resources from the Institute for Academic Development at the University of Edinburgh and then contextualised by staff from RLP who then delivered it. Sessions were also delivered by colleagues from the University of Makerere, such as a presentation by a Congolese student studying there who gave an overview of what to expect from a University education and campus, and remotely by team members at the University of Edinburgh, including a seminar on mental health and refugees that was designed to replicate a University-style tutorial with an academic facilitator.

The Study Skills team faced two major challenges, however, in terms of curriculum design. The first was how to prepare the students for the General Knowledge part of the MAEE, which accounts for 20 marks on the first part of the paper. Alongside encouraging students to keep up to date on current affairs and read widely to increase their knowledge on almost everything, one of the FFA interns generously piloted a weekly quiz for the students to complete based on the types of questions that have come up in the exam in previous years, which range from sport to beauty pageants to geography and beyond. Unless the exact same question were to come up in the exam though, the knowledge gained in this way was of limited use. It was also clear that the questions in the General Knowledge were generally taken from the year or two preceding when the exam was written, which could be 9-12 months prior to when students sit the paper. Familiarising themselves with current affairs in the lead-up to the exam was therefore of limited value too.

The second major challenge was how to prepare students for the subject specific component of the MAEE, given the enormous range of topics the students were applying for at Makerere. This second paper in the exam requires students to write short essays on topics related to their chosen degree programme, which generally rest on a basic understanding of the key ideas, theories or approaches used in that discipline. This plays to the strength of mature applicants who have already been working for some time in the field that they wish to apply for entry to, which is the demographic that the mature entry exam is primarily designed to provide a pathway into higher education for e.g. for an individual who has worked as a pharmacy assistant for some years but wishes to study for a degree to become a trained pharmacist. For students who wish to use the MAEE as a route into tertiary education because of disruption to their educational trajectory and employment, such as refugees, this second paper in the exam thus requires significant knowledge acquisition and study.

We attempted to prepare the students for this part of the exam in the following ways: 1) by developing their essay writing skills, which is a useful transferable skill as well as being useful for part 2 of the exam; 2) by inviting a range of guest speakers to give short presentations and Q&A sessions with the students on the most popular degree programmes (e.g. business administration, social work, etc.); and 3) by pairing the students with a mentor who could assist them in accessing materials that would provide them with a basic grounding in their chosen subject area. As tutors on FFA could not provide that form of bespoke support to every student on the programme, it was decided that mentors would be best placed to assist on a personalised basis even if they were not themselves studying the degree that the students wished to undertake. For future iterations of the programme, this seems like the best model for providing this teaching though. For this pilot of FFA, however, the success of this approach was reduced by the shorter time frame over which to deliver this teaching (because the MAEE exam was two months earlier than expected) and challenges connecting students to mentors.

## Digital Skills

Digital Skills was designed as an introductory course in digital skills for learners who are new to computers, comprehensive use of the internet, and online learning. It was designed to familiarise students with the important concepts of critical digital literacy and personal data management so they may safely and confidently use their digital skills. It was conceived to

emphasise the role of the digital in advancing personal and community goals; in communication, and expression, and advocacy; and in accessing and succeeding in education.

The course was designed to prepare students for day-to-day computing, as well as to provide instruction on the features of online and blended learning, such as using a virtual learning environment (VLE), meaningfully participating in discussion boards, writing blogs, and engaging with online open learning offerings. It set out to familiarise students with navigating the computer itself, online navigation, searching using browsers and search engines, and online applications such as email, word processing applications, presentation applications, and spreadsheets. Further, it provided instruction on the use of open educational resources, digital library resources, and additional learning applications, such as edX, FutureLearn, OER Africa, OER Commons, Khan Academy, Wikimedia, as well as the openly available OER in Kolibri. The course introduced many skills required for Foundations for All, as well as future university and independent study, and the workplace.

The teaching was done via face-to-face instruction in the learning centres, online tasks and other resources, which were developed and provided by the Digital Skills course team, and through tutoring, practical help and supervision provided by the Refugee Law Project. The necessary computing equipment was provided by the Refugee Law Project.

## Understanding Myself and Others

All FFA courses were designed according to key principles of social justice, mutual respect, equity, and inclusion to create supportive and non-hierarchical learning environments, but the 'Understanding Myself and Others' (UMO) course was specifically centred on supporting the psycho-social well-being of refugee and disadvantaged host learners.

The UMO course was therefore foundational to both the FFA curriculum and the programme's overarching design and ethos. The FFA team, inspired and informed by RLP's extensive experience supporting mental health among displaced populations, recognised that programmes involving refugee learners must have integrated and extensive psychosocial support. Previous work by RLP had made a direct link between student wellbeing and their ability to benefit from academic learning. RLP therefore drew on this experience to develop this dedicated, unaccredited course for all students enrolled in Foundations for All. They also provided ongoing training for tutors to support students and a system for effective referrals of students to other services.

Students have subsequently shared examples of how they have translated discussions from this course into their own lives, such as through allocating more time to friends and families, and employing strategies to communicate more effectively with others. They have reported how the course content has helped them to manage their stress, both at home and school. Learners were critically engaged with the differences between them, and how this may affect their learning experiences, though there were still challenges within the classroom as well as opportunities resulting from the wide range of cultures, ideas and behaviours present in that space. The classes were nonetheless extremely interactive, with refugee learners and host

learners generally being extremely friendly and respectful towards each other. Learners were also reported to open up about traumatic experiences in a therapeutic way.

During the selection exercise for potential students in Kiryandongo in early January 2021, five prospective students were referred for counselling with anxiety and worry due to a missing parent, trauma, divorce, minimal family support, academic distress, and career guidance. Once the programme had begun, the Kiryandongo study centre organised counselling sessions for 10 learners with most of them reporting family stress, academic stress, and trauma from what happened to them during the war. In the Kampala Learning Centre, counselling sessions were held with four learners to discuss anxieties around the course, conflicts with family members, and work-related stressors. These counselling sessions were organised around the teaching scheduled for FFA to ensure that students could receive support while continuing to attend classes and maintaining their academic goals. Due to the trust that FFA tutors built with their students, and the generally much-trusted reputation of RLP among refugee communities in Uganda, the programme provided an important conduit through which students could be open and access referrals to appropriate services and support.

The programme also referred students to services both within and outside of RLP when they required support that could not be provided through the curriculum or by FFA tutors. This became more necessary as students gradually felt more comfortable sharing substantial psychosocial issues. The counselling techniques used were trauma focused cognitive behaviour therapy, person-centred approaches, solution-focused grief therapy, and basic psychological first aid techniques. Students commented that the content for Understanding Myself and Others was appropriate and relevant, and delivered in a variety of engaging and accessible ways including through group work, role plays, lectures, group discussions and independent study.

# PROGRAMME OUTCOMES

## Timeline

The FFA programme was originally intended to run from January to August 2021. Due to the effects of the rolling lockdowns on staff capacity, course development, and the recruitment and selection processes for students, however, FFA began tutor orientation and student induction in early February 2021 and began its teaching programme later that month. Further disruption caused by Covid-19 [see 'Impacts of Covid-19' below] and election-related violence in Uganda then delayed the start of the second semester, pushing the end of the programme back to December 2021. We also recognised that students and teaching staff needed longer breaks around key public holidays and between the two intensive semesters.

In deciding this, however, there was a trade-off between being responsive to certain student's needs while avoiding a sense that the programme was overly flexible in a way that made it seem like it lacked any structure or direction.

# Impacts of Covid-19

FFA has, like every educational programme, been forced to adapt to the shifting policies and conditions that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic. The most immediate impact of the pandemic was in Spring 2020 when the planning of the programme had to switch to being done entirely online across Lebanon, Scotland and Uganda. This was obviously occurring during a period when all the team members were extremely low on capacity as they adjusted personally and professionally to the pandemic and had to make widespread changes across their organisations to administer programmes and support communities remotely. The result of this was that while the planning process was made more robust (it could happen on a weekly basis as opposed to every few months in face-to-face meetings), the start of FFA was significantly delayed.

Alongside the inevitable challenges that this presented to planning, the adjustments made in response to Covid-19 did enable much greater and more regular communication between all the project partners. Despite the technology existing to do remote training sessions and workshops before the pandemic, this approach was not a core part of FFA's proposed delivery. With the normalisation of this approach, however, we identified ways in which it would truly enhance the design and delivery of this multi-stakeholder, multi-country project. One example was in respect to how the literature review for this project was approached, which became a collaborative project across the three countries and involved an additional layer of capacity building through research methods workshops with Mastercard Foundation Scholars. This approach inevitably took longer, but it turned something that was previously very output oriented into an enriching learning process for all the partners involved. Academic researchers benefited from the knowledge and reflections of scholars with displacement experience and those scholars gained additional expertise in conducting academic literature reviews. Across the delivery of the programme, we saw more opportunities for the remote exchange of teaching, mentorship and ideas in ways that might not have been fully embraced were it not for the need to shift to online forums.

In terms of the implementation of the programme, many of the challenges FFA has faced have been the same as those experienced across the education sector more broadly, albeit further exacerbated because of the students' displacement histories and the general underfunding of services for refugees. The cancellation of face-to-face meetings and learning translated into the development of a hybrid model of teaching; for those with limited technological capacity (including students, tutors and other FFA team members), this took far more time and, for those with connectivity and electricity issues, it was obviously far harder for them to access the teaching and resources. For refugees, this was also occurring against a backdrop of other anxieties intensifying, such as how Covid-19 would spread in refugee settlements where access to healthcare is extremely limited, and worries about the health of distant family members back in countries of origin. Migrants and refugees were also being vilified throughout the early stages of Covid-19 as 'vectors' for the virus, which team members were aware could be a source of further stress for the students.

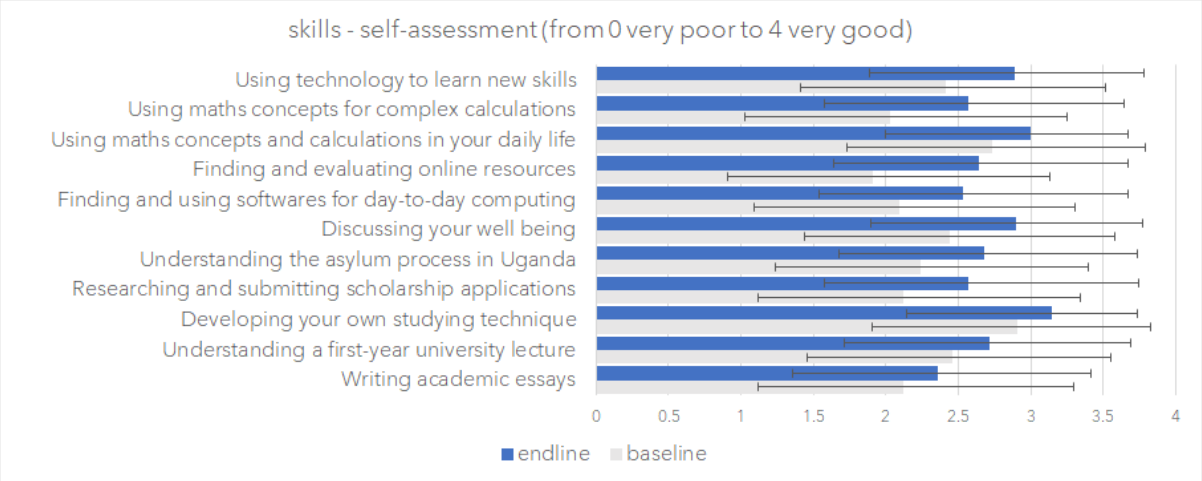
Rolling lockdowns closed the learning centres, forcing students to do more independent studying, often in home environments that were not particularly conducive for learning. Some students, for example, had no phone signal in their neighbourhoods and so had to travel simply to find reception to join classes. Some would dial in from market areas where there was phone signal, but for relatively short periods of time as they lacked the capacity to charge their phones in these often outdoor, public spaces. Staff at RLP tirelessly attempted to respond to each student's specific educational needs, such as by printing off and delivering hard copies of class materials to student's homes so that students they work this through offline. For some students, however, all the stresses related to Covid-19 made it extremely challenging to continue with their studies despite this additional support. There were also weeks when very little of the planned teaching could be delivered, meaning that FFA did not cover all the material that it had set out to do (which was further affected by the shift in date for the Makerere Mature Entry Exam). The expectations of all parts of the FFA team, from students to staff, had to be managed accordingly and adjustments had to be made, including: Kolibri self-study materials were provided for students, stipends were reworked to address mobile data costs, mobile devices were secured for those without any access to technology, and course designs were adjusted to allow for more asynchronous work to complement the synchronous activities that could be delivered.

## Main outcomes

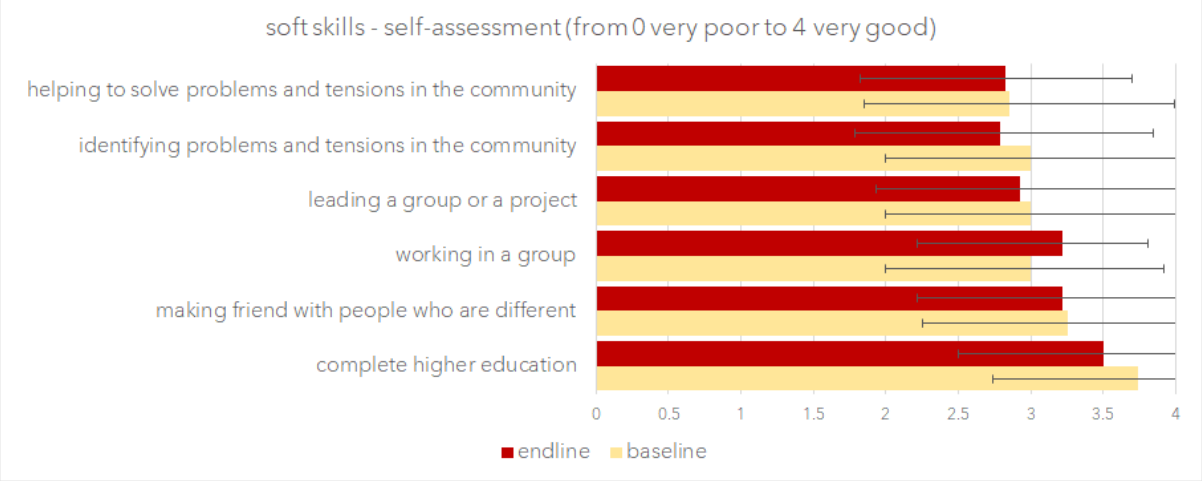
### Student trajectories and Learning Achievements

Of the 40 students, 38 completed the programme. The 2 students who did not complete the programme had the chance of joining the WUSC study and resettlement programme in Canada – FFA did, reportedly, help them make their case and get selected. At the time of writing this report, half of the cohort had had a first chance of sitting the Mature mature entry exam in 2021, before the end of the FFA programme, though none were successfully admitted in this first round. The FFA graduates are now preparing to sit the test in 2022, after completing the course and receiving further tuition on the exam in the second half of 2022 from dedicated RLP tutors.

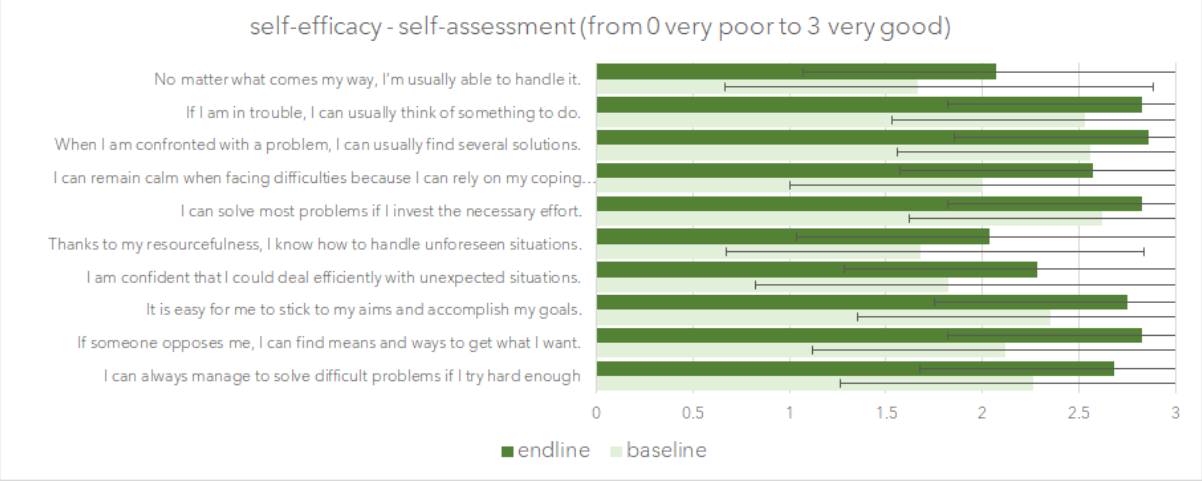
As the figure below shows, the self-assessed level of skills in FFA clearly improved over time, on average, across the cohort.




The changes are less clear in terms of some of the soft skills that were emphasised during the project. This might be due to some of these soft skills and aspirations being already developed in the EFA courses.




Finally, and importantly, FFA emphasised psycho-social skills. A set of key indicators that we used are standard "self-efficacy" statements that reflect aspirations, confidence, and mental well-being. As the figure below shows, progress on those aspects is evident and impressive.



## PROJECT LEVEL LESSONS

The key lessons that the FFA team took away from this pilot project include:

1. Facilitating Refugee Learning requires specific, contextualised and 'thick' approaches

This project made even clearer the need to adopt specific approaches to facilitating refugee learning at all stages of programme design and delivery. We consider that involving refugee learners and Mastercard Foundation Scholars throughout the process, in addition to the team's experiential knowledge from ongoing work with refugee learners and the significant knowledge gained through the parallel literature review process, was key to understanding the specificities of refugee-centred design and implementation. This helped inform the team's attempt to build a socially, politically and culturally relevant pedagogy for refugees that engaged learners holistically, attending to learners' academic, socio-cultural, political and material conditions within the two (very different) educational contexts.

It is very clear that bridging programmes like FFA must integrate and foreground psychosocial education at all stages and all levels in order to support learners' well-being and enable them to focus on learning, while also receiving counselling and developing personal strategies for overcoming trauma and grief. Such an approach is nonetheless resource intensive - to be done well, it requires time building trusting relationships - and emotionally intensive, with that emotional energy largely being provided by tutors and staff who are closest to the students and whose investment in supporting students is not always accounted for in budgets and contracts. In hindsight, FFA should have budgeted more for providing this kind of support so that the limited number of FFA tutors were not required to either stretch themselves thin or to do so much unremunerated work.

We learned that educational programmes for refugees have to function differently to courses that can assume a greater degree of similarity in educational attainment levels across the student body. Refugee learners are coming from extremely diverse educational contexts, and may have had their formal learning suspended at very different points in their learning. Some of our students, for example, had high levels of digital literacy whereas others were starting almost completely from scratch; the same could be seen across topics in the other courses too. This highlights the need to invest in skills and knowledge-based training for students at all levels to enable them to engage with the course, though adopting such a bespoke approach can be extremely challenging for tutors to both prepare for and implement in a mixed ability classroom setting.

Our initial failure to recognise this at the time of budgeting for this project (before the workshops in Lebanon and meetings with potential students in Uganda) also resulted in us vastly underestimating how much time it would take to produce content for FFA. The team had assumed that resources would be available through the University of Edinburgh, AUB and RLP that could be very simply repurposed for learners on FFA to work through. We quickly realised, however, that the content might be inappropriate or irrelevant for refugee learners, pitched at the wrong level, and potentially not very engaging or inspiring as the central part of any educational programme, as opposed to as supplementary materials in a complete learning environment. Much of the easily available content was material for students to work

through independently, whereas we knew we wanted interactive and participatory teaching to create productive and inclusive learning environments. We thus used some existing resources as templates or ideas for designing FFA-specific classes, but the class outlines and teaching structures were largely new. More generally, this highlights the limitations of funding models that require the project to be pitched before the detailed work can be done to budget for its success.

2. Ethical design has moving goal posts

When we began the FFA programme, we were clear that the team would not be able to provide the learners with scholarships for studying at University and that our engagement with the learners would largely be time-limited. Over time, however, students' expectations of the support that the programme would provide shifted and the team members' sense of responsibility towards helping students after the programme also increased. Though we engaged in ongoing efforts to explore and advocate for opportunities for refugee scholarships, we remained very aware of the difficulties that students would face in obtaining funded places. Simply being enrolled on the programme, however, with its connection to wealthy institutions in the Global North nonetheless clearly and understandably lifted the hopes of learners that if they were admitted to a University, they would be financially supported to attend.

This raises a central conundrum, however: should the programme in future only admit the number of students that could realistically be funded to pursue a University-level degree? In the process of doing the programme, some students will undoubtedly drop out, others will decide not to pursue a degree, and some will not pass the exam required to enter University. Without knowing this in advance, restricting the numbers preemptively deprives students of the other opportunities that any blended, bridging programme opens up to them. However, should a large number of students be successful in their applications to University, they would understandably be frustrated at not being able to take up the position because there was no funding available to them. No amount of expectation management would be likely to offset the disempowerment experienced by a scholar who found themselves in this position. This has all further highlighted the importance of developing a learner-centred, fully accredited bridging programme with a realistic and funded pathway to higher education in the future.

3. Research, teaching and learning are all strengthened when they are seen as indivisible

Mastercard Foundation and refugee scholars, faculty members, tutors and other staff were all involved in various dimensions of this project as researchers, teachers and learners. We sought to embrace a creative and iterative research methodology with collaboration as a central pillar that would increase the capacities of all team members to contribute to the research, while prioritising the skill-building for Mastercard Foundation and refugee Scholars. This capacity-building was ongoing as a full team, in small groups, and in one-to-one sessions between peers and scholars/faculty. The timing and expectations for Scholars' engagement was differentiated and calibrated to accommodate other circumstances in their lives including pressures related to studies, family responsibilities, work, and disruptions like the pandemic. Prioritizing the Scholars' involvement over pre-conceived deadlines did in many cases extend the timeline for project activities, but it was instrumental in sustaining Scholars' engagement

in the project. Furthermore, staff and faculty members offered their skills and experience while also embodying a stance of co-learning with the scholars, who brought their own skills and experience to the team as we collaboratively engaged in mutual efforts to deepen our understanding of our action research focus. As a result, the Scholars were engaged in all stages of the research from research design, to data collection, to data analysis; and the project has been enhanced by their unique and experiential knowledge about access to higher education for marginalised and displaced youth. The thoughtful questions, reflections, and ideas posed by the Scholar researchers from their varying personal and academic backgrounds increased the relevance and depth of the research endeavour.

4. Conceptualising the digital so prominently from the onset was potentially problematic

The programme team believed at the onset of this programme, and still believe, that the digital skills developed as a result of specific instruction on digital technologies, and more broadly whilst engaging with a blended learning curriculum, would be beneficial for these students in both their academic and professional lives. While the cohorts from the two learning centres had fairly divergent past experiences with digital technologies, early indications are that those who completed the curriculum did benefit in terms of the development of digital skills.

However, the conceptualization of the digital in the Foundations for All curriculum at the onset both as a dedicated course (Digital Skills) and as a mode of instruction and delivery (blended learning) created a series of cascading decisions as the FFA team responded to a series of evolving contexts. First, after some preliminary engagement to determine the general availability of digital technology amongst the groups from which the student cohort would be drawn from, it was determined that there would be a need to have dedicated technologies available in the two locations (Kampala and Kiryandongo). Dedicated learning centres were created and equipped with laptops, connectivity was acquired, and additional equipment was procured (printers and projectors). At the onset of the pandemic, when the learning centres became unavailable, additional resources were used to purchase mobile phones for students to continue their studies through an approximation of remote learning developed by the FFA team. Considerable amounts of time were spent attempting to use existing university technologies for work on FFA to ensure some degree of sustainability; an example of this is the aborted attempt to use the Learning Management System (LMS) at the University of Edinburgh before moving to Kolibri, a LMS more responsive to intermittent connectivity. Further, the digital skills developed as part of FFA were not part of the Mature Entry Examination, so as the students drew closer to the examination this digital work proved potentially distracting.

Overall, significant resources were dedicated to the digital aspects of the overall programme, resources that might have been better spent on additional tutors or dedicated administrative support on the ground in the two locations.

5. An emphasis on access to HE specifically drove programme activity; but with what effects?

While FFA was specifically advertised as a blended bridging programme for refugee learners hoping to enter HE, our initial aspirations for the programme did include a more general focus on transferable skills and general knowledge. It took the FFA partners a substantial amount of time to agree on the final intended outcomes of the programme. An in-person meeting over three days in Kampala was hugely beneficial to this process, although conversations about these outcomes carried across regular meetings, workshops, and through our programme WhatsApp groups.

It was decided that, for the pilot version of the programme, the intended main outcome would be admission to university, and more specifically Makerere University which already had a possible entry point we could prepare students for: the Mature Age Entry Exam. Other options included keeping as an outcome that students may (re)enter the job market after the programme, with tailored professional skills. However tempting, this proved too ambitious a goal for FFA and we decided to focus on what we knew better, and what we could reasonably provide considering our own expertise.

After the FFA team decided to support the students specifically to target the Makerere Mature Age Entry Exam, the focus of the whole programme was significantly narrowed. It is highly likely that through actively participating in a bridging programme for University, certains student decided that further education was not for them, even if they wished to continue to generally upskill themselves in digital skills, english and maths; the courses dominant focus on entering HE may nonetheless have been alienating or discouraging for those who found themselves in this situation. The last minute preparation for the MAEE was also highly stressful for all those involved, which may have done little to dispel students' concerns about the intensity and challenges of pursuing a University degree, and for those who were not sitting the exam, there was inevitably a reduction in the amount of teaching that was available and relevant to them.

## Institutional change

Turning first to the need for policy and institutional change in Uganda, Lebanon and beyond, we note that refugee education was hugely impacted by Covid-19. Even though schools and universities in Uganda and Lebanon have reopened following closures earlier in 2020, many refugee learners have still not been able to access education because their livelihoods were heavily affected. This has highlighted further the importance of an accessible, flexible and blended learning approach for refugees in resource constrained settings. For example, in Lebanon where educational institutions have adopted online learning during the pandemic, many refugees' ability to engage has been limited due to limited digital skills, lack of appropriate devices, and the high cost of internet access. High level advocacy with policymakers and practitioners is needed to ensure that higher education for refugees is provided for in national structures in Uganda and Lebanon, since policies and practice on higher education in both countries fail to ensure equitable access for refugees and neither country has fully recognized blended and online higher education programs as a strategy for addressing this. Above all, there is a need for resources to be allocated towards higher education within the current refugee responses in settings hosting refugees, and for the prioritisation of creative approaches to the attainment of higher education for refugees. We

see this clearly in Uganda and Lebanon, but also consider that policy changes to support refugee education are relevant beyond these contexts.

At every stage in the implementation of FFA we hit institutional and structural barriers. A key learning for the programme has been that programmes such as FFA require support from within institutions of higher education to be successful. Areas including accreditation and student registry, e-learning and development, IT and technology, scholarships and funding, online library access, plus all of the different teaching departments involved in delivering the courses must work together to ensure a coherent teaching programme that is recognised as providing access to, and preparing students for, higher education. In turn, this finding relates to the importance of involving universities in developing and advocating for improved policies on refugee education through access and bridging programs like FFA but also through becoming more inclusive institutions for refugee and other under-represented students throughout their student journey. All Universities can enthusiastically embrace UNHCR's 15by30 campaign (to have 15% of refugees enrolled in higher education by 2030), but this will not happen without concerted institutional investment to develop educational pipelines for refugees to gain admission into universities, and without other barriers to refugees' inclusion and success being addressed.

For various reasons, this support was not always easily accessed. The timescales over which FFA had to operate did not, for example, match the timescales over which accreditation would have been possible through the University of Edinburgh and how courses were structured and delivered to suit refugee learners in Uganda was on occasion very different to how similar initiatives would have been developed in Edinburgh. These differences in operating models, expectations and timelines translated into fewer opportunities for collaboration between FFA programme members and experienced colleagues within the UoE, as did the flexibility required to deliver the first pilot of FFA, which was relatively incompatible with the organisational structures and procedures of a large University bureaucracy. Future versions of FFA would likely have more lead-time for discussions about accreditation and course delivery, which would facilitate this collaboration. Nonetheless, if Universities are committed to supporting responsive educational programmes for marginalised groups, there needs to be further recognition of the flexibility and increased resources that are needed to effectively deliver these. The funder of FFA, Mastercard Foundation, has shown significant flexibility in extending timelines and allowing the reallocation of budgets to different lines.

Accreditation in the Ugandan context was also impeded by the FFA programme not meeting the quite rigid guidelines upheld by the Ugandan Business and Technical Examinations Board. Within UBTEB's existing structure for accrediting programmes, there was limited opportunity for recognising a blended bridging programme in the form of FFA, or knowledge of how to accommodate refugee learners without Ugandan nationality or evidence of previous educational levels within existing qualification structures. This is an area that will be targeted for change through collaborative discussions between RLP and UBTEB members.

Through supporting students to sit the Makerere MAEE, it also became clear that refugee applicants were at a disadvantage in sitting this exam, including through: admissions tests that are bias towards Ugandan nationals; the need to register for admissions exams in person

when refugees cannot travel freely; and a lack of understanding amongst University staff about barriers to refugees' entry. The refugee learners' eventual ability to register for and sit the MAEE at Makerere was contingent on a series of administrative exceptions being made, following sustained lobbying and support from RLP colleagues. Refugee applicants outside of FFA would not have similarly benefited from these efforts in 2021, and there is no evidence that these exceptions have yet translated into structural change to enable refugees' applications in the future. We have thus established a project in 2022 to work with institutions of higher education in Uganda to adapt admissions pathways to refugees' needs.

Finally, there is much evidence to suggest that Bridging Programmes benefit from being clearly nested within Universities, rather than being provided by other organisations or kept at arm's length. Arguably, FFA was being run by RLP at some distance from Makerere University and was almost entirely disconnected from the Universities of Edinburgh or AUB. Part of the push to get bridging programmes on University campuses relate to the psycho-social impacts of these programmes being run by committed Universities in their spaces. As Shaw (2010, cited in O'Rourke, 2011) outlines, University-based bridging programmes support refugees to develop the 'ontology' of the university student through affirming to them that they belong in spaces of higher education, and through helping them to build social capital and learn the unspoken cultural rules of a campus environment. These goals may best be achieved by the programmes being run by the very institutions that refugees are hoping to join.

## References

O'Rourke, D. (2011) 'Closing pathways: Refugee-background students and tertiary education', Kotuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online, 6(1-2): 26-36.