

The role of ICT in refugee empowerment: the Kiron experience in France

Since 2011, due to the “refugee crisis”, the number of displaced people throughout the world has reached its highest in modern history. Upon arrival to a new country, refugees suffer a quasi-automatic socio-economic downgrading: they are unable to access relevant information and job offers to successfully sustain themselves and be integrated in society. Education and training is a means of contributing to access better employment opportunities, cultural and economic integration, but also to prepare future resettlements. At global level, only 1% of refugees have access to higher education, due to the lack of knowledge of the local language, lack of funds, administrative documents and also the lack of capacity in universities.

Aimed at meeting this challenge, the Kiron initiative was born in Germany and then spread to France and Jordan. It not only explores potential solutions to support refugee education but also sheds light on the behaviour of various countries towards the integration of refugees. This short paper will focus on field feedbacks from the project implementation in France, which ended in December 2017.

Enlarging access to higher education for displaced persons

The Kiron model was designed to overcome the 4 main obstacles to refugee education identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): “the lack of language skills, the lack of funds, the absence of administrative and academic documents proving prior learning and experience, and the lack of capacity in universities” (DAFI report, December 2014 – www.unhcr.org/568bd4a59.html). The initiative consists of a hybrid learning programme which is accessible from anywhere to any displaced person regardless of their status, and allows for the accumulation of credit points which can be recognised by universities and traded against official ECTS (European Credits Transfer System). The end goal is to enable Kiron students to transfer to an official certified training programme through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The activities of the Kiron initiative thus encompass the design and development of the online training programmes using existing MOOCs and online resources by partners and providers, the follow-up and support of students during their online studies phase (the online and offline “Student services”), and the negotiations with universities and training centres revolving around the recognition of the Kiron credits and students’ transfers. The model was very innovative. It proposed a concrete new application of information and communication technologies ICT to help solve a large-scale issue and also contributed to addressing the issue of the status of online and distant learning and the recognition of prior learning and experience of refugees and displaced people.

A multi-actor system and the development of a structured institutional response

The initiative was intended as a response to an international challenge, but also adapted to the different specific local contexts thus proposing effective solutions at national level: the ICT-based model was a single product allowing enough flexibility to fit various contexts. The online character of the programme enabled the involvement of a large variety of stakeholders, around the common purpose of enabling refugees to access higher education: public and private funders, Ministries of Education, accreditation agencies, etc. The activities also relied on the volunteer involvement of private companies and individuals who donated both their time and resources. The Kiron model has therefore played a catalyst role for actions targeted towards the integration of refugees in the countries where it was implemented thanks to the role of intermediary played by the organisation and it received recognition and support at policy and institutional levels (official visit of Mrs Angela Merkel; winner of the UNESCO Prize for ICT).

Kiron France (KF) was created in 2016 to propose a solution to the high number of applications at universities; 12 universities signed a “transfer partnership” with KF and around 200 students were registered on the platform by the end of 2017. Since 2016, in France, there was a growing awareness on the issue, with the implication of individual universities, which grew into a more structured institutional response from September 2017. Yet, as opposed to Germany, no substantial public funding was granted to reorganise the integration of refugees into higher education.

Huge variety of motivation and profiles

One very important finding is that Kiron France students joined the programme for very different reasons, and not automatically the most obvious ones. Among the beneficiaries, the majority were interested in beginning their studies because they did not hold a previous diploma, in resuming their studies to improve or get a higher diploma, or in joining a community of students in order to make connections.

However, because of the lack of specific procedures to enable RPL, and because of the online character of the programme, Kiron also became the only possible choice, even a last resort choice for many people:

- People with diploma and work experience, but who were unable to achieve recognition of their prior experience or diploma and who sought to start over again.
- Asylum seekers who had no access to offline activities reserved for statutory refugees and just looked for a short-term occupation.
- People who were located in remote areas where very little support or activities were provided.
- People interested in offline student services such as French classes.

The need to complement the online learning model

These differences in motivation and goals led to a variety of learning challenges for the students, which added to the existing challenges specifically pertaining to distant

learning. The local team addressed them through a set of specifically designed offline services:

- Offline support was crucial and it was provided through a mentoring programme and weekly office hours.
- The team organised offline welcome sessions to support the students and introduce them to the learning platform.
- Transfer relied on the ability to prove completion of the MOOCs: close support and prior detailed explanations were thus needed to ensure that the students had all their documents in order.
- Language was an important issue as the Kiron platform and product was in English only but the universities required a high level of French to transfer. Kiron France thus substantially developed its Language school offer with regular French and English language classes (around 150 students were accompanied over 1.5 years). The model therefore requires a strong system of support and follow-up throughout the entire process – before application to the programme, during the learning phase, during the transfer phase, and after university integration, in order to ensure continuity and success.

Administrative and legal issues: main obstacles to learning

The legal status and its related day-to-day impact, remains the criteria which affects most the students' ability to learn, as a huge gap exists between the situations of statutory refugees and asylum seekers (AS): on the one hand AS have access to emergency housing and financial support but cannot register to official French classes to learn the language; on the other hand, after obtaining their status, refugees immediately lose their housing and aid, and many find themselves struggling to work as they have not been able to previously learn French. Thus, the Kiron model could not completely accommodate the material constraints of the students, on which their attendance heavily relied. In addition, the university transfer was only opened to statutory refugees as universities only accepted people with confirmed status in France. So the model could only work fully for part of the students, leaving out the AS. These results showed the limitations of the model, which was impeded by the local legal framework.

To conclude, by providing a way to access knowledge and ultimately a physical university for displaced people, the implementation of the Kiron model in France answered a concrete need for universities and refugees alike. Yet, the legal framework was an obstacle to the success of the model as it was creating difficulties in terms of language learning, ability to transfer, and stability of the learners. Despite a growing awareness of the issue and a more centralised institutional response, the current legal system remains a challenge to the full implementation of the model and allows for little possibilities for refugees to return to full-time studies.

Julia Tran Thanh, co-founder of UniR
(Universities & Refugees, formerly Kiron France)
(www.uni-r.org)