

Refugees and Online Engagement in Higher Education: A Capabilitarian Model

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Abstract

There are almost 90 million forced migrants around the world, many of whom could benefit from online higher education, and yet there is evidence that displaced people face challenges in online learning environments. This paper reports on a study in the context of a UK university's master's-level distance learning program that offers Sanctuary Scholarships to forced migrants. The study's aims were: (1) to identify practical ways in which higher education institutions can support displaced learners to engage in online learning, and (2) to add to our theoretical understanding of refugees' and asylum seekers' engagement in online degree programs. The methodology included a theoretical and an empirical component. In the theoretical analysis, the indicators from Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework were mapped onto capability lists drawn from the literature on the Capability Approach, generating a set of proposed underpinning capabilities for online engagement. The empirical analysis, which was carried out in parallel, was based on semi-structured interviews with ten online Sanctuary Scholars. Thematic analysis of the empirical data showed how the research participants had enacted behavioral, emotional, cognitive, social, and collaborative engagement and revealed some of the ways in which engagement fueled further engagement, alongside the mediating role of personal agency. When combined with the theoretical analysis, the findings enabled the creation of a capabilitarian online engagement model. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for institutional policies and practices around learning design and delivery to support online engagement among displaced learners, and potentially also among other underrepresented students.

Keywords: Capability Approach, online engagement, higher education, refugees and asylum seekers, forced migrants, Sanctuary Scholars, distance education, conceptual model

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In this paper, the terms “refugees,” “forced migrants,” and “displaced people” are used interchangeably to refer to all refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people, reflecting the ways in which they tend to be used elsewhere in the literature. This paper is part of a larger study investigating online engagement among displaced learners in higher education (HE) (Witthaus, 2022). This first section gives a brief background to the study and outlines the research aims. Section 2 introduces some of the central concepts in the literature on online engagement and explores how these concepts are addressed in the literature on displaced learners in online HE; it also introduces the Capability Approach as a social-justice-oriented conceptual framework. Section 3 describes the methodology used in the study. Section 4 presents the findings, while Section 5 provides a discussion of the findings and presents a proposed capabilitarian model for understanding online engagement. The paper concludes with implications for practice, policy and further research.

Displaced Learners in Online Higher Education

There are currently almost 90 million displaced people around the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). Article 22 of the 1951 Refugee Convention requires that a host state treats a refugee the same as its own citizens in terms of accessing educational opportunities (UNHCR, 2020). In practice, however, forced migrants face numerous barriers when attempting to exercise this right, and it is estimated that just 6% of young adults amongst displaced people are enrolled in HE, compared to the global average of 40% (UNHCR, 2023). Even where refugees do gain access, they often face significant challenges in terms of social, political and economic constraints. Forced migrants are “super-disadvantaged,” in that the different barriers they experience interrelate, compounding and exacerbating each other (Lambrechts, 2020; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). Despite the small percentage of refugees enrolled in HE, the number has grown considerably in recent years, and the UNHCR has attributed this increase to the new opportunities provided by “connected HE, where digital programs are combined with teaching and mentoring” (UNHCR, 2019, p. 39). However, literature in this area is limited (S. Reinhardt, 2018). For example, Ramsay and Baker’s (2019) meta-scoping study of the literature on refugee-background students in HE does not discuss online education, and in Streitwieser et al.’s (2019) literature review of HE interventions for refugees based in, or directed from, Europe and North America, there is no category for formal distance programs.

Providing effective online education for displaced learners can be challenging for higher education institutions (HEIs), partly because refugees are characterized by extreme heterogeneity (Baker et al., 2022; Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2018; Crea & Sparnon, 2017; F. Reinhardt et al., 2021; Unangst & Crea, 2020). Displaced learners also tend to be digitally disadvantaged: those based in refugee camps are unlikely to have access to the necessary digital infrastructure, particularly internet connectivity (Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Taftaf & Williams, 2020), and this has led to a call for more research into the role that mobile phone technology can play in enabling online learning in such circumstances (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Witthaus & Ryan, 2021). Even refugees in urban settings may be disproportionately affected by the “digital divide” (Mupenzi et al., 2020). The literature reveals many other barriers for displaced learners, such as difficulties in navigating HE, both online and offline (Cin & Doğan, 2021; Halkic & Arnold, 2019), cultural and linguistic barriers (Moser-Mercer, 2021), and social isolation (Witthaus, 2018). Distance education generally has notoriously low rates of student retention (Seery et al., 2021), and as Lee points out, “adopting online education does not naturally or automatically increase the accessibility of university education” (2017, p. 16). McClusky’s concept of

“lifeload” is salient here: as explained by Kahu, lifeload is “the sum of all the pressures a student has in their life, including university” (2013, p. 767). There is evidence to show that students prioritize lifeload over learning load (Hews et al., 2022), and as forced migrants face wide-ranging lifeload pressures, studies have unsurprisingly found that only a small percentage of refugee students complete their online courses (Halkic and Arnold, 2019; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2021).

Research Purpose and Aims

Since student retention is often viewed as being correlated with engagement (Seery et al., 2021), the purpose of this study is to shed light on how displaced learners engage in online HE, drawing on Bond et al.’s (2020) definition of student engagement:

Student engagement is the energy and effort that students employ within their learning community, observable via any number of behavioral, cognitive or affective indicators across a continuum. It is shaped by a range of structural and internal influences, including the complex interplay of relationships, learning activities and the learning environment. The more students are engaged and empowered within their learning community, the more likely they are to channel that energy back into their learning, leading to a range of short and long term outcomes, that can likewise further fuel engagement. (p. 3)

This definition includes the key dimensions of engagement that are typically discussed in the literature—behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social. It also alludes to the influence of social structures and “internal” (personal) influences, both of which are important to consider in the context of forced migrants from a social justice perspective. Finally, the definition points to the possibility of engagement “fueling” further engagement, which could have important implications for the retention of refugee students in online programs.

Considering the global context and the concept of student engagement discussed above, this study had two aims. Practically, it aimed to identify ways in which HEIs can support displaced learners in online learning. Theoretically, it aimed to generate a social justice-oriented conceptual model for online engagement in the context of displaced learners, drawing on Bond et al.’s (2020) definition of student engagement, Redmond et al.’s (2018) Online Engagement Framework, and concepts from the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2003; 2011; Sen, 1999; Walker, 2006). To address these aims, the following research questions (RQs) were explored in the context of a UK university that offers Sanctuary Scholarships to forced migrants for an online master’s program:

RQ1: What factors enable and constrain the Sanctuary Scholars’ progression through the online program?

RQ2: How do the Sanctuary Scholars’ descriptions of their online learning indicate and illustrate their online engagement?

RQ3: What capabilities underpin the Sanctuary Scholars’ enactments of online engagement?

RQ4: In what ways does engagement fuel further engagement in this context?

The study combined theoretical analysis with qualitative, ethnographic research methods and adopted an interpretivist epistemology for understanding the perceptions and experiences of individual learners.

Literature Review

As there is little overlap between the literature on online engagement and that on forced migrants learning online, this section sets the scene by drawing some links between these bodies of literature.

Online Engagement and Refugees in Online Higher Education

Redmond et al. (2018) developed an Online Engagement Framework for HE, after observing that quality guidelines for learning and teaching in HE in the literature tended to be focused entirely on campus-based education. Their framework, which was informed by a literature review, comprises the following five engagement elements: behavioral, emotional, social, collaborative, and cognitive engagement. The indicators for these elements are discussed below and are considered in relation to the literature on forced migrants learning online.

Behavioral Engagement

In Redmond et al.'s model, indicators of behavioral engagement include “developing academic skills, identifying opportunities and challenges, developing multidisciplinary skills, developing agency, upholding online learning norms, and supporting and encouraging peers” (2018, p. 190). Redmond et al. suggest that at the heart of these indicators are positive conduct and positive attitudes towards learning, suggesting an overlap with emotional engagement and highlighting some degree of interdependence between the elements. The refugee literature touches on these themes by noting that motivation to study is generally high amongst displaced learners (Mkwananzi & Mukwambo, 2019; F. Reinhardt et al., 2021), although fulfilling essential course requirements is often challenging due to lack of flexibility in time frames for assignment submissions, for example (Baker et al., 2020).

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement is seen in the online engagement literature as helping students to “manage expectations, articulate assumptions, recognize motivations, and commit to learning” (Redmond et al., 2018, p. 190). Much of the recent COVID-era literature finds that feelings of isolation can lead to stress and anxiety, negatively affecting emotional engagement (e.g., Hews et al., 2022). For displaced learners, these experiences can be magnified by bureaucratic obstacles, loneliness, and feelings of uncertainty about the future (Farrell et al. 2020; Witthaus, 2018). Furthermore, previous traumatic life experiences may be exacerbated by racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice within the HE system (Maringe et al., 2017; Molla, 2019). Importantly, however, HE has also been found to contribute to displaced students' emotional well-being, with university acting as a safe and hospitable space for refugees (Cin & Doğan, 2018; Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018; Mkwananzi, 2019). These examples highlight the overlap between emotional and social engagement.

Social and Collaborative Engagement

Redmond et al. (2018) describe social engagement in terms of “building community; creating a sense of belonging; developing relationships; establishing trust” (p. 191), and collaborative engagement as “learning with peers; relating to faculty members; connecting to institutional opportunities; developing professional networks” (p. 194). I have combined these elements into a single dimension because these indicators tend to be discussed together in distance education literature, often under the umbrella of “social presence” (e.g., Garrison et al., 2000). Displaced learners value having opportunities to communicate with other learners online,

although it has been noted that some feel “nervous, exposed and ... disinclined to post on the discussion forums” (Farrell & Brunton, 2020, p. 15), and many refugee students express a strong desire to connect with other students in their local area in person rather than online (Halkic & Arnold, 2019).

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement involves “thinking critically, activating metacognition, integrating ideas, justifying decisions, developing deep discipline understandings, and distributing expertise” (Redmond et al., 2018, p. 192). Since these activities are so dependent on language, the literature on forced migrants in online HE focuses substantially on the need to overcome the linguistic and associated cultural barriers that inhibit or prevent engagement with course content (e.g., Farrell et al., 2020; Streitwieser et al., 2019; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018).

Online Engagement, Teaching Presence, and “Care”

A common theme in the online engagement literature is “teaching presence” (Garrison et al., 2000), which is the students’ experience of receiving teaching online, whether emanating from their teacher, the course materials, or other students. There is growing evidence from the recent literature that student perceptions of teaching presence are strongly associated with enactments of care (e.g., Burke et al., 2021; Gourlay et al., 2021; Hews et al., 2022; Stone & O’Shea, 2019). The importance of care at the center of online pedagogy has also been recognized in the context of refugees (e.g., Baker et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2022).

The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach is a conceptual framework for evaluating social justice by focusing on the opportunities individuals have to experience well-being and the ways in which social arrangements and policies influence people’s well-being (Robeyns, 2017). The core principle is that the well-being of all humans can best be achieved by considering people’s “capabilities” and “functionings.” Capabilities are the freedom to do and be what one has reason to value doing and being, while functionings are people’s achievement of these “beings” and “doings” (Sen, 1999). Sen argues that capabilities denote freedoms that are genuinely attainable if the person chooses to pursue them, unlike rights, which a person may not always be free to exercise. Nussbaum (2003, 2011) argues that a list of core capabilities, or “fundamental entitlements,” is needed to embed basic human rights in social welfare policies in democratic societies. Her list contained ten points, including such fundamental freedoms as life, bodily health, and control over one’s environment. In 2006, Walker produced an “ideal theoretical” list of “higher education capabilities for rationality and freedom” (p. 110), drawing on Nussbaum’s core capabilities. Walker’s list includes capabilities not only in the sense of freedoms or opportunities, but also in the sense of “skills and capacities that can be fostered” (2006, p. 128). Empirical research in South Africa has shown that certain “basic capabilities,” such as the capabilities for shelter, food, and financial resources for survival, need to be in place before individuals can even aspire toward HE (Mkwanzani, 2019, p. 187). Sen (1999) referred to such survival-level capabilities as “elementary” (p. 36). In this regard, Nussbaum’s core capabilities for life, health, bodily integrity, and control over one’s environment could be considered elementary, and may be particularly pertinent in the context of displaced learners, whose lives are often characterized by precarity.

Another central concept in the Capability Approach is that of “conversion factors,” which are the factors that enable individuals to “convert” resources into capabilities, or that prevent them from doing so. A typical research question addressed by capability scholars in HE is: “Given the structural constraints [...], how do students convert available pedagogical and institutional arrangements and resources into participation?” (Calitz, 2019, p. 15). Positive and negative conversion factors can be thought of in terms of enablers and constraints respectively. In summary, there is a rich literature on the application of the Capability Approach to HE contexts, which, because it focuses on enhancing the agency and well-being of students from diverse groups and understanding the need for equitable policies and practices, could add new insights to our understanding of refugees’ engagement in online HE.

Method

Research Setting and Sample

The setting for this study was an online master’s program run by the Department of History, Politics and International Relations (HyPIR) at the University of Leicester, which has been offering Sanctuary Scholarships for distance learning since 2018. This was the first offer of online Sanctuary Scholarships in the UK. My research participants were identified through a convenience sampling process: ten of the Sanctuary Scholars volunteered to join the study. Demographic information is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

ID (pseudo-nyms)	Gender identification	Age on 10/30/21	Location when interviewed	Program start date	Program status, 10/30/22
Zain	M	34	Germany	March 2019	Graduated with MA (July ‘21)
Maryam	F	51	UK	March 2019	Graduated with MA (July ‘21)
Mohsin	M	42	UK	Sept. 2018	Graduated with MA (July ‘21)
Nadia	F	26	UK	March 2020	Graduated with MA (July ‘22)
Kareem	M	31	UK	Sept. 2019	Graduated with MA (July ‘22)
Sami	M	36	Malaysia	March 2019	Graduated with PG Cert (Dec ‘21)
Theresa	F	40	USA	March 2020	Withdrawn during first module
Sol	M	32	Netherlands	March 2019	Withdrawn; reapplied.
Lili	F	45	Australia	March 2019	Midway
Julian	M	36	Malawi	Sept. 2018	Midway

Empirical Data Gathering and Analysis

I carried out two semi-structured interviews with each participant between July 2019 and October 2021. The interview prompts focused on the Sanctuary Scholars’ motivation for doing the program, their prior experience of online study (if any) and previous HE, important things they had learned in the course, highlights and challenges, and their sources of support. I coded the interview transcripts in two stages, using a flexible deductive approach. First, I looked for examples in my data of the indicators of online engagement, with reference to Redmond et al.’s (2018) framework. Next, I examined my data for examples of the capabilities in Nussbaum’s (2003; 2011) and Walker’s (2006) capability lists. I then reviewed my coding for patterns and cross-checked my findings against the theoretical model I was developing.

Theoretical Analysis

The theoretical analysis, which was done in parallel with the empirical research, involved an exploratory mapping exercise, in which the indicators from Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework were mapped onto Nussbaum's (2003; 2011) and Walker's (2006) capability lists. I looked for relationships between the capabilities and the engagement indicators, based on the understanding that any form of engagement must represent a "functioning" (as acts of engagement are, in Sen's terms, "doings"), and therefore must be underpinned by associated capabilities. Based on the theoretical and empirical analyses, I then developed an integrated capability-based online learning engagement model, showing the patterns that I had found.

Ethics and Open Science

Ethical approval was obtained from both the University of Leicester and my PhD supervising institution, Lancaster University. I gained informed consent from all research participants. As forced migrants may be considered vulnerable participants, I followed guidelines for conducting research in contexts of forced migration (Clark-Kazak, 2017), for example, by avoiding asking questions about traumatic experiences. I also offered "study buddy" support to all the Sanctuary Scholars to provide reciprocal benefits to the community. This mainly involved giving linguistic feedback on draft assignments. Five of the participants accepted this offer. To raise awareness within wider society of the opportunities provided by online HE for displaced people and enable others to build on my work, I used an "open science" approach (Witthaus, 2022).

Results

RQ1: What Factors Enable and Constrain the Sanctuary Scholars' Progression through the Online Program?

This section summarizes four of the Sanctuary Scholars' journeys through the HyPIR MA, giving examples of the conversion factors associated with their different outcomes.

Zain—Graduated with the HyPIR MA

Zain is one of five Sanctuary Scholars who have graduated with the HyPIR MA. An asylum seeker in Germany, he was learning German while working full-time, which left him little time for studying. Constraints for Zain included difficulty in navigating the virtual learning environment (VLE) and the deep emotional pain he suffered at being separated from his family. The most severe challenge, however, was his experience of being homeless for three months during winter, along with difficulties in navigating the bureaucratic asylum system in Germany, both of which had a serious impact on his well-being and his studies. Nevertheless, he continued studying by accessing free Wi-Fi from a train station and successfully completed his online MA. Enablers for Zain included his previous experience of a university bridging program, the fact that he was able to use the time on his daily commute for reading, his enjoyment of learning, and his perseverance. His mantra was: "I survived, and I did not give up." Zain's story illustrates the complex interplay between personal agency and structural factors that was typical of the research participants' journeys through the program.

Sami—Graduated with Postgraduate Certificate

Sami exited the program halfway and achieved a Postgraduate Certificate (PG Cert). Sami grew up in an East African country, where his childhood was deeply affected by a bloody

civil war and was forced to flee his home country in 2002. He is now part of a community of forced migrants in Malaysia living in financially precarious circumstances. He works long hours at a school for refugee children that he co-founded. Sami was deeply interested in the subject of human rights and highly motivated to learn, and he had access to Wi-Fi; however, he was challenged by the linguistic demands of the program. Unfortunately, he did not have the required level of academic English to be admitted to the dissertation module and had to leave the program early, echoing the experiences of thousands of other refugees for whom language barriers are a major constraint.

Theresa—Forced to Withdraw

Theresa was not able to complete her first module and was forced to withdraw, despite intense engagement in the first three months. Coming from a socially conservative East African country and identifying as LGBTQI, she had experienced persecution and torture that left her physically disabled and emotionally scarred. Theresa applied for a Sanctuary Scholarship because she wants to become “a voice for the voiceless.” This motivation was an important enabler for Theresa, but during her first module, she was resettled to North America, which, although enabling her to finally feel “safe at home,” disrupted her study routine. She also suffered two bereavements and she had an accident that further reduced her mobility. During this time, Theresa lost her password for her university account. Despite several attempts to liaise with the university’s technical support staff, she was unable to restore this access. Eventually, her time allowed by the university rules for enrollment ran out, and she had to be unenrolled, echoing Baker et al.’s (2020) analysis of the dysfunctional timescapes experienced by displaced learners.

Julian—Midway

Julian is currently midway through the program. He has taken several rounds of voluntary suspension from his studies under mitigating circumstances. Julian’s story illustrates the sense of volatility that was typical for most of the research participants. Born in central Africa, he worked for an organization that promoted human rights in a war-torn region of the country; eventually, the dangers of this work forced him to become a refugee himself. He has been living in a refugee camp in Malawi for over a decade. The key enablers for Julian have been his commitment to learning, the good relationships he has built with the staff on the program, and his ability to apply his new skills and knowledge in conflict resolution in the refugee camp. A significant constraint is his lack of access to the essential digital infrastructure he needs: he has no electricity or Wi-Fi at home and so he uses the local community center to study. Furthermore, precarious circumstances in the refugee camp have led him to take up farming, which has reduced the time available for his studies.

All the above stories reflect the tension between the negative and positive conversion factors that were present for each of the Sanctuary Scholars. In summary, the constraints included trauma and associated mental health challenges, homelessness, lack of certainty about the future, time pressures and anxiety caused by survival needs, lack of digital infrastructure and connectivity, and lack of opportunity to develop the required academic English skills. The enablers included personal motivation and perseverance, good relationships with program staff, prior experience of a university bridging program, strong time management skills, and finding opportunities to apply new knowledge in daily life.

RQ2: How do the Sanctuary Scholars' descriptions of their online learning indicate and illustrate their online engagement?

This section considers the data in light of the engagement elements and indicators in Redmond et al.'s (2018) framework.

Behavioral Engagement

Redmond et al. (2018, p. 193) use Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris's definition of behavioral engagement, "doing the work and following the rules." I found many examples in my data of all the illustrative indicators for behavioral engagement listed in a previous section. One additional behavioral indicator that I identified in my data was *applying knowledge in real life*. Julian shared this example:

What I enjoyed a lot on the course, Art of Negotiation, was how you learn to be a negotiator... In the [refugee] camp, there is conflict every day all the time, so ... I may also assist some people... For example, a couple were fighting in their homes. They came to me, so that I may hear from them and see how I can resolve their conflict. Two, whenever there are churches that are fighting, or members of one church who are fighting, they also ask me to go there. Whenever they ask for meetings with the leaders, even myself, I'm also invited to see how we can help the members of that church.

Another prevalent indicator of behavioral engagement that I identified was that of *managing studies around lifeload*. This often involved managing time and scarce resources in contexts of precarity or extreme fragility. Mohsin said:

I came to the UK in late 2015. My new life wasn't easy at all - mainly because my wife was [unwell with PTSD]... We have three kids and it's not easy for me. I commute every day, and it's really hectic. When I finish my work, I have to make sure that my wife and the kids are OK... For me also, it's very stressful.

Lili commented that "self-scheduling" was her greatest challenge:

Because I'm very busy and my other commitments also [involve being] in front of a laptop and reading something, writing something, and it was really hard for me to make a balance between my commitments and my studies. [...] I myself could not write anything in [the discussion forum] last module because it wasn't a very easy time for me. I can just go to the study or reading mindset and find the sources that are more attractive for me or those where I think I'm going to find out some of my questions answered.

In these cases, the Sanctuary Scholars found even the most essential behavioral requirements of their programs challenging to meet at times. Julian's limited access to Wi-Fi and electricity restricted the time he could spend studying online, but through applying his knowledge in real life, he was able to deepen his learning. Mohsin and Lili talked about how they stayed on track with their studies by sometimes doing the bare minimum, in the knowledge that, without behavioral engagement, no other engagement would be possible.

Emotional Engagement

Redmond et al. (2018) characterize emotional engagement in terms of managing expectations, articulating assumptions, recognizing motivations, and committing to learning. An example of *committing to learning* comes from Maryam:

I started to write my first assignment on the paradox of political violence.... I had to write a critical review about this article [which had] a lot of academic terms and political terms... Even sometimes I asked some English friends, what does this word mean? And they said to

me, oh, this is quite difficult—you need to have a political dictionary... [My tutor] said to me, this is a difficult article, leave it and choose another easier one. I said to her no, I don't want to give up, because I spent a lot of time translating and reading and highlighting some points... I managed in the end to write the assignment. And [my tutor] was surprised. She said, you demonstrated some critical points, and [added] some new comments... When she said this to me, I felt more confident.

Maryam shared this anecdote in the context of a discussion about her struggles with mental health as a result of her prior trauma, which was compounded by having spent many years as an asylum seeker in a state of uncertainty about her future. She often described her learning in emotional terms and commented that reading and writing provided her with an enjoyable distraction from the stresses of her daily life. This resonated with a comment by Sol, who said that “learning can be healing.”

Social and Collaborative Engagement

An example of social and collaborative engagement from Nadia illustrates the presence of the following cluster of indicators: *building community, creating a sense of belonging, developing relationships, establishing trust, and learning with peers.*

You ask a question, your lecturer or other students get their point forward, and then you have to go back and reply back. It's all in the duration of a week [...] It's interesting, because in the online platform you get the opportunity to take more information or give more information, whereas in the classroom environment the contribution was minimal from certain people. ... Here [online] you get different viewpoints, and you can learn, you can go back to it anytime you want. It helped me a lot when I was writing my assignment.

Social and collaborative engagement was not always described in such positive terms by the Sanctuary Scholars, several of whom found the online format frustrating and longed for more personal interaction with their peers and tutors. Nevertheless, over time, most began to appreciate the value of the discussion forum.

Cognitive Engagement

Several of the Sanctuary Scholars commented on the development of their *critical thinking skills*, a key indicator of cognitive engagement. Kareem said:

I think it's a great learning experience for me, which is why it will definitely make me a better security professional. I'm improving already and I can see this myself; everyone around me can see this because I think in academia the way you debate, the way you argue, the way you present the facts, it really all becomes part of your DNA. ... You don't actually make a claim without actually presenting why you believe this is the case.

This example was typical of several of the participants, who felt they had been stretched to reflect on and recognize their own biases and had learned to argue in a more evidence-based way, pointing to the transformational role that a university education can play in students' lives through engagement with knowledge and ideas (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015).

RQ3: What Capabilities Underpin the Scholars' Enactment of Online Engagement?

RQ3 is based on the premise that each observable enactment of an engagement indicator represents a functioning, and therefore must be underpinned by associated capabilities.

Conversely, where these indicators are exemplified in a negative or frustrated sense, this must point to the lack of the necessary capability (opportunity, freedom, or skills) required for that

dimension of engagement. To the extent that RQ3 could be answered theoretically, I conducted an exploratory exercise mapping the indicators associated with the four dimensions of online engagement onto Nussbaum's (2003; 2011) list of fundamental entitlements and Walker's (2006) HE-focused capabilities list. This exercise led to the identification of four capabilities that are likely to underpin each engagement dimension, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The Engagement Dimensions and Proposed Underpinning Capabilities

Engagement dimension (functionings)	Proposed underlying capability	Capability definition
Behavioral engagement	Educational resilience	Able to navigate study, work and life, to negotiate risk and to persevere academically; able to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive to constraints (adapted from Walker, 2006).
Emotional engagement	Emotional health	Able to experience emotions that contribute positively to learning; not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning (adapted from Nussbaum, 2003; Walker, 2006).
Social and collaborative engagement	Affiliation and recognition	Able to be treated with dignity and to enter into relationships of mutual respect, recognition and trust; able to interact with others to learn new knowledge and solve problems (adapted from Nussbaum, 2003; Walker, 2006).
Cognitive engagement	Knowledge and imagination	Able to use imagination and thought to experience and produce academic and professional works of value to oneself and others; able to be an active inquirer without fear of reprisal or censorship (adapted from Nussbaum, 2003; Walker, 2006).

Table 2 was developed theoretically and then applied to the analysis of the empirical data. According to this analysis, underpinning Julian's, Mohsin's and Lili's accounts of behavioral engagement was the capability for educational resilience; Maryam's emotional engagement was premised on the capability for emotional health; Nadia's social and collaborative engagement relied on the capability for affiliation and recognition; and Kareem's cognitive engagement was underpinned by the capability for knowledge and imagination.

Similarly, there were examples where the absence of an engagement functioning could potentially be explained by the lack of the relevant underpinning capability; for example, Theresa's inability to maintain behavioral engagement was linked to her constrained capability for educational resilience—noting that resilience is not used in the sense of individual determination or “grit” here—rather it is a “socially located response to adverse conditions, combined with a capabilities informed analysis of factors that enable and constrain educational resilience” (Wilson-Strydom, 2017, p. 387). The theoretical relationships between capabilities

and functionings proposed in Table 2 provided reasonable explanations for both the presence and the absence of engagement indicators throughout the data.

RQ4: In What Ways does Engagement Fuel Further Engagement in this Context?

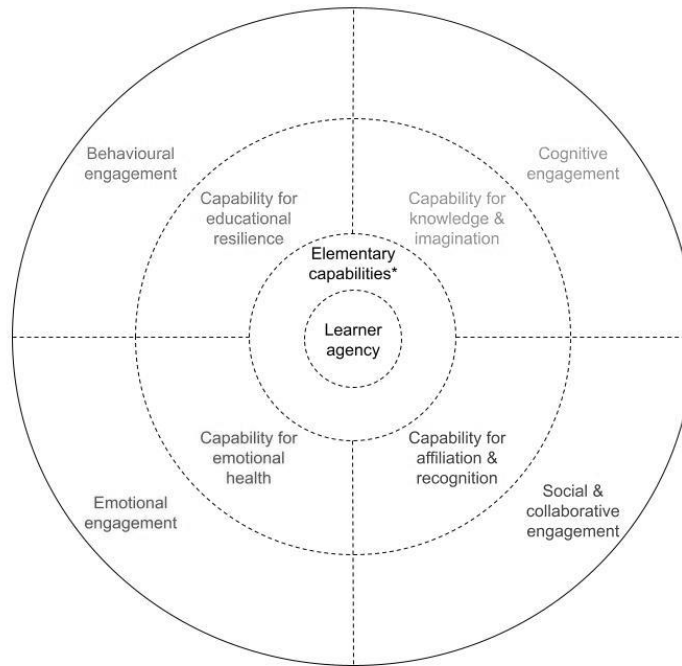
To answer RQ4, I briefly review four of the above vignettes. In Julian's story, behavioral engagement can be seen to fuel other kinds of engagement: by applying his new knowledge to daily life in the camp, he increased his personal status in the community and his emotional well-being; he was also more predisposed to engage cognitively with his course content, and he engaged socially with his local community while putting his learning into practice. Maryam's account of how she persisted with her assignment illustrates how emotional engagement can fuel cognitive engagement (e.g., translating and highlighting the text), behavioral engagement (completing the assignment), and social and collaborative engagement (talking to friends and her tutor about her learning). Nadia's story illustrates how social and collaborative engagement can fuel other kinds of engagement: as a result of participating in the discussion forum, she felt more emotionally engaged; she continued engaging behaviorally by returning to the forum; and her cognitive engagement was enhanced as she discussed the course content with peers and tutors. Kareem's example shows how cognitive engagement can fuel other kinds of engagement: he felt more emotionally engaged by seeing his critical thinking skills develop; there was some social and collaborative engagement through debate with peers and discussion with tutors; and he continued to engage behaviorally with his learning in the online learning environment and beyond.

Discussion

Discussion and Presentation of a Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model

Above, I have laid the foundation to argue that the Capability Approach and the Online Engagement Framework can together provide a powerful way of understanding the lived experiences of displaced learners in online HE. In this section, I present the capabilitarian online engagement model derived from the combined empirical and theoretical analysis (see Figure 1). The model is described below, starting from the outer ring.

Figure 1
Capabiltarian Online Engagement Model



* Elementary capabilities: life, health, bodily integrity, control over one's environment

The Functions of Engagement

The outer ring contains the four engagement dimensions: behavioral, emotional, social and collaborative, and cognitive engagement, which can be observed when students enact the respective indicators. In capability terms, these are functionings. As noted, there is some overlap between the different engagement dimensions here; this is represented by the dotted lines between the dimensions.

The Capabilities for Engagement

The next ring contains the four capabilities that, based on the theoretical analysis and the findings discussed above, are required to make the four dimensions of engagement possible: educational resilience for behavioral engagement; knowledge and imagination for cognitive engagement; recognition and affiliation for social and collaborative engagement; and emotional health for emotional engagement. Dotted lines show the permeability between the four online engagement capabilities, and between the online engagement capabilities and their associated functionings, implying firstly, that all the capabilities can fuel their associated engagement functionings, and secondly, that enactment of any one engagement type can fuel the capabilities for the other engagement dimensions.

The Elementary Capabilities

In the next concentric circle are the elementary, survival-level capabilities discussed earlier: the capabilities for life, health, bodily integrity, and control over one's environment. My empirical data has confirmed that all these capabilities need to be sufficiently in place at all times for the engagement-related capabilities to be present, although the dotted line between learner agency and elementary capabilities symbolizes the powerful role that personal agency can play in cases where the elementary capabilities are threatened (for example in the case of Zain, who continued his studies using public Wi-Fi at a train station while he was homeless and had little control over his environment).

Learner Agency

While “developing agency” is one of the indicators for behavioral engagement in Redmond et al.'s (2018) framework, I would suggest that the concept of agency plays a more fundamental role in learning. Sen defines an agent as “someone who acts and brings about change and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives” (1999, p. 19). While Nussbaum does not explicitly include agency in her theory, her capability for “practical reason” (“being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life” [Nussbaum, 2003, p. 41]) can be seen to reflect agency achievement (Robeyns, 2017). Enactments of agency were pervasive throughout my data, for example, in Julian's ongoing engagement despite having limited access to the internet and managing his studies around learning to farm for survival, and Maryam's determination to complete a difficult assignment. Some Sanctuary Scholars completed a module while facing enormous barriers, in a sense using their agency to “override” the negative conversion factors they faced. (Hypothetically, they could also have used their agency to *not* pursue their online degree even if no significant barriers were in place, although no-one in my study did so.) I have therefore placed learner agency at the heart of the model.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Practically, the Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model provides a heuristic to guide academics in the design and delivery of online education, by showing that engagement along all four dimensions is underpinned by specific capabilities that incorporate both skills and capacities that can be fostered, and social freedoms that are afforded (or not) by social structures. Thus, course teams could design social and collaborative tasks that promote the values associated with the capability for *recognition and affiliation* by considering questions such as “How can our course environment and activities create a culture of recognition and affiliation?” with reference to the definition of affiliation and recognition in Table 2. Such a conversation would lead to a greater emphasis on equity in the learning activities than starting from the more commonly used prompt, “How can we encourage social and collaborative engagement in the course?” Similarly, when designing learning activities aimed at developing critical thinking for cognitive engagement, course teams could consider how the overall course environment and tone of communication supports the capability for *knowledge and imagination*. A question to be considered here would be: “To what extent are students able to share their emerging understanding without fear of censorship (including self-censorship) or reprisal (from both peers and teachers)?” This would be especially important in the social sciences, where students from diverse backgrounds might bring knowledge or beliefs that are at odds with the knowledge being discussed in the course.

The model could also inform institutional policies and strategies. For example, course delivery could be enhanced by the provision of “warm” support (Baker et al., 2018) in the form of mentors or study-buddies acting as socio-cultural brokers for refugee students, which would support displaced learners’ capability for *emotional health*. Policies for flexible pathways through HE, for example via stackable micro-credentials, could help to mitigate constraints relating to refugee students’ elementary capabilities and would support the capability for *educational resilience*, thereby strengthening behavioral engagement. Furthermore, since each engagement dimension can fuel the capability for engagement in all the others, it is clear that any institutional effort aimed at providing students with opportunities for developing any one of the capabilities that underpin the online engagement dimensions could have a beneficial impact on students’ engagement overall.

Limitations

The chief limitation of the study was the small scale of the empirical component, which involved only ten students in one master’s program. However, in qualitative research, it is generally recognized that readers will be able to determine the extent to which the findings are transferable to other given contexts, given sufficient descriptive information about the research setting, the participants, and the methodology (Strunk & Locke, 2019); for this reason, this study aimed to provide “thick” descriptive information regarding these elements. The findings from this study may have broader potential significance. Because the Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model is based on established frameworks (Redmond et al.’s (2018) Online Engagement Framework and tools from the Capability Approach) it is likely to have explanatory power in other contexts beyond the case study context. Also, since forced migrants share many characteristics with the general student population, the model may be relevant to other contexts of online HE; for example although forced migrants are characterized by extreme diversity, heterogeneity is also a characteristic of the demographics of online learners in the general student population (Lee, 2017), and so it is reasonable to assume that efforts towards more inclusive practice aimed at forced migrants will also be beneficial to a wider cohort.

Conclusion

This study set out to achieve a theoretical and a practical aim, both of which I suggest are served by the capabilitarian online engagement model in Figure 1. From a theoretical perspective, the integration of Redmond et al.’s (2018) Online Engagement Framework with the Capability Approach furthers our understanding of online engagement by identifying the capabilities underpinning engagement, which reflect not only students’ individual skills and dispositions but also social structures that may be enabling for some students and constraining for others. The model highlights the interrelationships between personal agency, capabilities, and the functionings of engagement across four dimensions, and shows how engagement in one dimension can fuel the capability for engagement in the other dimensions. Identifying the characteristics of a pedagogy of care in the context of displaced learners and other underrepresented groups in online HE is an important area for future research, since such a pedagogy could help to foster the capabilities for all the engagement dimensions.

I hope that this study has shed light on online engagement in the context of displaced learners and potentially other underrepresented groups in HE. There is work to be done to test

the model in other settings and to further develop it for the purposes of guiding practice and policy, and I warmly invite others to build upon this research.

Declarations

The author declares no conflicts of interest associated with this article.

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