From Syria to South Sudan to Myanmar and beyond, the plight of refugees continues to demand attention as one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time. The UN estimates that 68.5 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide. Among them are 25.4 million refugees, more than 50% of whom are under 18. The resulting educational needs are staggering: only 23% of refugees have access to secondary education, and only 1% go on to higher education.

This is the reality, a colleague and I became aware of in 2016, while we were working for UWC (United World Colleges) on the organisation’s refugee scholarship initiative. For the lucky few who gain scholarships, this is a transformational experience, but Mia and I couldn’t help but think about the many who did not get a place. Refugees, like some of the families of international school students, live their lives across countries, are mobile and many do not know where they will live in the future. With this in mind, we started thinking about how the international education community might play a role in finding a solution to the refugee education crisis.

A GLOBAL HIGH SCHOOL FOR REFUGEES

The idea for Sky School was born: the development of an international and concept-based curriculum, delivered through a blended learning model in partnership with local organisations working with refugees to ensure contextualisation and flexibility.

Our ambition is to become a ‘global high school for refugees’, enabling refugee youth aged between 16 and 25 to re-access learning through studying for individual modules. Completing a total of ten modules will form a 1,000-hour high school diploma that will give access to higher education and training opportunities. All learning is designed to build agency, and competencies such as the ability to create new value, take responsibility and manage complexity.

GETTING STARTED

The first big step on this journey was to pilot our approach. In late 2017, we ran a course on social entrepreneurship in Amman, Athens and in Kakuma Camp in Kenya with a total of 50 students. Each week, students completed six hours of in-person study with the support of a facilitator in a local learning centre, and four hours online, using our online platform, Aula Education. Feedback from students was very positive. They told us they had gained valuable knowledge and skills that could be used immediately, and that before, where they saw problems, they now saw opportunities.

With the encouraging results from the pilot course, we are now developing the ten modules which will form the initial Sky School Diploma Programme. To make this happen, we are conducting so-called ‘curriculum hackathons’ to which we invite volunteer educators and refugee learners to participate. Over a weekend, the group collectively works through a process to rapidly develop a module. Our first hackathons have been a big success as this short video shows. They are hosted by international schools and have proved to be an innovative professional development experience. More hackathons are scheduled.

The collective support and skills of international school educators will help us take big steps forward. If you or your staff wish to participate in a curriculum hackathon, if you can offer your school as a hackathon venue, or if you would like Sky School to become your school’s charity partner, we’d love to hear from you.

THE AUTHOR

Polly Akhurst and Mia Eskelund Pedersen are co-founders and co-executive directors of Sky School. They are alumni of UWC (United World Colleges). You can reach Polly on Twitter and on LinkedIn.

Information about Sky School can be found at http://skyschool.world/ Read more: The collaboration with UWCSEA and Sky School.