
SPECIAL SECTION: EQUIPPING STUDENT LEADERS AS PARTNERS FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Equipping student leaders as partners for sustainable humanitarian action

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On March 30–April 1, 2023, we (Oshish Ungras and Gavin Brockett, the editors of this iteration of Voices from the Field) invited higher education students, staff, and NGO representatives to join us for a conference on how we can create partnerships to address today’s most complex humanitarian problems. Hosted at Wilfrid Laurier University in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency, the conference was itself organized through student-staff-faculty partnerships. This community of partnerships, called the International Students Overcoming War (ISOW) Scholarship Initiative, sees students, in partnership with university staff, faculty, and international NGOs, address the barriers to higher education for refugee, internally-displaced, and other conflict-affected youth through the provision of scholarships and holistic support.

As a concept, partnership was new to almost all delegates in attendance, but immediately it resonated with the enthusiastic participants once the connection was drawn between humanitarian emergencies, partnership, and the resulting potential to create initiatives all around the globe. As the conference organizers, we reached out in the following months to invite highly engaged delegates spanning various roles (student, faculty, staff), institutions (universities, UN Refugee Agency, NGOs), and countries of the world to submit to our collection of Voices from the Field. We received responses from 18 delegates across nine countries, including students who are actively engaged in partnership projects, recent graduates, NGO staff working to widen access to higher education in their communities, and staff or faculty at higher education institutions that aspire to invest in student-faculty/staff partnership programs.

We asked slightly different questions depending on role to help contributors reflect on partnership in their context. We list the questions here with some contextualizing, then we group contributors’ responses under each question:

1. What did you gain from contributing to the conference? In response to this question, we heard just how valuable students found the opportunity to contribute to shaping the conference before and during the proceedings.
2. How will you advocate for students-as-partners work to be incorporated into your school's leadership model? In response to this question, we heard from recent graduates who work to support student access to higher education.
3. How did the conference inspire you to introduce students-as-partners work at your home institution? In response to this question, individuals who have experience working within the higher education system brought their knowledge of their institutions and were encouraged by the student-faculty/staff partnership model to think creatively.
4. What potential do you see in the students-as-partners leadership model as a result of engaging in the conference? In response to this question, we share voices from the individuals working in the international NGO field who interacted with student-faculty/staff partnerships in ways that were unprecedented and yet invaluable to the work they envision in the coming years.

While the length of contributions to Voices from the Field is typically a maximum of 150 words per contributor, we deviated from that limit in this special case because we wanted to understand the impact of such a conference on the delegates after the initial enthusiasm and energy of the very intense few days had settled. As the conference called for institutions to partner with students in leading sustainable development and humanitarian projects, we wanted to understand how different stakeholders reflected on this topic as they returned to their roles. By including the voices of those with different positionalities and perspectives, we highlight the importance of bringing together multi-level stakeholders to broaden partnership for humanitarian action.

WHAT DID YOU GAIN FROM CONTRIBUTING TO THE CONFERENCE?

I had the privilege of participating as a facilitator at the students as partners conference. Being part of the leadership team of the conference was a rewarding experience that allowed me to contribute to the success of the conference.

As a facilitator, I guided meaningful discussions and encouraged a productive exchange of experiences and ideas among the participants. Firstly, I was able to engage with diverse participants, including student representatives from different countries (i.e., Denmark, USA, Canada) and a UNHCR representative. We discussed the education systems in the countries the participants were from, the impacts of humanitarian work, and how humanitarian work can be started at colleges and universities. It was inspiring to witness their exchange of ideas and intelligence as I learned about participants' perspectives on students' humanitarian work, backgrounds, and education systems.

Secondly, I learned to improve my leadership and communication skills by active listening and the ability to guide conversations respectfully to create a friendly environment. I also had the chance to network with them. All in all, I gained exposure to diverse perspectives and communications skills and established connections with professionals in the field. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in such a remarkable event.

—Nan Nway Nway San, 2nd-year student at Wilfrid Laurier University and ISOW scholar from Myanmar, Canada, nwaysan3@gmail.com

I was incredibly privileged to not only participate but also facilitate discussions at the ISOW-UNHCR conference in April of 2023. It had an outstanding group of international students, NGO leaders, and educators. Their discussions about the importance of global education, gender equality, and supporting refugees as international students was truly inspiring. I'm appreciative of the opportunity I had to be in the same room as these discussions about barriers faced by students and executive leaders in their fight for tertiary education. In addition to some great insight and conversation, I was also able to make some great relationships that I'm hopeful will last a lifetime.

To Dr. Brockett, Oshish Ungras, the entire ISOW team, students, and especially the outstanding professor of GS340T, Bina Mehta, you did an outstanding job and thank you. I'm confident that these discussions had an impact, and the relationships made, and conversations started, have an opportunity to change lives.

—Matthew Carr, 4th-year student at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada, carr3510@mylaurier.ca

When I received an email from my university inviting me to participate in the students as partners conference in Waterloo, I had my motivational letter to participate sent within 10 minutes. Two weeks later, on March 29th, I was sitting at a roundtable at Wilfrid Laurier University introducing myself to delegates from the United Nations, researchers from different institutions, and refugees from around the world. I started questioning my place as a 23-year-old undergrad from a small university, Université de Moncton, of about 4,000 students in Atlantic Canada. The imposter syndrome was real, but the students-as-partners model proves that people are better when they work together. It didn't matter that I was "simply" an undergraduate student because I could still contribute in my way. When dialoguing with the other delegates, I realized my status wasn't the priority; the priority was how I used my skills and experiences to contribute to the discussion and how I benefited from other people's skills and experiences to learn from them, because the students-as-partners model motivates, empowers, finds solutions, and creates change.

—Alex Brownstein, student at the University of Moncton, Canada, alexbrownstein2000@gmail.com

I'm a law/international relations student based in México. I've been engaged for almost 2 years with humanitarian action and SaP through the litigation practice of my university, partially sponsored by the UNHCR. However, it is clear for me that my time at the SaP conference organized by the ISOW team allowed me to deepen my understanding on

these subjects.

Traditionally, teaching in Latin America is characterized by pronounced hierarchical differences between faculty, high-ranking officials, and alumni. In careers like law and international relations, inequality is also marked by the preference for theoretical rather than practical methods of teaching. This is why SaP possesses a meaningful offer for a shift in the current educational model.

In sum, my time at the SaP-ISOW conference allowed me to take a glance at how education oriented towards humanitarian action is being approached in different parts of the world. This, in turn, resulted in new ideas developed by me and the team that I belong to about our approach to relations with stakeholders at our university in order to potentiate the refugee and displaced people attention program that we partake in.

—Eric Peña Marquez, law student, Mexico, epm199847@gmail.com

I had the opportunity to take a self-directed studies research course where I wrote a research paper as part of the conference proceedings titled “The Capacity for Universities to Engage in Humanitarian Action.” I was able to help with the logistical planning of the conference and facilitate discussions concerning conference topics. My leadership role in the conference provided personal growth through increased confidence and tenacity in academic and professional settings. This experience involved immersing myself in the subject matter, which provided me with a broader understanding of the field. I was provided many networking opportunities in which I had a chance to connect and hear many innovative ideas concerning students in leadership, universities in humanitarian action, and sustainable humanitarian action.

—Alexia Phillips, 4th-year student at Wilfrid Laurier University, ISOW, director of events and education, Canada, phil4220@mylaurier.ca

I am truly grateful for the opportunity I had, as it allowed me to meet many brilliant and inspiring individuals. This journey highlighted the incredible strength of resilience and the positive impact I can make in the lives of other students from refugee backgrounds. This experience underscored for me the power of resilience and the role I can play in supporting other students from refugee backgrounds.

The conference illustrated a role students can play in spearheading sustainable humanitarian actions and instigating transformative change. The combined efforts of students, academic professionals, NGOs, and higher education institutions can pave the way for innovative solutions to global challenges. Moreover, the conference presented a powerful case for the potential of student partnerships in driving change, both within institutions and in the wider community.

Being a leader at EmPATHy, I feel a deep responsibility to inspire students from refugee backgrounds and Japanese students alike. Some actions can be taken by forming a student advisory committee composed of members from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, which is what EmPATHy is doing. We should be encouraging faculty-student partnerships through collaborative projects and providing resources and training focused on leadership development and communication. I believe students should be at the forefront of activities that shape their future and the future of their peers.

—*Souzan Husseini, PhD student, Waseda University, Japan,*
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I gained valuable insights into the transformative impact of student partnerships across diverse academic domains. The conference emphasized the significance of student-centered learning and how student partnerships empower students by fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility in their academic journey. These partnerships lead to enhanced engagement, motivation, and overall satisfaction in the learning environment.

Moreover, integrating students into decision-making processes fosters a culture of co-creation and innovation. Their unique perspectives and insights offer opportunities for novel teaching methodologies, curricular enhancements, and the integration of cutting-edge technologies, contributing to a dynamic academic ecosystem.

Student partnership also plays a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and diversity within academia. By involving students in institutional development, universities can better address the diverse needs of student populations, fostering a sense of belonging and supporting equitable education.

Furthermore, the model's ability to transcend disciplinary boundaries enables multidisciplinary collaborations, nurturing interdisciplinary perspectives and transformative research. This interdisciplinary synergy contributes to innovative solutions for complex societal challenges.

Overall, embracing the "Student as Partners" leadership model on a broader scale promises to revolutionize higher education, fostering inclusive, innovative, and student-centric environments. By empowering students as active contributors to their educational journey and beyond, universities can pave the way for transformative growth and collective excellence in higher education.

—*Shivangi Shah, student at University of Westminster, UK,*
shivushah123@gmail.com

HOW WILL YOU ADVOCATE FOR STUDENTS-AS-PARTNERS WORK TO BE INCORPORATED INTO YOUR SCHOOL'S LEADERSHIP MODEL?

At the conference, I represented Central European University's Invisible University for Ukraine (IUfU), a project which aims to help students from Ukrainian universities whose studies were affected by the ongoing war. The conference gave me an unusual opportunity to discuss the current needs of sensible humanitarian action with people who

came with contexts and practices of civic engagement previously unknown to me. I saw students constantly challenging their universities to move further in response to global crises and NGO leaders continuing their work in the least favourable circumstances. They made me think about the practices I may introduce now and in the future. I have already graduated from my MA program at Central European University, but I am still enjoying the chance to share some ideas with the students of IUfU, many of whom are leaders in their university communities. Using the cases brought by the delegates, I would like to offer students at IUfU the opportunity to reflect on them and think about whether and how similar initiatives might work in their domestic contexts. I believe that the idea of students as partners, with all of its challenges, may be fruitful not only for dealing with the emergencies caused by crises worldwide but also for overcoming the war itself, an idea that, however, still needs to be raised and discussed broadly.

—Yevhen Yaschuk, *Central European University graduate 2023, Austria,*
main student coordinator, Invisible University for Ukraine,
[Yashchuk Yevhen@student.ceu.edu](mailto:Yashchuk.Yevhen@student.ceu.edu)

I attended the conference as a research presenter with a strong background in pedagogical partnerships, but hearing from the broad array of voices at the conference made me reconsider who gets the opportunities to engage in these partnerships. Originally, partnership between learner and teacher programs only existed on the higher education plane, but, after learning about how few refugee students get the resources they need to make it to college, I realized these programs needed to be implemented in a more accessible way. I've updated my partnership model that was previously only for Syracuse University students into the public high schools in Syracuse's inner-city, a school district with high concentrations of refugee and low-income students. As an education policy student, I was also inspired to conduct a research project on resource and funding inequities in public schools by citizenship status and spoke at the MIT Migration Summit about ensuring refugee voices are included and amplified in policy-making decisions.

—Dara Drake, *Syracuse University graduate 2023, USA,*
daradrake@kpmg.com

HOW DID THE CONFERENCE INSPIRE YOU TO INTRODUCE STUDENTS-AS-PARTNERS WORK AT YOUR HOME INSTITUTION?

Attending the Equipping Student Leaders as Partners for Sustainable Humanitarian Action Conference was a transformative experience. The global gathering at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada emphasized the critical role of collaboration in addressing humanitarian challenges.

The concept of introducing students as partners deeply resonated with me after witnessing its success at other universities in supporting refugee students. As a result, I am motivated to advocate for similar partnerships at the University of Inringa, facilitating tailored support services and decision-making processes that cater to the needs of refugee students.

Reflecting on the conference outcomes, my enthusiasm for driving positive change and improving access to higher education for refugees in Tanzania has intensified. I aim to share the invaluable lessons learned with colleagues to foster a broader understanding of the potential benefits that student partnerships offer. Championing inclusivity and responsibility, we will create a supportive educational environment that empowers all students, inspiring a sense of ownership within our diverse student body.

The conference has ignited a passion to empower refugee education, and I am committed to translating these insights into tangible actions. By nurturing collaborative partnerships, we will create a transformative educational ecosystem that uplifts not only refugee students but all members of our university community.

—Mauna Belius, senior admissions officer, University of Iringa, Tanzania,
belimau21@uoi.ac.tz

As the first author of the Routledge Undergraduate Research Series and a music professor at Montana State University, I found the SaP conference unique and infused with optimism. Arising from the trauma of war and displacement, the refugees I spoke with gave me hope that if this model could be replicated over and over, so many people could find a path to help make the world a better place. Immediately after the conference I flew to England to present at the World Congress on Undergraduate Research (WorldCUR) and I not only wore my ISOW t-shirt for my presentation, but also spoke about the positive impact that was taking place at Wilfrid Laurier. I encouraged undergraduate researchers and faculty to form multi-disciplinary teams to tackle some of the world's biggest problems. Since undergraduates will be the leaders of tomorrow, it is essential that we be proactive in bringing to light, discussing, and working tirelessly on poverty, climate change, sustainability, geo-political conflict, drought, and other issues. I view faculty and students together as a community of scholars who can bring multiple perspectives to the table and propose creative solutions.

—Gregory Young, professor, School of Music, Montana State University,
USA, gyoung@montana.edu

At the Equipping Student Leaders as Partners Conference, I participated as a panelist in the “Students as Partners for Sustainable Humanitarian Action” session. The experience was like a lightning bolt of inspiration, broadening my perspective to address refugee issues at a global level. I realized the untapped potential within every student worldwide, a superpower waiting to be harnessed.

After the conference, I initiated a conversation with my home institution's vice-provost and student registrar, hoping to gain institutional support for refugee student voices. Though their decision didn't entirely align with my request, it did spark some positive movement. As a former refugee, I understand the frustration of unheard voices without institutional backing. In Canada, I reached out to several universities as a “student” to collaborate, and one institution responded positively.

With my master's program starting soon, I am eager to partner with my prospective institution for a pilot project fostering collaboration, trust, and respect

between faculty and students. The conference was the catalyst for change, fueling my ongoing journey towards inclusive higher education, full integration, and empowering students to shape their own educational paths.

—Amna Shah, refugee rights advocate, director of *Opening Universities for Refugees* and co-coordinator of *Connecting & Equipping Refugees with Tertiary Education, Canada*, amnashah.initiativeour@gmail.com

I consider the event to have been highly inspiring, as it conferred protagonism on university students working on welcoming policies for people in situations of forced displacement. The format of the activities, the topics covered in the discussion groups, the proposals for joint actions, and the face-to-face meeting of students, researchers, teachers, activists, and international organizations gave universities a prominent role in the sense of “universal.” We reflected on the essential role of a coalition between universities—spread across the globe—in the adoption of affirmative action for displaced people, refugees, exiles and/or stateless people. Today there is no risk in claiming that there is no humanitarian “crisis”—because the meaning of crisis is episodic and what we are experiencing is a chronic, endemic, and damaging evil with a global reach.

And so, in this space we call “world,” the university must—and increasingly so—reiterate its mission of expanding frontiers in the broadest sense, be they frontiers of knowledge, disciplines, or even territory.

Bringing the new generations together in a coordinated action is one of the great merits of students as partners, because providing access to higher education resizes the possibilities for students to reintegrate and effectively makes it possible for them to have a new perspective on life.

—Dr. Ana Carolina de Moura Delfim Maciel, president of the *Sérgio Vieira de Mello Chair*, professor of the *Graduate Program in Multimedia, UNICAMP, Brazil*, anacamaci@gmail.com

WHAT POTENTIAL DO YOU SEE IN THE STUDENTS-AS-PARTNERS LEADERSHIP MODEL AS A RESULT OF ENGAGING IN THE CONFERENCE?

I am the CEO of Mosaik Education, an NGO that supports refugees to access university. I see significant potential in the students-as-partners model. In fact, we are currently working with students in the UK to help establish the students-as-partners model at their institutions. This is because I see opportunities for this model in three areas. Firstly, through this model, the university (and any other organizations that work in partnership) are transferring power to the students to directly affect a global education challenge. Secondly, it makes real what is taught in lectures, seminars, and textbooks by creating opportunities for students to develop knowledge and skills through applied learning. Furthermore, universities have the perfect infrastructure to put this in place through course credits, work placements, and even gainful employment. Finally, by involving students in the leadership of such programmes, it immediately grounds the programme in the day-to-day reality of student life at the university. The programme can be shaped

according to the histories or culture of the university, which feels inherently more sustainable.

—Ben Webster, CEO of Mosaik Education, UK, ben@mosaik.ngo

I represented Refugee Education UK (REUK) at the conference, which seeks to equip young refugees to build hopeful futures by thriving in education. Before attending the conference, “students as partners” was an entirely foreign concept to me. Beyond the individual refugee students who access our support services, we have not had the opportunity to engage with wider student bodies on university campuses. However, this is slowly changing as we explore new refugee scholarship programme opportunities in the UK.

At the conference, I was particularly inspired by the clear subversion of traditional hierarchies usually present in the relationships between university staff and students. The mutual trust and respect between ISOW staff and students was incredibly moving to witness, and it is clear that this relational context has allowed for innovative humanitarian action to be made manifest.

At REUK, we will be thinking carefully about how the students-as-partners model can be employed in the practical outworking of our nascent refugee scholarship programme. I see that partnering with the wider student body at our host universities will only strengthen our programme, especially—and in the first instance—in the day-to-day support of the refugee scholars.

—Dan Webb, higher education lead practitioner, Refugee Education UK, UK, dan@reuk.org

The Tertiary Refugee Student Network (TRSN) fosters collaboration between refugee students and alumni, aiming to share educational opportunities, provide admission guidance, and facilitate meaningful employment prospects after graduation. Our involvement in the student as partners conference was highly enriching. Collaborating with fellow student engagement champions, we co-created a comprehensive student participation model. This process involved reflecting on our journeys and combining our best practices to effectively support humanitarian initiatives led by students on campus.

Within the TRSN, we highly value student collaboration, mutual advocacy, and support in our pursuit of the 15by30 initiative. The ISOW conference solidified the notion that students have the power to drive positive change, showcasing their potential as invaluable partners to universities in advancing humanitarian efforts.

The ISOW conference inspired refugee students to contribute to their communities and facilitated networking opportunities between universities and student champions. It provided valuable insights into effective policies, professional advocacy, and the role of students as key partners in addressing global humanitarian issues. This engagement equipped the TRSN with meaningful knowledge and strategies for effective campus advocacy. Overall, our conference participation reinforced our dedication to driving positive change, advocating for refugee students’ growth, and nurturing their success beyond graduation.

—Sadiki Bamperineza, co-founder and global leader of the Tertiary Refugee Student Network (TRSN), Canada, rh.sadiki@gmail.com

The students as partners conference, hosted by a dynamic group of student leaders from the ISOW initiative was groundbreaking in bringing together a new combination of academic, humanitarian, student, faculty and international organization partners to tackle issues impacting refugee higher education and humanitarian response. The conference shed light on the immense potential of the students-as-partners model in the context of humanitarian response, where the role of youth and student leaders is crucial to ensuring that the needs and vision of young people affected by conflict are represented across the higher education space.

Partnerships can powerfully influence policies that support refugee inclusion on campus, expand curriculum and degree programmes that advance the knowledge and evidence base on forced displacement, and concretely increase opportunities for refugee students to participate in higher education. The students-as-partners model explored during the conference recognizes the important role that host community and refugee students play together and that student-led initiatives can provide tangible, impactful solutions to the pressing humanitarian crises of our time. The model encourages trust, exploration, empathy, and critique—qualities essential to realizing a more inclusive and sustainable future for higher education.

The students-as-partners model is an innovative and effective approach to expanding access to higher education for refugees, ensuring that diverse perspectives, experiences, and voices are included in global discourse, enriching the learning environment, and driving action. By facilitating the development of student leaders who are not only committed to humanitarian action but are equipped with the right tools to drive it, we are fostering a generation that can face challenges head-on.

—Manal Stulgaitis and Arash Bordbar, Division of Resilience and Solutions, United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugee Agency, Denmark, stulgait@unhcr.org and bordbar@unhcr.org

CONCLUSION

Conference delegates were left with an appreciation of the potential for higher education institutions to be ecosystems of partnerships that can be harnessed for humanitarian action. Instead of asking delegates to consider students as the leaders of tomorrow, the conference challenged delegates to think about students as leaders of today and join them in addressing the issues that affect our world. Doing so not only enriches the process but also learning outcomes, personal growth, and social awareness. We heard from students who found that opportunities to participate in partnership are inspiring and empowering, from recent graduates and staff/faculty who want to encourage the adoption of the model in their institutions and communities, and from international NGO representatives who are inspired to engage students as partners in their important work. As conference organizers, our goal was to initiate a conversation on the students-as-partners model as a key to sustainable humanitarian action that

involves a variety of stakeholders. Based on the reflections above, the conference was successful in sparking interest in the notion of partnerships that may begin in the classroom but extend far beyond, creating unlimited possibilities for the future of humanitarian action.

NOTE ON THE EDITORS

Oshish Ungras is a recent graduate of the Balsillie School of International Affairs with an MA in Global Governance. Her research interests include forced migration, international development, and humanitarian aid.

Gavin Brockett is an Associate Professor of History and Global Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University and specializes in the history of the Middle East and contemporary humanitarianism. He currently serves as Vice-Dean in the Faculty of Arts.