**Being a Refugee University Student:**

**A Collaborative Autoethnography**

**Abstract**

In this paper, we adopt a collaborative autoethnographic approach to explore the experiences of one refugee university student. Our method involved all three authors systematically analysing narratives written by one of us, R Student. These accounts provide deep descriptions of his life while studying at three different UK universities and our analysis of them demonstrates that higher education was a double-edged sword for R student. Our research illuminates how R Student’s past as a survivor of genocide and forced migration; his corrosive and supportive relationships; and neo-liberal policies and practices; all intersected in complex ways to circumscribe his agency and inform his experience as a refugee student. This understanding runs counter to neo-liberal policies and practices within higher education which often blame individuals for the problems they encounter and obscure social and relational forces. In describing the operable effects of abstract policies and concepts upon R Student, our study provides a counter-narrative to neo-liberal discourse and identifies systemic issues that may affect other students too.

*Wars give birth to many children. The eldest is Denial, followed by Retaliation for those who dare to speak up. I know where my place is and that is to be quiet and therefore even writing this brings a profound sense of risk. My family is still within X. The journey has been a long one and being open by ‘spilling the beans’ is difficult because there are still those in my life that are at risk. I do not discuss this work with anyone in my family, as they would stop me. A legitimate response as I know that we have to pretend nothing happened so we can be safe. If seeking safety means paying the price of silence, it is worth it.* (R Student)

**Introduction**

As an academic piece of writing, this contribution is unusual for two reasons: it is a collaborative autoethnography and the first author has chosen to remain anonymous by adopting the pseudonym ‘R Student’. The article is autoethnographic because it is based upon R Student’s own experiences as a refugee student in the UK. It is collaborative because his written accounts or narratives of specific incidents were analysed and interpreted by R Student along with the other two authors, who were initially his supervisors. Additionally, this article was produced by all three of us. The reasons why R Student has adopted an alias are complex and multiple and will become apparent as his story unfolds. They also expose systemic issues that must be addressed if refugees are to benefit fully from higher education.

**Background: Student Refugees in Higher Education**

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that ‘1 in every 113 people globally is now either an asylum-seeker, internally displaced or a refugee’ (UNHCR, 2016a). It also states that at the end of 2015, the forcibly displaced population reached record levels at 65.3 million. This total includes 21.3 million refugees (of which approximately half are under the age of 18), 40.8 million internally displaced persons and 3.2 million asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2016b: 2-3). Recognising that one of the main concerns for refugee communities is educational provision, the UNHCR emphasises that access to education is not only ‘“a basic right”’ but also ‘an “enabling right,” a right through which other rights are realised’ (cited in Dryden-Peterson, 2011: 8-9). Indeed, the right to education is enshrined in various conventions, declarations and treaties. For example, Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) proclaims:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

As this statement suggests, there is a distinction between primary education as a compulsory right and higher education as a qualified one. Article 22 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees similarly states that refugees should be provided with an elementary education equal to nationals but they need only be accorded ‘as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable’ treatment than that provided to aliens with regard to ‘other’ education, including secondary and higher education (United Nations General Assembly, 1951).

This division has resulted in a situation of severe neglect on the issue of post-primary education for refugees. While primary educational provision for refugees is generally limited, uneven and of very poor quality, the situation with respect to higher levels of education is even worse (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Anselme and Hands, 2010). Humanitarian and global educational efforts have almost exclusively focused on primary education (Crea, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2010). At the same time, although there is a growing body of scholarship on the topic of refugees and higher education, it remains relatively sparse (Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010; Gateley, 2015; Morrice, 2013). Bowen (2014) suggests that there is a particular need for research examining the experience of refugee students who have not previously undertaken higher degrees in their country of origin; and Ferede (2010) highlights the importance of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of refugees and higher education in order to help us gain a more complete picture.

The little work that has been done in this area suggests that despite facing numerous hardships including violence and trauma, resettlement, disrupted learning and language barriers, refugees are highly motivated and aspirational (El Jack, 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Morrice, 2013; Stevenson and Willott, 2007) and many regard higher education as a means of self-development, escaping poverty, attaining security and fending off despair (Bowen, 2014; Crea, 2016; Doyle and O’Toole, 2013; Gately, 2015; Elwyn et al., 2012; Shakya et al., 2010; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Higher education is understood as important both for the long-term future of individual refugees and for the societies in which they live (Dryden-Peterson and Giles, 2010).

Yet, refugee students often experience higher education as overwhelming and alienating. Key issues include the following: unfamiliar teaching, learning and assessment styles (Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Lawson, 2014; Morrice, 2013); insufficient English language or academic skills and inadequate support to address them (Earnest et al., 2010; Harris and Marlowe, 2011; Bowen, 2014); excluding and alien socio-cultural practices (Bowen, 2014; Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010; Morrice, 2013, 2009); bureaucratic and confusing institutional systems and procedures (Joyce et al., 2010; Lawson, 2014); financial burden (Earnest et al., 2010; Ferede, 2010; Harris and Marlowe, 2011) racism (Lawson, 2014; Bowen, 2014; Morrice, 2013); community and family pressure to succeed (Harris and Marlowe, 2011; Joyce et al 2010; Lawson, 2014); worries about family abroad (Harris and Marlowe, 2011; Joyce et al 2010; Lawson, 2014); financial pressure to support their families (Harris and Marlowe, 2011; Joyce et al., 2010; Morrice, 2013) and emotional distress relating to previous trauma (Joyce et al., 2010; Stevenson and Willot, 2010; Harris and Marlowe, 2011; Hannah, 1999). The difficulties encountered by refugee students are compounded by the fact that academic faculty are largely unaware of the issues they face and how these might impact upon their academic performance (Earnest et al., 2010).

This situation, however, may be changing in the UK with recent campaign efforts across the higher education sector to raise awareness and help individuals seeking refugee status gain equal access to colleges and universities. (Brewis, 2015; Kirby, 2015; Star and NUS, 2012). Such activities may lead to an upturn in the number of refugee students attending higher education in the UK. It is important, therefore, that universities and colleges introduce policies and practices that support and encourage, rather than alienate and exclude, these learners.

At the end of 2015, it was reported that there were 123,067 refugees, 45,870 pending asylum cases and 41 stateless persons in the UK (UNHCR, 2016b: 60). However, due to the way refugee data is collected, it is very difficult to estimate the number of refugees aged 18-29 who might be eligible for higher education within these figures (Bowen, 2014; Gateley, 2015). Additionally, the number of refugee students attending higher education within UK institutions is unknown because they are not recognised as a specific social group and therefore not traced (Morrice, 2013). Thus, in order to provide tailored support for refugees, it would seem important to introduce systematic methods of data collection to help gain a clearer idea of the numbers of potential and actual refugee students. However, as discussed below, individuals may not wish to be identified as a refugee for a variety of reasons.

**Methodology**

This project took root in a film about genocide that the three of us, located within the same faculty, created jointly. R Student, who survived genocide in his home country, asked his university lecturers Kathleen (Kathy - a medical sociologist) and Lawrence (Larry - a GP) if they would be interested in working with him on a film about his experiences. All three of us shared an interest in genocide and saw the film as an opportunity to break through the silence and taboo surrounding it. We wrote, performed and edited the film together with a few others.

The film’s force rests in R Student’s narrative, which poignantly and powerfully recalls his experiences in order to illustrate the issues we address. Throughout the film’s production, Kathy and Larry felt the power of ‘collaborative witnessing’, described by Ellis and Rawicki (2013: 366) as a kind of ‘“relational autoethnography”’ that allows researchers to focus on and evocatively tell the lives of others in shared storytelling and conversation’. As these authors note, the primary concern in such an enterprise is the well-being of the individual whose story is being told. As such, we felt it imperative to honour R Student’s request for anonymity in the film, which was generated by concern for his family’s safety back in his home country. We achieved this by blurring R Student’s face and body at the editing stage. At the same time, Kathy and Larry felt uneasy about the fact that R Student was redacted in the telling of his own story. In hiding his identity, they were concerned that he would not gain the academic and professional merit he deserved for all his work on the film. Additionally, they were aware of the power differential between R Student and themselves and they did not want to exploit this. Nonetheless, after numerous team discussions, we agreed that, upon balance, it was best to cloak R Student’s identity. What we did not know at the time was that the issue would resurface a year later and that the reasons for R Student’s desire for anonymity were more complex than first imagined.

R Student took a year out to intercalate at another university where he completed a related but separate degree. After rejoining the programme, he started a research project as part of his academic programme, under the supervision of Kathy and Larry. Sparked by R Student’s own history, the initial aim of the study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of refugee students studying at the university through interviews. In preparation, R Student met with a member of the university administrative team and learned that while there were refugee students on campus, the number was unknown because this information was not systematically collected.

Ethics approval was granted from the Faculty of Medicine Ethics Committee. No funding was received for the research. Recruitment was attempted by speaking to relevant student and refugee groups about the project, putting up posters across campus and in relevant shop windows, as well as through Facebook posts. Unfortunately, after three months, no students had volunteered to participate in the study. Bowen (2014), who conducted her PhD research on UK refugee participation in higher education around the same time period, had similar trouble recruiting and retaining participants. However, she eventually managed to enlist and keep hold of five students.

We discussed alternative strategies for continuing the work but agreed to adopt an autoethnographic approach as a means of exploring potential reasons why no refugees volunteered for the study. Although autoethnography takes many different forms and representations, it can be generally described as follows:

an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) [emphasis in original] (Ellis et al., 2011: 1).

It places the researcher’s subjectivity or lived experiences at the centre of the research and is predicated on the assumption that critical and systematic analyses of our own personal narratives can tell us something about the culture we are a part of and how it informs our identity (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, 2007). At the same time, autoethnography recognises that although we are socially situated, we actively interact with our environment rather than simply internalise it in a passive way. That is, our identities are constructed and reconstructed in an active and on-going process, through complex interactions between lived experience, social structure and subjective processes (Thurston and Beynon, 1995). Furthermore, because autoethnography is a means of giving authorial voice to marginalised and muted subjects it has the potential to provide unique insider perspectives into structures and relationships that both oppress and empower them.

Existing autoethnographies by refugees offer powerful contextualised human portraits, revealing complex and often contradictory personhoods (see, for example, Khosravi, 2011, 2007; Nguyen, 2015; Run, 2012; Sekalala, 2016). They demonstrate the operable effects of abstract concepts and policies upon individual lives and the existential consequences of this. Refugee autoethnographies focus on neither ‘one’s own subjectivity [n]or on the objectivity of the world, but on what emerges from the space between’ (Khosravi, 2011: 6). In so doing, they highlight the dynamic relationship between structure and agency, neither over-or under-endowing individuals with agency. In this process, they disrupt popular tropes of refugees as tragic victims, superhuman agents or opportunistic, criminal invaders. Sekalala (2016) states that most American and European citizens’ understanding of refugees come from journalists who adopt such tropes and argues that there is a particular need for autoethnographies by refugees to challenge them. Counter-narratives produced by autoethnographies can therefore be used to contest dominant discourses, reframe policy and practice and contribute to social change (Acosta et al., 2015).

As a refugee who attended three different British universities, R Student was in a unique position to recall and systematically analyse key events related to being a refugee while studying at each of these institutions. At the same time, our shared experience of filmmaking suggested that such an activity would in fact be a relational one. This was particularly the case because R Student would be submitting his project as coursework. Although he would be writing his report independently, Kathy and Larry were R Student’s supervisors and would be co-analysing his narratives. As McNamee and Hosking (2011) acknowledge, relationality is apparent in varying degrees and kind throughout the research process. Tenni et al. (2003) write that autoethnographic data analysis necessitates external support from supervisors or advisers. They further argue that while supervisors must engage with researchers and their data critically and robustly in order to help them engage at deeper and more nuanced levels, it is inappropriate for them to attempt to assume the traditional model of a supposed distanced and objective supervisory relationship. Instead, they recommend adopting ‘a professionally intimate supervisory relationship’ (Tenni et al., 2003: 4).

The first phase of the revised project began in February 2015, following a supervisory meeting in which R Student was asked to recall one key event or ‘epiphany’ while studying at each of the three British universities he attended in which being a refugee was significant and the consequences were transformative (Ellis et al., 2011). This was done with a view to identify potential reasons why refugee students did not volunteer to participate in the initial study. R. Student wrote these narratives independently on his computer at home over a period of two weeks. While writing, he referred to material relevant to the time and place of his recollections such as journal entries, e-mails or course material to verify that his memory correlated with contemporaneous evidence. Once he completed all of his accounts, he circulated them in a single document to Kathy and Larry. This document included additional narratives describing the circumstances in which he became a refugee and his resettlement experiences.

The stories contained in the document formed the research data that we all thematically analysed. Analysis involved a process of constant comparison, which entailed first independently identifying codes by manually examining each narrative line-by-line, grouping similar words and phrases together and then giving each cluster a name or code that best described what these similarities or issues were. We continued to work individually, comparing and contrasting our codes within and across accounts to distinguish key themes and reveal relationships among them (Glaser and Straus, 1967). Following this process, we came together as a team to share the themes we each identified. Our discussions led us to expand and collapse our codes and refine our themes until we reached agreement about what the most salient ones were. Throughout this process, we attempted to answer ‘so what do these themes mean?’ Addressing this question was critical because it allowed us to connect R Student’s accounts to the broader social context and therefore potentially to the experiences of other refugees. We did this by linking our themes to relevant literature and theory to arrive at an explanatory framework. On the way to reaching this framework, we worked separately and met together a number of times: each individual and combined analysis, informed the next. In this way, our research was ‘more iterative than linear’ (Chang et al., 2013: 24).

We aimed for analytic generalisabilty through the transferability of the findings to other situations and by way of our explanatory framework (Yin, 2014). We are not, however, assuming that our research findings are generalisable to all refugee students. They are a heterogeneous group who vary by, for example, country of origin, gender, age, sexuality, religion, pre-migration and post-migration experiences, as well as educational qualifications. We are also aware that we cannot know that any explanations we develop to account for why we were unable to recruit refugee students are in fact the *actual* reasons. These restrictions are inherent limitations of the autoethnographic method. Nonetheless, we believed that the thick descriptions and conceptual understanding arising from our research would offer valuable insights into the experience of refugee university students including possible reasons why none volunteered for the initial version of the study.

Situated within a social constructionist framework, autoethnography does not accept that knowledge is objective and neutral or that researchers should be value-free and detached (Ellingson and Ellis, 2008). Therefore, although autoethnographic research must be robust and rigorous, these qualities are achieved by different means than traditional quantitative research. Reliability is measured by the narrator’s credibility and validity is determined by the degree to which the narrative is convincing or believable and enables the reader to enter the narrator’s world (Ellis et al., 2011). We attempted to achieve these ends by adhering to a clear and transparent process, as outlined earlier, throughout our data analysis, interpretation and presentation. We also discussed and debated codes and themes as well as our understanding of these before reaching consensus. Additionally, preliminary findings were twice presented to groups of students and academics and we made modifications based on their feedback as well as in response to comments from the peer reviewers of this article.

The collaborative nature of this research became increasingly apparent during the construction of this article because it has involved not only further joint analysis and interpretation but also collective writing. Although there is often a fine line between supervision and collaboration, the involvement of Kathy and Larry has deepened, not only because of their writing but also because of their role in meaning-making (Chang et al., 2013). As such, we have reached agreement that the research has moved from being an autoethnography to a *collaborative* autoethnography. This decision also allows us to feel more able to mask R Student’s identity because Kathy and Larry can take responsibility for the veracity of the research. Although we are confident in our decision to mask R Student’s identity, as was the case with the film, Kathy and Larry remain troubled by the advantages they will gain at his expense and to his disadvantage.

‘Relational ethics’ is an important consideration in undertaking any piece of autoethnographic work. Since the stories we tell necessarily implicate others, we must balance our desire to tell the ‘whole story’ with ethical concern for others who may not want their story to be told (Ellis, 2007). As such, in addition to keeping R Student away from exposure, we have given pseudonyms to some of the individuals and places appearing in the narrative accounts.

**R Student’s Narratives**

This section contains four narratives written by R Student. Following each of these is a brief discussion, highlighting and linking key themes to some relevant literature about refugees. More detailed analyses, including the implications of our findings for policy and practice, are presented in the discussion and conclusion, which follow.

*No Place Like Home/No Place to Call Home*

*I was born in X in 1988. I grew up poor from a United Kingdom perspective. What I mean is that we had 3-4 hours electricity and 2 hours running water per day. We did not have any furniture and life was very simple. But in X we did not perceive as a family that we were poor. In fact, we thought of ourselves as blessed and lucky as we had shelter that we rented and could at least have two meals a day. Everything was precious and therefore everything felt like being in the Garden of Eden. Then the wars leading to the Genocide hit and Eden was lost.*

*My trajectory of life was removed and there was no road left to follow. I was expected to stop my education when I was 10-11 years old and work in my father’s shop but instead we were being chased and running around the continent to find a safe place. School was precious to me; there was a sense of order rather than engulfing chaos. Eventually, we settled into Y for a few years where I faced a different culture and expectations. I returned back to X and made my way to the United Kingdom (UK) when I was around 10 years old. If I have lost you within these unnamed locations and timeline, imagine the whirlwind I am caught within. I have lived in over 17 locations over three continents. In addition, by the age of 26, I have lived in over 28 homes. I have stopped counting after 28, I accept that I just have to keep moving.*

This initial narrative grounds R Student’s story. It provides the reader with important background information that will become vital to understanding his experiences in the narratives that follow. Crucially, it demonstrates that he was embedded in a web of relationships and structures which subjugated and enabled him. His agency was thus informed by and situated within interactions and social forces in particular moments and places.

By showing us a brief glimpse of R Student’s home life prior to the genocide, before becoming stateless, the account furthermore disrupts essentialist notions of refugees as having some innate and fixed essence. In fact, the only condition that all refugees share is loss of home (Papadopoulos, 2002). Papadopoulos (2002:15) argues that such deprivation can create a ‘sense of nostalgic yearning for restoring that very specific type of loss’. However problematic an individual’s family life is, whatever tensions and contradictions are in play, home contains people’s emotional states as well as their physical bodies and belongings. As such it provides them with a sense of security. Security here does not equate with safety, but rather with a feeling of coherence, routine and predictability about life. Homelessness, therefore, produces material, psychological and existential loss (Papadopoulos, 2002). As such, it is unsurprising that refugees often long for and idealise the homes they were forced to leave (Taylor, 2015; Sekalala, 2016). R Student’s likening of his home to the Garden of Eden thus can be understood, at least in part, as a desire to return to a time and place when life made sense. His recollection is not a facsimile of home but a strategy to manage his dislocation from it.

In addition to relaying his experience of homelessness and seeking refuge as one of constant movement and impermanence, the second paragraph foreshadows the important role education is to have for R Student. In the middle of disorder and dislocation, it provided stability and was therefore ‘precious’. Yet, education beyond age 11 was only possible because of his refugee status. Other researchers have similarly reported that forced migration may open up new and unexpected opportunities including schooling (Allsopp et al., 2014; Feuerverger, 2011); and that education can provide refugees with a sense of order and routine (Earnest et al., 2010; Sekalala, 2016; Stevenson and Willott, 2007).

*University A: (Dis)placement*

*For me, life truly began at the age of 18 when I started university. I was enrolled on a 3-year degree programme at University A, which had an optional placement before the final year. I felt really lucky because I was granted a 4-year student visa and that meant I was on track to navigate the immigration system and become a British citizen. The UK was my perceived utopia and going back to X was not an option. I began to realise it was a broken utopia but I would rather be here than back in X.*

*Although optional, the placement year was funded and therefore highly competitive. There were approximately 32 posts for the 180 students on the programme. The process involved sending four applications to various placement providers and, if successful with these, follow-up interviews. I got 3 interviews. These were conducted in a ‘milk-round’ style, where all the participants and interviewers were gathered in a large hall. Those that selected you interviewed you and offers were made immediately. I was rejected by all three interview panels. My close friends, who were all British citizens, were selected. Those not chosen progressed to the final year of the programme.*

*My first thought was that this invalidates my visa, I would be forced to go back to X. I messed up. This was the part to get me to safety by navigating the immigration system and I was terrified. When I left the hall, I did not know where to go. I could not go home to the student flat as my friends were there celebrating their acceptance posts. They were all thinking I was probably upset that I did not get the placement post but it was far deeper. I was shaking and I felt like crying and was completely dazed. I wandered and stumbled into the corridor where the staff offices were. There was a corner with some chairs and I sat there with my head down, recalling all the horrors I would have to face when I return back to X.*

*I heard a voice, it was Dr A, her office was opposite to the chair. She asked me ‘Are you all right?’. I looked at her, I was not crying but my face clearly had a damaged expression on it. She turned to the student she was with and said, “I am sorry but can we cancel this meeting?” She told me to come into her office. She picked up her phone, called her assistant and said to cancel her afternoon appointments. I was completely silent, looking at the floor. She was talking to me but I was not hearing anything she said. All I thought was she does not know about anything that I have to face when I go back to X.*

*My ears perked up and I listened when she said:*

*‘When I was 19 years old, I moved with my boyfriend to the United States. I got pregnant and he left me. I returned back to the UK and I am raising a single kid by myself, life is tough.’*

*I then started to talk to her. I did not tell her I was a refugee but simply stated that I could not go back to X. She encouraged me to find out why I got rejected as I was at the top of the cohort and her kindness gave me strength. That kindness was reminiscent of when as a family we were starving in the refugee homes in the camp and a person gave us a small piece of bread so we could have a bite each.*

*I contacted the interviewers and they told me that they wanted to pick me but they did not know what to do with someone from X. As the placements were paid posts, they did not want to take a risk and therefore they preferred British citizens. I called the Home Office, and they confirmed that I was eligible for these posts and therefore there was no risk to the hiring organisations. With support from A and other staff I applied to other posts with confirmed letters to say there was no risk. I was re-interviewed in different locations and I got rejected a further six times. My top choice location post decided to re-interview as the candidate they selected had dropped out. In the interview I begged the training officer to give me a chance and remember her saying, ‘You look good on paper but……… fine I will give you a chance’.*

*Dr A said this was the result of me persevering through, not giving up, and she was so happy. Years later, when I completed the final steps to become a British citizen, I asked Dr A if she would be the legal witness for me. This required her passport details, house address and university job contracts. When I went to see her she gave me the originals required for the process. I was shocked that she gave her trust. I owe her so much, she helped me in seeking safety and refuge. I was a strange random student. She never knew I was a refugee, I kept that hidden. I wish I had told her but I knew at that time I was still very weary and scared. It was not the right time to declare that truth.*

R Student’s account expands on the prized nature of his education here, describing his entry into university as the moment when his life genuinely begins. Other studies examining refugee narratives similarly note that post-war turning points, like starting university, can give life new meaning and so help to make sense of suffering endured (Gilpin-Jackson, 2012). R Student’s university studies also helped him in a very practical way by providing him with a student visa and through this, a route to obtaining British citizenship.

However, his plans were very nearly thwarted by the vagaries of a placement system that did not recognise or care to understand his refugee status. The impact of this is terror and shock because it would have forced him to return to his home country. The kindness and support of Dr A, and other staff, helped R Student to obtain a placement. Lawson (2014) similarly found that teachers supported refugees in continuing with their university education at pivotal moments. Years later, Dr A further serves as a legal witness and through this process, demonstrates her trust in him. Although R Student recognises how she helped him to achieve refuge, he could not tell her that he was a refugee.

As with R Student’s initial narrative, his account here powerfully demonstrates how his actions were thwarted and facilitated by various relationships and institutions. It also shows how his past interrupts the present, as a thoughtful action reminds him of a refugee camp and interview panel rejections return him to past horrors.

*University B: The Red Passport*

*Within the media, books and from certain people the term refugee is associated with some positive connotations such as bravery, and a tough, difficult life which can evoke a sense of empathy for refugees. I hate that label and detest being called a refugee. I use the term out of necessity. I associate that term with cowardice, weakness, pitiful, reject, tarnished and ultimately sub human. It is not an identity I want, it feels forced upon me as a form of language to help others see what type of creature I am.*

*The assumption that everyone understands the complexity of this label by presuming everyone went through a war was shattered by responses from my peers. For example, when a good friend found out I was one, he said to me, ‘You are the first refugee I have seen outside of a television screen’. I do not know how to respond to statements such as these. The idea of being a ‘human’ equal to my peers felt impossible until I achieved my British citizenship. The red passport is what gives me my human rights.*

*From the wars, I was stripped of rights and I left for a quest to regain them from a master who would mercifully grant them back to me. I got my citizenship after 11 years of toil. I could finally pay UK tuition fees like my peers. Due to a complex chain of events, however, I was initially denied that as I was classified as an international student. The UK university policies classify refugee students as international students and I could not afford the enormous fees charged to international students and was nearly forced to leave University B.*

*I was working on a project with a faculty member during this period and I shared my dilemma with them. I do not know why I shared it with him. Perhaps because I was so distressed that even though I gained citizenship I was still in the same position. He told me about his wife who was in a similar situation and said that the administrative offices lie to you. There is a legal clause and if I went to them, uttered those words and showed them the red passport, I would be granted my fee status as a British citizen. I did not believe him.*

*I went to see someone about the fees and as soon as he saw me he pounced, ‘I told you the matter is closed and my boss had also emailed you, your Dean and told you that we cannot do anything. You have to pay the international fee or leave and reapply next year to be granted home fee status’. I uttered the legal clause and showed him my passport. His expressions and demeanour completely changed and he said, ‘One minute sir, have a seat and I will go to my boss and also would you like a tea or coffee?’*

*My knees buckled and I fell onto the chair behind me. A minute later he came back and told me my status has been changed. I did not feel angry or upset, I thanked him like a beggar on the street who has been kicked and a coin thrown at him for compensation. I suddenly gained a flurry of rights I could not even comprehend. I was finally an equal human to my peers and I could not be forced back to X. That is the power of the red passport.*

*However, even writing this here, I am scared that it could be stripped away from me at anytime. The administrative office is like a master and I only want to obey rather than face the lashes. This was similar to when we were finding refuge in different countries. The immigration officers wielded power for you to be left out to die or to let you in. You do not have the inherent right to be treated mercifully, you should always beg for mercy; for that is how a refugee needs to behave.*

In this narrative, R Student revisits his reluctance to adopt the label of refugee. He eschews even the supposed positive connotations associated with it. Loizos (2002: 41) writes that ‘refugees often resist and resent the labels and policies of those who seek to help them.’ Such a response may be informed by a refusal to be pitied. Pity strengthens divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ by elevating the non-refugee into an elevated and impotent place of ‘innocence’, obscuring their own complicity in the situation and the systemic nature of the problem (Goulding, 2007; Szörényi, 2006). It furthermore objectifies refugees and feeds into caricatures of the kind seen on television by R student’s friend. The label of ‘refugee’ is a constant reminder to R student of his otherness, leaving him to feel sub-human. As such, it is only in obtaining the red British passport entitling him to citizenship that R Student believes he will become fully human. The passport held comparable power for the young people interviewed by Allsopp et al. (2014:168), who regarded ‘getting a passport’ as the means by which they would gain various rights including access to education.

R Student encounters further institutional vagaries that nearly cause him to leave his studies. However, reminiscent of his relationship with Dr A at his previous university, he finds his way through with the support of a faculty member. This time, however, the circumstances of his situation are so desperate that he discloses his refugee status. Despite gaining the red passport, R Student lives in fear that it will be taken. Such dread, which contributes to feelings of impermanence, uncertainty and threat, is common among former refugees, even long after gaining citizenship (Khosravi, 2011; Run, 2012).

*University C: Power Games*

*I pursued further higher education as an intercalated student at University C. I would have never thought that when I was stooped on the ground in the wars with guns pointing at me, I would end up pursuing so many degrees in different and prestigious universities. My background as a refugee should be irrelevant, as I have broken though those barriers. Should I be treated differently because of my past experiences? Can the refugee aspect of my identity be kept completely separate from being a student at university? Surely, academia is a leveller for all university students. At University C students are referred to as ‘brains on sticks’.*

*I was working in the second phase of the postgraduate degree with my supervisor on a research project. Through a complex chain of events, they sought me out. I felt trapped in a situation where I was placed by various powers within the department to work with my supervisor as they always picked top students from the cohort to work with. I was initially content to work with them. However, I found out that they were a soldier in the army. I am scared of soldiers. From that moment, an enormous power differential was created and my supervisor became my master. I would do whatever they said.*

*Back in X, an epidemic had broken out wiping out a good proportion of the population. Ironically, many of those that survived the wars died in the epidemic. I went to explain this to the head tutor of the course because it was affecting me as my family was still there. Her first response was, ‘I thought you were a second-generation born British citizen’. Clearly, I fooled the system, I really disguised my past well. That felt like a very good compliment. I finally was seen to be like them.*

*My supervisor did not think it was important because I could do nothing about what was happening in X. I worked 19 hours a day and on weekends. They were unhappy with the data I was producing and told me, among other things, that I was stupid and lazy. Even though my breakdown was obvious, my supervisor appeared to ignore it. By this point, I did not shave, change my clothes or eat and I smelled. I was not taking care of myself - I had gone into refugee mode. Many in the department noticed this, complained anonymously and told me that my supervisor’s treatment of me was wrong. Some suggested that I make a complaint about my supervisor – there were other complaints filed against them.*

*The head tutor approached me and said, ‘Your treatment is wrong and if you talk to me about it, I can act on that information’. That was irrelevant, as I could only see my supervisor as a soldier and I feared them. As a soldier, I perceived my supervisor had the right to do whatever they wanted with me. For example, we had a supervision meeting where they were screaming and yelling at me. My supervisor wielded such power that if they told me to sit on the floor in the stooped position as in the wars, I would have. One time they yelled. ‘Your English is terrible, is it your first language? You do not have the intellect or stamina to do research’. I just responded by saying ‘No’. Upon reflection, I wish I had the strength to respond by saying that I could speak, read and write in five languages. This is not because I like languages; it was a forced necessity during my time as a refugee in order to survive in different locations. I have never failed a degree exam. However, I could not say any of this to my supervisor because I learned you never argue with a soldier unless you want to be shot.*

*In my weakest moment, I blurted out to them, ‘I have been a refugee, I have been through a lot’. I was told that this did not excuse me from not performing to their standards. I needed to survive there, so I endured. One night when working by myself, I sang ‘Hallelujah’ by Leonard Cohen to provide comfort in my brokenness. I came in the top third of the cohort, just 1% short of a distinction on the course.*

Trauma, induced by a bullying supervisor, marked R Student’s time at University C. His ‘breakdown’ was the result of his supervisor’s abusive behaviour and unreasonable demands. While reported anecdotally and on internet blogs (Morris, 2011) exploitation within student-supervisor relationships remains virtually ignored by scholars (Aziz, 2016). A recent questionnaire pilot study nonetheless suggests that bullying of research students by their supervisors is not uncommon and that students tend not to report it (Aziz, 2016). However, R Student’s supervisor had a series of complaints against them, suggestive both of a pattern of their misuse of power and institutional indifference. The fact that they were also a soldier, worsened the already perilous dynamics for R Student who learned as a refugee never to argue with someone in such a position. Hynes (2003) reports that even after reaching safety, refugees remain fearful of soldiers and others in uniform because of unpleasant and life threatening past encounters.

Although R Student’s experiences as a refugee made him more vulnerable to his supervisor’s abuse, his emotional and physical reactions to his mistreatment should not be pathologised. Papadopoulos (2002) warns against adopting refugee trauma discourses that remove symptoms and reactions from the socio-political context they are located within. Unfortunately, as will be discussed in greater detail below, current educational policies and practices often also to locate social problems within individual students and their supposed deficits (Burke, 2011, Colley and Hodkinson, 2001; Keddie, 2012). Given this, there is a real danger that universities will blame students for their hardships instead of introducing institutional reform.

**DISCUSSION**

As noted in the methodology section of this paper, existing refugee autoethnographies demonstrate the operable effects of abstract policies and concepts emanating from systemic forces upon individual lives and the existential consequences of this. Our aim in this part of the paper is to deepen our analysis by adopting such an approach. To do this, we will situate R Student’s accounts within the broader social and geo-political context by linking his narratives to relevant key literature, concepts and theory.

This method is akin to adopting the ‘sociological imagination’ - a term coined by C. Wright Mills (2000) to describe the ability to link one’s own personal situation to the forces of history and the society in which they live. Even seemingly distant, intangible and impersonal social forces, he argued, may influence the situations people find themselves in. Following Mills’ lead, we will now consider how one prevailing social force - neo-liberalism - informed R Student’s experiences of being a university student. We aim to make visible some of the ways neo-liberalism infused the policies and practices encountered by R Student. We are not claiming that neo-liberalism provides a full understanding of R Student’s experiences while at university or that it can entirely explain the situation of any other refugee student in higher education. We maintain, however, that neo-liberalism is currently a powerful social force informing UK higher education and that this has consequences for those who work and study within it.

Although there are varied definitions and multiple strands of neo-liberalism, the term typically refers to the notion that open, unregulated and competitive markets, free from state intrusion, hold the key to wealth and contentment. Proponents of this logic, including successive British prime ministers since Margaret Thatcher, have progressively embedded market values including consumerism, competition, individual responsibility, efficiency and cost-effectiveness into more spheres of life. In accordance with these principles, individuals are pitted against one another and held almost entirely accountable for their failures and successes. As such, neo-liberalism generally promotes and rewards callous and self-interested policies and practices rather than compassionate and collaborative ones (Crouch, 2011; Hall, 2011; Harvey, 2007).

A number of scholars influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault have adopted an analytical framework referred to as ‘governmentality’, which recognises that populations are regulated through their hearts and minds as well as through direct coercion (see, for example, Bröckling et al., 2011; Burchell et al., 1991; Rose, 1999). That is, it is purported, that neo-liberal values are adopted and perpetuated as people internalise and strive to meet them. In suggesting that power operates not only from the top-down but also through subjectivity, the concept of governmentality opens up the possibility that individuals can resist rather than conform to neo-liberal principles. In such a way neo-liberalism may be understood not as a static or totalising force but rather as an unstable and permeable one (Fekete, 2016). Neo-liberalism, therefore, can be disrupted, challenged and changed.

Numerous writers have demonstrated how neo-liberal notions and practices have progressively penetrated higher education in the West (see, for example, Anderson, 2016; Canaan, 2013; Giroux, 2014; Hyatt et al., 2015; Maisuria, 2014). In the UK, higher education was effectively free for home students prior to 1998 because the state paid annual tuition fees and many learners also received maintenance grants. In 1998, however, tuition fees were introduced and loans replaced grants. Since then, and following devolution of the Scottish and Welsh governments, the cost of attending English universities has increased to a current cap of £9,000 per year. More recently, the Government announced that this cap will be increased from 2017-18 for institutions whose teaching is rated as successful under a new assessment exercise (Bolton, 2016).

These changes around tuition fees, commentators argue, have encouraged students to see education as a product that they consume rather than a right; and to regard learning as a way of gaining advantage over other individuals in a competitive job market rather than as a means of becoming engaged and informed citizens. Furthermore, a level playing field is assumed and social forces obscured so that students are largely held responsible for their own academic achievements and disappointments. (Giroux, 2014; Lauder, et al., 2012; Miller, 2015; Morrison, 2016).

At the same time, the state has reduced funding for higher education and consequently, universities are increasingly reliant upon student fees, research grants and industry partnerships for income. As international students are charged more for their education, they are a particularly sought after and new markets are pursued through overseas campuses (Ball, 2012; Miller, 2015; Morrison, 2016). In such ways, universities have become businesses. A growing body of scholarship has demonstrated the unhealthy consequence of this marketisation upon faculty and staff (see, for example, Davies and Petersen, 2005; Gill, 2010; Zabrodska et al., 2011).

An acknowledgement of these issues is not to romanticise the past nor to suggest that the current state of affairs in higher education is exclusively the result of neo-liberalism. It is instead meant to highlight some of the ways that neo-liberal processes are currently shaping universities in a variety of harmful ways. We will now explore how neo-liberalism may have informed R Student’s university experiences by considering some key examples within his narratives.

The prioritisation of market values can be found within R Student’s narratives. At University A, R Student had to compete against 180 students for one of only 32 posts. This situation may seem unworthy of comment, but, as Maisuria (2014) notes, neo-liberal principles are often seen as the natural order of things, and therefore go unnoticed. Yet, it is possible to imagine an alternative state in which *all* students are offered placements. Such a reality, however, would require a different set of values including a belief in equal access to learning experiences for all students.

At University B, an administrative officer initially refused to accept that R Student was a British citizen. This meant that he was classified as an international student rather than a home one and charged the fees associated with this status. We cannot know for certain why the Officer acted in the way he did, but he may have been responding to a financial incentive for the university related to the higher fees paid by international students. The Officer’s actions could have resulted in the university receiving no fees from R Student at all. Alternatively, they could have precipitated a situation where, in desperation, R Student found a way to pay international fees, even if the consequences of doing so were ultimately harmful to him.

R Student’s encounter with the administrative office must also be seen in the context of broader policy and practices across English universities Specifically, it is currently the case that individuals claiming asylum and those granted discretionary leave to remain are classified as overseas students. In addition, the majority of those applying for refugee protection are not permitted to work or take out student loans and although individuals given discretionary leave to remain are allowed to work, they are unable to access loans. These circumstances create a situation in which it is nearly impossible for young refugees to attend higher education. Various campaigns, as outlined earlier, are currently underway to encourage equal access to universities by granting home status to individuals claiming refugee protection and through the establishment of grants, scholarships, bursaries and fee waivers (STAR and NUS, 2012). Although these efforts have persuaded several universities to establish schemes and packages allowing some refugee students access, the numbers of individuals benefiting from these remain small (Brewis, 2015).

As noted previously, in alignment with market values, neo-liberalism often promotes and rewards unsympathetic and self-interested policies and practices. It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that R Student experienced disinterested, uncaring and even abusive encounters with others. The placement interviewers he met with while attending University A, either initially assumed that he was un-eligible for the government funds supporting the posts because he was not British, or, if uncertain whether he qualified, they did not confirm that this was indeed the case. Either way, their dismissive and indifferent behaviour nearly cost R Student his placement and possibly his route to British citizenship.

At University B, R Student confronted a cold bureaucracy at the hands of an office administrator. In steadfastly refusing to recognize his British citizenship until R Student uttered a ‘secret’ legal clause, the officer exemplified impersonal authority. Finally, R Student’s time at University C was marked by his breakdown prompted by a bullying supervisor. Not only was he forced to work unreasonable hours, his supervisor undermined R Student’s confidence by name-calling and yelling. He furthermore received no sympathy or understanding from his supervisor after confiding that he was a refugee and that an epidemic was killing a large number of people in X, where his parents lived. The supervisor abused and exploited R Student for their own research. Regarded as a ‘brain on a stick’, his well-being was of no concern to them and his inability to meet their impossible standards was seen entirely as his fault. Although the head tutor asked R Student to talk to them about his mistreatment in order to take action, they did not appear to consider seriously how institutional power imbalances, the experience of being bullied, and his status as a refugee, would make this very difficult to do. The working conditions described earlier as dominating neo-liberal universities create ideal conditions for bullying to occur (Davies and Petersen, 2005; Zabrodska et al., 2011).

These examples highlight how R Student’s experiences at three universities were powerfully affected by uncaring and abusive relationships as well as a prioritisation of the economic bottom line over the right to higher education. While it is the case that prior to neo-liberalism, universities were not immune from the pursuit of financial profit and students could encounter callous and bullying behaviour, evidence suggests that these conditions have worsened under it (Anderson, 2016; Canaan, 2013; Giroux, 2014; Hyatt et al., 2015; Maisuria, 2014).

R Student’s accounts also reveal, however, that he encountered kindness and concern for his well-being at all three universities. Dr A not only helped R student get a placement while attending University A, but she also served as a legal witness to his becoming a British citizen and entrusted him with her passport. Similarly, a faculty member at University B shared personal information and insider knowledge with R Student, which allowed him to pay home tuition fees. Finally, although they perhaps did not go far enough, a number of individuals at University C encouraged R Student to file a complaint against his supervisor and complained anonymously themselves to the head tutor. These examples suggest that neo-liberalism is not a totalising, inevitable or impenetrable force. As such, we are encouraged to think of alternative possibilities and to reflect upon how our own practices may be informed by, as well as challenge, neo-liberal values.

While neo-liberalism impacts upon the lives of all students attending universities within its reach, each individual will be affected differently depending upon a range of factors including their various social positionings and available resources. In R Student’s case, the fact that he was a refugee was highly significant. As Bowen (2014: 147) writes, the experiences of refugee students in higher education are ‘neither entirely different to other groups of students, nor are they entirely similar’. Other students may encounter some of the same issues as R Student. However, his background of surviving genocide and negotiating forced migration, as well as the cultural meanings surrounding refugees continually interact with his academic life. A tutor’s caring gesture reminds him of an act of kindness while in refugee camp; an administrative officer recalls powerful and callous immigration officers; a bullying supervisor’s military background takes him back in time to another soldier’s loaded gun; and a friend’s comment about having never seen a refugee in person highlights the distance between them. In these ways, seemingly routine events conspire to rupture time and place so that R Student’s past bleeds into the present and serves as a ghostly reminder to him that ‘[T]he refugee dwells inside’ (Nguyen 2015: 471).

Our analysis of R Student’s narratives demonstrates how university policies and practices informed by neo-liberalism intersected in complex ways with R Student’s past as a refugee to inform his life as a student. It furthermore shows that although neo-liberalism is a powerful force within higher education, it is not a totalising one. Dr A’s kindness and support and the faculty member at University B who confided in R Student about his wife’s situation illustrate this.

Additionally, although he suffered many hardships, R Student also made his way to the UK at age 10; contacted interviewers who initially rejected his application for a placement until he succeeded in securing a post; successfully challenged his classification as an international student; and despite being bullied at the time, completed his degree only 1% short of a distinction. While these examples of R Student’s actions illustrate how he exercised agency, the narratives overall reveal that it was exercised ‘*in relation to*…historical, social and economic constraints by operating through and with the affordances that [were] available within such constraints’ [emphasis in original] (Miller, 2015: 6).

Agency is thus shown to be not an inherent characteristic but rather something that is deeply informed by ‘material constraints, the top-down influence of powerful individuals and institutions, [and] the shaping effects of neoliberal economic practices’ (Miller, 2015: 6). In identifying the dynamic interaction between R Student’s agency, his relationships with others and the structures around him, he is shown to have a complex personhood in contrast to common reductionist tropes of refugees as being either superhuman agents or tragic victims. Indeed, we are able to see how he resists such labels.

**CONCLUSION**

While we can never know for certain why no refugee students responded to our invitations to be interviewed, R Student’s experiences suggest that the reasons are likely complex, relational and informed by socio-political forces. For example, R Student learned that his refugee status could be a liability, blocking educational opportunities or more gravely, leading to his deportation. Even after obtaining citizenship and while writing his autoethnographic accounts, he remains frightened that his passport will be stripped away, forcing him to return to X. Encounters with soldiers, immigration officers, interviewers, university bureaucrats and a bullying supervisor all gave him good reason to be mistrustful of others. He fears for his family who are still in X and who have learned that silence is a price worth paying for safety. Exposing his identity, even to a good friend, shifts relational dynamics and reminds R Student how unequal he is and how exotic he appears to others. When compelled to share his status with faculty, he finds that they might respond kindly or with indifference, illustrating the unpredictability of others’ reactions. Reminders that he is a refugee open up painful memories and deepen the shame he feels about this aspect of his identity.

R student’s desire to conceal the fact that he is a refugee for reasons including fear, mistrust, stigma avoidance, shame and the prevention of opening of old wounds, is consistent with the available literature (Allsopp et al., 2014; Bowen, 2014; Hannah, 1999; Morrice, 2013). The thick descriptions he provides, however, move beyond what is already known about the experiences of refugee students engaged in higher education by showing us first-hand the complex and entangled web of the multiple factors giving rise to them.

This article also makes explicit the stickiness of these elements by the fact that R Student feels unable to lay claim as an author of this piece. We did revisit earlier discussions about redacting R Student’s name in response to a peer reviewer’s concern that this might further marginalise him. Although now graduated, he continues to feel that it would be unsafe for him and his family to be identified. Indeed, since first submitting this paper to this journal, in the wake of Brexit, the dismantling of the Calais refugee camp and the election of Donald Trump as American President, we have all encountered and witnessed increased hostility toward refugees and migrants.

As with R Student, education is generally perceived by refugee communities as a precious opportunity, bringing stability and new beginnings. However, our research suggests that refugees may experience higher education as a double-edged sword. While scholarship on refugees’ experiences of higher education is growing, very little of this work is autoethnographic and, apart from our own, we are unaware of any collaborative autoethnographies. This study therefore makes a valuable contribution to both refugee and higher education scholarship. In adopting a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach that links R Student’s personal situation to the forces of history and the society in which he lives, we have gained unique insight into the refugee university student experience.

In particular, we have shown how R Student’s past as a survivor of genocide and forced migration; his corrosive and supportive relationships; and neo-liberal policies and practices all intersected in complex and varied ways to shape his experience of being a refugee student. As such, our study offers a counter-narrative. In particular, it challenges neo-liberal discourse which blames individuals for the problems they encounter and obscures social and relational forces. It furthermore identifies key systemic issues that must be addressed in order for refugees to benefit fully from higher education. In identifying the compassionate actions of two faculty members and describing how R Student exercised constrained agency we have also demonstrated that neo-liberalism is not an all-encompassing, consistent or impervious force. There is, therefore, the possibility that we can move away from neo-liberalism’s grip and develop alternatives.

If we are to make universities safe places for all students, including refugees, it is essential that we look critically at our institutions and practices and use the insights we gain to foster hospitable learning environments that nurture compassionate intellect and promote social justice. Our study may make a small contribution toward this goal. For example, we shared our research with the university that Kathy and Larry continue to work within and understand that the findings are being discussed and may be used to inform future developments in policy and practice. We hope too that others are able to use this article in a similar fashion at their own institutions and that they take encouragement from the fact that, as R Student’s story demonstrates, their individual acts of kindness can make an important difference to students.

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