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Blended Learning & Targeted Support for Refugees in South Africa: Adapting to Higher Education Barriers

An Evaluative Case Study of the UpLearn Blended Learning Program

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Abstract

This single case study encompasses the use of blended learning in higher education for refugees in South Africa, a societal group that is largely excluded from traditional institutions. The UpLearn program, facilitated by the Southern New Hampshire University in cooperation with the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town, seeks to overcome exclusionary access and success barriers by utilizing blended learning and providing targeted support. To evaluate UpLearn's approach and to generate knowledge about possible interventions that decrease higher education barriers, the following research question will be raised: *How does UpLearn facilitate access and success in higher education for refugees in South Africa?* To answer this question, the program will be evaluated based on an integrative literature review, semi-structured interviews and analyzed documents. Thereby, this study presents barriers, adaptations, impacts and recommendations. It is shown that blended learning signifies a flexible low-cost approach that can balance aspects of access and success. Furthermore, this study shows the importance of holistic support approaches that serve the needs of refugees.

Foreword

In the common debate about refugees, one might easily neglect the importance of higher education for this societal group. For me, this changed when I conducted a six-month internship at the UpLearn blended learning program in South Africa. I realized that regardless of how determined and capable refugees are, their ability to further their education in South Africa is limited. At UpLearn, I witnessed an approach that was fundamentally different from traditional higher education institutions and seemed to adapt to the circumstances of refugees especially because of that. This notion inspired me to conduct a case study about UpLearn to evaluate the program's adaptations. Hereby, I hope to contribute to the development of interventions for refugee higher education that enable pathways to individual and societal benefits.

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1. Introduction

By the end of 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported 29.4 million refugees and asylum-seekers [1] worldwide, the largest number since the end of World War II (UNHCR, 2019). Although research suggests that higher education carries inherent benefits for individuals and society, only one percent of the global refugee population can access it, which results from a myriad of barriers that are magnified by a lack of socioeconomic and academic support (Lenette, 2016; Ferede, 2018; Streitwieser, Loo, Ohorodnik & Jeong, 2019). This highlights the importance of identifying context-specific barriers and investigating the interventions of educational programs that are supposed to diminish these barriers (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Streitwieser et al., 2019). In this context, the South African higher education system is especially interesting because programs must adapt to the country's practically non-existing support (Kavuro, 2015; CoRMSA, 2008; Landau, 2006; Davis, 2019). Academic programs that diverge from traditional approaches might thus help to improve access and success for refugees through targeted interventions (Streitwieser et al., 2019).

1.1 Higher Education Inequity in South Africa

South Africa has a long history of inequity with regards to higher education, which has not been resolved since the end of apartheid. Despite several reforms, the system still fails to effectively include disadvantaged groups (Badat, 2010; Boughey, 2002; Kavuro, 2015). This is striking because international and domestic law promote a progressive introduction of accessible higher education without discrimination to realize the full potential of every student (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, art. 26; Refugee Act, 1998, art. 27; Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, chapter 2). In contrast, several unresolved access and success barriers for refugees and low-income students manifest in a decoupling of applicable laws and actual reality. Accordingly, the constitutional ideal of equal opportunities is out of reach. This derives from difficulties regarding the fulfillment of basic needs and exclusion from

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[1] Subsequently the term 'refugee' will be used to refer to both refugees and asylum-seekers.

interventions that facilitate higher education (Kavuro, 2015; CoRMSA, 2008; Landau, 2006; Davis, 2019; NSFAS, 2020). The underrepresentation of this societal group in higher education furthermore leads to a lack of academic support and ability to succeed (McCowan, 2016; Lenette, 2016; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Streitwieser et al., 2019). Thus, working towards equity can be seen as an important goal, as well as ensuring a high quality of support to foster success. This can be achieved by interventions in two distinct higher education stages: pre-enrollment [access] and post-enrollment [success] (McCowan, 2016; Boughey, 2002; Badat, 2010).

1.2 Targeted Interventions

Given that there has been virtually no progress in adapting to the needs of refugees in higher education, it is unlikely that the government of South Africa will remove the barriers to access and success anytime soon (Kavuro, 2015). Thus, innovative interventions are required to adapt to the specific needs of the target group. Resulting from the insufficiency of funds to meet the demand for higher education, these interventions must balance their funding to increase access through availability (by increasing the number of enrollable students), access through accessibility (by providing equal opportunities to enroll) and success (by offering equitable support to enable students to use their full potential). If the funding remains constant, the costs for the facilitation of one aspect would thus simultaneously lead to less funding for the facilitation of the other aspects. Hence, the limited funding results in a dilemma in the establishment of higher education programs (McCowan, 2016).

One intervention that reacts to this dilemma and seeks to decrease higher education barriers of refugees is represented by the academic program investigated throughout this research, which implements a blended learning approach. Blended learning is ought to combine the benefits of distance education with the benefits of traditional brick-and-mortar support (Singh, 2003). To analyze how blended learning programs adapt to higher education barriers in refugee contexts, research about the practical implementation of educational programs has to be conducted (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Streitwieser et al., 2019). The single case examined throughout this research is the UpLearn program situated in Cape Town, South Africa. The program is facilitated by the Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) and the Scalabrini

Centre of Cape Town (Scalabrini), which partnered up to provide accredited American Associate and Bachelor degrees to 150 students at no-cost. Its objective is to give access to those who may be constrained by financial or legal barriers. Besides, the program seeks to facilitate success by providing targeted support (Scalabrini, 2018; CLCC, 2017)

1.3 Research Questions

Throughout this study the following evaluative research question will be answered to elaborate on UpLearn's interventions in the South African refugee context:

How does UpLearn facilitate access and success in higher education for refugees in South Africa?

UpLearn will be evaluated based on an analytical framework that synthesizes literature to identify refugee specific access and success barriers (1). By referring to this framework, UpLearn's adaptations to these barriers will be explained (2). This enables an evaluation of the implications of these support adaptations on access and success in South African higher education for refugees (3). Based on this evaluation, recommendations will be derived to provide feasible approaches and navigate dilemmas (4). This process expresses in four sub-questions that will consequently lead to an answer to the main research question.

(1) What are the access and success barriers in higher education for refugees in South Africa?

(2) How does UpLearn adapt to access and success barriers in higher education for refugees in South Africa?

(3) What are the implications of UpLearn's adaptations regarding access and success in higher education for refugees in South Africa?

(4) How can UpLearn be improved to facilitate access and success in higher education for refugees in South Africa?

1.4 Social & Scientific Relevance

The social relevance of this research is grounded in the advantages of higher education on the individual and public level, which are vital for successful integration and wellbeing. On the individual level, higher education is an accelerator for upward social and economic mobility, while additional benefits, such as increased social engagement, increased tax revenues and a decreased demand on public budgets, exist on the public level. An exclusion from higher education can contrarily be evaluated as reinforcing poverty and dependency (Lenette, 2016; Russell & Weaver, 2019; Ferede, 2018; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Kavuro, 2015; Crea, 2015). Since blended learning might be a tool to decrease the global access gap between refugees (1%) and the global youth (34%), it is of fundamental interest to explore the potential prospects of the approach (Russell & Weaver, 2019; Akyol et al., 2009; CLCC, 2017; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Streitwieser et al., 2019). Therefore, the findings will be of special interest for stakeholders associated with the education sector, who are interested in an analysis of higher education barriers, blended learning and targeted support in the context of refugees. Moreover, the findings will be explicitly relevant to the facilitators of the UpLearn program.

The scientific relevance lays in the novelty of the research topic. Although research about education for refugees increases in popularity, the higher education context remains largely unexplored. Only a small body of literature focuses on higher education barriers for refugees, while country-specific data is especially rare. Hence, research about existing interventions can help to understand the facilitation of higher education in country-specific circumstances (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Streitwieser et al, 2019). Firstly, this study contributes to the scientific debate through the development of an analytical framework that identifies South African access and success barriers. Secondly, collecting evidence about the adaptations and implications of the UpLearn program helps to decrease the knowledge gap concerning blended learning and targeted support interventions. This study consequently follows the recommendation to "focus on the enablers and support mechanism that exist and ask questions of what needs to be created to facilitate success" (Ramsay & Baker, 2019, p. 80).

2. Analytical Framework

To analyze the UpLearn program validly, a theoretical analytical framework has to be established. This requires the conduction of an integrative literature review to synthesize different theories (Torraco, 2015). Subsequently, this chapter elaborates on the context of operation and explores socioeconomic and academic support in South Africa. Building upon this, different higher education barriers will be distinguished. Then, blended learning will be presented as a mode of instruction that might be beneficial in overcoming these barriers. Considering all elements will finally lead to a comprehensive analytical framework.

2.1 Socioeconomic Support

Socioeconomic support will be conceptualized as access to governmental social and financial support (McCowan, 2016). South Africa relies on the self-dependency of 112.000 refugees and 464.000 asylum-seekers residing all over the country, which means that socioeconomic support is barely available (UNHCR, 2015; CoRMSA, 2008). Support in terms of accommodation and financial aid is rare, or there is no access to services at all. Thus, most refugees support themselves through work or informal social networks (CoRMSA, 2008; Rugunanan, 2011; Landau, 2006). As literature concludes, there is little evidence for a systematic and consistent improvement even concerning the most basic rights, such as health and education. Hence, the lack of enhancement of socioeconomic support diminishes hope for future developments. Being deprived of socioeconomic support and student funding, most refugees do not have the means to participate and succeed in higher education (Kavuro, 2015; CoRMSA, 2008; NSFAS, 2020).

2.2 Academic Support

Academic support is another important determinant for access and success in higher education and will be conceptualized as adapting to the needs of students on the level of higher education institutions (McCowan, 2016). Although public South African universities generally accept refugees, they are bound to socioeconomic support constraints. Universities do not have the funding to compensate for this, which results in low enrollment figures (NSFAS, 2020;

UCT, 2020; Davis, 2019; Kavuro, 2015). The low admittance of refugees naturally results in a lack of pressure to act, which hinders the adoption of appropriate academic support mechanisms. This derives from the premise that "curricula and institutional cultures are seen to favour dominant social groups and can serve to marginalise others and lead to their 'failure' within the system" (McCowan, 2016, p. 651). The limited enrollment thus results in lingering effects on support opportunities, which is problematic because it hinders "tailored academic, social, and practical support throughout the process of applying to and studying in higher education contexts" (Ramsay & Baker, 2019, p. 67).

2.3 Access to Higher Education

Access to higher education will be conceptualized as the extent to which socioeconomic and academic support enable enrollment in higher education. To achieve equity of access, there must be sufficient places to grant every individual who desires and has a minimum level of preparation access to higher education (availability). Furthermore, the received support must depend on the needs of individuals and applicants must have a fair opportunity to enroll at the institution of their choice (accessibility) (McCowan, 2016). Thus, the barriers specifically applicable to refugees must be identified and targeted to facilitate equity (Streitwieser et al., 2019; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Subsequently, five barriers to access will be distinguished and entered as intervening variables into the framework. The first barrier is *limited access to information* and results from a lack of knowledge about applicable procedures. Information might be difficult to retrieve or there might be no access to the internet (Ferede, 2018; Oyedemi, 2012; McCowan, 2016). Secondly, the *unavailability of necessary documents* can effectively prevent refugees from enrolling. This is grounded in the malfunctioning South African asylum system, which produces a mass of undocumented foreigners and unprocessed asylum requests. Additionally, documents regarding prior education might be lost or difficult to retrieve. Other problems include interrupted schooling or complex evaluation processes (CoRMSA, 2008; Scalabrini, 2019; UNHCR, 2015; Landau, 2006; Rugunanan, 2011; Ferede, 2018; Schockaert et al., 2020; UCT, 2020; Matriculation Board, 2020). Thirdly, *limited language proficiency* is common and non-native speakers often fail to satisfy the enrollment

requirements. This is manifested by the lack of governmental language training, which forces refugees to self-responsibly enroll in (paid) language courses (CoRMSA, 2008; UCT, 2020; Landau, 2006; Ferede, 2018). Additionally, refugees often face *precarious life circumstances* that are associated with legislative challenges and problems concerning work, housing, security, childcare or transport (Landau, 2006; Rugunanan, 2011; Ferede, 2018; CoRMSA, 2008). Lastly, the *prohibitive costs* of higher education oppose a barrier to enrollment because refugees need to be financially self-sufficient. This means that only regular low-income citizens are entitled to access the NSFAS funding scheme that covers costs for tuition, food, accommodation, books, and travel (NSFAS, 2020; UCT, 2020; Davis, 2019; Ferede, 2018; Kavuro, 2015). Hence, *socioeconomic- and academic support must be targeted at removing the presented barriers to foster access to higher education.*

2.4 Success in Higher Education

Success in higher education will be conceptualized as the extent to which socioeconomic and academic support enables students to use their full potential. To facilitate equitable success in higher education, adequate support mechanisms have to be in place to react to the barriers of the target group (Lenette, 2016; McCowan, 2016). The first barrier is a *lack of resources,* which includes a lack of study materials, internet access and transport. Resources to succeed are often not affordable as a result of the absence of socioeconomic support (CoRMSA, 2008; Crea, 2015; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Brown & Pallitt, 2015; Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010; Oyedemi, 2012; Kavuro, 2015; Venter, 2011). Secondly, refugees *need to prioritize immediate problems,* which means that fixed schedules can be detrimental to success because consistent participation might not be possible. Many need to take care of their family or sustain themselves through work, which limits their availability for study activities (CoRMSA, 2008; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Kavuro, 2015; Russell & Weaver, 2019). The third barrier is *academic language and digital literacy demand,* as it cannot be expected that the target group meets the demand of the study immediately. Besides, principles concerning academics vary greatly between countries and refugees need time and support to adapt (Xu, 1991; Boškić et al., 2018; Ferede, 2018; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; CoRMSA, 2008; Russell & Weaver, 2019; Berman & Cheng,

2010; Xu, 1991; Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010; Leung, 2009; Brown & Pallitt, 2015). The fourth barrier is manifested by *psychological and emotional effects* which result from resettlement experiences and require cultural competence from the university staff. This also includes mental issues resulting from precarious life circumstances, study stress and difficulties to connect with other students from dissimilar backgrounds (Papadopoulos, 2017; Murray, Davidson & Schweitzer, 2010; Schockaert et al., 2020; Crea, 2015; Rayle & Chung, 2007; Jack, Chase & Warwick, 2019). Lastly, a *lack of targeted support* limits the success of refugees. The diversity in student backgrounds might result in problems for the teaching staff to adapt to individual needs and to allocate equitable support (McCowan, 2016; Boughey, 2002; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Lenette, 2016; Halkic & Arnold, 2011). Thus, *socioeconomic and academic support must be targeted at removing the presented barriers to foster success in higher education.* Deriving from the unlikelihood of government-led improvement of socioeconomic and academic support, *innovative support adaptations are required.*

2.5 Blended Learning

Adapting to access and success barriers can be done through innovative interventions, such as the blended learning program that constitutes the unit of analysis. To conceptualize blended learning, one has to differentiate between three different modes of instruction, namely: traditional, distance and blended. A traditional mode of instruction, often referred to as brick-and-mortar education, implies that students physically attend classes on-site. This means students have to reside in proximity to a university campus and that education takes place in the classroom. Oppositely, distance education takes place online and does not require the students to be physically present. According to the original use of the phrase 'blended learning', this research will thus conceptualize blended learning as the combination of traditional and distance modes of instruction (Singh, 2003; CLCC, 2017; Akyol et al., 2009; Scalabrini, 2018).

Initial research pointed out that blended learning has benefits over distance learning in fostering group cohesion, levels of inquiry and student satisfaction. This is largely attributed to the ability of participants to meet face-to-face with teaching staff and peers. The material and social context of brick-and-mortar education consequently has positive implications on the motivation

of students (Akyol et al., 2009; Halkic & Arnold, 2018; CLCC, 2017). In contrast to traditional modes of instruction, the distance learning component incorporates adjustable schedules, which facilitates the ability of students to take care of other needs. This enables access for those who would not be able to fulfill their basic needs if they would enroll in programs with fixed schedules (Singh, 2003; Russell & Weaver, 2019; CLCC, 2017). Moreover, higher education institutions can offer the same program content in different locations by working with partner organizations, which can increase access through availability (McCowan, 2016; Russell & Weaver, 2019). Furthermore, Singh argues that a blended mode of instruction can improve the "learning program development and deployment costs and time" (Singh, 2003, p.52). He adds that blended learning can work better than individual forms of traditional or distance education (Singh, 2003). Based on the argument that blended learning can facilitate availability, flexibility, learning and support it can be proposed that *blended learning can be beneficial in overcoming access and success barriers in higher education for refugees in South Africa.*

2.6 Combined Analytical Framework

Deriving from the theoretical discussions in this chapter, a comprehensive analytical framework has been constructed. Socioeconomic and academic support are seen as the main determinants of access and success in higher education for refugees. The presented barriers are intervening in the relationship and are supposed to be removed by the main determinants, to evoke increased access and success in higher education for refugees in South Africa. The analytical framework can be used to analyze the adaptions of any program that seeks to improve its support for refugees. Subsequently, this framework will guide the analysis of the UpLearn program including its blended learning and targeted support approach (Figure 1).
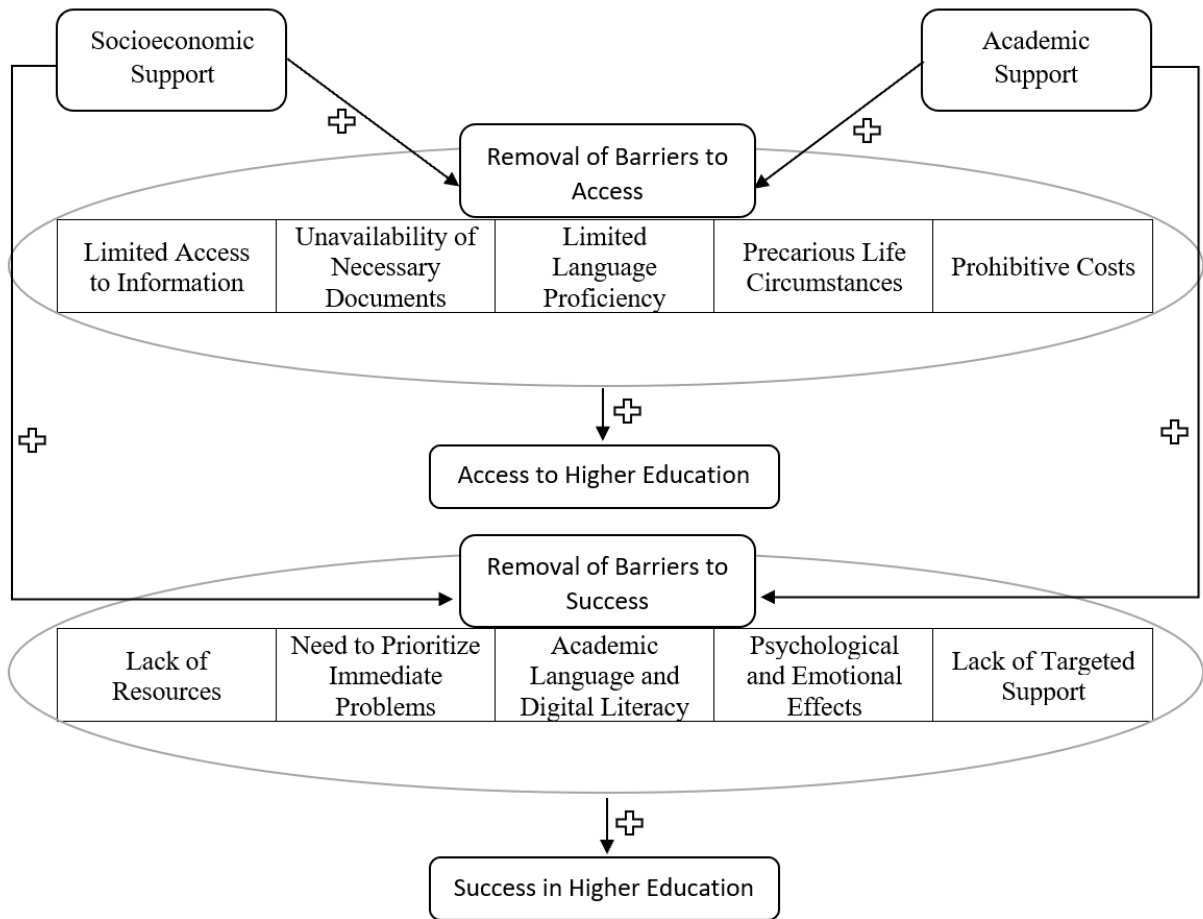
Figure 1: Analytical Framework

3. Methodology

The barriers presented in the analytical framework are linked to different issues that require diverse interventions. Henceforth, multiple data collection methods are essential to examine the different barriers and adaptations by using an evaluative single case study design. Utilizing triangulation can lead to answers that are solidly embedded in a framework of rich data collection methods (Maxwell, 2008; Lewis, 2009; Yazan, 2015).

3.1 Research Design

This case study uses a single holistic design, with the UpLearn program as a unit of analysis. The UpLearn program was selected because it deviates from other programs and requires further exploration to investigate the suitability of its approach for the South African refugee context. The UpLearn program will thus be analyzed by "addressing the "how" and "why" questions concerning the phenomenon of interest" (Yazan, 2015, p. 138). The single holistic design is especially suitable for evaluative research and applicable when there is insufficient preexisting data available. To generate valid findings, each component must be rigorously interlinked with the analytical framework, and the quality of the methodology has to be measured against validity criteria (Yazan, 2015; Maxwell, 2008).

3.2 Data Collection Methods

The data analysis is guided by an analytical structuring of the topic. Articles relating to each barrier were identified by reviewing their content and relevancy. Mainly peer-reviewed articles, published in established academic journals, were included. If relevant information was published in other formats, the trustworthiness of organizations and authors was investigated. The articles are then synthesized through an integrative literature review to analyze barriers and adaptations. The collected literature provides the context for analysis (Torraco, 2005).

Further, open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders by using the interview guide in the appendix. Obtrusiveness has been taken into account and questions were phrased to understand the true experience of respondents. The possibility for follow up questions helped to react to the different roles and experiences of interviewees. All

respondents were purposively selected according to their role at UpLearn. Firstly, an interview with Yoni was conducted, who is the Program Manager of UpLearn (Yoni, 2020). Next, Tavia was interviewed, who is the Academic Coordinator of UpLearn (Tavia, 2020). Then, three students were purposively selected, which differ in terms of their academic characteristics. Thembani started the study relatively recently and it is her first higher education degree (Thembani, 2020). Adolphe studies simultaneously at a traditional university and can compare both modes of instruction (Adolphe, 2020). Donatha recently finished her Bachelor's degree at UpLearn and already studied in her home country (Donatha, 2020). Thus, the interviewees had different perspectives on the program, which contributes to the depth of findings. Based on the analytical framework, the coding scheme consists of ten codes representing each barrier. This form of coding enables the integration of data into the evaluative context.

Additionally, document analysis was conducted as a means of triangulation. A full list of the consulted documents can be found in the appendix. The analysis included administrative data provided by the facilitators of the UpLearn program and an analysis of the CfA online learning platform. The documents and login for the CfA platform were solely provided to the author of this research and are not disclosed. The document selection process involved skimming through almost 3.000 files to identify relevant information. About 200 remaining documents were then processed by using ATLAS.ti. Finally, 18 high information density documents were selected and used for analysis. Since document analysis is not the sole data collection method, only a few evidence-rich documents are sufficient to provide effective means (Bowen, 2009). The documents were coded by using the same scheme as for the interviews.

3.3 Validity

Five main forms of validity had to be taken into account, namely: descriptive validity, interpretation validity, theory validity, researcher bias, and reactivity. To increase descriptive validity, the retrieved information was submitted to review in its entirety, and information was accurately reported. Interpretation validity was facilitated by sticking close to the factual information, to grasp the intended meaning. Furthermore, member-checking helped to gain evaluative feedback of participants. The juxtaposing of data collection methods enabled triangulation and

enhanced evidence for interpretation. Moreover, theory validity was examined by checking if the theory is mirrored in interviews and documents. Closely sticking to the observations helped to prevent researcher bias. A constant critical reevaluation of findings and an active consideration of disapproving data decreased reflexivity. Hence, It can be assumed that the adopted methods adequately react to validity threats to allow for a coherent data analysis (Yazan, 2015; Maxwell, 2008 & Lewis, 2009).

4. Data Analysis

In this chapter, the data is juxtaposed to attain a deep understanding of the context and case. Firstly, the case will be described to establish a context for evaluation. Secondly, the analysis is structured based on the four sub-questions. Each subchapter will analyze one barrier and refer to program adaptations and the implications of these adaptations. The evaluation then leads to recommendations for the improvement of the program.

4.1 Case Description

UpLearn enables students to engage full-time in earning American accredited Associate of Arts- (AA) and Bachelor (BA) degrees from the not-for-profit Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). For this purpose, full scholarships are awarded for a maximum duration of four years. These scholarships cover the full costs of the program through which students can be awarded communication-, management- or healthcare management degrees. The brick-and-mortar support component of the blended learning approach is facilitated by the Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town (Scalabrini, 2020; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020).

The roots of the UpLearn program lay in the development of the College for America (CfA) platform in 2014, which was originally intended to serve working students in the United States. CfA relies on self-paced learning and focusses on the attainment of practical competencies that are organized in goals (Clerkin & Simon, 2014; Russell & Weaver, 2019; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Tavia, 2020). The AA and the BA each require the accomplishment of 120 competencies through the mastering of 20 goals which are designed as real-world activities to serve the mission of facilitating success in the workplace (CLCC, 2017; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). After students submit projects, their work gets assessed by expert reviewers that determine whether the student masters the competencies of the project or receives feedback. Therefore, the program features unlimited attempts at mastery supported by personalized feedback from the reviewer. Self-directed pace is hence the key measurement of success (Clerkin & Simon, 2014; Russell & Weaver, 2019; CfA, 2020; Tavia, 2020).

After receiving a grant, SNHU started to utilize the CfA platform through a blended learning approach to educate refugees and other vulnerable learners in Rwanda (SNHU, 2019; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). In 2018, this gave rise to the founding of the Global Education Movement (GEM) (Russell & Weaver, 2019). One year later, GEM served about 1.000 students in five countries with its mission "to provide a college education and a path to work for refugees and other vulnerable populations" (SNHU, 2019). According to GEM's long-term goal, the program plans to expand to eleven countries and seeks to provide 50.000 students in refugee camps and urban settings with high-quality low-cost degrees (SNHU, 2019). While formative feedback, direct instruction and degree awarding are sole responsibilities of SHNU, the local brick-and-mortar support is facilitated by partner organizations (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Tavia, 2020).

Scalabrini is the local non-profit partner organization of SNHU, operating in the city center of Cape Town, South Africa. The organization offers several services with the overall objective "to foster the cultural, social and economic integration of migrants, refugees and South Africans into local society" (Scalabrini, 2020). These mostly free-of-charge services are used by around 2.000 clients per month and include employment-, welfare-, community-, advocacy- and other support programs (Scalabrini, 2020; Scalabrini, 2018). UpLearn in part of these services and Scalabrini is responsible to utilize SNHU funds to ensure that students have access to brick-and-mortar facilities and necessary technology. Besides, Scalabrini has to ensure proper monitoring and availability of support services (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020).

The local support is facilitated by six fulltime staff members and three volunteers, who oversee 150 enrolled students (BASP Staff Roles, 2020). The average age of an UpLearn student is 34 and about 60 percent of the participants are female (GEM Annual Funder Report, 2018). More than ten nationalities are represented, and students are originating mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo (83), Zimbabwe (20) and Burundi (12). In terms of occupation, 68 percent of the students are employed and 53 percent have children or dependents (Scalabrini Data, 2019; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020).

4.2 Adaptations to Barriers to Access

Barriers to access can ultimately lead to the exclusion of societal groups from higher education. In line with the sub-questions of this study, it is important to identify access barriers, investigate program adaptations and their impact. Higher education actors can structure their support according to these barriers and learn from existing interventions.

4.2.1 Limited Access to Information

The first barrier is represented by the lack of information about higher education. Refugees might not know about their opportunities and therefore not consider enrolling. Firstly, this results from a lack of access to the internet, since most refugees rely on limited mobile data. If internet access is limited, applying to higher education becomes increasingly difficult because the majority of information is provided online (Oyedemi, 2012; Ferede, 2018; GEM Partner Data, 2019; Donatha, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Secondly, universities provide information mainly for regular citizens, so that information specifically useful for refugees might be difficult to retrieve (Ferede, 2018; UCT, 2020).

After conducting 400 admission interviews, UpLearn reached its maximum capacity of 150 students and closed its application process. All enrolled students entered the program through internal referral by Scalabrini employees, which means that applicants were existing clients of the organization (Scalabrini, 2020; Donatha, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Referrals are based on the prerequisite, that "candidates must have performed well in and demonstrated commitment to other educational programs, have expressed interest in pursuing higher education, have basic digital literacy skills and have strong written and spoken English" (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). Following the referral, interested clients are interviewed by the facilitators of the program and are provided with comprehensive information (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). Throughout the interviews, the main criterium is that applicants would not be able to study at traditional institutions. Other determinants are referral requirements such as motivation and capability (Tavia, 2020). Students are then required to conduct tests to get admitted to a three-

month pre-degree program, in which applicants attend courses to get informed and prepared (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Adolphe, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

Information about the program is not spread publicly, which limits its accessibility. Thus, potential applicants are excluded from applying to the program, although they might have the potential to be successful students and to gain significant benefits from higher education. Consequently, the referral system limits access to information (Yoni, 2020; Adolphe, 2020). After referral, applicants benefit through the complex evaluation- and pre-degree phase, which provides sufficient information (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; GEM Partner Data, 2019; Tavia, 2020; Adolphe, 2020).

To decrease the information barrier, the program manager explained that UpLearn has to "think about how to open up the opportunity to refugees and migrants beyond the Scalabrini clientele" (Yoni, 2020). For instance, UpLearn admitted students with limited language proficiency, which diminishes their likelihood of success. The limited number of places could be more efficiently used by applicants who fulfill higher language requirements (Tavia, 2020). Nevertheless, an increased provision of information would also lead to a higher workload for the staff and stricter entry requirements through increased competition (Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020). It can be recommended to open up the application process to the extent that there are enough applicants that fulfill the basic requirements such as need, motivation, capability and language skills. The program could gradually enable referral to UpLearn by other organizations or provide information online. If enough applicants who fulfill the basic entry requirements are found, UpLearn should close applications. This derives from the premise that UpLearn should continue to pursue affirmative action and admit students that could not access traditional institutions to foster social and economic mobility (McCowan, 2016; Ma et al., 2019; Lenette, 2016). Furthermore, this enables UpLearn to maintain its extensive interview and pre-degree system, because the number of applicants is intentionally limited. A complete removal of information barriers is thus neither feasible nor desirable for UpLearn.

4.2.2 Unavailability of Necessary Documents

The unavailability of necessary documents has two dimensions; barriers to access asylum documentation and barriers to prove prior learnings. The first dimension results from the inadequacy of South Africa's asylum system, which actively prevents asylum-seekers from getting their request assessed, as shown by the backlog of 464.000 asylum requests (UNHCR, 2015; Schockaert et al., 2020). It is reported that the refugee reception offices are corrupt, fail to provide sufficient assistance with the process and deny a fair hearing. The adjuration process commonly spans over several years and asylum-seekers must travel long distances to renew their request (CoRMSA, 2008; Rugunanan, 2011; Schockaert et al., 2020; Landau, 2006; Scalabrini, 2019; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). These factors contribute to the risk of losing documentation and consequently access to protection from the South African state, which leads to vulnerability to arrest, detention and deportation (CoRMSA, 2008; Landau, 2006; Schockaert et al., 2020). Although an asylum-seeker permit grants access to higher education, they have an unclear future in the host country and might not consider long-term investments (Tavia, 2020). The second barrier is represented by the requirement to furnish proof of prior learning. High school degrees might be lost and not retrievable from the home country. If documents are available, refugees have to acquire a matriculation exemption certificate and qualification assessment by navigating a complex certification process (Matriculation Board, 2020; Ferede, 2018; Rugunanan, 2011; Yoni, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

UpLearn admits students who have either a work permit, refugee-, asylum-seeker- or citizen status. Undocumented people cannot be admitted according to South African law. Therefore, UpLearn is lenient in accepting students with rather temporary permits (Yoni, 2020). Additionally, Scalabrini offers an advocacy program that seeks to support asylum-seekers in overcoming documentation barriers (Scalabrini, 2020; Yoni, 2020). In terms of prior learning, a high school certificate from any country suffices. Hence, applicants do not need to follow the regular South African equivalence assessment (Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020).

The approach of UpLearn is flexible in recognizing asylum documents and prior learning without equalization and students who fail to meet the admission requirements at traditional

universities might get access to UpLearn (Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Donatha explains that UpLearn was the only program enabling her to pursue higher education: "They [traditional universities] were refusing my papers because I was just an asylum-seeker. They were telling me I should find an equivalent SAQA [qualification assessment] and HESA [matriculation exemption certificate] from South Africa. So, I applied for my SAQA and HESA and it was not successful. They were saying that they were not able to contact my university from my country" (Donatha, 2020). UpLearn does not require this process and hereby decreases the documentation barrier significantly. Furthermore, the advocacy program helps refugees to navigate the necessary paperwork (Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020).

UpLearn does not enable access for those who cannot retrieve their high school certificates (Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Therefore, the program could investigate the option to establish alternate pathways to verify high school level skills. It could implement the GEM initiative that leads to the attainment of a General Educational Development certificate, which verifies skills equal to American high school graduates (CLLC, 2017; GEM Annual Funder Report, 2018; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Offering this support on the other hand might be very costly and the funding could be spent on the improvement of other aspects. Consequently, the program should only facilitate alternate pathways if there is a clear demand.

4.2.3 Limited Language Proficiency

Admission to a South African university requires language tests to prove proficiency in English. While advanced language skills are necessary to succeed in higher education, refugees often face language difficulties that prevent enrollment. Since the South African government does not implement free language courses, non-natives are required to self-responsibly seek support. Language courses are often not affordable, available or restricted in the number of participants (CoRMSA, 2008; UCT, 2020; Ferede, 2018; Scalabrini, 2020). Therefore, language support mechanisms are inappropriate in insufficient socioeconomic support contexts.

UpLearn requires applicants to fulfill certain English levels. Before students can enter the pre-degree program, they have to conduct a read theory test, a written test, a grammar test and

an interview. After completion of the pre-degree, which includes academic English classes, applicants have to master a certain score or show significant improvement (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; GEM Partner Data, 2019). To aid language development, UpLearn closely cooperates with Scalabrini's English School, which provides English lessons for English levels ranging from Beginner A to Intermediate B. The English lessons are provided at a nominal cost of R300 per 12-week term and include two 90-minute learning sessions per week (Scalabrini, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Additionally, free academic English courses are consistently provided throughout the program (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

The English School significantly helps to overcome language barriers, which mirrors in frequent UpLearn referral. Low-cost English classes meet the demand of the target group and are fundamental in fostering higher education, employment and integration. The English School is therefore an essential part of Scalabrini's approach (Scalabrini, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). The availability of classes after enrollment allows the program management to be more lenient in granting applicants access, who might not reach the required English level at enrollment but show determination and capacity to improve. Unlike standardized language tests at traditional universities, the evaluation is based on the context of the applicant (UCT, 2020; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Donatha, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Thus, UpLearn recognizes that applicants with lower admission scores can have more potential than other candidates (McCowan, 2016; Tavia, 2020). Thereby, UpLearn does not remove language barriers, but provides support to overcome them, to participate and to improve continuously during studying.

Nevertheless, language barriers are present throughout the interviews and many applicants were reported to lack sufficient language skills at enrollment. Furthermore, there was a significant difference between interviewees regarding their language proficiency (Donatha, 2020; Thembani, 2020; Adolphe, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). As argued in 4.2.1, the program should raise its admission requirements to only include students that have adequate English skills to enable access for those who are most promising to succeed. Hereby, the program

should not exclude those who initially fail to meet the requirements, but should refer them to Scalabrini's English School to prepare them for participation. If students succeed in the English School's Intermediate B course, they should be able to participate in upcoming admission procedures. Through implementing this recommendation, UpLearn would make sure that students effectively use the offered services to overcome language barriers.

4.2.4 Precarious Life Circumstances

The lack of socioeconomic support leads to precarious life circumstances for refugees. This is manifested by "difficulties in obtaining legal papers, insufficient employment opportunities, deplorable living conditions, the prevalence of crime and the threat of xenophobia" (Rugunanan, 2011, p. 712). The limited support from the government increases these issues and many become dependent on the help of NGOs. Coping with these everyday burdens requires a lot of time and energy, the environment is unstable and many are struggling to ensure the fulfillment of their basic needs. Besides, a lack of sufficient transport, resources and safety renders the thought of furthering education out of reach (CoRMSA, 2008; Ferede, 2018; Rugunanan, 2011; Landau, 2006; CLCC Year Book, 2019; Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020). As UpLearn's program manager noted, "there is just no way they [refugees] could fit in a full-time degree with the other pressures on their life" (Yoni, 2020).

Precarious life circumstances are expensive to target through support by academic institutions (Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020). While UpLearn reserves some funding for welfare support, these funds can only be utilized in certain cases and not as a precondition at enrollment (Scalabrini, 2020; GEM Partner Data, 2019; Welfare SOPs, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Consequently, the program mainly relies on students to support themselves. This is enabled through UpLearn's self-paced blended learning approach, which implements a flexible schedule for applicants and supports students by providing resources to work at home (Laptop Loan, 2019; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). Additionally, the Employment Access Programme helps to bring clients into employment through skills training, job placement services and a help desk (Scalabrini, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020).

Welfare and employment support can help students to improve their precarious life situations and sustain themselves (Scalabrini, 2020; GEM Partner Data, 2019; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). UpLearn's self-paced blended learning approach enables this through flexibility, while brick-and-mortar full-time programs are "very prohibitive if you got lots of other life challenges" (Yoni, 2020). Hence, UpLearn allows applicants to remain working and thus integrates into their life (Russell & Weaver, 2019; GEM Partner Data, 2019; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

Precarious life situations remain evident among UpLearn students, because "students are older, have families to provide for and don't have easy access to good jobs" (Yoni, 2020). With sufficient funding, UpLearn could support students with their living-costs or give credits. On the other hand, this would significantly increase the costs per student, which could lead to lower student admittance figures due to insufficient funds. UpLearn has to set priorities and therefore cannot provide this form of financial support. While supporting students with their living costs would be more effective to remove the barrier, UpLearn limits the costs per student, to be able to increase access through availability.

4.2.5 Prohibitive Costs

Refugees in South Africa are defined as international students and are exposed to high tuition fees and financial self-dependency. The NSFAS funding scheme that would cover the costs for tuition, food, accommodation, books and travel is only available to low-income students with citizen status (NSFAS, 2020; Kavuro, 2015; Davis, 2019; Yoni, 2020). Additionally, the time demand of higher education implies that full-time work is unbearable. Paying the tuition without work or financial aid is not feasible and therefore the direct costs and the costs of opportunity are prohibitive (Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Thembani, 2020; Donatha, 2020; Adolphe, 2020). Thus, the government's failure to provide support implies that funding needs to be retrieved from external actors (Davis, 2019; Kavuro, 2015; Ferede, 2018). When Thembani was asked if she considered attending university before she got to know about UpLearn, she commented: "I can't say I thought about going to South African university, because I didn't have the money, but it was always my wish to go to university" (Thembani, 2020).

The approach of UpLearn towards decreasing the direct costs for students is to provide the degree and all associated services at no cost, except a nominal once-off registration fee of R250. Students receive a bursary over four years from SNHU, which also funds the local services at UpLearn (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Thembani, 2020). Moreover, self-paced blended learning enables the flexibility to be self-sustainable (CLCC, 2017; Scalabrini Data, 2019; Tavia, 2020).

UpLearn's approach of offering bursaries decreases prohibitive costs because students are not subjected to direct costs for their study and their financial wellbeing after completion is not affected (McCowan, 2016; Tavia, 2020). Most full-time students at traditional universities could not conduct major work next to their study, resulting from fixed attendance requirements. Contrarily, blended learning enables adaptable schedules and decreases the costs of opportunity associated with higher education. This is mirrored in the student data since more than half of the UpLearn students work or have dependents and thus would be prevented from accessing traditional institutions (Scalabrini Data, 2019; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Adolphe, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

Nevertheless, prohibitive costs are not completely diminished and "students who decide to maintain significant work or other life commitments do so with the full knowledge that if these commitments interfere with the student's ability to make satisfactory academic progress, they may pose a risk to continued scholarship support" (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). While certain progress and brick-and-mortar presence are required for UpLearn students to retain their scholarship, the flexibility to work nevertheless reduces prohibitive costs. It might be a feasible suggestion to also offer bursary periods exceeding four years (part-time) conditional on the applicant's circumstances to serve the self-sustainability requirement.

4.3 Adaptations to Barriers to Success

Not every program that enables access to higher education for refugees can be evaluated as successful. Implementing a successful program requires equitable support approaches based on the needs of students. If there is a lack of support, only the most dominant, capable and equipped students would be able to succeed, which reproduces inequality (Halkic & Arnold, 2018; Lenette, 2016; McCowan, 2016; Yoni, 2020). Hence, adaptations to barriers to success are equally important and will be examined in the following paragraphs.

4.3.1 Lack of Resources

A lack of material resources such as laptops, internet access, learning spaces and transport can endanger the success of students (Crea, 2015; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020; Thembani, 2020). Capitalizing on the use of personal devices and the internet bares risks in resource-constrained environments and opposes a risk for successful participation in increasingly digitalized study activities (Brown & Pallitt, 2015; Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010). As shown in a survey from 2012, 63 percent of South African university students had access to a personal device and 37 percent had access to the internet at home. The figures were especially low for low-income households (Oyedemi, 2012). This becomes apparent throughout the interviews, as UpLearn students lack access to the internet and rely on the program's computer lab (GEM Partner Data, 2019; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020; Donatha, 2020). Moreover, travel requirements hinder physical access and consequently success in higher education (Kavuro, 2015; GEM Partner Data, 2019; Donatha, 2020). Transport costs are reported to be regressive and accordingly consume large proportions of the income of economically disadvantaged students (Venter, 2011). Moreover, security risks and crime are prevalent (Rugunanan, 2011; Landau, 2006; Tavia, 2020). Refugees are explicitly affected because accommodation in the urban periphery is more affordable, which results in long travel distances of up to four hours a day (GEM Partner Data, 2019; Tavia, 2020). Donatha recognizes this as her main challenge with regards to her study and explains: "I wanted to get to Scalabrini so I can be able to access the internet. If I stayed home, I was not able to access the internet and then the challenge was to get transport to get to Scalabrini" (Donatha, 2020).

UpLearn features a computer lab in which the students have access to 30 computers and private rooms for academic activities (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Student Support SOPs, 2019). In 2019, UpLearn additionally provided laptops for academic purposes to all applying students (CLCC Year Book, 2019; Laptop Loan, 2019; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020; Thembani, 2020). The computer lab and laptops can be used to access the CfA platform that provides the resources necessary for project completion (CfA, 2020). Furthermore, these resources are saved on a USB drive that is provided to every student upon admission to be able to work from home. Students without a personal computer can use the printing service which is available for R10 (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Guide to Working Offline, 2020). In terms of transport, UpLearn investigates options of support, but currently only provides financial support during internships or on a case-by-case basis (GEM Partner Data, 2019; Tavia, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

The computer lab offers a common space for students to access the internet, approach staff for support and collaborate, which is essential for success in the degree (CLCC, 2017; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Student laptops help to create a learning space at home. The suitability of the CfA platform and the offered resources for offline use enable successful work in environments with limited internet access (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; CfA, 2020; Guide to Working Offline, 2020). These services have a positive impact on the ability of students to use their resources outside of the computer lab, which facilitates project completion and therefore success in the study (Clerkin & Simon, 2014; Russell & Weaver, 2019; CLCC, 2017; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; CfA, 2020; Guide to Working Offline, 2020; Adolphe, 2020).

UpLearn could improve on the availability of computer spaces since "the lab must be accessed in shifts and thus every student will have a set attendance schedule" (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). This implies that the lab is only available for limited periods, although students might need more time to access brick-and-mortar or online services, collect additional resources, submit projects or receive feedback. The program could further provide students with mobile data for academic purposes (Donatha, 2020). UpLearn should continue to check

for solutions for transportation problems such as ridesharing or taxis which remains problematic because "students just live in too many different directions" (Tavia, 2020). Although support concerning transport is available on a case-by-case basis, transport issues remain a big barrier to success, since brick-and-mortar services are difficult to access (GEM Partner Data, 2019; Tavia, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

4.3.2 Need to Prioritize Immediate Problems

Precarious life circumstances and prohibitive costs not only affect access but also success in higher education because refugees need to prioritize immediate problems over study activities (CoRMSA, 2008; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Kavuro, 2015; Russell & Weaver, 2019). Therefore, refugees might be "more worried about essential things like food and rent than studying" (Tavia, 2020). Being enrolled in a full-time study means that students are supposed to spend 40 hours a week on their studies. Lectures and examinations take place at prescribed times and require regular attendance. Thus, a student's success is endangered by failures to attend lectures or to meet deadlines for graded assignments, presentations or examinations. This causes delays in the study, financial hardship and eventually can cause students to drop out. The barrier results from the lack of flexibility to react to permanent or temporary problems of students. Significant work, childcare and other obligations are not possible if a fixed schedule is set by brick-and-mortar programs (Davis, 2019; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Kavuro, 2015; Russell & Weaver, 2019; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Adolphe, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

UpLearn requires students to attend two computer lab sessions each week to maintain eight hours of contact time. The computer lab and brick-and-mortar support are available weekdays between eight am and four pm. Additionally, students can fulfill their attendance requirements on Tuesday and Saturday evenings. This is complemented by at least 22 hours of self-study a week. In the first week of each month, students must attend two full-day teaching workshops during their AA and one full day during their BA. Additionally, students must complete an internship, a professional development course and a digital literacy course. Ultimately, UpLearn expects students to master at least six competencies each month during their AA and five

during their BA. If students consistently fail to meet any of the mentioned obligations, they will be put on academic probation. Since the main measurement of success is competency mastery, students on academic probation are under strong supervision of their academic coach to bring them back on track. If students fail any of the requirements, they might get subjected to academic exit hearings, which can result in withdrawal from the program (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; CLLC Application, 2019; Student Support SOPs, 2019; Exit SOPs, 2019; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020).

Similar to other full-time higher education programs, UpLearn requires a high time commitment from students. Nevertheless, mastering projects can be done at any time, which allows students to take care of immediate problems. The schedule for a student's lab sessions is adaptable and the opening times allow students to schedule their attendance around obligations like work or childcare. Additional courses are offered several times per year and the internship requires a low weekly time to accommodate personal schedules (BASP Information, 2020; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; BASP GEM Presentation, 2019; GEM Annual Funder Report, 2019; Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020). Under special circumstances, students might receive permission to receive alternative schedules with less contact time or remote schedules. Furthermore, a leave of absence for a maximum of three months can be granted in case of unforeseen circumstances. Yet, to eradicate delays students are expected to have a high time commitment afterward (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Student Support SOPs, 2019). UpLearn thus enables students to flexibly structure their study commitment to allow them to take care of immediate problems.

The program should continue to offer flexible schedules based on the life circumstances of students. Hereby, the flexibility of voluntary and especially mandatory services could be improved by using several timeslots. If possible, classes should also be recorded and provided for use at home. In case of long-term problems that are detrimental to pursuing the degree, the administration could consider offering an extended bursary period based on case-by-case decisions. This would prevent students who are in long-term hardships from dropping out because of circumstances that are not related to their capability or motivation.

4.3.3 Academic Language and Digital Literacy Demand

Since non-native speakers have to pass language tests before enrollment, it can be expected that students at South African institutions have decent English skills (UCT, 2020; Xu, 1991). Nevertheless, writing academically is difficult for non-native speakers that are not accustomed to the language (Ferede, 2018; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; CoRMSA, 2008; Russel & Weaver, 2019; Zonokhanyo Network Proposal, 2019; Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Thembani, 2020). Language difficulties are directly related to academic performance and Tavia notes that "students who performed lower in English have struggled more in the degree" (Tavia, 2020). Therefore, refugees must get support to cope with academic language demands especially during their first year (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Xu, 1991). In terms of digital literacy, there are instances where students are not accustomed to using a computer, although computer skills are necessary to succeed in higher education. Higher education institutions might see these skills as basic and given, but they can be difficult to acquire for individuals who barely got in contact with computers (Boškić et al., 2018; IDinsight Report, 2018; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Therefore, digital literacy skills must be developed throughout the program since students might lack the ability to flourish in an increasingly digital environment (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010; Boškić et al., 2018; Leung, 2009; Brown & Pallitt, 2015).

The three-month pre-degree program is an initial preparation for students to improve their academic language, digital literacy skills and capability to navigate the CfA platform (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; GEM Partner Data, 2019). Throughout the degree, students can also use the skill-building resources offered via the CfA platform (CfA, 2020). Besides, students are encouraged to approach the in-lab volunteers and to use online services like grammarly.com and tutor.com (Coaching SOPs, 2019). Additionally, UpLearn offers two different English courses, that meet three times a month. The English Club 101 is targeted at students which struggle with academic writing, and the Creative English Club is supposed to improve individual writing styles for passionate students (BASP Information, 2020). Digital literacy is facilitated through a ten-week digital literacy training, after which participants are envisioned to master all necessary tech skills (BASP Information, 2020; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020).

The UpLearn academic coordinator explains that the program initially admitted some students with low English proficiency but that these students showed significant improvement throughout the degree (Tavia, 2020). This can be attributed to the online and brick-and-mortar support approaches of the program. Students improve their academic language and digital literacy skills through working on projects, attending complementary classes or communicating with peers. The need for different levels of support is accommodated by the existence of two separate English clubs depending on language levels. UpLearn thus manages to provide students with the tools to improve their academic language and digital literacy skills (BASP Information, 2020; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020; Donatha, 2020).

Throughout the interviews, the language levels of students differed significantly and one AA respondent had difficulties with giving detailed answers to some of the interview questions (Thembani, 2020; Donatha, 2020; Adolphe, 2020). Similar to the recommendations in 4.2.1 and 4.2.3, the program should either make its admission process stricter or additional language classes mandatory if language skills are insufficient. Yet, the analysis has shown that participation in language classes might not be possible for everyone since classes are scheduled once a week during working hours (BASP Information, 2020). UpLearn should consider offering essential classes in the evening or on weekends to accommodate the need to prioritize immediate problems and increase participation. This would manifest in increased success through better English development.

4.3.4 Psychological and Emotional Effects

Forced migration can predispose individuals to psychological problems in resettlement countries. Hereby it can be differentiated between preflight, flight and resettlement factors. Refugees "must learn to navigate an entirely new community, language, and cultural system, while simultaneously coping with the loss of homeland, family, and way of life" (Murray et al., 2010, p. 557; Jack et al., 2019; Crea, 2015). Situations, where refugees struggle with fulfilling their needs, will impact mental health. This means that changes in social roles, social isolation, unemployment, insecurity and financial difficulties can seriously affect individuals (Papadopoulos, 2007; Murray et al., 2010; Jack et al., 2019). The presence of these factors in the South

African refugee context evokes a demand for structural (Schockaert et al., 2020). Moreover, academic stress might emerge from studying, especially if students lack social support or feel as if they do not matter to their institution (Rayle & Chung, 2007). These factors can be detrimental to success in higher education because students might be concerned with other problems than studying (Murray et al., 2010; Papadopulos, 2017; Rayle & Chung, 2020)

UpLearn provides higher education for refugees who wish to pursue it but are excluded through the barriers presented throughout this study. As presented in the previous chapters, the program recognizes the need to prioritize immediate problems and fosters integration through employment support, professional development training and other services. Furthermore, students can get support from peers and frequently interact with staff members (Scalabrini, 2020; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020; Donatha, 2020; Adolphe, 2020). Individual coaches can help students to navigate the demand of the program and to find individualized solutions. If the issue is beyond the capacity of staff members, coaches can facilitate psycho-social referrals to counseling or group-therapy (Coaching SOPs, 2019).

Facilitating higher education "is vital to ensure wellbeing, greater socioeconomic integration and inclusion, and successful settlement of refugee communities to make a positive contribution to society" (Lenette, 2016, p. 1311). Therefore, the facilitation of higher education as such is an intervention that helps to overcome the psychological and emotional effects of forced resettlement (Murray et al., 2010; Crea, 2015; Jack et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2019; Lenette, 2016; Russell & Weaver, 2019; Ferede, 2018; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Kavuro, 2015; Crea, 2015). Moreover, the holistic support concerning non-academic problems and the flexibility of the program contributes to the wellbeing of refugees. The possibility of psycho-social referrals can help to overcome mental health problems (Papadopoulos, 2007; Murray et al., 2010; Jack et al., 2019). Throughout the interviews, students repeatedly mentioned that they appreciate the opportunity, value contact with peers and feel supported. The positive connection to the program fosters the wellbeing of students. The willingness of students to help each other, the family atmosphere and the individualized coaching show students that they matter to their program (Rayle & Chung, 2007; Adolphe, 2020; Donatha, 2020; Thembani, 2020).

The UpLearn program should continue to positively affect the academic and personal lives of students and follow the idea that "health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play and love'" (Jack et al., 2019, p. 62). This objective might be difficult to achieve resulting from unawareness about mental health issues, lack of knowledge about support opportunities and significant stigmas attached to seeking mental health support (Jack et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2010; Papadopoulos, 2007). Therefore, UpLearn should raise awareness among students, actively promote mental health services, investigate problems through coaches and facilitate workshops that concern the issue.

4.3.5 Lack of Targeted Support

Access to higher education does not automatically lead to "meaningful access to the curriculum, or to conversion of education into opportunities in the broader society" (McCowan, 2016, p. 651). Programs tend to focus on dominant student groups and disadvantaged students might lack the specific support adaptations needed to be successful in higher education. Therefore, the support might be entirely inappropriate to react to the complex barriers of refugees (Lenette, 2016; Halkic & Arnold, 2018; McCowan, 2016; Boughey, 2002; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Crea, 2015). To target this, institutions must proactively design interventions for underrepresented students (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Kavuro, 2015).

While traditional institutions intuitively adapt their support to students with citizenship status, UpLearn adapts its support to refugees as they shape the dominant student body (McCowan, 2016; Scalabrini Data, 2019). Hereby, the program considers the contextual conditions of refugees and implements a holistic approach that fits their circumstances. The targeted support interventions include but are not limited to adaptable schedules, language classes, content tutorials, individualized support and financial support (Scalabrini, 2020; UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020; BASP GEM Presentation, 2019; Yoni, 2020; Tavia, 2020). Students are furthermore guided by personal coaches, "that try to help people to build resilience, navigate external challenges and an academic path through those challenges" (Yoni, 2020).

The support received throughout the degree is highly valued by respondents (Donatha, 2020; Adolphe, 2020; Thembani, 2020). When asking Adolphe to compare UpLearn with his program at a traditional university, he states that "everything they do on a daily basis or in a month, it's all about supporting us in achieving our degrees, so it's completely different from traditional university" (Adolphe, 2020). Students get prepared for the content of selected projects throughout the teaching week. The provision of information about a self-selected project thus helps to reach the minimum competency requirement of one project a month (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). In-lab tutoring through volunteers and the online platform tutor.com can help students with ad hoc problems during their project (Coaching SOPs, 2019). Coaches establish academic targets, hold students accountable and provide holistic support, which increases success (Tavia, 2020; Yoni, 2020; Donatha, 2020; Adolphe, 2020). By creating targeted holistic support interventions, the program "has gone from 20% of its students on track to graduate in time in February 2019 to 58% of its students on track to graduate in time in December 2019" (BASP Information, 2020). The program management expects that UpLearn's support approach will help the remaining students to be on track by the end of the bursary period (BASP Information, 2020).

While the UpLearn's support serves the needs of South African refugees, the CfA degree platform is not contextualized and is mainly targeted at students in the United States (CfA, 2020). The curriculum lacks epistemological access, consequently, students might identify less with the curriculum, which can lead to decreased motivation and success. Furthermore, the curriculum contains knowledge that does not necessarily translate to advantages in the host country (McCowan, 2016). UpLearn tries to incorporate knowledge relating to the South African context in their teaching week, but the main curriculum is determined by CfA (UpLearn Programme Guide, 2020). Therefore, SNHU should contextualize projects to increase epistemological access and transfer of relevant knowledge.

5. Discussion

This study has shown that educational programs must become proactive to include refugees in higher education and UpLearn's blended learning intervention presents one way to approach this. It is hence necessary to discuss the findings of this study by explaining how UpLearn reacts to higher education barriers of refugees and what these findings mean for the practice of utilizing blended learning. To facilitate the improvement of UpLearn and to present dilemmas in the program design, a further elaboration on this study's recommendations can be found in the appendix (see 8.1).

5.1 Access & Success Barriers

This study distinguished ten barriers that exclude refugees from higher education. Hereby, the analysis provides evidence that the support is merely targeted at citizens and dominant student groups, which shows the inequity in South African higher education. In terms of access, these barriers are unavailability of necessary documents, limited language proficiency, limited access to information, precarious life situations, and prohibitive costs. In terms of success, these barriers are lack of resources, need to prioritize immediate problems, academic language and literacy demand, psychological and emotional effects and lack of targeted support. Throughout the interviews, these barriers were identified by the respondents and the list was regarded as complete. The identification of these barriers can help higher education programs to identify shortcomings in terms of adaptations to refugees.

5.2 Blended Learning & UpLearn

The necessity for the establishment of a program targeted at refugees can be explained by the failure of the South African higher education system to fulfill the two main equity of access principles laid down by McCowan: "(1) There must be sufficient places so that all members of society who so desire, and who have a minimum level of preparation, can participate in higher education [availability-access]. (2) Individuals must have a fair opportunity of obtaining a place in the institution of their choice [accessibility-access]" (McCowan, 2016, p. 652). This study added another principle concerning equity of success: (3) Individuals must be able to use their

full potential through equitable socioeconomic and academic support depending on their needs [success]. South Africa's system fails to fulfill the three equity principles and thus it is necessary to establish programs that pursue affirmative action to target those members of society that have been failed by government interventions. Hereby, it is important to utilize limited funds efficiently to increase access and success for underrepresented societal groups.

Firstly, the analysis has shown that blended learning can increase availability and hence access to higher education. The mode of instruction allowed SNHU to make CfA available across the globe through working with local partner organizations. Online resources are developed once and are indefinitely available to an unrestricted student body which decreases the costs per student. Furthermore, the central curriculum development leads to easy deployability in different countries. Since the main learning takes place online, students have fewer contact hours, leading to decreased costs for in-person activities. While local partners must fulfill certain requirements, such as enabling access to technology and offering adequate support, these partners not necessarily require expensive facilities or staff with academic titles. Excluding living expenses from scholarships additionally decreases the costs per student significantly and facilitates more efficient utilization of limited funds to enable access through availability.

Secondly, this research has shown that blended learning can increase the accessibility of higher education for refugees by limiting the effects of socioeconomic support constraints. The blended learning approach adapts to socioeconomic barriers by enabling adjustable schedules that fit in the precarious life circumstances of refugees. Since the main workload consists of self-studying, students can fulfill major parts of their commitment at any time. Additionally, they can largely structure brick-and-mortar contact hours and interventions around their other obligations. In contrast to traditional learning, the flexibility of blended learning thus allows students to simultaneously sustain themselves and participate in higher education.

Based on these arguments one could contend that the mentioned benefits are also attributes of pure distance learning programs, which are easier to deploy, less cost-intensive and more flexible. Nevertheless, this study has shown, that refugees face barriers that can only

adequately be targeted through brick-and-mortar support interventions. Hereby, it is important that programs holistically support students, by focusing not only on academic support but also on accommodating other life challenges that might be preventative. UpLearn's support adaptions range from employment and welfare support that foster socioeconomic wellbeing, to personal coaching, tutoring and tutorials that facilitate academic success. This is complemented by interventions that are especially relevant in the refugee context, such as the provision of free academic resources, language classes and psychological support. Especially the individualized support from coaches helps to hold students accountable, facilitate academic progress and connect students to the different support interventions. Furthermore, direct contact with peers and the program's positive atmosphere increase identification and motivation. The effectiveness of these brick-and-mortar interventions towards the removal of access and success barriers thus supports the preposition that blended learning and targeted support can be beneficial in overcoming access and success barriers in higher education for refugees in South Africa.

5.3 Implications for Implementation in Practice

Blended learning is especially suitable in countries with low availability of higher education, refugee camps or rural areas. The time- and cost-effective deployability helps central institutions to expand higher education to areas where funding is limited, access is stratified or resources are not sufficient (e.g. facilities, availability of staff with academic titles). The necessity of in-person support furthermore shows that pure distance learning programs do not sufficiently react to the needs of refugees (e.g. learning spaces, coaching, language courses). Thus, the ability to maintain brick-and-mortar activities is necessary to enable a suitable adaptation to higher education barriers. The combination of cost-effectiveness, flexibility and support renders blended learning an appropriate approach for resource-constrained environments. Besides, the approach is predestined for students that require flexibility to maintain obligations such as work or childcare.

Regarding the self-sustainability requirement, this study has shown that other obligations can be detrimental to higher education. Countries that are more progressive concerning equitable

access should rather cover the living expenses of disadvantaged students. The reason for this lies in McCowan's equity of access principle, which is violated when disadvantaged students do not have fair opportunities to enroll at institutions of their choice (McCowan, 2016). The benefits of blended learning could be utilized in those countries but students should not be bound to self-sustainability and should be able to freely select their program. Progressive countries should rather focus on improving existing institutions regarding academic support for non-dominant student groups. They might especially consider implementing more individualized support approaches to react to differing needs and to provide courses that target differences in prior education. Similar to this study, institutions could assess the barriers applicable to different strata and adapt their support interventions.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the question *How does UpLearn facilitate access and success in higher education for refugees in South Africa?* It can be argued that the program successfully utilizes its funding to balance aspects of availability-access, accessibility-access and success. This balance is mainly achieved by applying the benefits of blended learning and by providing targeted support. Thus, the program manages to be cost-effective and maintains sufficient support to enable access and success in higher education.

In terms of access, the flexibility enabled through blended learning allows the UpLearn to decrease the costs per student by relying on their self-sustainability. Blended learning likewise decreases costs for curriculum development, deployment, staff and facilities. The flexibility of blended learning hence increases the availability of higher education. Concerning accessibility, UpLearn increases the overall equity of access through affirmative action by admitting applicants who are excluded from traditional higher education. The availability of students for other obligations and the full tuition fee coverage contribute to the suitability of the program to fit in the precarious life circumstances of refugees. In terms of admission requirements, leniency concerning required documents, guidance through the admission procedure and preparational courses help students to overcome documentation, information and language barriers.

In terms of success, UpLearn decreases barriers that prevent refugees from coping with the study demand. Socioeconomically, the flexibility of self-paced blended learning allows students to prioritize immediate problems and enables participation in higher education despite other necessary commitments. This is accommodated by the provision of free material resources and work spaces. In terms of academic support, UpLearn fosters language and digital literacy development by offering brick-and-mortar courses. This is complemented by enrichment activities, tutorials and individualized one-on-one support to prepare students for project mastery. Especially the frequent contact with peers and guidance enabled through the coaching system contribute to the ability of students to navigate the program. Therefore, it has been shown that staff can successfully connect students to internal and external holistic support services.

Concludingly, UpLearn facilitates higher education for refugees in South Africa by providing a holistic support system. In contrast to traditional higher education, the blended learning approach allows the program to be flexible to suit the circumstances of students and enable students to support themselves. In contrast to distance education, the approach allows the conduction of brick-and-mortar activities that have inherent benefits regarding language proficiency, accountability, guidance, academic support and social aspects. Thus, UpLearn balances access and success in a unique way and thereby succeeds in decreasing higher education barriers.

In evaluating the results of this study, the reader should bear in mind that this study does not consider higher education outcomes but solely focusses on access and success. Comparing outcomes by conducting experiments with different modes of instruction would help to find out more about the effectiveness of blended learning. This would foster recommendations concerning the curriculum, teaching methods and facilitation of learning. Furthermore, a large scale survey could help to investigate the experiences of refugees in differing educational programs to evaluate what might work and develop best practices. This study represents the first step in the research process by providing evidence that UpLearn's blended learning approach successfully adapts to the needs of refugees. Evaluating a program that diverges from established academic programs can thus open a window of opportunity for researchers to build upon these initial findings to make the approach more robust. Subsequently, actors in the higher education sector should react and build educational programs based on evidence regarding successful existing interventions.

7. References

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8. Appendix

8.1 Recommendations for UpLearn

Although UpLearn's approach was generally evaluated as successful in decreasing barriers to higher education, this study managed to present some recommendations. Hereby, three major dilemmas were encountered, which UpLearn has to take into account. The first dilemma lies in the development of blended learning curriculums that are taught to students in differing circumstances and countries. While offering the same content decreases costs, the curriculum lacks contextualization and hence relevance for the context of the target group. SNHU must decide if their funding should be used to enhance availability for more students, or if they want to foster success and higher education outcomes. Deriving from the argument that non-contextualized curriculum contents do not translate into meaningful knowledge and decrease the benefits of higher education, it can be recommended that *SNHU should contextualize projects to facilitate success and relevant learning outcomes.* Hereby, projects specific to the United States need to be adapted to the target group while general projects can remain the same, which helps to keep the costs within limits.

The second dilemma emerges from the finding that increased access to information decreases the leniency of the program towards limited language proficiency and precarious life circumstances. Therefore, increased access to information improves access to UpLearn's admission process, but not access to higher education, because the number of available places remains constant. The program might find more successful students, but simultaneously excludes others from access through stricter admission requirements. Since UpLearn admits a maximum of 150 students, the program cannot overcome the dilemma and has to make compromises. Hereby, UpLearn should continue to pursue affirmative action by admitting those who cannot access higher education through traditional institutions. Thus, it can be suggested, that *UpLearn should gradually increase the provision of information until enough applicants with sufficient need, motivation, capability and language skills are found. Unsuccessful applicants should be referred to the other services of Scalabrini and should have the possibility to*

participate in upcoming admission processes. By implementing this suggestion, UpLearn would admit more suitable applicants and simultaneously help unsuccessful applicants to improve. To achieve this, UpLearn could refer unsuccessful applicants to Scalabrini's English School to attain Intermediate B language skills. Additionally, the Employment Access Programme can help to find employment that improves the precarious life circumstances of applicants and enables participation.

The third dilemma is represented by the incompatibility of attendance and progress requirements with the need to prioritize immediate problems. In terms of attendance, students benefit from brick-and-mortar interventions that facilitate success. Moreover, progress requirements help to establish goals, hold students accountable and increase availability by limiting costs and enrollment periods. Notwithstanding these benefits, fixed commitments contradict flexibility requirements and UpLearn has to find the right balance. Thus, it can be recommended that *UpLearn should offer important brick-and-mortar interventions in several timeslots, during non-working hours, or provide a recording of the meeting. Furthermore, UpLearn should grant bursary period extensions to students who are determined to succeed in the program but face detrimental external barriers.* By implementing this recommendation, UpLearn can increase participation in voluntary courses and simultaneously make interventions mandatory for those who are affected by a lack of language-, digital literacy- or other skills. Students could better combine participation in brick-and-mortar interventions with the need to prioritize immediate problems. Additionally, influences that are not related to the motivation of a student would not necessarily evoke the removal of the student.

8.2 Staff Interview Guide

[Please think about the structure of the UpLearn program]

What are your responsibilities at UpLearn?

What is the function of SNHU and Scalabrini in the UpLearn program?

What kind of support from SNHU does Scalabrini receive?

[Please think about the background of refugees in South Africa]

How would you evaluate the governmental socioeconomic support available to refugees?

How would you evaluate the academic support for refugees at traditional universities?

[Please think about the enrollment process]

Which barriers prevent refugees from enrolling in traditional universities?

What support does UpLearn provide to overcome these barriers and what could be improved?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? *[send statement in chat]*

> The main barriers to enrollment at traditional universities are: unavailability of necessary documents, limited language proficiency, limited access to information, precarious life situations, and prohibitive costs.

How does UpLearn adapt to each of these barriers?

[Please think about the experience of students during their study and thus post-enrollment]

Which barriers prevent refugees from succeeding in higher education?

What support does UpLearn provide to overcome success barriers and what could be improved?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? *[send statement in chat]*

> The main barriers to success at traditional universities are: lack of resources, need to prioritize immediate problems, writing and literacy demand, psychological/emotional effects and lack of targeted support.

How does UpLearn adapt to each of these barriers?

[Please think about the UpLearn program as a whole]

What are the benefits of SNHU's CfA distance learning platform and what could be improved?

What are the benefits of Scalabrini's academic support and what could be improved?

All in all: How successful is the blended learning approach at UpLearn, what could be improved?

8.3 Student Interview Guide

[Please think back to the time before you became a student at UpLearn]

Did you consider to attend university before you got to know about UpLearn?

What prevented you from considering or applying for regular universities?

How did you get to know about UpLearn?

Why did you choose to study at UpLearn?

What problems did you experience when you signed up?

How did Scalabrini support you when applying for the study, what could be improved?

How did Scalabrini help you prepare for your study?

[Please think about your current situation as a student}

How does a typical day look like for you?

What challenges do you have in regards to your study?

How did these challenges change over time?

How does UpLearn support you, what could be improved?

How does the CfA platform help you, what could be improved?

What support mechanisms are especially useful for you in overcoming challenges with your study?

[Please think about your opinions on the UpLearn program]

Would you choose to study at UpLearn again and why?

Your program merges online degrees with local support. What do you think about that?

All in all: How would you evaluate the UpLearn program, what could be improved?

8.4 List of Analyzed Documents

BASP English School Ad

BASP GEM Presentation

BASP Information

BASP Staff Roles

CfA (College for America Platform)

CLCC Year Book

Coaching SOPs

Exit SOPs

GEM Annual Funder Report

GEM Partner Data

Guide to Working Offline

IDinsight Report

Laptop Loan

Scalabrini Data

Student Support SOPs

UpLearn Programme Guide

Welfare SOPs

Zonokhanyo Network Proposal