

Coursera for Refugees: Universal Access to World-Class Education

Lauren Swersky, Kara A. Behnke (PhD), Jade Mays

Coursera
lswersky@coursera.org, kbehnke@coursera.org,
jmays@coursera.org

Abstract. In June 2016, President Obama announced a Call to Action that gave impetus to private-public partnerships to address the global refugee crisis, including Coursera for Refugees [1]. As a result, a multi-stakeholder collaboration between Coursera, the U.S. Department of State, and nonprofit organizations around the world have enabled thousands of refugees to access a unique catalogue of MOOCs to help them gain crucial skills necessary to succeed in the global economy. This initiative, known as Coursera for Refugees, is a testament to the broad social impact and economic potential of MOOCs and public-private partnerships to address the global refugee crisis.

Keywords: Coursera, Refugeed, MOOCs

1 Introduction

Coursera, the largest open online education provider, envisions a world where anyone, anywhere can transform their life by accessing the world's best learning experience. As of March 2017, Coursera offers over 2,000 courses, 160+ Specializations, and 2 degrees from top universities around the world. As such, over 24 million people have taken courses on a mobile device or computer from 149 university partners. With Coursera's global reach and high-quality educational content, we launched Coursera for Refugees to offer tangible, private-public solutions to help address the socio-cultural impacts of the global refugee crisis.

Coursera for Refugees is an initiative launched in June 2016 addresses the refugee crisis by granting refugees with free access to over 1,000 online university courses that provide educational and career-skills training. In this policy paper, we discuss how Coursera approached this challenge and offer recommendations and applied actions for policy makers and government stakeholders.

2 Problem description / challenges

There are currently 65.3 million refugees globally who have been displaced because of social conflict and violence—the highest number on record since the UN Refugee Agency began collecting statistics [2]. Included in this population are 12 million Syrians who have been displaced from their homes since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 [2]. Among the many challenges refugees face is the lack of access to education and 21st century skills needed to succeed in the global economy. Of the six million refugees that should be in school or receiving an education, nearly two thirds are not [3].

Increasingly, refugees need career and life skills training to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and new environments. *Coursera for Refugees* addresses the unprecedented urgency to create conditions for refugees to achieve the right to education and succeed in an interconnected global economy. Per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations, “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free... technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.” [4] As the leading online education provider, Coursera is uniquely positioned to make an impact in closing the gap for access to education and career-skills training.

In June 2016, the White House launched a *Call to Action* to the U.S. private sector to increase its efforts in response to the global refugee crisis [1]. President Obama called for new, measurable, and significant commitments that will have a durable impact on refugees residing on the frontlines of the global refugee crisis and in countries of resettlement, such as the United States [1]. Drawing on Coursera’s unique expertise, resources, and entrepreneurial spirit to help refugees regain control over their lives and integrate into their new communities, *Coursera for Refugees* was created.

"*Coursera for Refugees* is designed to provide as many [refugees] as possible with greater access to education in career relevant skills, as they navigate new homes and difficult times in their lives," said Rebecca Taber, Coursera's head of Government Partnerships, in a statement.

Coursera for Refugees includes a catalogue of recommended courses selected specifically for refugees, which not only focus on career-relevant skills, but also life skills like language, communication, and socialization, that help them adjust even outside the employment arena. This comprehensive course list is designed to not only help refugees improve their career prospects, but to also adjust and integrate in their host communities. Courses are offered by school including Stanford University, University of Pennsylvania, Duke University, and IE Business School.

“The humanitarian crisis surrounding refugees now is at a critical point,” said Evan Ryan, Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, in a statement [4]: “Coursera for Refugees builds on our work to help people succeed in the global economy, [it] will help refugees integrate in their host communities,” he said [5].

The program also partners with any nonprofit organization that works directly with refugees. These nonprofits can apply to Coursera for one year of financial aid to pay for courses for refugees. Nonprofit organizations are able to access an individual online portal allowing them to track the progress of refugees taking the courses, and also to interface with other nonprofits to share best practices [5]. Coursera for Refugees has launched with nonprofits working with displaced people in Kenya, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, among others.

As of January 2017, Coursera for Refugees has 2,331 enrollments and 11,696 total learning hours. Coursera’s ambition is to provide valuable credentials and career-relevant skills to 10,000 refugees by the end of 2017. Research points to the corresponding positive outcomes: the vast majority of learners who complete MOOCs report both career advancement (72%) and educational advancement (61%) [6]. These reported outcomes are even greater among learners who cited career or educational advancement, respectively, as their primary motivation for enrolling in online courses. Moreover, learners from lower socioeconomic status (SES), from emerging economies, and those without a bachelor’s degree were more likely to report benefits, indicating that open online education can empower people of all backgrounds and especially those at a disadvantage [6].

On September 20, 2016, the Obama Administration convened a high-level roundtable with a cross-sector of private leaders to recognize commitments in response to the Call for Action, including *Coursera for Refugees* [1]. This indicates preliminary success and high-level support from government organizations.

3 Recommendations

A social-political issue as urgent as the refugee crisis requires more than state action; it demands high-level private-public partnerships and multi-stakeholder collaboration. As such, we recommend that policymakers model the following procedures:

1. **Private-public partnerships:** Coursera has distinct experience among leading technology companies in partnering with governments and nonprofits on workforce development initiatives. Specifically, Coursera recently launched “Coursera for Governments & Nonprofits,” a unique effort to close current and emerging skills gaps in the global workforce. Beyond *Coursera for Refugees*, Coursera has joined with initial government and

nonprofit partners in Egypt, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Singapore and the United States. These efforts exemplify how private-public partnerships can create scalable solutions to begin to address the global refugee crisis.

2. **Cross-sector private partnerships:** Policy initiatives driven by driven by cross-sector partnerships, including a call to action at the national level to draw on the unique skills, resources, and entrepreneurial spirit of the private sector. We must tap into the unique capabilities of multiple companies in order to achieve a common goal; it takes a village, and diversity of contributions are necessary. We believe that private-private partnerships can also make an important impact on closing the global skills gap, particularly for refugees. Cross-sector partnerships such as Coursera and Google [7] is an example of how companies can create new hiring opportunities and professional development training for refugees and other displaced workers.
3. **Private-university partnerships:** Universities should source and provide access to MOOC content tailored to learners' unique needs, including career-relevant skills and life skills. Coursera provides recommendations [8] to universities for creating inclusive educational content, so that learners can benefit from personalized educational experiences. Coursera translates video lectures into over 15 languages, but providing learning content in native languages such as Spanish [9], Russian [10], Chinese [11] and French [12] is an important next-step for university partners.

Ultimately, policy initiatives should empower online learning providers to expand access to MOOCs so all learners can transform their lives. The early success of Coursera for Refugees is a testament to the significant resources we can mobilize when the public and private sectors work together.

References

1. <http://www.partnershipforrefugees.org/call-to-action/>
2. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/30/fact-sheet-white-houselaunches-call-action-private-sector-engagement-0>
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/15/world/middleeast/refugee-children-school-unitednations.html>
4. <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
5. <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-06-20/coursera-on-a-mission-to-helprefugees>
6. <https://hbr.org/2015/09/whos-benefiting-from-moocs-and-why>
7. <https://blog.coursera.org/coursera-collaborates-google-cloud-foster-global-ecosystemskilled-cloud-talent/>

8. <https://blog.coursera.org/learning-without-limits-creating-inclusive-course-communitiescoursera/>
9. <https://blog.coursera.org/coursera-launches-14-new-spanish-language/>
10. <https://blog.coursera.org/first-million-russian-words-of-course-content/>
11. <https://blog.coursera.org/one-year-and-500000-learners-later-guokrs-mooc/>
12. <https://blog.coursera.org/parlez-vous-francais-3-picks-from-our-french/>