Refugees' Online Learning Engagement in Higher Education: a Capabilitarian Analysis

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Abstract

There are almost 90 million forced migrants globally, many of whom could benefit from online higher education; yet evidence suggests extremely low retention rates of displaced people in online learning. Since retention is often seen as being linked to engagement, this study aimed to understand the nature of student engagement by displaced learners in online higher education (HE) and to identify practical ways in which higher education institutions (HEIs) can support displaced learners to engage in online learning. The methodology included both empirical and theoretical components. The empirical study focused on a qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of ten online Sanctuary Scholars enrolled on an online master's degree with a UK university. The theoretical analysis involved integrating concepts related to online engagement from the HE literature with those from the Capability Approach. A thematic analysis of the empirical data found that, while conversion factors such as trauma and "lifeload" presented obstacles for all the Sanctuary Scholars, some graduated, whereas others withdrew from the programme without completing it. The findings point to a nuanced web of interactions between resources, enablers and constraints (positive and negative conversion factors), capabilities, engagement and personal agency for each research participant. The original contribution of this thesis is that it proposes a *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model*, which shows how engagement along four dimensions is underpinned by specific capabilities; it also illustrates how engagement fuels the capability for further engagement and highlights the role of student agency. The study contributes to theoretical understanding of displaced learners' engagement in online learning, while practically, it offers insights to HEIs for fostering online engagement. Socially, the thesis adds to the growing body of open research in the social sciences.

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Acknowledgements

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- The Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN) has been a source of inspiration for me, providing ongoing moral and intellectual support for my open research. GO-GN also part-funded my attendance at several conferences where I shared my work-in-progress.
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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my beloved parents, Ken and Geraldine, who always encouraged me to choose education.

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. Some parts of this thesis may bear resemblance to the following open-research outputs:

My blog contains reflections on my learning throughout the study:

- Witthaus, G. (2023). *Art of e-learning* [Blog]. Art of E-Learning. https://artofelearning.org/

I produced an open educational resource on the Capability Approach:

- Witthaus, G. (2022). *Exploring the Capability Approach as a Social Justice Framework for Researching Higher Education in 12 blog posts*. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6463267

My *Open Thesis* website contains my full thesis.

- Witthaus, G. (2023). *#OpenThesis by Gabi Witthaus*. https://sites.google.com/artofelearning.org/opendissertation/

My lightning talk at the OER22 conference in London in April 2022 included early versions of Figure 5.1 and Figure 6.5.

- Witthaus, G. (2022, April 26). *An asylum seeker's journey through an online MA: a capability analysis in 6 minutes*. [Presentation slides]. OER22, London. https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1rn68IDhn8XiwcQzYjBZ6UHSsmchTZcbWGFL N6aTGuME/edit?usp=sharing

My presentation at the I-HE2022 conference in Athens in October 2022 included my draft research questions and early versions of Table 4.1, Table 5.1, Table 5.2, Figure 5.2, Figure 5.3, Figure 5.4, Figure 8.1 and Figure 8.2. These were shared in my conference submission, slides and a video.

- Witthaus, G. (2022, October 19). *Displaced learners and online engagement in higher education: A capabilitarian analysis*. Innovating Higher Education 2022 (I-HE2022) Conference, Athens. https://i-he2022.exordo.com/programme/presentation/29
- Witthaus, G. (2022, October 19). *Displaced learners and online engagement in higher education: A capabilitarian analysis*. [Presentation slides]. Innovating Higher Education 2022 (I-HE2022), Athens. https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1huMcIkMEJdkbKlTlu9LaiICsWnP6oPzXpD5zx cDF7J0/edit?usp=sharing
- Gabi Witthaus (Director). (2022, November 21). [Video]. *Displaced Learners and Online Engagement in Higher Education by Gabi Witthaus*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cW95WWY8ss4

Arising out of the I-HE2022 conference is an article (Witthaus, 2023c) which summarises my key thesis findings. It includes versions of Figure 8.2, Table 4.1 and Table 5.2.

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Publications derived from work on Doctoral Programmes

The following publications were derived from work in the PhD programme:

Witthaus, G. (2018). Findings from a case study of refugees using MOOCs to (re)enter higher education. *OpenPraxis*, *10*(4), 343–357. https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.10.4.910

Witthaus, G. (2020). Talking across the Chasm: Opening up Higher Education in the Knowledge Economy. In Conrad, D. and Prinsloo, P. (Eds.), *Open(ing) Education*: *Theory and Practice* (pp. 72-100). Leiden/Boston: Brill. [Open access preprint available at: https://zenodo.org/record/3670623]

Witthaus, G. (2023). Refugees and Online Engagement in Higher Education: A Capabilitarian Model. *Online Learning*, 27(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v27i2.3762

Witthaus, G., & Ryan, G. (2021). Supported mobile learning in the "Third Spaces" between non-formal and formal education for displaced people. In J. Traxler & H. Crompton (Eds.), *Critical Mobile Pedagogy: Cases of Digital Technologies and Learners at the Margins* (pp. 76–88). Abingdon: Routledge. [Open access preprint available at: https://zenodo.org/record/4293565]

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to better understand the nature of student engagement in online learning amongst forced migrants, both from a theoretical, social-justice-informed perspective, and in terms of the implications for teaching practice. This chapter clarifies the terminology used in the thesis and then introduces some background information, explains the research problem and specifies the research questions. It then provides a brief overview of the conceptual frameworks used in the study and an outline of the research design. I also discuss my own professional experience and personal motivation for conducting this study and put forward its original contributions to knowledge. The chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis.

1.2 Terminology

I begin by presenting brief definitions of key terminology around forced migrants and clarifying how the terms are used in this thesis. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as:

> a person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2020b, p. 3)

The definition in the Convention does not distinguish between refugees and asylum seekers; however, many host countries do make such a distinction, and the status under which a person is classified has material consequences for the type of support they are entitled to. In the UK for example, a refugee is someone who has had their claim for asylum accepted by the government, while an asylum seeker is someone whose request for sanctuary has not yet been processed (UNHCR UK, 2022b, 2022c). Consequently, an asylum seeker has fewer rights than a refugee and may be vulnerable to deportation at any time. Within UK law, there are also other categories such as "Limited Leave to Remain", and those under "Humanitarian Protection", which may have special conditions attached, including regarding rights to study (UKCISA, 2022). Dependants of individuals with any of the above statuses are granted different rights accordingly. Another category of forced migrants is internally displaced people (IDPs), who, while also fleeing persecution, have not crossed any borders, and thus are still subject to the laws of their home country. The 1951 Refugee Convention does not cover these individuals; however, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) website notes that: "There is widespread international debate currently underway on how this group of uprooted people can be better protected and by whom" (UNHCR, 2020a).

In this thesis, I use the terms "refugees", "forced migrants" and "displaced people" interchangeably to refer to all people in these categories, and where a person or group's legal asylum status is germane to the discussion, this is made explicit. Another key term in the context of this study is "Sanctuary Scholars": these are forced migrants who have received scholarships, usually

as part of a university's wider sanctuary framework for refugee support. I use the term "scholars" as a shorthand to refer to the Sanctuary Scholars who participated in this study.

1.3 Background: forced migrants in higher education

There are currently almost 90 million displaced people around the world, amounting to one in every 88 people on earth (UNHCR, 2022a). It is estimated that just 6% of young adults amongst displaced people are enrolled in higher education (HE) around the world, compared to the global average of 40% (UNHCR, 2023). In this section, I elucidate this problem further.

1.3.1 Displaced people and access to higher education

Facilitating access to, and successful participation in, HE for forced migrants is important because of the benefits to recipients in terms of gaining skills, building a new life, and contributing to their host communities (Arar et al., 2020; Bhabha et al., 2020; de Wit & Altbach, 2016; Dumont & Liebig, 2014; Gladwell et al., 2016; Hirano, 2018; Nakhaie, 2018), while also enhancing their contribution to the public good in their host communities and countries of origin (Cin & Doğan, 2021; Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; Naidoo, 2018; S. Reinhardt, 2018; Sheehy, 2014). There may also be benefits to host institutions in terms of enhancing their internationalisation profile and boosting visibility of their social contribution (de Wit & Altbach, 2016; Streitwieser et al., 2019). Article 22 of the 1951 Refugee Convention requires that a host state treats a refugee the same as its own citizens in terms of accessing educational opportunities (UNHCR, 2020b); in practice, however, forced migrants face

numerous barriers when attempting to exercise this right. Dryden-Peterson argues that refugees "are caught between the global promise of universal human rights, the definition of citizenship rights within nation-states, and the realization of these sets of rights in everyday practices" (2016, p. 473).

Even where refugees do gain access to HE, barriers often remain in terms of the need to navigate the social, political and economic constraints they face. Forced migrants are "super-disadvantaged", in that the different barriers they experience interrelate, compounding and exacerbating each other (Lambrechts, 2020; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). Commonly cited barriers to access and successful participation in HE for refugees include: lack of recognition of prior learning and qualifications (Garito, 2017a; Gladwell et al., 2016; Kalocsányiová et al., 2022; Knoth et al., 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2019; Suter & Rampelt, 2017; Webb et al., 2019; Witthaus et al., 2016); precarity and vulnerability (Morrice, 2011; Naidoo, 2018); unwelcoming environments (Molla, 2021a; Murray, 2022); significant financial and structural barriers (Farrell et al., 2020); the relevance of educational offers, language issues, difficulties in transitioning to university, and resource poverty (Kalocsányiová et al. 2022). In the case of resettled refugees in the USA, it has been observed that "[t]he real needs of refugee students range from food insecurity to language barriers, to lack of information about how to navigate admissions and financial aid systems, to the unaffordability of education once they manage to get in" (Streitwieser et al., 2020, p. 217). Women refugees often face even more severe challenges due to the intersection of genderised expectations around domestic labour and care that further entrench their disadvantage (Bajwa et al., 2018; Dahya & Dryden-

Peterson, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017; Mkwananzi & Mukwambo, 2019;

F. Reinhardt et al., 2021; Unangst & Streitwieser, 2018; Younes, 2020).

The consequences of such barriers are evident in completion rates; for example, in one Australian study conducted between 2001 and 2017, it was found that only 17% of forced migrants enrolled in (on-campus) undergraduate degrees completed their programmes (Molla, 2021a, p. 336), compared to 73-74% of the general population of bachelor's students at Australian universities in roughly the same time period (Universities Australia, 2020). Given these circumstances, some researchers point to the need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to treat forced migrants as a group in their own right, whilst also observing the challenges in this proposition, since as a group, they are characterised by extreme heterogeneity (Baker et al., 2021; Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2018; Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Lambert et al., 2018; Morrice, 2007; Nell-Müller, Happ et al., 2021; F. Reinhardt et al., 2018; 2021; Unangst & Crea, 2020; Webb et al., 2019). Some scholars point out that institutional cultures need to change to recognise and build on the strengths of students from refugee backgrounds (Cantat et al., 2022; Harvey & Mallman, 2019; Mupenzi et al., 2020; Naidoo et al., 2018). In their 2019 meta-scoping study of the literature on HE and refugee backgrounds, Ramsay and Baker (2019) note that there is "relative consensus" in the literature regarding the barriers to participation by students from refugee backgrounds, and advise that our research focus should shift towards examining the enablers and support mechanisms that exist, and asking "what needs to be created to facilitate success" (p. 80).

1.3.2 Article 26 and Sanctuary Scholarships in the UK context

Access to HE is often complicated by the legal rights attached to different categories of forced migrants in their host countries (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018), and opportunities for access tend to be uniquely configured in each country (Vickzo et al., 2021). In the UK, which is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, all forced migrants are allowed to apply to a university; and yet they often face insurmountable barriers to exercising their right to HE. The first such barrier is cost: asylum seekers are treated as "international" students for fee-paying purposes, thus facing tuition fees of between £12,000 and £19,000 per year (Murray & Allingham, 2019), while also not being eligible for student loans. People with refugee status are classified as "home" students (UKCISA, 2022). They are thus subject to relatively lower fees of up to £9,250 per year (for undergraduate study), and although they may be eligible for student loans (Gov.uk, n.d.), this finance results in an average student debt of £57,000 (Belfield et al., 2017). A second barrier is the seemingly arbitrary imposition of "no study" restrictions on some individuals who have exhausted their asylum appeal rights (Baron, 2019; McClenaghan, 2018), preventing them from enrolling in any form of adult education or HE. One might expect that the UK's "Widening Participation" policies (Gov.uk, 2022) would help to mitigate these barriers; however, these policies are silent around refugees and asylum seekers (Stevenson & Baker, 2018). The so-called "hostile environment" in national policy makes it incumbent upon institutions to find ways to include forced migrants (Lounasmaa, 2020). Streitwieser et al. (2020) similarly argue for more compassionate national policies in the USA context. As forced

migrants move through the imposed identities of undocumented migrant, asylum seeker and eventually refugee, they also experience different levels of anxiety, vulnerability and shame, which can impact significantly on their mental health (Morrice, 2011).

The UK charity, Article 26 (named after Article 26 in the United Nations' 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Right*s, which states that "Higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" (United Nations, n.d.)) was set up in 2010 to offer Sanctuary Scholarships to refugees (Murray, 2022). The organisation gives advice and guidance on supporting students who are seeking asylum (Article 26, n.d.). The Sanctuary Scholarship scheme provides a legal and procedural framework for universities to offer full-tuition scholarships to refugees (Hudson & Murray, 2018; Mayblin, 2011). There is a growing body of literature about the experiences of refugees who have received such institutional support to engage in HE (e.g., Araos-Moya, 2017; Bowen, 2014; Hudson & Murray, 2018; Jack, Chase & Warwick, 2018; Mayblin, 2011; Ploner, 2017; Student et al., 2017). Notably, all these studies focus on traditional campus-based education, highlighting the gap in the sector's knowledge of refugee students' experiences in *online* education programmes.

1.3.3 Displaced people and access to online higher education

Despite the small percentage of refugees enrolled in HE relative to the general population, the figure of 6% cited earlier is significantly higher than that reported in prior estimates; the UNHCR has attributed this increase to the new opportunities provided by "connected higher education, where digital

programmes are combined with teaching and mentoring" (UNHCR, 2019, p. 39). Some researchers consider online education as a potentially viable response to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which includes the goal of lifelong learning for displaced people by 2030 (Moser-Mercer et al., 2016; O'Keeffe, 2020). Mkwananzi and Mukwambo (2019) argue that access to "unconventional" modes of HE, such as open distance learning, can enable students to expand their capabilities for career development and economic well-being.

In a recent literature review of HE interventions for refugees based in or directed from Europe and North America, six categories of educational assistance were identified: a) Accredited, on-site or blended learning programs, b) international online learning platforms, c) scholarships, d) information-sharing platforms, e) assessment of credentials and qualifications, and f) efforts to address other barriers to access (Streitwieser et al., 2019, p. 476). Category a) mainly involves HEIs from the Global North working in partnership with organisations in refugee camps in the Global South, for example, the University of Geneva's InZone programme, which aims to lay the groundwork for developing more comprehensive HE offerings to support displaced people in emergency settings (Delahayes & Sebastiani, 2016; Moser-Mercer et al., 2016). Category b) includes online platforms such as FutureLearn, Edraak, University of the People and Coursera, working in partnership with universities and refugee service organisations to provide short courses for refugees (Barcena et al., 2018; Bokai, 2017; Brunton et al., 2018; Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2018; Kennedy, 2019; Shah & Calonge, 2019; Suter & Rampelt, 2017). Category c)

includes national and institutional scholarships for refugees to enrol in campus-based programmes, including many in the UK under the Article 26 umbrella. Categories d) to f) are services supporting refugees' access to HE. Notably, there is no category in the above taxonomy for the provision of formal distance programmes, which reinforces the finding by S. Reinhardt (2018) that there is a significant gap in the literature in this regard.

1.4 Research problem

The University of Leicester, which is the case study institution for this thesis, was the first to start offering online Sanctuary Scholarships to displaced people in the UK in 2018 (Leicester University of Sanctuary, 2022). While a number of formal distance learning initiatives have been established for refugees by European universities (e.g., Farrell et al., 2020; Garito, 2017a, 2017b; Open University, 2022; Sánchez Román, 2018) and North American universities (e.g., Antze, 2016; Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Redden, 2017; Streitwieser et al., 2019), much of the literature in this area is descriptive and there is limited research that theorises the relationship between the barriers faced by refugees and their persistent engagement (or not) with such programmes. Furthermore, there is evidence that retention and completion rates amongst this demographic are extremely low (e.g., Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018), confirming the argument that merely granting access to online HE is not enough if widening participation is the goal (Baker et al., 2022; Lee, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Stone & Springer, 2019). As Lee argues, in her critique of the literature on online HE, "it may be difficult to develop a comprehensive account of the accessibility of online HE—beyond simply explaining how easy it is for

disadvantaged students to begin their university study" (2017, p. 21). The question then arises: if refugees do get access to online HE, to what extent are they able to participate and complete their programmes? With an incomplete understanding of how displaced learners engage in online HE, policy makers and providers of online degree programmes do not have access to much knowledge from the field that could inform their efforts to support refugee learners and foster their engagement, or act to counter their potential disengagement.

1.5 Research questions

This study has three overarching aims. Theoretically, it aims to contribute to the sector's understanding of refugees' and asylum seekers' engagement in online degree programmes, combining Redmond et al.'s (2018) online engagement framework with notions of capability, well-being and agency from the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Practically, it aims to generate recommendations for ways in which HEIs can support refugee students to engage effectively in online learning. To achieve these first two aims, the following research questions were explored in the context of a UK university that offers Sanctuary Scholarships to forced migrants for an online master's programme:

RQ1: What factors enable and constrain the Sanctuary Scholars' progression through the online programme?

RQ2: How do the Sanctuary Scholars' descriptions of their online learning indicate and illustrate their online engagement?

RQ3: What capabilities underpin the scholars' enactments of online engagement?

RQ4: How does engagement fuel further engagement in this context?

In **Chapter 3**, I revisit these questions from the perspective of the Capability Approach and link them to capabilitarian concepts.

The third aim is a social one: to disseminate the research in a way that is open and accessible to displaced people and civic/ community-based organisations that support them, in order to help inform decisions around online study as an alternative to traditional, on-site attendance at university.

1.6 Theoretical approach

The analysis in this study is embedded in a definition of engagement by Bond et al. (2020) which asserts that engagement "fuels" further engagement, and underpinned by two conceptual frameworks: the Online Engagement Framework by Redmond et al. (2018), and a social justice framework, the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Redmond et al.'s Online Engagement Framework categorises online engagement under five headings: emotional, social, collaborative, cognitive and behavioural. Since this framework was based on a literature review and was accompanied by an invitation from the authors to test its applicability to different contexts, it offers both a solid starting point for my study and an opportunity to contribute theoretically to the field. Additionally, since most of the existing student engagement frameworks do not adequately account for structural factors

beyond the micro-level of the institution and the classroom (Bond et al., 2020), I address such structural issues in this study by employing the Capability Approach.

Researchers working within this framework try to identify the "capabilities" available to individuals - i.e. the specific freedoms a person has which allows them to choose what they are able to do and be, along with associated "functionings" - a person's actual ability to enact those freedoms. A significant focus in such research is on the positive and negative "conversion factors" (Sen, 1985, p. 10) - the enablers and constraints respectively, that enable an individual to "convert" resources into capabilities. Insights from such an analysis can highlight socially unjust practices, since "the freedom of agency that we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us" (Sen, 1999: xi–xii). It has been argued that more research is needed that explicitly considers the intersectional characteristics and lived experience of displaced learners (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Unangst & Crea, 2020). The Capability Approach offers an appropriate response to this call, as its starting point is to understand the individual's "valued functionings" - "the various things a person may value doing or being" (Sen, 1999, p. 75), and then considers the real opportunities available to those individuals to pursue and achieve their aspirations. As suggested by Ramsay and Baker (2019), this viewpoint shifts the narrative from the idea of the "resilient individual" towards examining "how the system can be adapted to better meet the needs of the diverse student body" (p. 80).

By combining these two frameworks, I aim to generate insights into online student engagement that align with established categories of engagement, while also shedding light on aspects of formal distance education provision that potentially replicate unjust social structures and perpetuate disadvantage among displaced learners and other equity groups in HE.

1.7 Research design

I conducted this study within the social constructivist paradigm, which is based on the understanding that people experience reality in diverse ways and that there is therefore no single truth. In the social sciences, constructivism is premised upon ontological relativism, meaning that any definition of reality is a matter of convention, which is socially constructed through dialogue and argumentation (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Thus, "[k]nowledge is not 'discovered' but rather created; it exists only in the time/space framework in which it is generated" (p. 40). From this perspective, I viewed my research participants as partners in the investigation and attempted to understand their individual realities through dialogue with them, while also recognising that the output of such dialogue would be filtered through my own interpretation and coloured by my personal biases and implicit assumptions. For this reason, I give an overview of my own professional experience and positionality in the next section, so that the reader can create their own informed interpretation of the claims made in this thesis.

1.7.1 Setting and participants

The case study for this thesis is the online Sanctuary Scholarship programme of the University of Leicester in the UK, which is offered to displaced people for participation in a fully online master's programme. These scholarships provide a full fee waiver to people with asylum-seeker, refugee and internally-displaced-person status located anywhere in the world. Ten Sanctuary Scholars and two staff members (the programme director and lead administrator) volunteered to participate in the study. The locations of the scholars included a refugee camp in Africa and cities in Europe, Asia, North America and Australia.

1.7.2 Methodology

I conducted an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of the research participants in their online learning. In parallel, I carried out a theoretical analysis, in which I integrated concepts related to online engagement from the HE literature with those from the Capability Approach, to develop an empirically informed conceptual argument and associated model, as a basis for understanding the nature of engagement by forced migrants in online HE.

1.8 Professional experience and personal motivation

My personal interest in supporting disadvantaged groups in education began in the early '80s, when, as an undergraduate student in South Africa, I volunteered as an adult literacy tutor for black adults in the informal network of "night schools" in Johannesburg. The students were mainly domestic workers and gardeners from the "white" suburbs, who had been denied schooling under the apartheid regime. As a member of the privileged white community that

resided in those suburbs, volunteering gave me first-hand knowledge of the suffering caused by the discrimination and prejudice that had fostered such an unjust system, while giving me a practical role to play in the anti-apartheid movement. I found the regular classes and associated training events life-enhancing, as they enabled me to mix across the (then legally entrenched) racial divide with both students and fellow volunteers, who together formed a remarkable community. I subsequently spent almost two decades working professionally in adult literacy programmes in South Africa.

When, in 2009, I relocated to the UK and entered HE as a research associate, I was drawn towards open, online education as a way of extending educational opportunities to adults. Being an immigrant myself, I felt an affinity with other immigrants and a desire to carry out research that would be useful to those who had been forcibly displaced. I carried out a study in 2016-17 with ten refugees and asylum seekers who were enrolled in Kiron's online study programme (Witthaus, 2018). I used the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000) in this study, and although it offered some explanatory power around student engagement in the online context—particularly when used with some modifications proposed in subsequent literature (Shea et al., 2012)—it proved inadequate for analysing issues related to learners' well-being and agency in online education. I therefore began to explore different conceptual frameworks for understanding online student engagement from a social justice perspective. I was drawn towards the Capability Approach, inspired by the large body of research emerging from the South African HE environment, which has shed light on the lived experiences of

students in HE in a context of severe inequality, since South Africa tops the World Bank's inequality index (World Population Review, 2022)).

When I heard about the University of Leicester's Sanctuary Scholarships for distance learning in History, Politics and International Relations, which was the first such initiative in the UK, I sought permission from the programme director to focus on this initiative as my case study and was grateful that she immediately agreed. Because of my personal conviction that it is important to make knowledge accessible outside of paywalled databases so that it can be used by members of the public and civic organisations, I have shared my work-in-progress throughout the writing of the thesis, publishing draft chapters and my reflections on the research process under an open licence via my blog and an "Open Thesis" website (Witthaus, 2023a; 2023b). This was also in keeping with an important ethical commitment to people in situations of forced migration, which is to share knowledge back within the community that contributes to the research (Clark-Kazak, 2017).

1.9 Contributions

The original contribution of this study is threefold: theoretical, practical and social. I outline each of these below.

Theoretically, the study contributes to our understanding of forced migrants' engagement in online learning by providing an original conceptual model: the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* (**Figure 8.2**), which illustrates the interrelationships between student agency, capabilities and the functionings of engagement across four dimensions (behavioural, emotional, social and

collaborative, and cognitive), and shows how engagement in any one dimension can fuel the capability for engagement in the other dimensions. The model is supported by another visual representation, the *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map*) (**Figure 5.1**), which illustrates how a student moves from aspirations, through engagement, to outcomes such as graduation. Both the engagement model and the map were found to have explanatory power in this study for understanding how refugees engage in online HE.

The practical contribution of the thesis is that it can inform policy makers and programme teams in HEIs. The *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map* could support student-staff dialogue around the barriers to online engagement and progression, while the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* offers a heuristic to help academic programme teams foster online engagement.

The social contribution of the thesis is that it has been developed as an "open thesis" (e.g., Witthaus, 2023a; 2023b). Considering that one of the major findings from the literature concerns the importance of partnerships between HEIs and community-based organisations in supporting refugees' online learning, this thesis and its associated, openly licensed resources could potentially assist organisations in such collaborative efforts.

1.10 Overview of thesis

The thesis is organised into nine chapters. **Chapter 1** provided the research context, background and research aims. **Chapter 2** discusses the background to the study by outlining key themes from two largely separate bodies of literature—that on online student engagement and that on displaced people in

online HE. **Chapter 3** presents the Capability Approach as a theoretical lens for understanding the online engagement of displaced learners. **Chapter 4** provides an overview of the methodology that I used to answer my research questions. **Chapter 5** begins to address **RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3** conceptually by developing two theoretically rationalised visual models: a *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map*, showing hypothetical learner journeys through an online degree programme, and a *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model*, representing the interrelationships between student agency, capabilities and online engagement functionings in online HE. **Chapter 6** completes the answer to **RQ1** by providing an overview of empirical findings regarding the Sanctuary Scholars' journeys through the online MA. It also includes a completed *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map* for the research participants, providing some initial analysis of the capabilities needed by the Sanctuary Scholars for participation and progression. **Chapter 7** completes the answer to **RQ2** by analysing the Sanctuary Scholars' descriptions of their online learning according to the indicators of Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework. In this chapter, I also apply the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* to analyse the capabilities that underpin the scholars' engagement. In **Chapter 8**, I complete the answer to **RQ3** by discussing the findings from the previous two chapters in terms of capabilities. This also enables me to further develop the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* to represent how engagement fuels the capability for further engagement, thus answering **RQ4**. **Chapter 9** contains a summary of the research outcomes, presents some implications for HEIs, reflects on the trustworthiness and limitations of the research, and suggests some areas for further research.

Chapter 2: The literature landscape: online engagement and displaced learners

2.1 Introduction

While there are growing bodies of literature both on online student engagement and on refugees' experiences of participating in online HE, the refugee literature does not tend to focus in any depth on students' lived experiences of engagement, and so these bodies generally do not intersect. This study attempts to address this lacuna. The first part of this chapter focuses on online engagement among the general population of HE students and introduces Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework, which forms the foundation for my own theoretical model (introduced in **Table 5.1**). The second part of the chapter discusses key themes from the literature on forced migrants in online HE. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the need for further analysis and theorising of displaced learners' engagement in online HE, providing the rationale for the present study.

2.2 Student engagement in online higher education

In contrast to the vast body of literature available on student engagement in campus-based HE, there is comparatively little literature available using the terminology of "student engagement" in the context of online or distance learners (Farrell & Brunton 2020; Redmond et al., 2018; Redmond et al., 2021), and even less that specifically focuses on the engagement of underrepresented groups of students in online HE, although there is an emerging body of such literature since the Covid-19 pandemic forced most face-to-face HE to "pivot"

online in 2020. Below I explore some themes from the literature that are salient to this study.

2.2.1 Defining student engagement

While student engagement has been positively correlated with student success (Thomas, 2012), a consistent theme in the meta-reviews is that much of the literature lacks conceptual clarity and methodological rigour, and there is no widely shared definition of the term "student engagement" (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; V. Trowler, 2015; Tight, 2020; Zepke, 2021). Student engagement has been variously defined as "both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices" (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2008); "a student's emotional, behavioural and cognitive connection to their study" (Kahu et al., 2014, p. 523); the exercise of agency by students in relation to their learning through intentional action Kahn (2014); or the contribution of the "student voice" to institutional and curricular decision-making (e.g., Buckley, 2018; Tait, 2014). V. Trowler (2015) suggests that the "chaotic" nature of the concept of student engagement allows it to mean many things to different people, and thus to be applied - or manipulated - in keeping with different underlying interests, while Zepke (2021) argues that the lack of a single agreed definition is a strength, as the literature collectively provides valuable "psychological, psycho-social, socio-cultural, socio-ecological, and socio-political research perspectives" (p. 2).

A significant strand of the literature focuses critically on the deficit narrative in neoliberal education policies (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017), for example,

Vallee (2017, p. 920) highlights "the pathologising and exclusionary effect of engagement discourse which operates within a dialectic of normal/engaged // ab/normal/disengaged" in academic and public discourse. He argues that this discourse deflects attention from social and economic inequality by "psychologising" public problems. Zepke (2018) similarly critiques "the overarching explanatory meta-construct" of student engagement—the cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions—as being overly-driven by psychology, thus masking wider ethical and political questions (p. 440). V. Trowler observes that a deficit approach can even be detected in the prepositions used in student engagement definitions:

> Defining student engagement as engagement *by* students lays the responsibility and accountability at the door of students: students who are not engaged have failed to engage… Defining student engagement as engagement *of* students ascribes responsibility to institutions but denies agency to students: students who are not engaged have not been engaged (but will be when the institution does it 'right'.) (2015, pp. 305-306)

From a social justice point of view, one might consider that focusing on engagement both *of* and *by* students, and the interplay between these two kinds of engagement, avoids the two extremes. It is worth noting that there is some disagreement around the extent to which the engagement literature is characterised by a deficit view, with Zepke (2014; 2015) arguing that it is pervasive and P. Trowler (2015) challenging this perception. I would suggest

that the following definition achieves the dual focus of engagement both *of* and *by* students:

> Student engagement is the energy and effort that students employ within their learning community, observable via any number of behavioral, cognitive or affective indicators across a continuum. It is shaped by a range of structural and internal influences, including the complex interplay of relationships, learning activities and the learning environment. The more students are engaged and empowered within their learning community, the more likely they are to channel that energy back into their learning, leading to a range of short and long term outcomes, that can likewise further fuel engagement (Bond et al., 2020, p. 3).

Bond et al.'s definition was informed by a systematic review of the literature on student engagement and educational technology. I have chosen to use this definition as the basis for my study because it highlights both the structural and personal ("internal") influences, and also because it provides me with one of my study aims - to ascertain the ways in which engagement fuels further engagement.

2.2.2 Motivation, cognitive engagement and academic achievement

Students' motivation is said to initiate, guide and sustain engagement in online learning (Ng., 2019), and is strongly correlated with cognitive engagement and academic achievement (Chung et al., 2022; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022). Students with high levels of motivation tend to use more self-regulation strategies, such

as forethought and planning, monitoring and reflection (Shea et al., 2012), which have been found to be crucial to all aspects of online engagement (Chung et al., 2022; Ng., 2019; Park & Yun, 2018). When the learning content has personal significance to students, this can have a positive impact on cognitive engagement (Park & Yun, 2018). The use of critical pedagogy has been found to be important for teaching students to develop a critical consciousness (McKay & Dunn, 2020; Zepke, 2015), and timely assessment feedback to students can also support cognitive engagement (Chakraborty & Nafukho, 2014; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Seery et al., 2021). Self-directed learning, defined as "learning that is directed by the learner rather than by someone else" (Pemberton & Cooker, 2012, p. 204), has also been found to be a strong predictor of cognitive engagement and student achievement in online learning (Bolliger & Martin, 2020; Park & Yun, 2018; Torun, 2020). A cautionary note here is that the individualistic orientation of much of the literature on motivation, self-regulation and self-efficacy has been criticised as epitomising a deficit approach. There is empirical evidence showing that external factors, including the social and physical context, can shape self-regulation (Hensley et al., 2022), and that motivational support can be distributed across many aspects of distance learners' participation in online education, including through interaction with others in the learning community (Ng, 2019, p. 479). These critical perspectives highlight the importance of viewing motivation and associated outcomes, such as academic achievement, through a wider socio-cultural lens, and not just in terms of inherent individual abilities.

2.2.3 Retention and lifeload

Student retention is often seen as a proxy for engagement (Bawa, 2016; Seery et al., 2021; Simpson, 2013; Tight 2020; Woodley & Simpson, 2014), and it has been argued that "the more engaged a student is—with their HE and the institution from which they are receiving it—the less likely they are to voluntarily leave HE before they have completed their studies" (Tight 2020, p. 689). This is particularly important in the context of distance education, which has notoriously low rates of student retention (Bawa, 2016; Seery et al., 2021; Simpson, 2013; Woodley & Simpson, 2014). Seery et al.'s (2021) systematic literature review of institutional retention strategies for online students found that factors not directly related to students' studies, including their family lives, their professional and caring responsibilities, financial worries, political events, and demographic factors such as age, ethnicity, gender and race had a significant impact on online student engagement. The term "lifeload" was coined by Howard McClusky, who proposed the theory of "margin", which referred to the reserve of energy a person has left to dedicate to their learning after dealing with the "load of life". He explained it as follows:

> When *load* continually matches, or exceeds *power*, and if both are fixed, i.e. out of control, or irreversible, the situation becomes highly vulnerable or flirts with breakdown. If, however, *load* and *power* can be controlled, and better yet, if a person is able to command a *margin* of latent *power*, he [sic] has more autonomy. He is thus prepared to meet emergencies. He can engage in exploratory or creative activities. He can take risks and do things that enable him to live above a plateau of mere self-maintenance (McClusky, 1970, p. 27).

Kahu defined the concept of lifeload for students as "the sum of all the pressures a student has in their life, including university" (Kahu, 2013, p. 767). Lifeload has been identified as a critical factor affecting learning engagement by distance learners (Farrell and Brunton, 2020; 2020; Kahu, 2013; Kahu et al., 2014), and a recent study investigating how the shift to online education during Covid-19 had affected students' perceptions of learning and engagement found that students "consistently prioritised lifeload over learning load" (Hews et al., 2022, p. 128).

2.2.4 Digital capabilities

Prior experience of online learning has been found to positively influence online engagement (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Park & Yun, 2018), and much of the literature on online engagement highlights the importance of digital literacies as a prerequisite for engagement (e.g., Chikasha, 2022; Fabian et al., 2022; Hews et al., 2022; Kara, 2022; Wei & Chou, 2020). Provision of training for students in the use of digital tools and the online environment is advised (Bond et al., 2020; Fabian et al., 2022). In some of the UK discourse, digital literacies and competencies are referred to under the umbrella of "digital capabilities" (e.g., Jisc, n.d.), in recognition of the fact that digital skills for learning and teaching are not purely an individual possession, but are influenced by structural factors (Beetham, 2016; Cronin, 2016). The recent, Covid-era literature on online HE has provided substantial evidence for the fact that digital poverty puts some students at a disadvantage (Crawford et al., 2022; Cullinan et al., 2021; Pickering & Donnelly, 2022; Mapletoft et al., 2022). Online students often report a lack of suitable devices

for studying, along with no or unreliable internet connectivity at home (Salas-Pilco et al., 2022), or comment on the difficulties of sharing physical space, devices and limited internet connections with family members (ElSayary et al., 2022). Students in countries with developing or emerging economies are unsurprisingly more severely affected by such issues (Cranfield et al., 2022). Payne et al. (2022) note that digital inequality is intersectionally related to other forms of disadvantage and suggest that it can be at least partially mitigated through teaching approaches which emphasise a relational, rather than transactional, approach by educators. Costa et al. (2018) caution that some learners may be reluctant to participate in online activities due to a perception of the Web - and by extension, the virtual learning environment - as a place of surveillance. They liken the online learning platform to a "panopticon", which allows the teacher to remain unseen in a virtual "watchtower", while the students are exposed through their online performance, undermining the idea of authentic participation. Like Payne et al. (2022), these authors argue for more caring, participatory learning and teaching practices.

2.2.5 Emotions, well-being and engagement

Emotional engagement has been found to have greater influence over satisfaction for online learners than cognitive, behavioural or social engagement (Deng, 2021). Much of the Covid-era literature focuses on student well-being and finds that feelings of isolation can lead to stress and anxiety, negatively affecting emotional engagement (e.g., Hensley et al., 2022; Kara, 2022; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022; Tulaskar & Turunen, 2022). Hews et al. (2022) found an "inextricable connection between students' personal lives, including emotions

and wellbeing, and their university lives" (p. 128). Significant correlations have been found between online learners' positive emotions and interest, learning and effort; while negative emotions have been found to be strongly associated with negative interest, enjoyment, learning, effort, and attention (Garris and Fleck, 2022). Chung et al. (2022) argue that further research is needed into the impact of online learners' well-being on their educational experience and success, to better understand the interplay between emotions and online learning engagement. A recent paper by Gourlay et al. (2021), co-authored with students, highlights the importance of the affective, relational nature of online learning for students, in contrast to the "technical" focus of much of the literature that focuses on digital access and connectivity; this finding is borne out by a recent Romanian study which highlights the importance of social interaction for fostering positive emotions and well-being among online students (Mihai et al., 2022).

2.2.6 Social presence, belonging and mattering

There is a substantial body of literature on the social aspect of engagement in distance education, where it is often called "social presence". The term was coined in the 1970s (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), and the concept received renewed interest in the 90s as distance education shifted towards internet-based delivery, with empirical research highlighting the value of the social construction of knowledge (e.g., Berge, 1995; Gunawardena, 1995; Harasim, 1993). The Communities of Inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000) proposed three "presences" at the heart of the online educational experience: social, cognitive and teaching presence. This model was widely influential in

subsequent literature (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2020), helping to highlight the importance of the social dimension in online learning. A significant strand of the literature on learning design for online settings argues for the embedding of structured opportunities for students to develop and enact social presence (e.g., Armellini et al., 2021; Bawa, 2016; Khan et al., 2017; Laurillard, 2001; Salmon, 2011; 2013; Seery et al. 2021). A large-scale study at the UK's Open University found that the "primary predictor for academic retention was the time learners spent on communication activities" (Rienties & Toetenel, 2016, p. 222).

Asynchronous discussion forums have been the locus of much of the empirical research into online social interaction. Discussion forum participation has generally been found to have a positive impact on student retention (Pinchbeck & Heaney, 2022) and on cognitive engagement (Prestridge & Cox, 2021); it has also been correlated with increased social capital and gains in academic achievement (Carceller et al., 2015). There is also some evidence, however, that discussion forums can have a mixed influence on engagement, with some students feeling anxious or stressed about participation (Farrell and Brunton, 2020). This may be related to the finding from social media research that online communication "massively enables (or incites) social comparisons [...] Hence, the Internet intensifies the experience of inequality and of the negative emotions typically triggered by inequality: shame, guilt, and envy on the part of the "losers"; scorn, pride and hubris on the part of the "winners"; anxiety, exhaustion and confusion among those in between" (Marx, 2022, p. 18). Thus, some sensitivity is called for in the design of interactive online activities.

Developing an inclusive curriculum that "considers student diversity as an inherent educational value" is also linked to engagement (McDuff et al., 2020, p. 92). A major strand in the literature on social engagement focuses on the importance for students of feeling a sense of belonging to the learning community (e.g., Gourlay et al., 2021; James et al., 2022; Johnson, 2022; Thomas, 2012), or "mattering, feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the campus community" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 4). The notion of "mattering" is an emergent concept appearing across much of the literature on access, retention, attainment and progression in HE, and essentially refers to the idea that "'the university' cares" (Austen et al., 2021, p. 4). This idea is discussed further below in relation to pedagogy.

2.2.7 Pedagogy, teaching presence and care in online HE

In Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry model, teaching presence was presented as the students' experience of receiving teaching, whether from the teacher or other students or through the learning environment. In this model, teaching presence was demonstrated in online education through course design and organisation of curriculum and resources, facilitation, and direct instruction. There is growing evidence from the recent literature that student perceptions of teaching presence are strongly associated with enactments of care by the teacher or course team (Addae et al., 2022; Burke, Fanshawe & Tualaulelei, 2021; Burke & Larmar, 2021; Hensley et al., 2022; Hews et al., 2022; James et al., 2022; Payne et al., 2022). Students have been found to value "a general culture of warmth and inclusion" (Burke et al., 2021, p. 295), which they say is demonstrated through personal emails, video messages and

discussion forum posts delivered by the teacher in an encouraging tone, as well as through a well-designed, easily-navigable curriculum on the VLE. Conversely, when students experience disregard (such as dismissiveness of their requests for flexibility), this can be particularly discouraging. (Hensley et al., 2022, p. 51212).

Gourlay et al. (2021) argue that establishing a culture of care is crucial to promoting critical thinking, on the grounds that developing criticality involves learning a set of epistemic practices that include "an intertwining of the relational, the personal and the affective. Space, autonomy, confidence, a sense of belonging, and respect are mentioned [by students] as central to the project of engaging in questioning and criticality" (p. 11). This understanding leads the authors to argue for an ethos of care at the heart of online teaching, and a recognition that HE needs to nurture relationality, belonging and trust in order to provide conditions conducive to engagement.

2.2.8 Redmond et al.'s Online Engagement Framework

While there are many models of student engagement in the literature (e.g., Bond et al., 2020; Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018) I have chosen to use Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework for my study, as it focuses specifically on engagement in online learning environments. The framework has been influential in the literature (e.g., Bond et al., 2020; Burke et al., 2021; Seery et al., 2021; Tualaulelei et al., 2021). The authors developed the framework after observing that the Australian Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT, similar to the UK's NSS) were entirely focused on

campus-based education and neglected the online education experience (Brown & Redmond, 2022). The framework, which was informed by a literature review, comprises five categories of engagement with illustrative indicators. *Social engagement* is described as students "creating purposeful relationships with others" (Redmond et al., 2018, p. 191), through both academic and non-academic activities. *Cognitive engagement* is "the active process of learning" (p. 191). The authors link this element to notions of surface and deep cognition: surface cognition refers to student contributions that lack judgment, justification or clarification, while deep cognition refers to more complex processes involving integration of information and the use of metacognitive strategies. *Behavioural engagement* is described as "doing the work and following the rules" (Redmond et al., 2018, p. 193, citing Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris). *Collaborative engagement* is "related to the development of different relationships and networks that support learning, including collaboration with peers, instructors, industry and the educational institution" (p. 194). This description overlaps somewhat with social engagement, although collaborative engagement appears to have a greater emphasis on academic and employment-related outcomes. *Emotional engagement* is "related to students' feelings or attitudes towards learning" (p. 195) and "can be observed through their … enthusiasm, interest, anxiety or enjoyment in the learning process" (p. 195). The framework is reproduced in Table 2.1, along with the illustrative indicators provided by the authors.

Online engagement element	Illustrative indicators
Social engagement	Building community Creating a sense of belonging Developing relationships Establishing trust
Cognitive engagement	Thinking critically Activating metacognition Integrating ideas Justifying decisions Developing deep discipline knowledge Distributing expertise
Behavioural engagement	Developing academic skills Identifying opportunities and challenges Developing multidisciplinary skills Developing agency Upholding online learning norms Supporting and encouraging peers
Collaborative engagement	Learning with peers Relating to faculty members Connecting to institutional opportunities Developing professional networks
Emotional engagement	Managing expectations Articulating assumptions Recognising motivations Committing to learning

Table 2.1: Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education (Redmond et al., 2018, p. 190, CC BY-4.0)

Redmond et al. (2018) offer recommendations for instructors, instructional designers, teaching teams, programme designers and policy makers for using the model as an evaluative or a design tool. They conclude their 2018 paper with an invitation to other researchers to apply the online engagement framework to validate it. In a later paper by some of the same authors, Brown et al. (2022b) propose a "nudging protocol", based on findings that students respond positively to being "nudged" by a teacher to take specific actions to further their learning, when the nudge is couched in the tone of a "concerned

friend", using a "strengths-based, educative discourse" (p. 11). A suitable nudge would sit comfortably within the notion of a pedagogy of care discussed above.

2.3 Refugees in online higher education

The literature on displaced learners in online HE contains a rich and detailed exploration of the barriers faced by such learners, but also provides many examples of persistence and success in the most challenging of circumstances. It is worth noting that most of this literature is based on relatively small-scale, qualitative studies, and that little is known about about the overall impact of online education initiatives for refugees, or even about the challenges and limitations for providers of such offerings (Crea and Sparnon 2017; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; UNESCO 2018). Below is an overview of some of the key themes from this literature.

2.3.1 Refugees' perceptions of online learning

While motivation to participate in HE is high among forced migrants (Baker et al., 2019; Berg, 2018; Jack et al., 2018; Hoff, 2020; Mkwananzi & Mukwambo, 2019; F. Reinhardt et al., 2021), it has been noted that some refugees are reluctant to learn online (Bothwell, 2017; El Ghali & Ghosn, 2019; Fincham, 2020b; Younes, 2020). The reasons for this may partially be cultural—see, for example, Cranfield et al.'s. (2021) comparative study of learners of different nationalities' perceptions of online learning. The preference for face-to-face learning may also be influenced by students' limited exposure to high quality online education. In a study amongst Syrian refugees in the MENA region who were offered online courses, many viewed online learning as inferior to face-to-

face learning, and assumed that online instructors would be less competent than teachers at a "real university"; furthermore, the study participants felt disadvantaged by the fact that there was limited recognition of credits and qualifications received for online study by local universities and employers (Fincham, 2020b). Online learning may also be less motivating to forced migrants, and less empowering, because it reduces opportunities for social integration with the local community (Younes, 2020). Nevertheless, many displaced learners appreciate the flexibility of online learning and embrace it, recognising that it provides opportunities for engaging in HE that would not otherwise be possible (Brunton et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2022).

2.3.2 Retention of forced migrants in online HE

There is evidence that refugee students are more likely to drop out of on-campus university programmes than non-refugee students (Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018). There is limited empirical research into the retention of forced migrants in online HE, but two examples from the literature paint a sobering picture. A study by Halkic and Arnold (2019) on how displaced learners used Kiron's online education offerings found that only a small, relatively privileged group of enrolled learners completed the programmes they had started. An evaluation of a blended, tertiary-level health programme in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya found that, while all participants gained useful skills to tackle local health problems, only 14 of the 67 students completed their first module (Bolon et al., 2020). Had this been fully online, presumably the completion rate would have been even lower. The causes of such low retention rates include technological, linguistic and cultural barriers, and well-being

issues caused by social isolation, uncertainty and trauma. Many of these barriers can be viewed as aspects of lifeload, in that they contribute to the pressures in a refugee's life. The concept of lifeload resonates well with the social justice literature, particularly the capabilitarian literature, which considers how individual capabilities can vary dramatically even when all individuals have access to the same resources.

2.3.3 Technological barriers and digital capabilities

For displaced learners, all the barriers and risks related to digital technologies mentioned in relation to the general distance learning population are pertinent and may often be amplified. The "Digital Intelligence Index" (Chakravorti et al., 2020) plots countries on a matrix according to their "digitalisation state" and momentum, and it is worth noting that many of the refugee-producing countries are in the "Watch out" zone, where they have both a low state of digitalisation and low momentum. Students from these countries are likely to have had less experience of digital technologies in their daily lives than those from the "high state" countries, which are predominantly in the Global North. Forced migrants located in refugee camps are least likely to have access to the necessary digital infrastructure and tools, particularly internet connectivity (Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Moser Mercer et al., 2016; Taftaf & Williams, 2020), and even refugees in urban settings are likely to be disproportionately affected by the "digital divide" in comparison to the host population (Mupenzi et al., 2020).

In relation to digital literacies, many of the online HE providers who offer programmes for displaced learners also offer specific digital literacy orientation

support (e.g., Brunton et al., 2018; Farrell et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022). Further research is needed to understand the local, contingent needs of refugees in different environments, to create appropriate digital literacy policies and curricula, and to support refugee communities (Unangst and Crea, 2020). Traxler (2018) makes a detailed and coherent case for such research in relation to the diaspora of Palestinian refugees.

2.3.4 Linguistic and cultural barriers

Within the literature on forced migrants in online HE, much of the discussion on academic performance focuses on linguistic and/or cultural barriers that inhibit or prevent engagement with course content (Halkic & Arnold, 2021; Moser-Mercer et al., 2016; Palanac et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2022; Streitwieser et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2018; Younes, 2020; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2021). It is difficult to compare refugee student experiences against those of the general population in this regard, since issues of language and culture have received limited attention in the wider literature about the general (i.e., non-refugee) student population (F. Reinhardt et al., 2021), although there is some evidence of the critical role of language in the success of learners from developing countries on massive online open courses (MOOCs) (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2014) and barriers to understanding caused by the use of unfamiliar reference points (Nkuyubwatsi, 2014; S. Reinhardt, 2018). Furthermore, culture appears as a barrier in terms of the HE culture and practices of the educational institutions themselves, which may be alien to students of refugee backgrounds (Farrell et al., 2020; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). Traxler (2018) also highlights the "cultural specificity of digital literacy theorising and practice"

(p. 1), which leads to cultural biases in digital education policies that can disadvantage certain groups of learners such as refugees.

2.3.5 Supporting online higher education in refugee camps

Barriers to access and participation in refugee camps are often linked to site-specific factors, as each camp is characterised by its own resources, cultural dynamics and constraints; however, there are commonalities, such as the lack of congruence between learning materials and the students' lives, and the lack of explicit learning pathways for refugee students (S. Reinhardt, 2018). Much of the literature in the context of refugee camps promotes the idea of blended learning programmes which include some face-to-face facilitation, on the basis that the on-site teaching presence could help bridge the technology, cultural and linguistic gaps for students (Bolon et al., 2020; Colucci et al., 2017; Creelman & Witthaus, 2018; Girme, 2022; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; O'Keeffe, 2020; Taftaf & Williams, 2020; Witthaus & Ryan, 2021). This is in keeping with the United Nations High commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) recommendations for delivering education in situations of conflict and crisis (UNHCR, 2016).

There is also a need to consider the digital technologies that are available to people in refugee camps: Dahya and Dryden-Peterson (2017) found that mobile phones and the social networks they afforded were critical to facilitating pathways into and through HE for refugees in camps in Kenya, and in a study amongst Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, Reinprecht et al. (2021) argued that adapting online learning materials for use on smartphones with low

bandwidth would significantly increase the potential number of online learners. These authors call for more research into the role that mobile phone technology can play in enabling online learning for people in refugee camps.

Most recommendations for institutions/ organisations that want to make their online courses available to people in refugee camps, such as those cited above, focus on adapting or augmenting existing offerings to suit the context(s) of the camps. The University of Geneva's InZone programme goes further by partnering with local universities and organisations in the provision of online and blended courses in refugee camps in Kenya and Jordan; it has also developed open educational resources for rapid emergency response training in refugee camps. Their "Theory of Change" challenges institutions to "rethink their civic engagement, responsibility and accountability when operating in humanitarian contexts" (Moser-Mercer, 2021, p. 15). InZone ensured that their local partners owned the degree programmes; they then offered short, credit-bearing courses to refugees that would be recognised by the local university and could form the "building blocks" of their degree programmes. Moser-Mercer (2021) remarks that this partnership positioned InZone as a learning organisation, not merely as an education provider. Such approaches clearly require significant institutional commitment and investment.

2.3.6 Trauma, anxiety and stress

There is substantial evidence of the impact of trauma and post-traumatic stress on refugees in campus-based HE, and it seems reasonable to assume that the findings are transferable to the online learning context. While it is clear that the

stresses of life as a forced migrant can distract students from their studies, there are conflicting reports on the role of HE as either exacerbating or ameliorating these stresses. A Canadian study found that, for many forced migrants who were survivors of war and/or torture, previous traumatic life experiences have not only become embedded in their identity, but are exacerbated by experiences of racism, xenophobia and other forms of prejudice within the HE system (Bajwa et al., 2018). A South African study argued, similarly, that universities may contribute to the reproduction of trauma for displaced learners through the imposition of a single identity as "international students", and through the lack of a culture of care and support for refugees (Maringe et al., 2017). Conversely, in a study amongst Syrian university students in Turkey, although students were experiencing "acculturative stress" triggered by uncertainty about the future, nostalgia for the loss of their community back home, and a sense of hopelessness about future employment opportunities, these stressors were softened by the pursuit of HE, which increased the students' self-esteem and self-efficacy (Safak-Ayvazoglu & Kunuroglu, 2019). Cin & Doğan, in their study amongst refugees in Turkey, found that at university, "the everyday racism, xenophobia, and discrimination is alleviated to a significant degree through providing a peaceful and safe space for coexistence with others" (2021, p. 298).

While there is less empirical research that focuses specifically on displaced learners in the online learning environment, there is evidence that the bureaucratic obstacles faced by forced migrants, the loneliness of being separated from their families, and feelings of uncertainty about the future make

it difficult for these learners to focus on their studies (e.g., Witthaus, 2018). In the Irish context, asylum seekers who are housed in "direct provision" (Government of Ireland, n.d.) have described the emotional experience of the accommodation arrangements as "'stressful', 'depressing', 'lonely', and 'anxious'" (Farrell et al. 2020, p. 8), and noted that these feelings can detract from online learning engagement. Similarly, Brunton et al. (2019) found that the long waiting periods in direct provision (which can last up to three years) can negatively affect people's physical and mental well-being and make it difficult to establish effective online study habits. Such experiences point to the need for consideration of appropriate pedagogy and support for refugee students.

2.3.7 Displaced students and online pedagogy

Since refugees who have experienced war, forced migration and violence are likely to be particularly susceptible to being retraumatised in education settings, some scholars argue that academics who teach displaced students should receive professional development in trauma-informed pedagogy (e.g., Palanac, 2019; S. Reinhardt, 2022). Support is also needed to address the "financial, structural, cultural and digital equity barriers" faced by displaced learners in online HE (Farrell et al., 2020, p. 1). Nanyunja et al. (2022) argue for the provision of "thick" models of programmes which include substantial psychosocial support for displaced learners, rather than "thin" models which merely provide online content. Baker et al. (2018) explored the kinds of support that refugee students in campus-based HE relied on most, differentiating between support that was hot ("signifying familial and community-based 'grapevines' of information"), warm ("information by a person who is distant, but

with whom there is 'perceived synergy'") or cold ("formal, institutional sources of information") (Baker et al. 2018, p. 6). They found that students relied mostly on "warm" support and recommended that universities should increase such sources of support. In a later study also led by Baker, the authors discuss bell hooks' notion of "engaged pedagogy", the constitutive parts of which are:

> an interest in collectively creating exciting classes; an understanding that despite the relative power, the teacher is not all knowing and that power needs to be shared with students; a commitment to mutual vulnerability and developing trusting relationships; all underpinned by the understanding that education can be liberatory and transgressive. (Baker et al., 2022, p. 448)

These authors argue that such a relational, student-centred approach is more likely to encourage active participation in learning, especially in the case of those students who are otherwise disadvantaged by dominant forms of HE. On a practical level, they also argue for modifying assessment policies and practices in online HE to address the barriers faced by refugee learners (Baker et al., 2022).

2.4 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has focused on two bodies of literature that have limited crossover: that on online engagement in general and that on forced migrants in online education. The latter highlights many of the challenges for displaced learners, often focusing on the impact of such challenges on student retention and success, but generally without explicit consideration of online

engagement. The online engagement literature, by contrast, has until recently, included very few empirical studies of students from underrepresented minority groups, and is typically underpinned by an assumption that most students are learning in relatively stable, decently resourced contexts. During the pandemic, some of the research emerging from both the Global South and the Global North started to expose and explore issues of equality, diversity and inclusion. However, this literature is in its infancy, and there is room for the development of new frameworks for understanding online engagement which foreground social justice. It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the current literature offers limited theoretical guidance for understanding the ways in which underrepresented students such as refugees and asylum seekers engage in online HE, providing the rationale for the present study. Specifically, my study takes up three direct challenges from the literature: the first from Unangst and Crea (2020), who argue for the need for more research into the intersectional nature of challenges faced by refugee-background students learning online; the second from Bond et al. (2020), who claim that further research is needed into the role played by structural factors in student engagement; and the third from Redmond et al., (2018), who invite other researchers to trial and further develop their Online Engagement Framework.

Chapter 3: Social justice conceptual framework - the Capability Approach

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the Capability Approach as a theoretical lens for understanding the online engagement of displaced learners. The Capability Approach is a conceptual framework for evaluating social justice by focusing on the extent to which individuals experience well-being and the ways in which social arrangements, institutions and policies influence people's well-being. I will use core concepts from this theory in **Chapters 5 and 8** to build two original, social-justice-oriented visual representations of online student engagement.

The Capability Approach (also called the Capabilities Approach) was first propounded by the economist and philosopher, Amartya Sen, in the late 1970s, and was subsequently taken up by other philosophers (most notably Martha Nussbaum), economists and social policy scholars. It is the cornerstone of the United Nations Development Programme's concept of "human development" (ul Haq, 1995). The core principle is that the well-being of all humans can best be achieved by considering people's "capabilities" and "functionings". *Capabilities* are the freedom to do and be what one has reason to value doing and being, while *functionings* are people's achievement of those beings and doings (Sen, 1999). According to Sen (1999, p. 75), capability is "a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)". Capabilities denote freedoms that are genuinely attainable if the person chooses to pursue them;

unlike rights, which a person may not always be free to exercise. For example, while some countries have gender equality in their constitutions, this is not fully realised in terms of equal education for girls and women (Walker & DeJaeghere, 2021). Additionally, Sen's reference to "functioning combinations" highlights the fact that exercising one's capability to pursue one valued functioning may preclude the pursuit of another. For example, it may not be possible for a woman to both earn an income for her family and look after her children, and she may be "forced to make some hard, perhaps even tragic choices between two functionings which are both central and valuable" (Robeyns, 2017, p. 52).

The Capability Approach highlights inequalities in society, in that functionings tend to have a snowball effect. As noted by Wolff and de-Shalit (2013), "[m]any functionings are in fact capabilities for other functionings. For example, literacy is a capability and reading is a functioning. But reading is not only a functioning; it is, at the same time, a capability, for example, for studying…" (p. 163). Thus, once a person can demonstrate a functioning, this *achieved functioning* can act as a capability leading to ever more valuable functionings. Such functionings are referred to as "fertile functionings" (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007, p. 134); however, the opposite may also occur, where a person's lack of capabilities leads to disadvantage which becomes compounded over time, such as when someone loses their job and then becomes destitute. This situation would be described as "corrosive disadvantage" (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007, p. 121).

Some capabilities are essential to survival, and Sen referred to these as "elementary capabilities", in that they allowed a person to "avoid such

deprivations as starvation, under-nourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality" (Sen, 1999, p. 36). Mkwananzi's (2019) study amongst migrants in South Africa highlighted the importance of elementary capabilities (which she describes as "basic capabilities"), such as the capabilities to obtain shelter, food and sufficient financial resources, being in place before individuals could even aspire towards HE. In her study, women tended to be responsible for caring at home, which was a corrosive disadvantage in that it prevented them from going to university or earning an income.

3.2 Two approaches to defining capabilities in the literature

There are two approaches to defining capabilities in the literature, which are broadly as follows:

1. **Capabilities as freedoms:**

    Sen and Nussbaum both view capabilities as "opportunities" or "freedoms" to realise "valued doings and beings" (Sen, 1992), although they pursue different philosophical paths towards enabling the achievement of those freedoms:

    a. Sen argues that specific capabilities should be determined through public deliberation in given contexts. His emphasis on opportunities (freedoms) has been critiqued by some capability scholars as being too vague, and subject to the dual risks of both an "underelaboration" and an "overextension" of the concept of freedom (Gasper & Van Staveren, 2003, p. 137). From Sen's perspective, however, this is

exactly the point, as it highlights the importance of the voice of the people in shaping policies that affect them.

b. Nussbaum agrees with Sen that the notion of freedoms is central to creating a normative sense of social justice, but argues that this can only be so if a fixed set of "core capabilities", or "fundamental entitlements" are specified as the most important ones to protect. Nussbaum's aim was to create a normative framework with universal applicability that would influence national governments to embed basic human rights in social welfare policies, ensuring that everyone can live "a life worthy of human dignity" (2011, p. 32).

2. **Capabilities as freedoms plus "skills and capacities *that can be fostered*" (Walker, 2006, p. 128, emphasis added):**

Some capability scholars in the HE literature have opted for a definition of capabilities "both as opportunities but also as skills and capacities *that can be fostered*" (Walker, 2006, p. 128, emphasis added). This understanding of capabilities, which highlights the potential for educational interventions, is generally more closely associated with Nussbaum's work, in that its adherents tend to work with capabilities lists. For example, Walker's (2006) influential "ideal theoretical" list of capabilities for HE takes Nussbaum's (2003) core capabilities as its starting point but includes capabilities in this education-focused sense of the word.

The approach taken in this thesis is based on this understanding of capabilities as both freedoms and skills/ capacities that can be fostered.

3.3 The Capability Approach in higher education

The prevailing neoliberal logic in HE policy, which emphasises HE as a private good (Marginson, 2012), is seen in the capabilities literature to offer "an impoverished model for education as it does not prioritise well-being, human agency or the transformative potential of education" (Hannon et al., 2017, p. 1226). Walker (2008) proposes shifting the policy emphasis from a narrow economic focus on human capital outcomes towards a broader focus on "widening capability" (p. 267). Cin and Doğan (2021), in their study of refugees in Turkey, argue that education should be mutually beneficial to students and society, by raising "individuals who are able to secure and distribute diverse and incommensurable goods and capabilities to other members of the community" (p. 309). Education is generally seen in the capabilities literature as enabling individuals to attain "freedom of choice, liberation from domestication and the ability to function meaningfully in society" (Akala, 2019, p. 16), while freedom is viewed as "education's core value, both as a goal… and as the means used to achieve the goal" (Lozano et al., 2012, p. 138).

In the Capability Approach, there is a broadly sequential and iterative relationship between aspirations, resources, conversion factors, capabilities, and the achievement of valued functionings, with personal agency and well-being running through the sequence, as illustrated in **Figure 3.1**. Each of the elements in the diagram is discussed below.
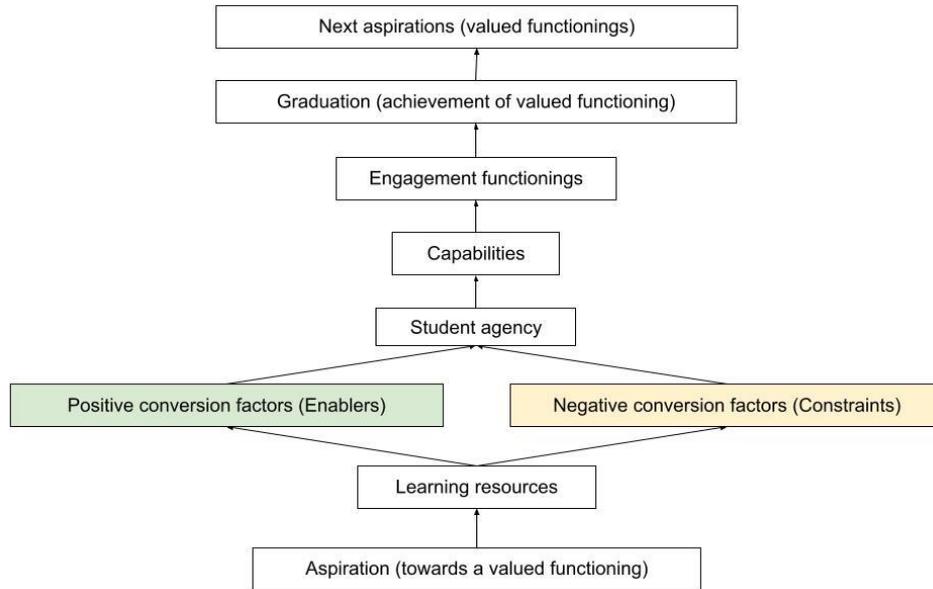
Figure 3.1 Capabilitarian Learning Journey Overview

3.3.1 Aspirations as valued functionings

Starting from the bottom of **Figure 3.1**, students' aspirations are seen in the literature as representations of their valued functionings (Hart, 2012), with the caveat that aspirations are intertwined with agency in complex ways (Mkwananzi, 2019). Hannon et al. (2017) found that "providing a student with agency, including the freedom to decide and 'the power to act and be effective', can support the capability to aspire" (p. 1241), confirming previous work by Walker (2008), Crocker and Robeyns (2009) and Wilson-Strydom (2016). Mkwananzi (2019) mapped the aspirations of her research participants, who were migrant youth in South Africa, onto a matrix, with one axis representing personal agency and the other representing external influences. The exercise yielded four types of aspirations: "resigned, powerful, persistent and frustrated" (p. 96), and her analysis showed that individuals had the potential to move from one quadrant to another. In the current study, all the Sanctuary Scholars could

be assumed to share at least one central aspiration: that of graduation from the online MA programme.

3.3.2 Learning resources

The next element in **Figure 3.1** is *learning resources*. A central idea within the Capability Approach is that giving people access to resources is only the first step towards fair and equitable social policies. It is not enough to say that all people have access to education, for example, if some people are physically disabled and do not have the capability to enter the school building. Thus, any analysis of social justice in a given context needs to start with an understanding of what resources are available to all individuals, and then consider whether those people have the capabilities to use those resources as intended. One important resource for students who are intersectionally disadvantaged is the provision of bursaries. Harrison et al. (2018) found that bursaries can act as "a 'lubricating' resource that enables students to craft an individual experience with features that are likely to support retention and success by strengthening social networks, reducing anxiety and raising motivation, as well as improving access to the formal and informal curriculum" (p. 692). In this study, the primary resource that all research participants have in common is their Sanctuary Scholarship, which gives them a full fee waiver and allows them to access tutors, all their course materials, the VLE, the online library and associated online resources.

3.3.3 Conversion factors

Branching upwards from the learning resources in **Figure 3.1** are the *conversion factors*. These are the factors that either enable individuals to "convert" resources into capabilities or prevent them from doing so. To give an example from Sen (1985, p. 10), if I have a bicycle (a resource), and I have the physical ability to ride and the roads in my environment are safe for cycling, I can use the bicycle to get to work (a functioning). However, if I am a woman living in a society which forbids women from riding bicycles, I do not truly have the capability to ride to work. Conversion factors are categorised as personal (e.g., having the physical ability to ride), social (e.g., the ban on women riding bicycles) and environmental (e.g., the existence of safe roads).

The relationship between conversion factors and capabilities is dynamic and can change over time as students' circumstances and goals change (DeJaeghere, 2020), and may include iterative cycles. Identifying positive and negative conversion factors is critical to understanding the capability sets of individuals. A typical research question addressed by capability scholars in HE is: "Given the structural constraints […], how do students convert available pedagogical and institutional arrangements and resources into participation?" (Calitz, 2019, p. 15). Examples of positive conversion factors from Calitz' study amongst migrant youth in South Africa were: "affiliation with lecturers; affiliation with peers; the platform for voice; access to information; and recognition of capabilities" (p. 127), while negative conversion factors that constrained participation included: "individualising failure, uncritical engagement with knowledge, lack of participation in decision-making, alienation from lecturers,

and misrecognition" (2019, p. 96). Calitz is using "misrecognition" in the sense of Fraser's (1995, 2008) theory of social justice, which emphasises the recognition of human dignity in the face of power differentials between dominant groups and those who are marginalised in society. Many other negative conversion factors have been identified, including a sense of social exclusion (e.g., Pym, 2017; Tamim, 2021) and lack of "navigational capacity" (Cin & Doğan, 2021). In Australia, Molla (2019, 2020a, 2020b) found that many refugee-background African youth were unable to navigate the HE system, which he attributed to life experiences such as "war trauma, disrupted educational pathways, low parental educational attainment, negative stereotypes, racial discrimination, financial hardship and language barriers" (2019, p. 8). He found that these were compounded intersectionally, resulting in corrosive disadvantage.

There is evidence that different conversion factors work intersectionally in both positive and negative ways. Walker's investigation into student decision-making about accessing university in South Africa provides a positive example:

> A [student's prior educational experience of attending a] low-quality school on its own impedes access. But where it intersects with a significant other (teacher, friend) or a supportive family and especially with the personal conversion factor of determination in a context where getting out of poverty means getting into university, the overall impact can be the functioning of access (Walker, 2020, p. 15).

In summary, the literature shows that conversion factors are linked to intersectional disadvantage in context-specific ways. An analysis of conversion factors can highlight opportunities for enabling all students to participate more fully in HE.

Following this discussion, **RQ1** for this study can be elaborated as follows: What *conversion* factors enable and constrain the Sanctuary Scholars' progression through the online programme?

3.3.4 Student agency

The question of how individual agency interacts with social and institutional arrangements is central to the capabilities literature. For ease of representation, I have chosen to add *student agency* next in **Figure 3.1**, so that it appears in between *conversion factors* and *capabilities*, although it is more accurately understood as a thread running through every element in the chain from aspiration to achievement of valued functioning. Sen defines agency in terms of being an agent, i.e., "someone who acts and brings about change and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives" (1999, p. 19). I have placed it in this central position in the diagram to emphasise the point that conversion factors are filtered through an individual's agency, thus disrupting the idea of a strictly linear or directly causal relationship between conversion factors and capabilities. There is evidence that, even in cases where severely negative conversion factors are present, personal agency can act as a mitigating factor. Molla (2019) found considerable resilience among refugee-background African youth in Australia, some of whom thrived in HE,

and Calitz notes that, "far from being passive, disengaged victims of poverty, individuals negotiate structural inequalities with agency and resistance" (2019, p. 15). Walker stresses the importance of "reflexive and deliberative agency", hard work and the learning disposition of learners in confronting structural obstacles (2020a, p. 15). Mkwananzi's (2019) matrix of aspirations and agency highlights the role that personal agency can play in moving an individual from a state of resigned or frustrated aspirations to one of powerful aspirations; nevertheless, she cautions that, even where structural supports and flexible policies are in place, people may have more urgent survival needs to fulfil, which lessen their agency towards pursuing educational goals.

Sen (1999) notes that agency and well-being are inextricably related, since we sometimes deliberately exercise our agency in ways that compromise our well-being, for example when someone finds themselves at the scene of a crime and chooses to shield a victim, putting their own well-being at risk. Thus, Sen distinguishes between "agency achievement" and "well-being achievement", noting that each of these achievements has its own associated "freedom": agency freedom is "one's freedom to bring about the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce", while well-being freedom is "one's freedom to achieve those things that are constitutive of one's well-being" (1992, pp. 56-57). In Mkwananzi's (2019) study, the women who had caring responsibilities and were not able to go to university lacked agency freedom regarding education. To the extent that they also experienced anxiety about their safety and survival, they lacked well-being freedom too. Lacking these

freedoms, they were not able to achieve either agency achievement or well-being achievement.

3.3.5 Capabilities for higher education

The next element in **Figure 3.1** is *capabilities*. Nussbaum put forward a list of core capabilities, or "fundamental entitlements" (2003, 2011) that she argued should be viewed as global benchmarks for social welfare policies. Her list contained the following items: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment. (See **Appendix A** for the full text.) She explained that any such list should not be seen as fixed:

> Since the intuitive conception of human functioning and capability demands continued reflection and testing against our intuitions, we should view any given version of the list as a proposal put forward in a Socratic fashion, to be tested against the most secure of our intuitions as we attempt to arrive at a type of reflective equilibrium for political purposes. (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 77).

Accordingly, Nussbaum's list has been an essential reference point for development of alternative lists itemising the capabilities required for successful transition to, and participation in, HE. In 2006, Walker produced a list of "higher education capabilities for rationality and freedom" (p. 110), drawing on Nussbaum's core capabilities, Alkire's (2002) dimensions of development and Robeyns' (2003) capabilities for gender inequality assessment, as well as student and researcher voices from the literature. Walker's list is reproduced

below, with abridged explanatory text for each capability (2006, pp. 128–129). (See **Appendix B** for the full text.)

1. *Practical reason:* able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, intellectually acute, socially responsible, and reflective choices.

2. *Educational resilience:* able to navigate study, work and life; able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically.

3. *Knowledge and imagination:* able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject; able to use critical thinking and imagination; able to debate complex issues.

4. *Learning disposition:* able to have curiosity and a desire for learning.

5. *Social relations and social networks:* able to participate in a group for learning; working with others to solve problems and tasks.

6. *Respect, dignity and recognition:* able to have respect for oneself and for and from others, being treated with dignity.

7. *Emotional integrity and emotions:* not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning.

8. *Bodily integrity:* safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the HE environment.

I would like to note three key differences between Nussbaum's list of core capabilities and Walker's list. Firstly, some of Nussbaum's original capabilities do not appear on Walker's list—in particular, life, bodily health, and control over one's environment, which might all be relevant to students in precarious contexts. Secondly, Nussbaum's capability of "affiliation" has been divided into

two (social relations and social networks; respect, dignity and recognition) in Walker's list. Thirdly, Walker has added two capabilities: educational resilience and learning disposition. While other capabilities lists for HE have been developed (e.g., Boni & Velasco, 2019; Loots & Walker, 2015; O'Riordan & Dennis, 2021; Walker, McLean et al., 2022; Wilson-Strydom, 2016), in this study, I draw primarily on Nussbaum's and Walker's lists because both are intentionally generic, or "ideal-theoretical", in Walker's (2006) words, which makes them suitable for adaptation to specific purposes—in this case, the identification of the capabilities needed for online engagement.

3.3.6 Engagement as "achieved functionings"

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, while *capabilities* are the freedom to do and be what one has reason to value doing and being, *functionings* are people's achievement of those beings and doings (Sen, 1999). The next element in the chain in **Figure 3.1** is *engagement functionings*, because, returning to Wolff and de-Shalit's notion of reading as an *achieved functioning* and also a capability for further, higher-level functionings, it is easy to see that there are many actions or practices that students routinely carry out when engaging in online learning that can be considered in the same way. I would suggest that the illustrative indicators from Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework (see **Table 2.1**) can help to identify those actions or practices that signify online engagement, and therefore that point to *achieved functionings,* which would cumulatively lead towards successful completion of the programme.

The understanding presented here of engagement as a set of functionings provides the basis for reframing research questions 2, 3 and 4 as follows:

RQ2: How do the Sanctuary Scholars' descriptions of their online learning indicate and illustrate their *achieved functionings of* online engagement?

RQ3: What capabilities underpin the scholars' enactments (*i.e., achieved functionings*) of online engagement?

RQ4: How does engagement fuel further engagement (*i.e., act as a fertile functioning)* in this context?

3.3.7 Graduation (achievement of a valued functioning)

Graduation is a *valued functioning*, which is defined by Sen (1999, p. 75) as anything that "a person may value doing or being". Since graduation can lead to other valued functionings, such as better employability and income opportunities, or an enhanced ability to engage in the political and cultural life of one's community (Molla, 2020b), it may be considered a "fertile functioning" (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). Although it has been pointed out that many forced migrants remain underemployed despite holding tertiary qualifications (Baker, Due & Rose, 2019; Fincham, 2020), there is evidence of reciprocal benefits between refugees and their host communities arising out of their participation in HE (e.g., Arar et al., 2020; Bhabha et al., 2020; de Wit & Altbach, 2016; Dumont & Liebig, 2014; Gladwell et al., 2016; Hirano, 2018; Nakhaie, 2018), and therefore graduation from HE remains a valued functioning for many displaced people.

3.3.8 Next aspirations (valued functionings)

The final element in **Figure 3.1** is *next aspirations (valued functionings)*. As discussed in **Chapter 2**, it is well documented that refugees value the employment and social integration opportunities offered by achieving a university degree. It is also often argued that graduates have a moral responsibility to use their agency to contribute to the well-being of others (e.g., Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015), and there is indeed empirical evidence from the capability literature that people who have overcome structural obstacles in their own lives often aspire to help others. For example, Mkwananzi and Cin (2020) found that the marginalised migrant youths in their study developed aspirations to work for the good of their community, and identified a sense of collective agency which they argue could be leveraged for social transformation.

3.4 Well-being and flourishing

Well-being in the Capability Approach is not measured in terms of people's satisfaction and happiness (Alkire, 2010), because, as Sen points out, people tend to adapt their expectations to their circumstances, and may accept hardship "with non-grumbling resignation" (Sen, 1992, p. 55). This tendency is called "adaptive preference". For this reason, well-being is equated with capabilities and achieved functionings rather than with satisfaction and is often discussed in terms of "flourishing" (Nussbaum, 1997). Wilson-Strydom and Walker (2015) define flourishing as "the extent to which a person is able to be and do what they have reason to value being and doing" (p. 313). Flourishing in

education requires consideration of both the well-being *and* the agency of students (Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015), and therefore refers to a situation where a person has reached both agency achievement and well-being achievement. This may be a temporary state, since both agency and well-being can, at any moment, be constrained or enhanced by external factors, as illustrated in the English study by Harrison et al. (2018), who observed a "highly-individual web of complex trade-offs made by students in order to balance conflicting capabilities around what they value" and noted that this could change over time (p. 677).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of key concepts in the Capability Approach and discussed the ways in which they have been applied within the HE literature. It also elaborated on the research questions for this study to highlight this theoretical orientation and has begun to draw links between the Capability Approach and the online engagement literature, particularly through showing how indicators of online engagement (Redmond et al., 2018) can be viewed in capabilitarian terms as functionings. In later chapters, I build on this foundation to develop two original visual representations which shed light on the factors that constrain and enable online engagement by displaced students, identify the capabilities that underpin online engagement, and illustrate the ways in which engagement in one dimension can fuel the capability for engagement in other dimensions.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter contains an overview of the research paradigm used in this study and a discussion of my research design and implementation, including an explanation of how I developed the research questions, the rationale for my choice of setting and sample, and a discussion of ethical considerations. It details my data gathering methods and analysis processes and elucidates how I developed two conceptual models by drawing on both theoretical and empirical analysis. It concludes with a reflection on both the trustworthiness and the limitations of the study.

4.2 Research paradigm: ontology, epistemology and positionality

The ontological frame of reference for this study is social constructivism, which takes as its starting point the notion that reality is not fixed but is socially constructed. As argued by Lincoln and Guba (2013):

> In the human sciences, entities are matters of definition and convention; they exist only in the minds of the persons contemplating them. They do not "really" exist. That is, they have ontological status only insofar as some group of persons … grants them that status (p. 39).

This understanding leads me to the epistemological standpoint that knowledge (in the social sciences, at least) is constructed through dialogue between specific people in specific contexts and is thus always subject to interpretation. Lincoln and Guba describe this process as being "highly subjective, mediated

by the knower's prior experience and knowledge, by political and social status, by gender, by race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, by personal and cultural values" (2013, p. 40). Such an epistemological stance requires an interrogation of the researcher's position in relation to the research participants.

My own position was ostensibly one of an "outsider researcher", as I am not formally associated with the case study institution or programme of study; however, I perceived my role as being characterised by "in-betweenness" (Jimenez, Abbott & Dasuki, 2022). This is partly because, as a former staff member of the University of Leicester, I have some "insider" insights as to how the distance programme is "supposed" to operate, and I was also a co-researcher in a separate project with University of Leicester colleagues which investigated English Language Teaching and well-being in the refugee language classroom (Palanac et al.,2023.) while doing this study. I also felt an affinity with the Sanctuary Scholars on several levels: as an immigrant myself, as a long-time distance learner, and as someone with a personal interest in politics and international relations (the subject of the case study programme). My role as "study buddy" to the five scholars who requested such support ranged from reading and giving language-focused feedback on their draft assignments, to offering a listening ear when they were experiencing difficult circumstances. This provided me with deeper insights into their online learning experiences and life circumstances, as we had ad hoc, informal WhatsApp calls or text exchanges. (See **Section 4.3.3.1** for a more detailed description of the support I provided in this role as study buddy.) While these aspects of my role constituted "warm support" (Baker et al. 2018), I also recognised that I held a

position of power in relation to the scholars—not only as the person leading this research, but also as an academic working within a Western epistemic tradition that predisposed me towards certain interpretations of "reality". In this regard, I was at risk of perpetuating, in the words of Stevenson and Baker, "the powerful politics of knowledge that permeate academic publication practices and which privilege Western methodologies, knowledges, practices and voices" (2018, p. 8), in both my research processes and outputs.

To counterbalance these privileges and biases, I designed the study to prioritise the voices of the Sanctuary Scholars, foregrounding their own articulation of their experiences and perceptions of learning. This approach was in keeping with the majority of other empirical capabilitarian studies in HE, which use participatory approaches insofar as practically possible (Walker & Boni, 2020), thereby "recognising and connecting with others from diverse reference points in epistemic networks" (Martinez-Vargas et al., 2021, p. 8). The capabilities literature in HE emphasises an interpretivist epistemology and generally uses qualitative, ethnographic research methods, typically in the form of Participatory Action Research (e.g., Boni & Velasco, 2019.; Martinez-Vargas et al., 2020; Martinez-Vargas et al., 2021, Walker, Boni et al., 2022). The voices of members of the communities being researched are given prominence (e.g., Hart, 2012; Mkwananzi, 2019; Molla, 2019; Walker & Mathebula, 2020) in order to provide a rich, multifaceted view of the phenomenon under investigation. In my study, I aimed, through the methods described in this chapter, to offer participants the space to shape the direction of the research. I believe that the use of the Capability Approach as a conceptual framework helped to reduce the effect of

my own potential biases, as the approach was explicitly developed to draw

attention to inequality and social injustice.

4.3 Research design

My research design comprised the following five stages, which are discussed

below.

1. Establishing the research questions
2. Selection of setting and sample
3. Addressing ethical considerations
4. Data gathering
5. Analysis – both theoretical and empirical

4.3.1 Establishing the research questions

I established the research questions for this study based on a review of the

literature and my own previous research with refugees undertaking online HE

(Witthaus, 2018), both of which showed that there is a need for greater depth of

understanding of the lived experience of online engagement (and indeed, dis-

engagement) by displaced people in online HE programmes.

I started my review of the literature on the Capability Approach by reading core

texts by Sen (1992; 1999), Nussbaum (2003; 2011), Robeyns (2017), and

Walker (2006). I then delved more deeply into the capabilities literature in HE,

as discussed in **Chapter 3**. Throughout this process, I wrote regular and

extensive blog posts reflecting on the readings (e.g., Witthaus, 2022c; 2023a).

This cycle of reading, reflecting and writing was interspersed with readings

about online engagement and displaced learners (see **Chapter 2**). I shared my

emerging understandings of the Capability Approach and online engagement in several conference and webinar presentations. This process helped clarify my understanding of my research goals and informed the development of my research questions, which were stated in **Chapter 1** and elaborated on in **Chapter 3** to more explicitly show the influence of the Capability Approach on the research design.

The research questions attribute value to the subjective descriptions provided by my sample of participants around aspects of their own lived experience, as well as to my interpretation thereof. Therefore, my study presents a view of online engagement by refugees and asylum seekers that is co-constructed and context dependent.

4.3.2 Selection of setting and sample

In late 2018, I sought an institution that was offering online HE to refugees and that could facilitate my access to participants. I found that the Department of History, Politics and International Relations (HyPIR) at the University of Leicester was offering Sanctuary Scholarships for distance learning on their six online master's programmes. The scholarships offered a tuition-fee waiver to forced migrants located anywhere in the world. Since October 2018, six Sanctuary Scholars have been admitted to each new twice-yearly intake. This was a novel programme in the UK, and there were only a few precedents elsewhere for the offer of formal online learning opportunities to refugees (see for example Garito, 2017; Sánchez Román, 2018). The University of Leicester's

initiative was therefore an important milestone in terms of increasing opportunities for displaced people to engage in HE.

Conducting research with refugees in a HE setting requires a relationship of trust between the researcher and the "gatekeepers" of the programme the research participants are enrolled on (Palanac, 2019). I was grateful therefore that the programme director was enthusiastic about my research proposal and that she immediately gave me permission to use this programme as my case study. My student research participants were found using convenience sampling. Between October 2018 and October 2019, 17 Sanctuary Scholars joined the HyPIR programmes: six in October 2018, six in March 2019, and five in October 2019. A further six joined in March 2020. These 23 scholars were all invited to participate in my research by means of an initial email from the programme director, which included a link to a short video I had made in which I introduced the study to them, along with the transcript. Included in my introductory message was an offer of informal "study-buddy" support for all the Sanctuary Scholars, which was not dependent upon their participation in the study. (See **Section 4.3.3.1.**) Those Sanctuary Scholars who expressed an interest in participating in the study were then sent further information about the research and asked to complete a consent form (see **Appendix C**). Ten of the scholars did so, thereby becoming my sample research population. I also interviewed two staff members: the programme director and the lead administrator.

Demographic data of my research participants is summarised in **Table 4.1** below. The setting and sample selection had certain inherent limitations. Firstly,

the convenience sampling of participants might have meant that the data was unduly skewed towards those Sanctuary Scholars who had more time available and greater access to online communication tools than others; however, in practice, the research participants varied widely in both of these respects. A second potential limitation was that the small sample size would make it difficult to make any generalisations from the findings. However, small-scale qualitative research can often lead to valuable insights through its very focus on the minutiae that might be missed in larger-scale, quantitative studies. While a small-scale study of this nature can provide only a partial view of the online engagement of refugees and asylum seekers, I anticipated that it would generate themes and patterns that would shed light on general principles of online engagement among underrepresented student groups that would have significance beyond the specifics of this case study.

The following table provides an overview of the demographic profile of the research participants.

Identity	Gender identification	Age (on 30/10/22)	Place of origin	Location when interviewed	Programme start date	Programme status (October 2022)
Zain	M	30-39	Afghanistan	Germany	March 2019	Graduated with MA (July '21)
Malka	F	50-59	Iraq	UK	March 2019	Graduated with MA (July '21)
Mohsin	M	40-49	Syria	UK	Sept 2018	Graduated with MA (July '21)
Nadia	F	20-29	Afghanistan	UK	March 2020	Graduated with MA (July '22)
Kareem	M	30-39	MENA region	UK	Sept 2019	Graduated with MA (July '22)
Sami	M	30-39	Somalia	Malaysia	March 2019	Graduated with PG Cert (Dec 2021)

Theresa	F	40-49	Rwanda	USA	March 2020	Withdrawn during first module
Sol	M	30-39	Syria	Netherlands	March 2019	Withdrawn before starting; reapplying for Sanctuary Scholarship
Julian	M	30-39	DRC	Malawi	Sept 2018	Midway through 4th taught module
Lili	F	40-49	Iran	Various locations	March 2019	Midway through 4th taught module

Table 4.1. Summary of demographic data and programme status of research participants

4.3.3 Addressing ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from both the University of Leicester (where the case study was based) and Lancaster University (the institution supervising my PhD). I gained informed consent from all research participants, which was straightforward, considering that all the participants were master's level students with a good command of English. Because forced migrants may be considered vulnerable participants in the sense that they may have suffered, or currently be suffering, significant trauma, I followed well-established guidelines for conducting research with people in contexts of forced migration (Clark-Kazak, 2017; Mackenzie et al., 2007), for example, by avoiding asking questions that might require them to dwell on traumatic experiences, which could be re-traumatising. I also employed an "ethics-in-practice" approach (Fox et al., 2020), which involved ongoing reflection of ethical issues throughout the research, in line with the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration's (IASFM 2018) code of ethics and the British Educational Research Association's guidance, wherein "ethical decision-making becomes an actively

deliberative, ongoing and iterative process of assessing and reassessing the situation and issues as they arise" (BERA, 2018, p. 2).

4.3.3.1 "Giving back" to the community

An important ethical consideration in the context of forced migration is that researchers ensure that their research projects aim to bring about reciprocal benefits not just for the individual research participants, but for the communities of participating refugees (Mackenzie et al., 2007; Vanner, 2015). To address this consideration, I offered "study buddy" support to all the Sanctuary Scholars who were invited to participate in my study, which was not dependent on whether they chose to join my study. Five of the participating scholars took me up on this offer. The nature of this support included:

- Reviewing several draft assignments for two scholars and giving them audio feedback on their use of English via WhatsApp.
- Proof-reading one scholar's dissertation.
- Being a discussion partner for four scholars in helping them decide which elective modules to take.
- Helping to find information in the course handbook. This included helping scholars understanding the course structure and timing. One scholar did not know whether she had passed or failed an assignment; I consulted the course handbook and was able to drirect her to the relevant information in a section called "Grade Boundaries", the meaning of which had been opaque to her.

- Helping one scholar to formulate his request for an extension in a series of emails to the programme administration office and to understand their responses, which included technical information about the university's rules.

- Attempting (unsuccessfully) to help one scholar retrieve her password for her university account, by helping her to arrange a meeting with IT Services across time zones.

4.3.3.2 Open research

Another way of giving back, in the case of this study, was to ensure that the findings could be shared with, and further built upon by, other researchers and practitioners. I therefore conducted the research in the open as far as possible. Doing open research involves sharing progress and interim findings along the way and publishing data (to the extent that this can be ethically done), as well as one's processes and conclusions under an open licence. The benefits of this approach are that the research process and outputs are located within a community which includes the research participants themselves and their wider communities/ support entities, enabling people to both learn from the research and contribute additional insights while it is still in progress. Also, the research is available to interested readers who do not have access to paywall databases (Pitt et al., 2016). I therefore blogged regularly about insights as they occurred to me throughout the process (Witthaus, 2023a), shared my draft chapters and other artefacts of my research via an open website (Witthaus, 2023b), and disseminated updates within my academic and professional networks on social media. I also presented regularly at academic conferences and accepted

invitations to speak at workshops and webinars. As a result of this ongoing, open sharing of my work in progress, I received peer feedback from other researchers and practitioners that supported my critical reflection, which I believe has enhanced both the quality of my research and its relevance to the sector.

4.3.3.3 Attribution vs anonymity

An area in which I exercised "critical reflections" (Fox et al., 2020; IASFM, 2021) was around the naming of research participants. I initially gave the research participants the option to be named, in the spirit of academic writing, which builds on the words of other writers through rigorous and respectful citation practices. The case for naming research participants has been persuasively argued by researchers such as Moore (2012), who draws on a feminist ethics of care in questioning anonymity-by-default; Giordano et al. (2007), who assert that giving respondents the option for disclosure is a way of respecting their autonomy; and Walford (2005), who recommends that "those about whom the ethnographer writes should themselves be given a platform" (p. 91). Before the first interview, the participating scholars all filled in a consent form (see **Appendix F**), where anonymity was the default position but there was an option to choose attribution later, after they had reviewed the relevant draft sections of my thesis. The purpose of including the opportunity for participants to review the thesis was to ensure that they were giving truly informed consent for the use of their names in my work. I recognised that some research participants might choose anonymity for the sake of personal privacy,

and that being named could constitute a security risk for others, which obviously needed to be avoided at all costs.

Upon completing their consent forms, eight of the ten participants expressed an initial interest in being attributed; however, it proved impractical to ask all these participants to read enough of my thesis for them to understand my interpretation of their quotes or the conclusions I had drawn from their contributions, within the time available. One of my findings was that the Sanctuary Scholars had huge demands on their time from lifeload factors such as caring responsibilities, long hours of employment and lengthy commutes, dealing with the bureaucracy surrounding forced migration, and/or resettling in new locations—not to mention completing their own readings and assignments for their master's degree, and it would have been unreasonable of me to place additional pressure on them to review a substantial portion of my thesis. I therefore defaulted to pseudonymised anonymity for all the research participants. The only exception to this decision was in the case of Malka, who had given me permission to include her poem in the thesis and to attribute her for it (see **Chapter 6**), and I asked her if she would be willing to read the entire thesis (with all mentions of her name highlighted) to confirm that permission. Malka generously agreed to do this.

4.3.4 Data gathering

My main data source was semi-structured interviews with the Sanctuary Scholars, which I supplemented by reviewing their scholarship applications and their online discussion forum posts (with their permission). I also requested

photographs from them. Each of the data generation methods and sources is described below.

4.3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

I planned to conduct two semi-structured interviews with each of the research participants, but in practice, I carried out two interviews with the first nine scholars, and one with the tenth (Sol). The interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes and took place between July 2019 and October 2021. (See **Appendix D** for the interview questions.) All interviews were held online via WhatsApp, Skype or Zoom, apart from in one case where a research participant was Leicester-based and we met face-to-face. With the first nine participants, the first interview took place soon after they had started the HyPIR programme and focused on their previous experiences of HE, their motivation for doing the programme, and their future aspirations. The second interview took place a few months later, by which time the scholars had at least partially completed their first module or were enrolled in later modules, and we discussed their experiences of the programme so far, especially any highlights and challenges they were willing to share in relation to online learning. One participant, Sol, was enrolled in the March 2019 cohort, but had to withdraw before starting the programme due to experiencing trauma. He contacted me in September 2021 when he was hoping to rejoin the programme, and we carried out the first (and only) interview then. Two staff members were also interviewed for the study - the programme director and the lead administrator for the programme. This data was used to explain the context of the HyPIR programme in **Chapter 6**.

All the interviews were recorded electronically and then transcribed using "denaturalised" transcription (Oliver et al., 2005), i.e., focusing on meaning rather than an exact replication of what was said, while making every effort to retain each scholar's "voice". I chose this approach because the study was focused on the substance of their narratives rather than the linguistic features of their discourse.

4.3.4.2 Document review - research participants' Personal Statements

In addition to the interview transcripts, I reviewed the Personal Statements that had been written by the participating scholars as part of their applications for a Sanctuary Scholarship, after obtaining their permission to do so. In these texts, the scholars explained their motivation for applying for the scholarships and gave some background information about themselves. The statements ranged in length from a short paragraph to two pages. Some details from these Personal Statements are shared in **Chapter 6**, where I sketch out each scholar's history as a forced migrant, their motivation for joining the programme, and any relevant prior experience they had had, such as previous participation in online courses.

4.3.4.3 Online text review - module discussion forum posts

As I was interested in understanding the impact of discussion forum participation on the different kinds of engagement, I reviewed the discussion forum entries by research participants for the modules they were enrolled in, with their permission. As contributing to the forum was optional in most

modules, not all research participants had posted. Where I did find discussion forum posts from the scholars (these numbered approximately 20 in total), I used them to help me formulate additional questions for those participants in the second interview.

4.3.4.4 Photo-elicitation

In addition to the above data gathering methods, I initially planned to use photo-elicitation, as this method has been shown to generate surprising and profound insights (e.g., Bates et al., 2017, Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2015); however, this did not go according to plan. During my first interview with the scholars, I asked if they would be willing to send me five photographs according to the brief in **Appendix E**. I had hoped that the scholars would send me pictures representing highlights, lowlights and critical incidents in their experiences as online learners. For ethical reasons, I included a question in the consent form asking participants for their permission to use their photos in the dissemination of my research; I also advised them that if their photos included images of humans, I would manipulate them to blur the humans so that they could not be identified.

In practice, although all the Sanctuary Scholars said they were happy to send me photographs, only six did so, and I did not want to press the others, as I was aware that they were already giving up precious time for the interviews. The photographs that I received were mainly snapshots of the scholars themselves, sitting at their laptops, surrounded by books, printed papers, marker pens, sticky notes, and so on, in their home study environments. Two participants

sent images that I felt added an important new dimension to the interview data. Nadia sent me five images representing her hopes, dreams and concerns: two of these powerful images are presented in **Chapter 6**. Julian sent me photographs of his local surroundings in the refugee camp where he lives, two of which are also shown in **Chapter 6**, as they provide a stark reminder of the realities of life for online students in fragile contexts where such supposedly basic utilities as electricity, running water, and wi-fi connectivity, are in limited supply.

I think there were three reasons why the photo-elicitation did not go according to plan. Firstly, my brief to the scholars may have lacked clarity, in that the photo requests were somewhat abstract. (I had deliberately avoided giving a more concrete or detailed brief, as I did not want to "lead" the participants to produce imagery of any specific kind, but this ambiguity may have been a source of confusion.) Secondly, there was no support for the research participants to contribute to my study in this way. In other studies where photo-elicitation is used, significant effort is often devoted to training and supporting participants to plan and implement a "project" using photographic imagery to represent key facets of their lived experience (e.g., Martinez-Vargas et al., 2020; Senkhe et al., 2018). Thirdly, my request for photos could have been an imposition on my research participants, who were time-poor. While this part of my study did not follow the research design, the images I received nevertheless provided a starting point for discussion in the second interviews with the six participants who sent me photos. They also gave me insights into the living and

study environments of these scholars, and helped to build our relationships, thus contributing indirectly to the quality of the research.

4.3.5 Data analysis process

My data analysis took place in two overlapping stages: first theoretical and then empirical analysis. These stages are described below.

4.3.5.1 Theoretical analysis

While reading about the Capability Approach, I came across Tao's (2013) flowchart (see **Appendix G**), which powerfully illustrates the effects of different conversion factors on the capabilities and functionings of teachers in rural Tanzania by showing how each individual's experience could be characterised by either expanded or constrained capability, leading to two possible outcomes in each case. I had already produced the flowchart shown in **Figure 3.1** as an aid to understanding the relationship between key concepts in the Capability Approach, and so I added the branches leading to "expanded capability" and "constrained capability" following Tao's chart, along with further sub-branches for the possible outcomes, to depict the learning journeys of my research participants. (As my chart in **Figure 3.1** moves from bottom to top, I added the new branches at the top). I then experimented with various formations in an attempt to integrate the online engagement dimensions but found the flowchart format inadequate to the larger task of showing the more complex interrelationships that I was theorising between capabilities, online engagement functionings and student agency. I therefore decided to leave these elements in the flowchart as empty "placeholders", highlighted by the device of a magnifying

glass symbol, and to use the resulting template as a birds-eye view of the scholars' possible journeys through the online MA. (See **Figure 5.1**.)

I then proceeded to develop a separate visual model to depict the associations between the concepts under the magnifying glass. I started by reviewing the capabilities lists by Nussbaum (2003; 2011) and Walker (2006) for similarities and differences, and reflected on how the illustrative engagement indicators from Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework might be viewed as *functionings* that were enabled by some of these capabilities. In parallel, I was coding my data, and as I had identified some additional engagement indicators, I included these in my mapping exercise. While deliberating in this way, I created a four-dimensional version of the Online Engagement Framework (**Table 5.1**) and began sketching out the model that eventually became the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model*. This process is described in detail in **Chapter 5**, along with a series of images showing how I built up the model (**Figures 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4**).

4.3.5.2 Empirical analysis

Methodologically, taking a constructivist stance leads to a research process that "delves into the minds and meaning-making, sense-making activities of the several knowers involved" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 40). I attempted to do this by using a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis on the interview transcripts of the Sanctuary Scholars. I started by using NVivo to analyse the interview data, because I had found this tool useful in previous research (Witthaus, 2018). However, I had also made printouts of each

transcript to use as a checking aid whilst developing my theoretical models. In parallel to the NVivo coding, I began highlighting and annotating the paper transcripts, identifying examples of the four engagement dimensions and identifying conversion factors that could be mapped onto the capabilities in Nussbaum's and Walker's lists. As there were only ten documents (one for each research participant containing their combined transcripts from both interviews), I was able to spread them out on the floor and could quickly compare and contrast multiple transcripts against the capabilities lists which I had on my computer screen. This way of working proved more productive than trying to conduct all the analysis on the screen, and I therefore stopped using NVivo and switched to doing the coding on the printed transcripts (see coding samples in **Appendix F**).

I subsequently reread all the transcripts through an inductive lens, to check for themes which I had neglected to discuss due to my deductive focus on linking the data to the theoretical categories. I found one such theme, which was a focus on the nature of learning devices and tools used by the scholars (e.g., tablets, computers, phones, e-book readers, printers and paper-based readings), which had featured in several of the interviews but did not seem to warrant substantial discussion in the analysis, apart from noting the effect that access to devices had in terms of conversion factors. I also reviewed the transcripts, looking for cases where my empirical data did not "fit" the conceptual models I had developed, but was unable to find any such examples and thus felt confident that my analysis was solidly aligned with my data.

During the interviews, I used techniques such as summarising what I had understood the participants to be saying and asking further questions to prompt clarification, as ways of member checking that I had correctly interpreted their meanings. After completing the first draft of Chapters 6 and 7, I sent these to each of the research participants, with their respective quotations highlighted, and invited them to edit these and to share their own interpretations of the data with me. Two of the scholars did not respond to this request, which may have been because they did not have time; the other scholars all replied, either with a brief positive response or with suggestions for minor amendments/ additions to the sections pertaining to their experiences. One scholar (Malka) reviewed draft versions Chapters 6, 7 and 8 twice to confirm her permission for the use of her poem and her name.

4.3.6 Time frame

The study was originally designed to be completed within two years from mid-2019, and the empirical data was expected to provide a "snapshot" of the Sanctuary Scholars' experiences of online engagement over a twelve-month period. However, after starting the study, my personal lifeload commitments increased and I was not able to proceed within the original timeframe. This proved fortuitous in the sense that the data gathering phase was spread over two years, producing longitudinal data and enabling a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between conversion factors, capabilities and functionings over time. Initial communication with the first research participants began in July 2019, and data gathering continued until October 2021. The staggered intake of Sanctuary Scholars on the HyPIR programmes meant that

different scholars joined the study at different times; also, as I built relationships

with each of them, we developed different rhythms for communication,

depending on their desire for interaction and our mutual availability. Data

analysis was ongoing from the start, but I engaged in two particularly intense

bouts of analysis from November 2021 to January 2022 and from May to

August 2022, in order to produce the two theoretical models.

4.3.7 Summary

The data gathering process and timeline is summarised in **Table 4.2** below:

Activity	Details	Timeline
Semi-structured interviews	Held 19 interviews (two with the first nine participants and one with the tenth participant). Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed. (See **Appendix E**.)	July 2019 to October 2021
Review of discussion forum posts	Reviewed discussion forum posts by Sanctuary Scholars in the modules they were enrolled in, on the VLE, with their permission.	July 2019 to October 2021
Photo elicitation	Invited the Sanctuary Scholars to send me five photographs. (See **Appendix E**.)	July 2019 to October 2021
Textual analysis (Personal Statements)	Reviewed ten Personal Statements from the participants' Sanctuary Scholarship applications.	April 2020 to December 2021

Table 4.2: Data gathering process summary

The data analysis process and timeline is summarised in **Table 4.3** below:

Activity	Details	Timeline
Aggregation of personal data	Personal data were recorded and aggregated to provide a demographic profile of the participants (See **Table 4.1** above.)	June 2020
Coding of transcripts	Coding of transcripts by hand (See **Appendix F**.)	March 2020 to January 2022
Summarising of scholars' journeys through MA	Summarising the scholars' journeys into and through the MA with reference to their Personal Statements (with permission) and interview data (see **Chapter 6**.)	April 2020 to Dec 2021
Theoretical analysis	Developing the two conceptual models - the template for the *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map* (**Figure 5.1**) and the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* (**Figure 8.2**).	November 2021 to August 2022
Diagrammatic representation of scholars' journeys through MA	Analysis and representation of scholar journeys through the MA using the *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map* template (See **Figure 6.5.**)	January to March 2022
Analysis of findings in terms of online engagement	Analysis of findings against indicators in Redmond et al.'s Online Engagement Framework (See **Chapter 7**)	March to July 2022
Writing up findings and member checking	See **Chapters 6-7**.	January to August 2022

Table 4.3: Data analysis summary

4.4 Conclusion: limitations and trustworthiness

In conclusion, the two chief limitations of the study are the small scale of the empirical component and the choice of interviews as a methodology. I outline each of these below and discuss the mitigations that help to make the research trustworthy.

The sample involved ten students and two staff members in one programme of study, and thus raises questions about the generalisability of its findings. However, since this research is located within a social constructivist paradigm, it can be argued that there is value in carrying out interviews with a relatively small number of research participants to co-construct a shared understanding of their lived experiences. In qualitative research, it is generally recognised that readers will be able to determine the extent to which the findings are transferable to other given contexts, given sufficient descriptive information about the research setting, the participants and the methodology (Strunk & Locke, 2019); I therefore aimed to provide rich, thick descriptions of the research setting, the participants and the findings. Methodologically, my choice of interviews as the main data gathering instrument held the risk that my interpretation of the resulting data would be biased. I therefore used the following strategies to increase the rigour and credibility of the findings, in line with established approaches to qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015):

- Examining researcher positionality (see **Section 4.2**)
- Member checking (see **Section 4.3.5.2**)
- Cross-checking across different data sets for confirmation of interpretations and exploration of potential contradictions (see **Section 4.3.4**)

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- Ongoing triangulation of findings with the literature on online engagement, refugees in online HE, and capabilities in HE
- Obtaining peer feedback on preliminary findings via presentations and a publication (Witthaus, 2023c), helping to avoid confirmation bias.

The use of established frameworks for online engagement (Redmond et al., 2018) and capability analysis (Nussbaum, 2003; 2011; Walker, 2006) also increased the robustness of the research, especially as my parallel processes of theoretical and empirical analysis converged seamlessly in the creation of the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* (**Figure 8.2**).

Chapter 5: Theoretical development of a Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map and Online Engagement Model

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I develop two original visual representations based on key concepts from the Capability Approach and Redmond et al.'s Online Engagement Framework: one is a *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map*, showing the whole student journey, from aspiration as an expression of a valued functioning to graduation as an achievement of the valued functioning and other possible outcomes. The second, the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model,* zooms in on the central elements of the learning journey map—agency, capabilities and online engagement functionings—to show the relationships between these elements. The chapter provides the theoretical foundation for answering **Research Questions 1 and 3**:

RQ1: What (*conversion)* factors enable and constrain the Sanctuary Scholars' progression through the online programme?

RQ3: What capabilities underpin the scholars' enactments (*i.e., achieved functionings*) of online engagement?

While the process of developing the theoretical models was very closely intertwined with, and informed by, the empirical data analysis, I will present my theoretical analysis and empirical analysis sequentially for ease of reading. This chapter contains a theoretical response to **RQ1** and **RQ3,** and **Chapters 6 and 7** will address the the research questions based on the empirical analysis.

5.2 Proposed Capabilitarian Online Learning Journey Map

Based on the outline of the Capability Approach in HE presented in **Chapter 3**, the flowchart in **Figure 5.1** below provides a theoretically informed template for mapping the journeys of the scholars in my case study, starting at the bottom with their aspirations, and moving upwards towards either the achievement of those aspirations (as *valued functionings*) or other possible outcomes. The branches at the top of the *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map* depicting expanded/ constrained capability and potential outcomes (shown in **Figure 5.1)** were inspired by Tao's (2013) flowchart (which is reproduced in **Appendix G**), as discussed in **Section 4.3.5.1.** The template should be read from bottom to top.
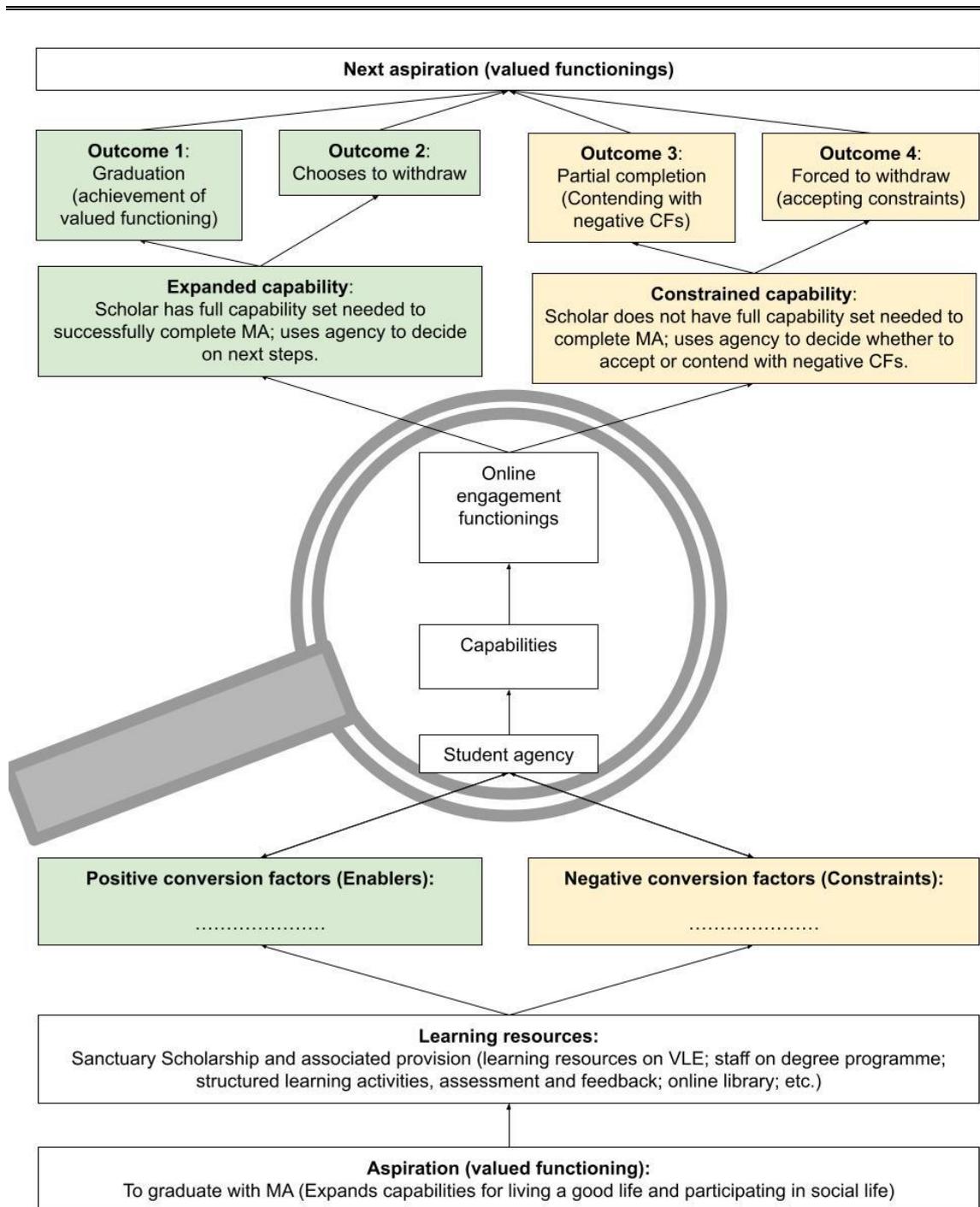
Figure 5.1: Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map - template showing the Sanctuary Scholars' possible journeys through the online MA

Each element in **Figure 5.1** is described next. The magnifying glass in the centre of the template points to three central elements that will be described in greater detail in **Section 5.3**.

5.2.1 Aspiration (valued functioning)

At the bottom of the flowchart is the Sanctuary Scholar's primary aspiration (valued functioning), which can be assumed to be to successfully complete their online degree and to graduate. This should expand their capabilities for other valued functionings (as depicted in the top box).

5.2.2 Learning resources

The scholars in my case study have institutional resources provided as part of their Sanctuary Scholarship, e.g., the virtual learning environment (VLE), access to email and discussion forums for communication with lecturers and peers, and other online learning resources.

5.2.3 Conversion factors

The learning resources are converted into capabilities through *conversion factors* that will either expand or constrain the scholars' capabilities. These boxes are blank in the template, because each scholar is subject to a different set of conversion factors that either enables or constrains their capabilities for online engagement.

5.2.4 Student agency, capabilities and online engagement functionings (overview)

The *student agency* box indicates that each individual scholar will use their personal agency in different ways to mediate the impact of the positive and negative conversion factors on their journey through the MA programme.

The *capabilities* box represents the proposed capabilities required for successful *engagement functionings*.

The *online engagement functionings* box represents the indicators of online engagement, with illustrative indicators provided by Redmond et al. (2018), based on the premise discussed in **Section 3.3.5,** that the engagement indicators can be viewed as functionings.

The elements of agency, capabilities and online engagement functionings are discussed in more detail in **Section 5.3**.

5.2.5 Expanded or constrained capability

While both positive and negative conversion factors may temporarily coexist simultaneously for a single scholar, thus both enabling and constraining their capabilities for engagement, eventually each student's trajectory will branch into one of two possible directions. If the scholar has the full capability set needed to successfully complete the degree, they will take the left-hand branch in the map towards "expanded capability". If the scholar does not have the full capability set needed to complete the degree, they will find themselves following the right-hand branch ("constrained capability"), where they will have to decide whether to accept or contend with the negative conversion factors. These decision processes may be iterative over time.

5.2.6 Graduation and other outcomes

On the left-hand side of the map, we see how, with the combination of expanded capabilities *and* no overwhelming negative conversion factors *and*

personal agency, the scholar achieves Outcome 1 – the valued functioning of graduation. This is a highly fertile functioning, as it makes other valued functionings, such as better employment opportunities, more likely. Outcome 2 may occur if a scholar is capable of engaging sufficiently with the programme to complete the degree but makes an agentic decision not to. The right-hand branch of the map shows what will happen if a scholar experiences overwhelming negative conversion factors. At this point, scholars will have the option to either accept the situation and withdraw (Outcome 4) or to contend with the negative conversion factors and graduate with at least a partial degree, which in this case will be either a Postgraduate Certificate or a Postgraduate Diploma (Outcome 3). Outcomes 3 and 4 may point to corrosive disadvantage, such that certain scholars face insurmountable obstacles due to a combination of negative conversion factors that compound intersectionally.

The use of this flowchart in my empirical analysis is presented in **Chapter 6**.

5.3 Under the magnifying glass: agency, capabilities and functionings

In this section, I theorise the elements from the flowchart that are highlighted by the magnifying glass in **Figure 5.1**. I start with online *engagement functionings* and work backwards to ascertain the underlying capabilities for engagement from a theoretical perspective. I also consider the role of student agency in engagement from a capabilitarian viewpoint. Via this process, I generate a tentative *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* to illustrate these relationships. In later chapters, I review and develop the model further with reference to my empirical data.

5.3.1 Online engagement as a functioning: the four dimensions of online engagement and their indicators

I established in **Chapter 3** that engagement can be viewed as a set of functionings, and that I would use Redmond et al.'s (2018) illustrative list of engagement indicators to help identify engagement functionings in my data. Here I would like to make a slight adaptation to this framework in view of my intended use of it for my data analysis. In **Chapter 2**, I noted the potential overlaps between the five engagement elements, particularly between social engagement and collaborative engagement. Because the indicator "establishing trust" is at the heart of both types of engagement, I anticipated difficulties in making meaningful distinctions between these two elements when coding my data. I therefore decided to combine the two elements into one, as shown in **Table 5.1** below. I will refer to this adapted version of the framework henceforth as the Four-Dimensional (4D) Online Engagement Framework.

Online engagement dimension	Illustrative indicators
Behavioural engagement	Developing academic skills Identifying opportunities and challenges Developing multidisciplinary skills Developing agency Upholding online learning norms Supporting and encouraging peers
Emotional engagement	Managing expectations Articulating assumptions Recognising motivations Committing to learning
Social and collaborative engagement	Building community Creating a sense of belonging Developing relationships Establishing trust Learning with peers Relating to faculty members Connecting to institutional opportunities Developing professional networks
Cognitive engagement	Thinking critically Activating metacognition Integrating ideas Justifying decisions Developing deep discipline knowledge Distributing expertise

Table 5.1: Four-Dimensional (4D) Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education (adapted from Redmond et al., 2018, p. 190)

I planned to ascertain how the Sanctuary Scholars' descriptions of their online learning mapped onto this adapted version of Redmond et al.'s (2018) online engagement framework (**RQ2**) by looking for examples in my data of any of the engagement indicators listed in **Table 5.1,** as well as identifying any additional indicators and determining which engagement dimension they fall under. This part of the analysis involved subjective judgement, since, even after combining social and collaborative engagement into one dimension, there were still

overlaps between engagement dimensions; e.g., the behavioural engagement indicator "Supporting and encouraging peers" could also be considered a social and collaborative engagement indicator. Ultimately, the framework needs to be viewed as a heuristic which allows for multiple interpretations of data.

5.3.2 Theorising the capabilities that underpin online engagement

The search for the capabilities that underpin the scholars' achieved functionings of online engagement (**RQ3**) implies a merging of ideas from the online engagement literature and the Capability Approach. To the extent that the question can be answered theoretically, I now conduct an exploratory exercise mapping the four dimensions of online engagement (see **Table 5.1** above) onto Nussbaum's (2003; 2011) list of fundamental entitlements and Walker's (2006) derivative HE-focused capabilities list. Based on the premise that indicators of online engagement represent achieved functionings, any evidence of the indicators in my data must point to the existence of underlying capabilities/ capability sets. I argue further that, where these indicators are exemplified in a negative or frustrated sense, this must point to the lack of the necessary capability (opportunity, freedom or skills) required for that dimension of engagement. It is often noted in the capabilities literature that capabilities themselves are hard to identify but can be deduced from the presence or absence of functionings (Walker, 2006). Below, I identify four capabilities from the above-mentioned capability lists and explain how they can be seen to underpin each engagement dimension.

5.3.2.1 Behavioural engagement and the capability for educational resilience

Any examples found in my data of behavioural engagement can be assumed to represent the functioning of behavioural engagement for those scholars, and an associated capability must therefore be in place. Conversely, where I find examples of frustrated attempts at behavioural engagement, this must point to the constrained capability (opportunity, freedom or skills required) for such engagement. Redmond et al.'s (2018) indicators listed for behavioural engagement focus on observable behaviour, for example students' posts to discussion forums. I think this dimension maps well onto Walker's (2006) capability for "educational resilience", which is defined as *being able to navigate study, work and life; able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive to constraints* (adapted from Walker, 2006, p. 128). It is important to note that resilience is not used in the sense of individual determination or "grit" here - rather it is a "socially located response to adverse conditions, combined with a capabilities informed analysis of factors that enable and constrain educational resilience" (Wilson-Strydom, 2017b, p. 387).

5.3.2.2 Emotional engagement and the capability for emotional health

Viewing Redmond et al.'s indicators for emotional engagement as functionings, this dimension of engagement seems likely to be fostered by the capability for "emotions" in Nussbaum's (2003) list, or "emotional integrity" in Walker's (2006)

list. I will call this capability "emotional health", following Wilson-Strydom (2016), who developed a modified version of Walker's list through a participative research process. Drawing from the definitions in all three sources, I define this capability as: *able to experience emotions that contribute positively to learning; not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning.*

5.3.2.3 Social and collaborative engagement and the capability for affiliation and recognition

The capability most suited to the indicators listed for social and collaborative engagement by Redmond et al. (2018) is Nussbaum's (2003) "Affiliation". This was taken up by Walker (2006) as two capabilities: "Social relations and social networks" and "Respect, dignity and recognition". Drawing on both authors, I propose a capability set for this engagement dimension called "affiliation and recognition", which is defined as: *able to be treated with dignity and to enter into relationships of mutual respect, recognition and trust; able to interact with others to learn new knowledge and solve problems.* Here I would like to draw attention to the language used for framing capabilities, which goes beyond the typical narratives in the engagement literature: this capability is not just about the ability to relate to others, but also about enjoying the freedom to be treated with dignity and respect by others. It is this attention to the impact of wider social structures that gives the Capability Approach its power in highlighting social justice issues.

5.3.2.4 Cognitive engagement and the capability for knowledge and imagination

Redmond et al.'s (2018) indicators for cognitive engagement map comfortably onto the capability for "knowledge and imagination" Walker (2006), which is based on Nussbaum's fundamental entitlement for "Senses, imagination and thought". Combining Nussbaum's (2003) definition with Walker's (2006), I define this capability as:

> *Able to use imagination and thought to experience and produce academic and professional works of value to oneself and others; able to be an active inquirer without fear of reprisal or censorship.*

Here again, the language draws attention to capability as freedom within social structures; thus, in a political or institutional system in which *expression* of critical thinking was not allowed, students would not have the full capability for knowledge and imagination—even if they had the skills as individuals to think critically.

The proposed relationship between online engagement (as a set of functionings) and the underlying capabilities is summarised in **Table 5.2** below.

Online engagement functionings, with illustrative indicators from Redmond et al. (2018)	Proposed underlying capabilities
Behavioural engagement: Developing academic skills Identifying opportunities and challenges Developing multidisciplinary skills Developing agency Upholding online learning norms Supporting and encouraging peers	**Educational resilience:** Able to navigate study, work and life, to negotiate risk and to persevere academically; able to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive to constraints (adapted from Walker, 2006).
Emotional engagement: Managing expectations Articulating assumptions Recognising motivations Committing to learning	**Emotional health:** Able to experience emotions that contribute positively to learning; not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning (adapted from Nussbaum, 2003; Walker, 2006).
Social and collaborative engagement: Building community Creating a sense of belonging Developing relationships Establishing trust Learning with peers Relating to faculty members Connecting to institutional opportunities Developing professional networks	**Affiliation and recognition:** Able to be treated with dignity and to enter into relationships of mutual respect, recognition and trust; able to interact with others to learn new knowledge and solve problems (adapted from Nussbaum, 2003; Walker, 2006).
Cognitive engagement: Thinking critically Activating metacognition Integrating ideas Justifying decisions Developing deep discipline knowledge Distributing expertise	**Knowledge and imagination:** Able to use imagination and thought to experience and produce academic and professional works of value to oneself and others; able to be an active inquirer without fear of reprisal or censorship (adapted from Nussbaum, 2003; Walker, 2006).

Table 5.2: 4D Online Engagement Framework showing proposed underlying capabilities (adapted from Nussbaum, 2003; Redmond et al., 2018, p. 190; Walker, 2006)

5.3.3 Building a capabilitarian online engagement model

I now turn to my process of building a model that shows the relationships between the elements under the magnifying glass in **Figure 5.1**: student agency, capabilities and online engagement functionings. For the purposes of building a capabilitarian online engagement model, the relationship between capabilities and the functionings of engagement is depicted in the form of two concentric circles, divided into four quadrants, as shown in **Figure 5.2**.
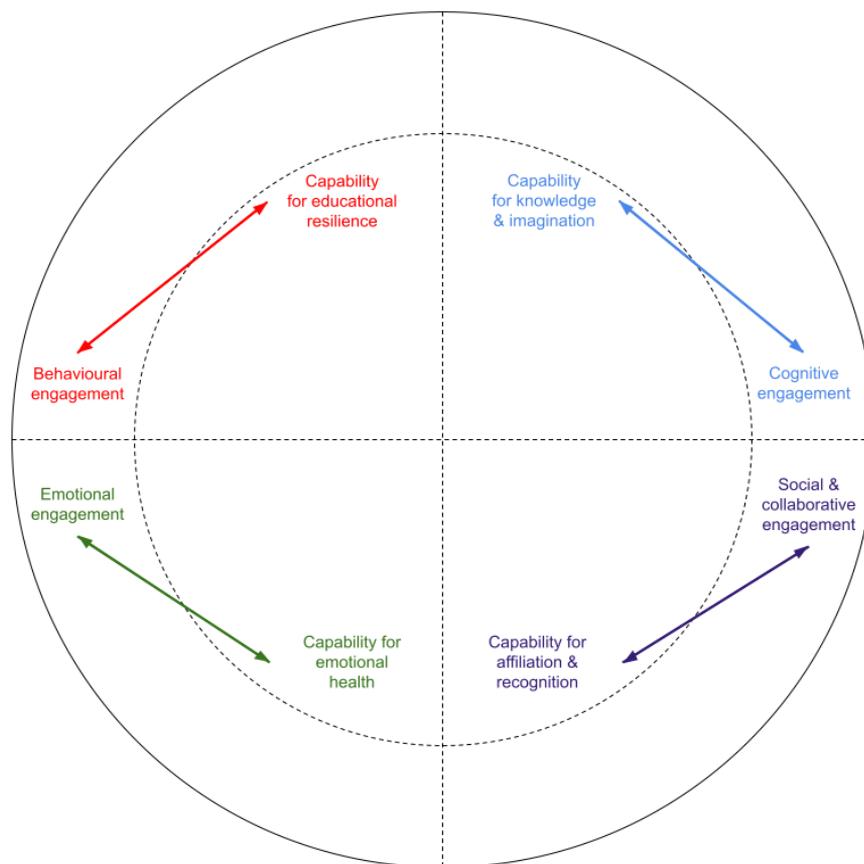
Figure 5.2. Theoretically derived capabilities underlying the functionings of online engagement (derived from Nussbaum, 2003; Walker, 2006)

The outer circle contains the four engagement dimensions (functionings) and the inner circle has the four proposed underlying capabilities. Dotted lines between the four quadrants indicate the overlaps between the four dimensions

of engagement, and similarly, dotted lines between the inner and outer circle indicate that, as capabilities become realised as functionings, those functionings themselves can become capabilities for further functionings. In each case, I also expect to find a two-way relationship between the engagement dimension and the capability, in that while the capability is a prerequisite for a certain form of engagement, the capability itself is also strengthened when the functioning is achieved (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007). For this reason, the arrows between capabilities and engagement functionings point in both directions.

5.3.3.1 Elementary capabilities required for participation in online higher education

As discussed in **Chapter 3**, Sen (1999) noted that certain capabilities were elementary, in the sense that they were necessary for survival. Evidence from the HE literature shows that certain such capabilities are needed before a person can even aspire to HE (e.g., Mkwananzi, 2019). I argue that four of the capabilities from Nussbaum's list are critical to a person's physical survival and mental well-being, and should therefore be considered elementary in the context of online engagement:

- The capability for bodily integrity: "being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault…";
- The capability for life: "being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length";

- The capability for health: "being able to have good health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter";
- The capability for control over one's environment: "being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life…" (Nussbaum, 2003, pp. 41-42).

Bodily integrity was included in both Walker's (2006) and Wilson-Strydom's (2016) lists, reworded to refer primarily to students' physical safety in the HE environment. In the context of distance education, this seemed more appropriately labelled as an elementary capability because the university cannot provide this kind of protection for its online students (unlike for campus-based learners, who would rightly expect to be able to move around the campus and halls of residence in safety). The last three capabilities in the above list are normally excluded from capability lists for HE, probably because they do not appear to be directly relevant to learning. I chose to include them as elementary capabilities, because the absence of one or more of these freedoms may completely disrupt the student's life, either suddenly or continuously. In **Figure 5.3**, an inner ring is added for these elementary capabilities.
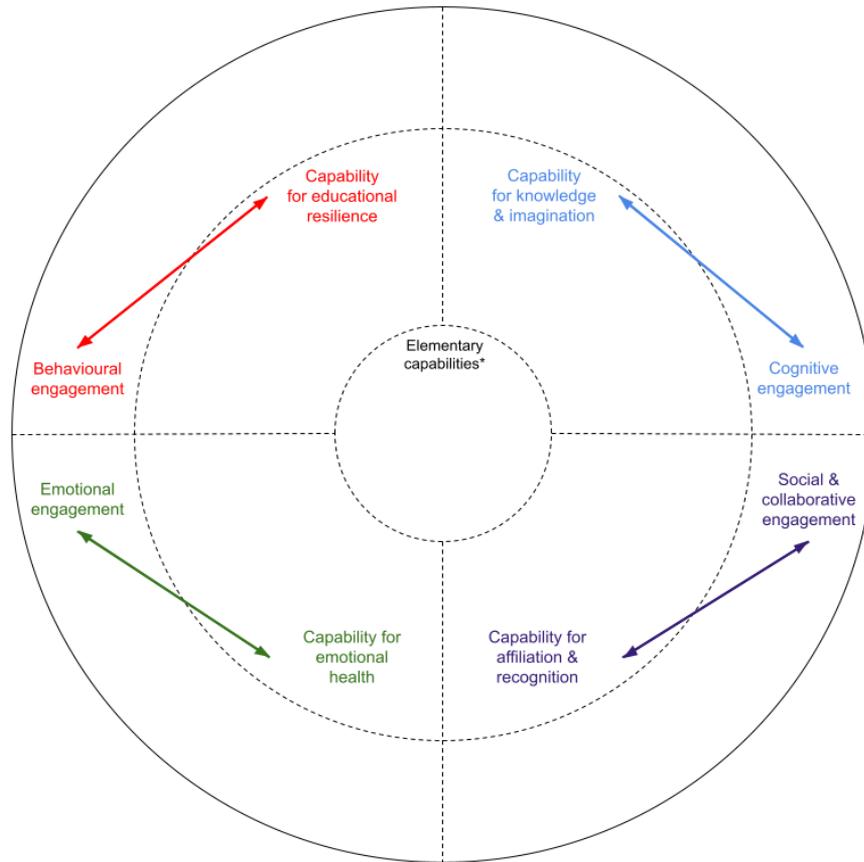
* Elementary capabilities: life, health, bodily integrity, control over one's environment.

Figure 5.3: Theoretically derived elementary capabilities for online engagement

Similar to the use of dotted lines elsewhere in the model, the elementary capabilities are contained within a dotted-line circle, to show the likely porousness between these capabilities and the capabilities needed for online engagement.

5.3.3.2 Capabilities omitted from the model

In developing this model, I have left out two of Nussbaum's original "fundamental entitlements": "other species" and "play". While it could be argued that the relational nature of these capabilities makes them an important part of the project of engaging in online HE, I find it difficult to justify them as being essential for this purpose. I have also omitted capabilities proposed by other

authors that I think could be accounted for as conversion factors, for example, learning disposition (Walker, 2006); competence in the language of instruction (Naidoo & Adoniou, 2019; Tamim, 2021; Wilson-Strydom, 2016); discipline-specific critical literacies (Calitz, 2019; Walkington et al., 2018); and digital capabilities for online learning (O'Riordan & Dennis, 2021). Nussbaum's capability for practical reason has also been omitted because of its overlap with the notion of agency, as explained in the next section.

5.3.3.3 The role of student agency in online engagement

The next version of the diagram (**Figure 5.4**) places student agency at the centre of the model. This central position illustrates how personal agency permeates every aspect of online engagement, in keeping with Walker and Boni's explanation of the role of student agency in HE:

> Active agents make choices, albeit under specific contextual conversion circumstances, which may enable or constrain both at the point of converting resources into capabilities and then in choosing which capabilities to operationalise as functionings. (2020, p. 10).

Agency is also represented by a dotted-line circle to represent permeability between it and the other elements in the model.
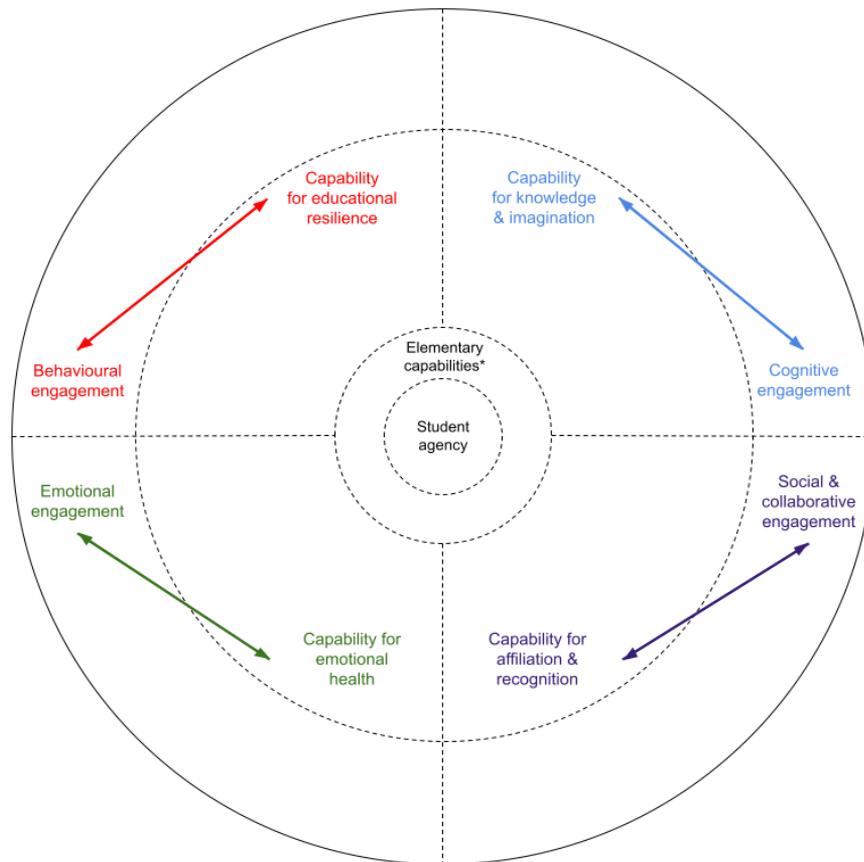
* Elementary capabilities: life, health, bodily integrity, control over one's environment.

Figure 5.4: Theoretically derived Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model

The concept of agency is closely related to Nussbaum's capability for "practical reason", which she formulates as "Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life" (2003, p. 41). According to Robeyns:

> Martha Nussbaum explicitly refrains from integrating the notion of 'agency' in her capability theory (Nussbaum 2000, 14). However, this does not mean that there isn't an account of agency in her theory, since the inclusion of the capability of practical reason on her list of central human capabilities can be understood as corresponding to one particular conceptualisation of agency. (2017, p. 37).

Robeyns (2021) further argues that Nussbaum's Practical Reason is equivalent to Sen's *agency achievement*, as it prioritises a particular kind of higher value over personal well-being—for Nussbaum, that value is the social good.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have further developed my argument from **Chapter 3** that, where indicators of online engagement are exemplified in my data, these will represent achieved functionings, and conversely, that where these indicators are found in a negative or frustrated sense, this will illustrate the lack of the necessary capability for that dimension of engagement. I have proposed here that four specific capabilities are closely related to the four engagement dimensions of the 4D Online Engagement Framework (adapted from Redmond et al., 2018), as shown in **Table 5.2**. I have also developed two original conceptual models to be used in the empirical analysis that follows, to help in understanding the engagement—and disengagement—of displaced learners in online HE programmes.

Chapter 6: Sanctuary Scholars' journeys through the online MA

6.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with a brief contextual overview of the History, Politics and International Relations (HyPIR) programme and the online Sanctuary Scholarships, followed by key demographic information about the Sanctuary Scholars in the study. It then provides an overview of the research participants' journeys through the online master's programme, examining their aspirations, the barriers and enablers that characterised their participation and their progress on the programme. The narratives presented in this chapter address **Research Question 1:** What factors enable and constrain the Sanctuary Scholars' progression through the online programme? This question was reformulated through a capabilities lens in **Chapter 3** as: What *conversion factors* enable and constrain the Sanctuary Scholars' progression through the online programme?

6.2 The HyPIR programme and the online Sanctuary Scholarships

In this section, I describe the HyPIR online MA in terms of its structure and its delivery format and explain the thinking behind the offer of the associated Sanctuary Scholarships, based on interviews with the Programme Director, who was the visionary and driving force for the Sanctuary Scholarship award, and the lead administrator on the programme.

The HyPIR MA, a fully online distance programme run by the University of Leicester, has been offering twelve Sanctuary Scholarships per year since October 2018. Students can choose between six different specialisations:

Diplomatic Studies, Intelligence and Security, International Relations and World Order, International Security Studies, Human Rights and Global Ethics, and Politics of Conflict and Violence. The programme is offered in partnership with the NATO Defense College (NDC, 2016; 2022), and its audience typically includes students in war zones and remote areas. It is therefore designed for low bandwidth delivery: all communication takes place asynchronously via text-based discussion forums or email, with no synchronous video-based communication required. The programme is part-time, with an expected time commitment of 15-20 hours' study per week.

The programme structure comprises four taught modules followed by a dissertation module. There are two midway exit points: a Postgraduate Certificate which is awarded for two passed modules, and a Postgraduate Diploma for four passed modules. According to the university regulations, the MA must be completed within four years of registration. The programme staff have discretion to allow extensions for mitigating circumstances within this period and can also apply to the Registry Office for an extension to registration of up to two additional years on behalf of students who request this, on a case-by-case basis. The two staff members interviewed stressed that, in their experience, this flexibility plays a critical role in enabling Sanctuary Scholars to complete their online degree programmes. According to the Programme Director, one hoped-for future resource is the appointment of a dedicated staff member to support the Sanctuary Scholars.

6.3 Sanctuary Scholars' online learning journeys

The remainder of this chapter discusses the scholars' journeys through the programme and is structured according to their completion status.

6.3.1 Scholars who graduated with HyPIR MA

Five of the ten research participants have successfully completed the programme and graduated with the HyPIR MA. (See **Table 4.1**.) Their journeys are outlined below.

6.3.1.1 Zain: "I survived, and I didn't give up."

Zain speaks seven languages fluently and has always had an interest in intelligence and security matters. His initial career goal was to be a security analyst and contribute to positive changes in security policymaking in his country, Afghanistan. He previously completed an interdisciplinary undergraduate degree in administration and diplomacy and also had the opportunity to participate in a European university preparatory programme, which he felt enhanced his academic skills.

Zain's early career included acting as a cultural advisor and translator, working in a national body for law enforcement and criminal investigation, and working to raise awareness around media freedom, human rights and conflict management. Some of these activities posed security risks for him, and he was forced to leave his country. He has been living as a refugee in Germany since 2016. He works as a volunteer there with a non-governmental organisation.

Zain was enrolled on the online MA in Intelligence and Security. He explained his motivation:

> I am confident that this MA programme will help me acquire advanced academic knowledge on how countries engage in strategic decision making, why strong regional security is crucial for the coexistence of nation-states, and how intelligence information can help policy makers reduce uncertainty over their decisions on important state affairs.

He hoped to be able to apply his knowledge of security back home or to find work in international organisations.

Zain experienced several potentially overwhelming constraints during his time on the programme. He suffered enormous *emotional pain* at being separated from his family, and has, at times, been deeply concerned about illnesses in his family back home. He was working full-time and had to learn German, which meant that he had *limited time and energy* available for studying. He also had *difficulty navigating the VLE*. The most severe challenge, however, was his experience of *being homeless* for three months during his second semester, along with difficulties in navigating the *bureaucratic asylum system* in Germany, both of which had a serious impact on his well-being and his studies. He had access to shared accommodation with other refugees which was not hygienic, and during this time he would sometimes ask his German friends if he could use the shower at their house. He continued with the master's programme by *studying from a train station* where he could access free wi-fi. During this time, he sent over a thousand emails in response to advertisements for rental

apartments and did not receive any positive responses. ("Nobody is giving a flat for refugees, especially for ones that have a beard like me.") He finally found a flat by offering to purchase the previous tenant's furniture from her for more than the asking price, out of desperation. Despite all this, Zain succeeded in graduating from the HyPIR degree.

Enablers for Zain included his *previous experience of the university preparation programme*, the fact that he has *access to a printer* at work and that he was *able to read on his commute* to work every day, his *enjoyment of learning*, and his *perseverance* through extremely trying circumstances. He said on several occasions, "I survived, and I did not give up." Having graduated from the HyPIR programme, Zain's next aspiration was to find a career option where he could apply his newfound knowledge of security.

6.3.1.2 Malka: "I just managed to catch the light"

Prior to starting the HyPIR MA, Malka had obtained an MA in Iraq and taught literary criticism at a university there. Malka has spent almost two decades working on women's issues and women's rights. Her activism led to her receiving many invitations to participate in training events internationally, which increased her understanding of women's issues, but also led to her being persecuted at home. She has been living in the UK as an asylum seeker for over a decade. Malka is an acclaimed poet in the UK and chose to donate all proceeds from the sale of her first poetry book to humanitarian charities.

Explaining her motivation for applying for a Sanctuary Scholarship to study the Politics of Conflict and Violence, Malka said she hoped that the programme would open a door to an academic career for her:

> I have been here for a long time without having any higher education in the UK, despite my background as a lecturer at university and having a master's degree… So when I got the opportunity to study a master's online, it was a wonderful gift for me… I just managed to catch the light and achieve my dream of studying [further in] higher education.

The enabling factors that expanded Malka's capability to complete the HyPIR MA included the fact that she had a *strong desire to complete the programme*. She b*uilt good relationships with her tutors and the programme staff and felt supported by the staff*, which strengthened her resolve to keep going. Another significant enabler was the fact that she had access to a local university library, giving her *a quiet space and access to wi-fi*. She had *time to study*, as her asylum status prevented her from seeking employment. This also proved to be a negative conversion factor, however, as she explains: "I haven't got my settled status yet. And still, I feel quite nervous and *worry that I have no future*. I don't know what's going on in my future. So sometimes it makes me quite stressed." She also *struggled with a sense of isolation* from her peers, and initially had *difficulties navigating the virtual learning environment*. These stressful experiences, combined with her *past trauma*, created a significant burden on her mental health and well-being during her studies. When her class was invited to post photographs to the discussion forum showing "The view from my window", Malka posted this poem to the forum:

In my tight shelter
my tears, fear pulls me apart:
a woman who writes her freedom on raindrops
who drew a home on the cloth on pillowcase that she lost
and another who watches me from behind closed windows
and her killing shout points it towards me between
a diaspora of madness,
or the last farewell train,
a difficult balance:
exchange a dream for a nightmare
exile for exile.
May and me: where is our path?

© Malka al-Haddad, 2019

Malka explained to me that "May and me" in the last line was a reference to Teresa May, the then Home Secretary, and added:

> This poem came from my heart… I said to myself, I don't have a good view from my window. I have only fear, and even nightmares. Someone wants to kill me. I have no hope for my future. I just feel the Home Office want to catch me and they watch me all the time. So, I cannot enjoy the beautiful view behind the window.

Despite these challenges, Malka completed the programme and graduated. She continues to hope that she will achieve settled status in the UK, and she has set her sights on pursuing a PhD and following an academic career.

6.3.1.3 Mohsin: "It's something I really like - that I'm free to think."

Mohsin came to the UK from Syria in late 2015 seeking refuge and has lived here ever since. He had previously worked for the United Nations in a role which he feels gave him good experience for a career in security. Mohsin

currently works full-time in a logistics role, with a long daily commute by car. He also has family caring commitments. About studying online, he said:

> I feel like I wanted to improve myself. I wanted to gain something for myself, since I'm here. According to my current situation, I can't get engaged in full-time learning because I can't afford it timewise, or financially, everything. It's not easy. So, choosing an online programme gives me the flexibility I need... Seriously, when I turn my laptop on or my iPad and start reading or studying, these are the only moments I have during the day, that I feel I'm doing something for myself.

Mohsin already has an MBA from the Syrian Virtual University and has undertaken professional training programmes on topics such as effective negotiation and transformative mediation skills. He felt that he could benefit further from formal academic knowledge, and so applied for the Sanctuary Scholarship for the online MA in Intelligence and Security. He described his motivation for choosing this programme:

> I had a dream and the determination to study [in the UK] but the financial barrier was always there till the opportunity of this scholarship came up… As soon as I read about the Sanctuary Scholarship the University of Leicester is offering... I was so glad to know that my dreams would come true and I would be equipped with needed knowledge to help build up my country again.

Significant constraints for Mohsin included his *lifeload* due to domestic caring responsibilities and initial difficulties in *navigating the virtual learning*

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environment. However, he found the *flexibility* of online learning enabled him to keep up with the programme in his own time, and the *staff on the programme were highly supportive*. He *reflected on the feedback he received* on assessed work and *gained confidence* as he saw his academic skills improve, commenting, "It's something I really like, that I'm free to think." These positive experiences, along with his own *perseverance*, expanded his capability to engage with the programme and ultimately to graduate. His next aspiration is to reconsider his career options, as he does not meet the recruitment criteria for working in intelligence in the UK. He says:

> Sometimes I feel like what I'm doing now is worthless career-wise [laughs], but then maybe I haven't got through all the jobs that I can do. I think when the time comes, … I have to start looking for different things, maybe in the private sector.

Thus, while Mohsin does not have the opportunity to achieve his initial aspirations, he nevertheless feels an *expanded capability for alternative career options*, having completed his MA.

6.3.1.4 Nadia: "For me, the aim is to educate myself, no matter how difficult the journey is"

Nadia was born in Afghanistan, where she experienced the trauma of witnessing suicide bomb attacks as a small child. She says of her early schooling:

Due to the attacks being repetitive and school students getting poisoned to discourage them from going to school, we were told to abandon school which meant a lack of education due to the hostile environment created by war and conflict.

This experience cemented her belief in the importance of education. Nadia's response to my request for photographs provided some visceral insights into the traumatic childhood experiences that had shaped her view of the world and her hopes for the future. One picture showed a group of young girls sitting under a tree in a makeshift outdoor classroom. A version of this image (reproduced using an online tool that can create images from natural language to avoid infringing copyright) is presented in **Figure 6.1** below, along with the caption Nadia provided.

Figure 6.1: "Having recognised that the most powerful weapon to fight poverty and inequality is education". (Image produced using Dall-e Open AI)

Of this picture she said:

> We were one of those families, we were refugees… And we actually did
>
> our education like that so it reminds me of what I did as a child, sitting on
>
> the floor to educate ourselves... and then the war destroyed everything.
>
> And we had to go, flee as refugees, to a country that did not, at times,

give people the respect that we deserve… I was only six or seven at that

time. I remember it, and it does affect me.

Nadia came to the UK as a young teenager with her family, and they received

humanitarian protection here. She finished her schooling in the UK and studied

law at university. She subsequently took on roles as a researcher and a

translator in human rights projects, as she can speak several languages. She

plans to do her PhD in peace and conflict resolution in future. Of her motivation

to do the HyPIR MA, she says:

> This course will provide me with a strong academic platform to bring
>
> about a change that I have always dreamt of. The dream is to give voice
>
> to the voiceless victims, stop the suffering and the unbearable pain war
>
> and conflict brings.

She provided another picture which she used to motivate herself, a version of

which is provided in **Figure 6.2.**

Figure 6.2. "The light of hope in the darkness" (Image produced using Dall-e Open AI)

Nadia described this image as follows:

> So, in this picture, a ladder is going up, towards the light. So for me,
>
> education is the fact that I want to get out of this dark room, into the
>
> light—you know, going up the ladder and getting to the light. When I'm
>
> studying, I have that picture in my mind so that, you know, when I get
>
> tired, I think I'm going to be trapped in that dark room if I don't get myself

out of it. And the only way to do it is by educating myself… For me, this is the steppingstone to get that journey started.

In summary, one of the constraints influencing Nadia's engagement in the online MA programme was *childhood trauma*, which still affected her. During her studies, she also suffered several *bereavements*. Nadia had initial difficulty *navigating the VLE and found asynchronous interaction frustrating,* as she had to wait for responses to her queries in discussion forums or via emails. The Covid lockdowns meant that her local library was closed and so she *lost access to her quiet study space*. Nevertheless, she *persisted* and completed the programme. The enablers included her *dedication to learning*, her *good command of English* gained through her high school and undergraduate studies in the UK, her *access to appropriate digital technologies*, including a printer at home, and her philosophical orientation towards *using learning as a way of overcoming grief*.

6.3.1.5 Kareem: "In academia, the way you debate, the way you argue, the way you present the facts, it really all becomes part of your DNA".

Kareem began the HyPIR MA in September 2019 and graduated in July 2022. Originally from a country in the MENA region, he now lives in the UK. He speaks five languages, and back in his home country, his education and career were thriving. While studying for his bachelor's degree in management and economics, he took on full-time employment to financially support his education and volunteered with various United Nations programmes. He developed a

strong interest in human behaviour and public affairs and built up a large professional network of contacts. He also participated in several online courses on Middle East Studies on the Coursera platform.

After obtaining his bachelor's degree, Kareem co-founded a security firm and started working with various political and peace-building organisations. During this time, his opposition to his government's policies led to him experiencing a great deal of injustice, such that his life and freedom were at risk. Eventually he fled the country and became a refugee in the UK. He says:

> As a refugee, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to start from scratch in a country where I am safe and my rights are respected and protected, but this opportunity comes with extraordinary challenges that one wouldn't typically experience.

Despite the difficulty of starting over in the UK, Kareem managed within a few years to make a new home for himself and to establish a successful career with two leading international companies. In addition, he is currently working to establish a charity aimed at supporting conflict resolution. He hopes that the HyPIR programme will help him to achieve his ambition of working in foreign policy and international security. Kareem is particularly motivated by the opportunity to develop his intellectual skills through the programme. Of academic life, he says:

> I'm improving already and I can see this myself; everyone around me can see this because I think in academia the way you debate, the way

you argue, the way you present the facts, it really all becomes part of your DNA.

The barriers for Kareem included the fact that he felt *underprepared and unsupported when it came to writing academic essays*: he felt he was totally on his own. He *wished for greater clarity* from academic staff when they provided feedback on his work; he also *wanted more social interaction with peers* to discuss the subject matter than was possible within the framework of the MA. On the other hand, the enabling factors included the fact that he had *good command of English* from his previous schooling. He greatly *enjoyed the intellectual challenge* of the programme and felt that it made him more of a critical thinker. He *saw great value in the social aspects* of the programme, despite the lack of opportunities for real time communication with peers and tutors. His home was *well equipped for studying online*. Whenever Kareem encountered frustrations, he would persist, saying *"I don't give up easily"*. Kareem now hopes to pursue a PhD.

6.3.2 Scholar who graduated with HyPIR Postgraduate Certificate

One of the Sanctuary Scholars, Sami, had to withdraw from the programme before completing it, as he did not have sufficient opportunity to develop his academic English language skills to the level required. However, he achieved a Postgraduate Certificate (PG Cert) in recognition of his successful completion of two of the taught modules.

6.3.2.1 Sami: "Getting a better education will benefit me as well as my community."

Sami grew up in Somalia, where his childhood was deeply affected by a bloody civil war. He notes that, as a child, he was "one of the lucky ones" who attended a United Nations "World Concern International" school. This experience shaped his view of the world. He explains: "This [primary school experience] empowered me a lot as I had to help my parents to read and write the letters they received from other relatives who fled to other parts of the country."

When new clashes began between local tribes and warlords trying to take over the city, he and his family joined the thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) in his country. It became harder to continue his studies, as his mother was struggling to make ends meet. He says:

> She was my saviour and motivation, doing manual work… She wanted me to go to school and registered me to a high school paying fees every month.

Sami was forced to flee Somalia in 2002. He sought refuge in Yemen and lived there for 13 years. He worked at night for a hotel restaurant while undertaking a three-year diploma in English, and he found that this experience helped increase his resilience. During this time, he also contributed actively to the efforts of the UNHCR and other organisations in the protection and integration of other refugees and IDPs. He subsequently moved to Malaysia, where he is now based.

Sami explains his motivation for doing the online MA in Human Rights and Global Ethics as follows:

The reason I am choosing to study [this programme] goes back to my days at school, when one of my teachers was a volunteer and at the same time working with one of the [international non-governmental organisations]. He got the chance to go to university in the good days and had a degree in Law. I still remember how great a role model he was. He shaped my whole life, and it was a childhood vision to know how to defend the oppressed through the correct ethical conduct, so that I contribute back to society and motivate many deserving young children.

His subsequent experience as an IDP entrenched his desire to advocate for human rights for forced migrants.

Sami had to contend with many constraints in his journey through the HyPIR MA, as Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN 1951 Refugee Convention and *does not have a legal framework for the provision of asylum*. He is part of a community of forced migrants facing *severe financial worries*, resulting in *precarity around accommodation and food*, especially during the pandemic when informal work opportunities were curtailed. He *works long hours* at a school for refugee children in the city where he lives, which he co-founded. He was *frustrated by the lack of real-time communication* with his lecturers and peers and *felt isolated* in the programme. On the positive side, he was *deeply interested* in the subject of human rights and *highly motivated* to learn; he was also *able to spend more time at home* during the pandemic, and he had *access to wi-fi* for the purposes of studying. Sami *struggled with the requirements of academic English*, and although he made great improvements in this area, he was advised by the programme team that he would not be eligible for the

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dissertation module, and so he left the programme after achieving his Postgraduate Certificate. He subsequently enrolled in several online English for Academic Purposes courses and hopes to be able to reapply for a master's scholarship soon.

6.3.3 Scholars who did not complete any modules

Two of the research participants in this study were forced by circumstances to withdraw from the MA programme before completing any modules. Theresa left the programme midway through her first module, and Sol did not manage to begin the programme at all. Their stories are told below.

6.3.3.1 Theresa: "I am evolving as an activist, with other activists worldwide, building a better world."

Theresa began the HyPIR programme in March 2020. Unfortunately, despite intense engagement in the first three months of her enrolment, she was not able to complete her first module. Theresa was born and grew up in Rwanda. Back home, she did an internship for her Bachelor's in Social Sciences, which involved conducting research into the education of children with disabilities. She says: "I chose to do this research… because I knew the value of education and I wanted to identify [the children's] different needs and challenges as the forgotten ones in the society."

Theresa identifies as LGBTQI and has disabilities as a result of torture and persecution. She was forced to leave Rwanda in 2010 and was later granted refugee status in Uganda. There she worked as an interpreter (she speaks five

languages), a social worker, and a coordinator for a refugee support association, and she worked on projects with national and international organisations, including conducting art workshops for refugee children.

Life was extremely challenging for Theresa. She says:

> I [faced] violence, injustice, harassment and cruelty during my many years in Uganda. This persecution [came] from Ugandans and fellow refugees. My experiences however have driven me to become a voice for the voiceless, as there are many who need support and do not know their rights, and need others to help defend and protect them.

Theresa was enrolled on the online MA in Human Rights and Global Ethics. She described her motivation for doing the programme as follows:

> Undertaking [this programme] will help me to serve my community with greater confidence and knowledge. As a human rights activist, this course is directly relevant to my work and my role as an advocate, in particular for refugees and asylum seekers, [especially] LGBTQI people and those with disabilities… The scholarship will help me to meet with and exchange ideas with people around the world… and sharpen my mind about how best to address the challenges I see … as a grassroots human rights worker.

Theresa likes studying and her long-term dream is to get a PhD. However, despite her clear commitment to learning, she faced many significant barriers that ultimately proved overwhelming. Her *prior experience of persecution and*

torture in her home country and first country of refuge had left *physical and emotional scars that contributed to her disability*, which affected her eyesight and her mobility. Three other major life events coincided during her time on the programme: she was *resettled* to North America, and while this was a positive move for her, it was also extremely disruptive to her study routine; she suffered two *bereavements* in her family; and she had *an accident* which led to an injury that further reduced her mobility for a time.

While dealing with these challenges, Theresa *lost her password* for her university email account, which resulted in her being unable to access either the virtual learning environment or her university emails. Despite repeated attempts to liaise with the institutional IT Services staff, she was unable to restore this access. She was greatly frustrated by this situation, but, because of her visual impairment, it seemed insoluble without having someone with appropriate technical skills provide in-person support for her. As this was not possible during the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, eventually *her time for completion of the first module ran out* and she had to be unenrolled from the programme. Theresa's story is, sadly, a reminder of the relatively small retention rate in distance learning programmes generally (Bawa, 2016; Seery, 2021; Simpson, 2013; Woodley & Simpson, 2014), and the even lower retention rates recorded amongst displaced learners in online environments (Halkic & Arnold, 2019).

6.3.3.2 Sol: "I find learning healing. Through learning, we change our life."

Sol lives in the Netherlands, having fled there from war-torn Syria. He describes his motivation for applying for the HyPIR degree as follows:

> It's very interesting for someone who is an LGBT activist, who is a human rights defender, who is someone looking for justice, because I couldn't have justice in my life unfortunately, especially from the people who tortured me in the prison, but what I can do is change my life [by studying]. Maybe that's my justice, right? Maybe that's my healing. Maybe that can help me to accept my life and do something positive in my life.

Sol's ambition is to be a life coach. He believes in the power of storytelling to motivate and inspire others; he has been an invited speaker at many events and is currently also writing a historical novel. He would like to study in order to better understand human rights issues and to work again for international humanitarian organisations, as he has done in the past.

Sol's Sanctuary Scholarship was awarded in early 2019, but he unfortunately experienced a traumatic life event just before the start of term and was unable to put his mind to studying. His trauma remained overwhelming for the next three years. By early 2022, when he felt ready to restart the programme, he was advised by the programme team that he would not be able to complete the MA within the four-year limit, and so he decided to withdraw from the programme and reapply for a new Sanctuary Scholarship. He explained the impact of trauma on his life and his attempts at overcoming it:

So, I did trauma therapy. I went before to psychologists to deal with my trauma. What I discovered was, it was not enough, because it doesn't matter how many times you will go, the trauma will stay with me. I cannot change what's happened but what I can do all the time is to find something positive … and my alternative trauma therapy is marathon running... Studying also is healing.

Thus, Sol's major barrier was his *experience of trauma*, which had a severe impact on his life. This constrained his freedom to engage at all with the online MA. Nevertheless, there are some positive aspects to his story which could potentially act as enablers in his future attempts at online learning: he has *strong English language skills*; he is highly *motivated to learn*; and he *lives in a relatively safe place* where he is rebuilding his life.

6.3.4 The midway scholars

Two of the Sanctuary Scholars, Julian and Lili, are currently midway through the programme. Both are struggling with mitigating circumstances that have required them to request several rounds of suspension from the programme. Their stories highlight the sense of volatility that has been typical of all the scholars in this study at some point in each person's journey.

6.3.4.1 Julian: "I would like to be a humanitarian agent, to change the lives of people who are suffering."

At the time of writing, Julian has successfully completed four modules. He is now reaching the end of the four years allowed by university rules for

completion of the programme but hopes to be allowed an extension to his registration so that he can complete the full MA.

Julian was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He has been living in a refugee camp in Malawi for over a decade. Back in his home country, after completing secondary school, he got a job in an organisation that promoted human rights and peace resolution in a war-torn region of the country. Through this work, which involved supporting refugees, he felt that a humanitarian spirit was developing in him and he says he decided to sacrifice his life for the betterment of others. However, this was dangerous work, and soon, he himself became a refugee. After what he describes as "two years of confusion and stress", Julian established a faith-based youth organisation, aiming to prepare young people economically, intellectually and spiritually to bring development and social change to their communities. This led to recognition by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Julian was selected as a youth representative of his refugee camp. He also became a member of the local peace committee. He subsequently got the opportunity to study online for a diploma through a faith-based educational organisation. While doing this, he was awarded an internship with the UN, where he learnt about gender equality, and this led him to fight for women's empowerment and protection.

Below are two images from the refugee camp sent to me by Julian (which I have altered to protect the privacy of people depicted).

Figure 6.3: Drawing water from the borehole in the refugee camp (original image by Julian, altered for anonymity using BeFunky)
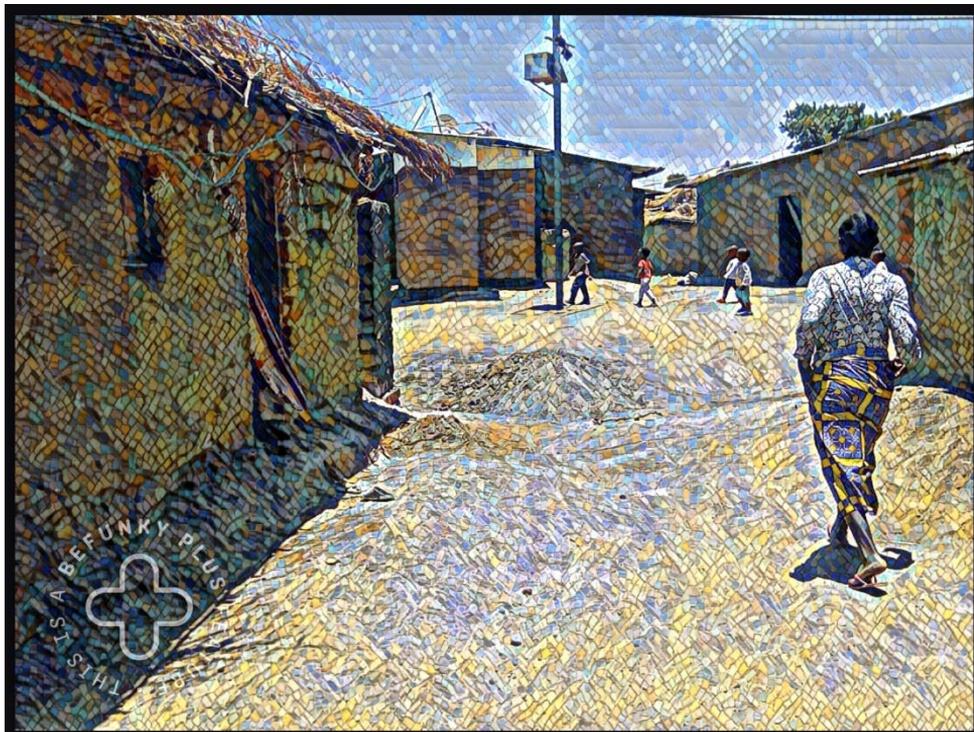
Figure 6.4: A scene in the refugee camp (original image by Julian, altered for anonymity using BeFunky)

Today Julian volunteers as an academic assistant for vocational skills training programmes in his spare time. He explains his motivation for doing the HyPIR programme as follows:

> The time when I knew about this opportunity of studying, I saw straight away that my vision is fulfilled now. With diplomacy studies, I will be able to negotiate with countries, organisations and individuals to bring peace, to end wars, to promote human rights, to look after oppressed people, and to bring justice for all, among other things… This is my time to bring my dream into the reality

For Julian, the key enablers on his online learning journey are his *personal commitment and drive* to complete the programme, the *good relationships he has built up with the academic and administrative staff* on the programme through regular email communication, and his ability to *apply his new skills and knowledge* in conflict resolution to mediating conflict in the refugee camp. A significant constraint is his *lack of access to the essential digital infrastructure* he needs: he has *no electricity* at home and therefore goes to the local community centre to study. At this centre, he can access a shared computer and the internet, but only for short periods of time, and only at certain times in the day, and he is often interrupted while studying. (This problem was partially solved when Julian *received a donated laptop* after his first module.) Furthermore, his *precarious circumstances in the refugee camp* have led him to take up farming for both subsistence and income generation purposes, and this has taken time, preventing him from focusing on his studies. He is currently in

negotiation with the programme staff about his options for completing the programme.

6.3.4.2 Lili: "If there weren't such online activities, really, I could not study."

Lili is midway through the fourth module of the MA International Relations and World Order. She was born and grew up in Iran, where as a member of a minority religion, her right to study was restricted. She undertook an engineering degree offered by an organisation that was not recognised by the government and was subsequently not able to work in the profession that she was qualified for. Lili lived for some time in a European country; however, her degree was also not recognised there. After six years, she decided to reskill herself, and began taking online courses on human rights, social justice, and gender equality, topics that she was passionate about. She applied for a HyPIR Sanctuary Scholarship to study these subjects in greater depth. Describing her motivation to do the programme, Lili says:

> I firmly believe that national challenges and issues in countries all over
> the word have an international dimension. Therefore, improving the
> foundation of world order and international relations is an essential field
> in the 21st century… It is with this vision that I hope to be able to study
> this MA and make a career shift towards working in public sector
> research or policy making after resettlement.

About the Sanctuary Scholarship, Lili says:

In fact if there weren't such online activities, really I could not study. Although I love studying… you know there are many obstacles in the world, unfortunately [especially] in my country.

Lili has *relocated several times* during the course of her studies on the HyPIR MA. She lived for some time in Turkey, waiting to be resettled by the UNHCR, and found it difficult to study at home there, as the *accommodation for refugees was not appropriate*. Lili also *does voluntary work* to support refugees from all backgrounds to advance their education, and the most significant challenge for her is the *lack of time* to spend on her studies. Another difficulty is her *lack of prior knowledge* of the field; she says that sometimes it takes her two to three days to go through the list of recommended readings for the week provided by her course tutors and select one or two to read. She also feels a *sense of isolation* as a distance learner, and longs for a greater sense of community online.

The chief enabler for Lili is the *flexibility* of the online programme. Other enablers for Lili have been her *prior experience of online learning*, her *enjoyment of the readings*, and the fact that she was able to buy herself *a printer* to read hard copies. She also finds the *contributions of her peers on the discussion forum* very helpful in giving her an overview of the course content, even when she herself is not able to participate due to time constraints. Finally, Lili regularly r*eflects on how the readings have changed her own thinking* and tries to apply the theoretical knowledge to her own experience of the world.

Lili was recently *resettled in a new host country*. While this was a very positive development, it was also fraught with challenges related to *lifeload*, which required her to temporarily suspend her studies.

6.4 Capability analysis of scholars' online learning journeys

The aim of this chapter was to offer insight into the lived experiences of the Sanctuary Scholars on the online master's programme by outlining their hopes and aspirations for the future and sharing some of the key barriers and enablers which have characterised their journeys through the HyPIR MA. In capability terms, the enablers can be characterised as positive conversion factors, which supported the scholars in converting their Sanctuary Scholarships and associated resources into the capability for effective online engagement, while the constraints represent negative conversion factors preventing such engagement. As discussed in **Chapter 3**, conversion factors can be characterised as falling into three categories: personal, social and environmental. **Figure 6.5** below reproduces the capabilitarian learning journey template from **Figure 5.1**, with the conversion factors and outcomes of the research participants' journeys through the HyPIR MA filled in, thus providing an overview of the journeys of the ten Sanctuary Scholars.
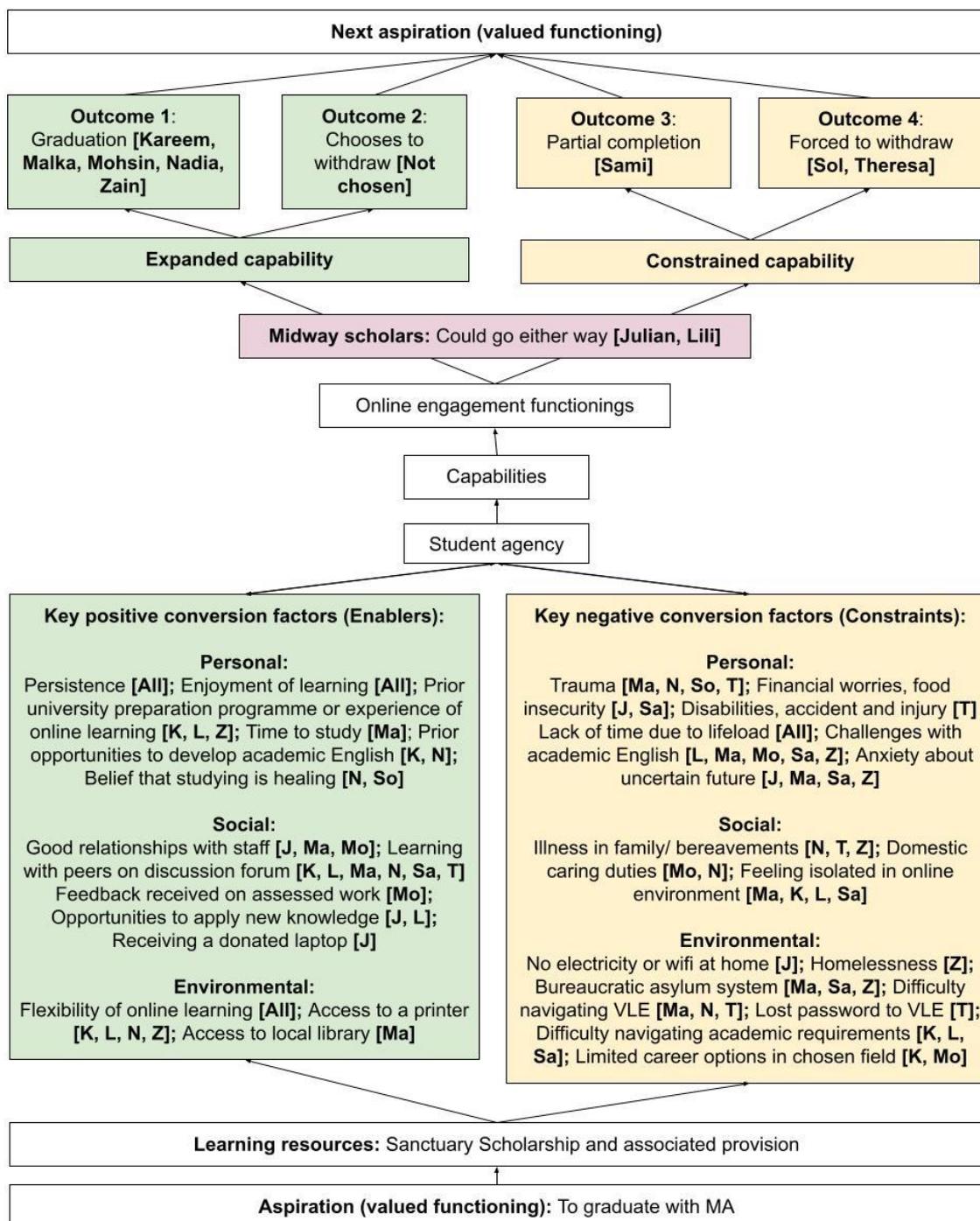
Figure 6.5: Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map filled in to show the Sanctuary Scholars' actual journeys through the online MA.

The vignettes presented above vividly demonstrate the ongoing tensions

between positive and negative conversion factors, and the ways in which

trauma, loss, lack of mental and bodily well-being, lack of access to appropriate

digital technology and internet connectivity, or lack of opportunities to develop

the necessary linguistic skills, can ultimately be overwhelming for individual scholars. The stories show the significant role played by the scholars' own agency, in the form of their perseverance and use of effective learning strategies, in confronting circumstances beyond their control. They also point to the value of the flexibility afforded by online education and the importance of having understanding staff on the programme team, who are authorised to allow extensions for mitigating circumstances without demanding detailed explanations. They raise questions about the seemingly arbitrary cut-off points imposed by institutional rules, and whether a more flexible approach by universities to qualification structures might help to foster student retention.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter provided an analysis of the Sanctuary Scholars' journeys through the online HyPIR MA, with a focus on the extent to which the participants achieved their aspiration (valued functioning) of graduation, and the positive and negative conversion factors that contributed to the outcomes experienced by each person. The flowchart presented a high-level overview of the scholars' learning journeys but did not discuss the participants' online engagement functionings and associated underlying capabilities in any detail: these issues are addressed in the next two chapters respectively.

Chapter 7: Analysis: online engagement functionings and capabilities

7.1 Introduction

This chapter looks under the magnifying glass in **Figure 3.1**. It first addresses **RQ2:** How do the Sanctuary Scholars' descriptions of their online learning indicate and illustrate their online engagement? (which was rephrased in **Chapter 3** as: How do the Sanctuary Scholars' descriptions of their online learning indicate and illustrate their *achieved functionings of* online engagement?) I answer this question by providing empirical evidence of the illustrative indicators of Redmond et al.'s (2018) online engagement and by noting the presence of additional relevant indicators in my data. Next, I address **RQ3:** What capabilities underpin the scholars' enactments (*i.e., achieved functionings*) of online engagement? I do this by reviewing my data for evidence of the four dimensions of online engagement being underpinned by the capabilities posited in **Table 5.2**. The analysis in this chapter starts from the capabilitarian premise argued in **Chapter 3** that engagement is a *functioning*. As discussed in **Section 5.3.2**, instances of negative engagement or frustrated attempts at engagement can point to constrained capability, thereby highlighting the importance of the relevant capability in ways that are not obvious when the functioning is achieved (Walker 2006). I use such examples from my data to illustrate the relationships between engagement functionings and the proposed underpinning capabilities. I then discuss my data in terms of the *elementary capabilities* needed for online engagement, as discussed in **Chapter 5** and introduced in **Figure 5.3**. Finally, I discuss the role of student agency in online engagement, with reference to my findings.

7.2 The functionings of engagement and the capabilities to engage

This section analyses each of the four engagement dimensions in turn. For each engagement indicator, I give examples that were associated with positive sentiments for the research participants (even if they involved some initial degree of challenge or struggle), suggesting that they experienced these as successful achievements of engagement functionings. I also discuss cases where online engagement indicators were discussed in a negative or frustrated sense or were only partially achieved. These cases are likely to point to constrained capability—although the possibility that the person made an agentic decision *not* to engage in certain ways, despite having all the capabilities they needed, should not be ruled out. I then consider the extent to which the proposed underlying capability for each dimension, as depicted in **Figure 5.2**, can plausibly be seen as underpinning particular enactments of engagement. I begin by discussing behavioural engagement, as this allows me to provide a developmental narrative, beginning with the most concrete, visible forms of engagement and progressing towards cognitive engagement, which is often evidenced in more abstract ways.

7.2.1 Behavioural engagement

Redmond et al. (2018) draw on the definition of behavioural engagement by Fredricks et al.: "doing the work and following the rules" (p. 193). Below, I discuss one indicator from their framework, *developing academic skills,* and two additional indicators I found in my data, *managing access to resources* and *managing studies around lifeload*.

7.2.1.1 The functioning of behavioural engagement

Indicator: Developing academic skills

One aspect of developing academic skills which required persistent efforts from the scholars was learning to navigate the VLE (Blackboard), echoing other studies on the experiences of forced migrants in higher education (Brunton et al., 2018; Farrell et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022). While some scholars, who had experienced online learning before, did not struggle significantly with the VLE, others experienced initial challenges. Zain gave an example:

> Our lecturer just mentioned that we have already received our [assignment] and we have already been given our marks, and then I was thinking, OK, where is my mark then? [And he said there was an] extra comment. I was thinking, where is my comment? After four hours I was searching, searching, where is this comment? And then I sent an email to my tutor saying, where is this comment? He just told me to go here and go here, and then my god, it was just taking two minutes and I found his comment!

Several others mentioned experiencing similar initial challenges. Theresa faced particular technical barriers with extreme consequences, as she lost her password and was locked out of her university account midway through her first module, losing access to emails and all her course materials. The combination of her visual impairment and the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation for her:

So, when I struggle with these technical problems, sometimes [a friend comes] to help me to sort this out, but because of Corona nobody can come to me, and I can't take this laptop with me to a person to help me.

Numerous attempts were made to resolve the situation, but as it occurred in combination with her relocation to a new host country, an accident which caused her some physical injuries, and two bereavements, it added an insurmountable strain to her lifeload and she never returned to the programme.

Managing access to resources

Some of the research participants were well equipped for online study, for example, Kareem noted:

I usually study at home. I'm very specific about what I need. I need to have my pens and pencils and every little thing around me… I have my little tablet, which is the one where I do some reading, especially books, because Kindle is really helpful for note taking… I have my desktop computer. I have two screens [and] this is where I do all the heavy work basically. But then I have my laptop … as well. I very rarely use [my phone]… [And] printing is like an addiction for me really... So I'm lucky, because I have this ability.

A few other scholars also explained how they distributed their study activities over a combination of devices. However, access to appropriate digital resources and internet connectivity was extremely challenging for some. Zain had an outdated laptop that was unreliable. He also lacked access to

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appropriate study facilities, and had to develop a strategy for accessing his online course materials while homeless:

> The most difficult semester for me was my second semester.... because I had no house, and I had no flat…. I was downloading my own documents from a train station... It was very cold. It was not that good, but finally I survived and I didn't give up.

Julian had particular barriers to accessing electricity, wi-fi and suitable digital resources in the refugee camp, in line with findings from other studies (Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Moser Mercer et al., 2016; Taftaf & Williams, 2020). In his first module, he had no laptop of his own and used a shared computer in the office of the education organisation where he was a volunteer. He described one of his strategies for managing this situation:

> What I usually do is I start reading the introduction and I take a picture of the introduction [on my phone]. Then I work on the conclusion, then I also get another picture there [to read later]…. So from most of those readings, I get 10% or maybe 20%. But there are other readings which are somehow simple to understand and they are very interesting. So those ones, I read them [fully].

He later received a donated laptop, which significantly improved his ability to study. However, having no electricity at home, he remained reliant upon the education centre for wi-fi access. He explained:

Sometimes if there is no network in the morning, and the internet comes around 12pm… when almost everyone is out of the office to go to lunch. I don't go home; I can stay in the office to read my emails, and even sometimes to submit [assignments].... Sometimes there is no internet connection, or maybe there is no electricity in the whole camp. There is no power on my computer and I'm already at the deadline, so I'm somewhat confused and frustrated with that situation.

The scholars who had access to appropriate facilities generally recognised and appreciated this fact, and those who did not found pragmatic solutions, as illustrated in the quotes above.

Managing studies around lifeload

Another indicator of behavioural engagement that was prevalent in my data was that of managing studies around one's lifeload. This was not just a case of having good time management skills, but more about managing time and scarce resources in a context of precarity. Some scholars fitted their studies around long working hours, and some also had caring duties at home:

I came to the UK in late 2015. My new life wasn't easy at all - mainly because my wife was [unwell with post-traumatic stress]…. We have three kids and it's not easy for me. I commute every day, and it's really hectic. When I finish my work, I have to make sure that my wife and the kids are OK... For me also, it's very stressful. (Mohsin)

Lili commented that "self-scheduling" was her greatest challenge, and explained her strategy for keeping up with her course when going through a difficult time:

> Because I'm very busy and my other [work and volunteering] commitments also are kind of reading and writing something in my mother language, so most of the day I'm spending in front of a laptop and reading something, writing something, and it was really hard for me to make a balance between my commitments and my studies... I myself could not write anything in Blackboard last module because it wasn't a very easy time for me. I can just go to the study or reading mindset and find the sources that are more attractive for me or those where I think I'm going to find out some of my questions answered.

Some scholars needed to turn their attention to subsistence or income-generating activities for survival; for example, Julian took up farming, which required a significant time investment and delayed his completion of the fourth module. The university's provision for extensions to assignment deadlines based on mitigating circumstances proved to be a crucial conversion factor in allowing him to complete the first four modules and was also mentioned by several other scholars as having supported their progression through the programme.

7.2.1.2 The capability for educational resilience underpinning behavioural engagement

The proposed capability underlying behavioural engagement (see **Table 5.2**) is the capability for *educational resilience*:

Able to navigate study, work and life, to negotiate risk and to persevere academically; able to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive to constraints.

In all the above narratives, this capability was highly constrained due to structural issues beyond the control of the individual scholars. In some of the above examples, severe negative conversion factors are at play. These included, in Julian's case, the lack of access to electricity, internet connectivity and appropriate digital devices and for Theresa, it was the loss of her university password in combination with several life-changing events (resettlement to a new country, an accident and bereavement) on top of her existing disabilities, at a time during the restrictions of lockdown which prevented her from accessing help. As indicated before, I have highlighted examples of negative or frustrated engagement, as these can demonstrate the need for underlying capabilities (Walker, 2006)—in this case, the capability of *educational resilience*.

7.2.2 Emotional engagement

Redmond et al. (2018)'s illustrative indicators for emotional engagement include managing expectations, articulating assumptions, and committing to learning. I also found another indicator that appeared frequently in my data: *investing emotionally in the subject knowledge*. Examples from my data are discussed below.

Managing expectations and articulating assumptions

The research participants' discussion of expectations and assumptions revolved mainly around their growing awareness of how online learning works. The scholars who had prior experience of distance learning seemed better prepared for the initial challenge of navigating the VLE than others, although all participants mentioned this as an initial obstacle. Malka was initially resistant to the notion of online learning but gradually accepted it:

> First of all, online studying was quite a hard, strange system for me. And in the beginning I just felt a bit crazy about this, because no, I didn't want online studies. And then day by day I found it got easier.

Nadia found she had to be more patient online than on campus:

> For me the main challenge is the fact that sometimes you have questions, but you can't ask them in that minute. You just have to wait for your questions to be answered. It can be a bit time consuming, the journey of relating bits of information to one another. But when you are in a classroom environment, a question has been put forward, you put your hand up and you answer it. And if it's not right, your lecturer says, OK this is how it's meant to be.

While both Malka and Nadia overcame the initial emotional frustrations they felt, some scholars found the online mode so challenging that they asked for their Sanctuary Scholarship to be converted into one that would enable them to enrol as on-site students, which would have required the students concerned to be residing in the UK and to have refugee status. The fact that the university was not able to support the scholars in this way highlighted the limitations of online

study for those in the most precarious circumstances, echoing evidence from the literature in this regard (e.g., Bothwell, 2017; El Ghali & Ghosn, 2019; Fincham, 2020a; Younes, 2020).

Investing emotionally in the subject knowledge

All the research participants made strong personal connections to the subject matter in the HyPIR courses, aligning with findings from the literature that personal significance of learning content and activities enhances engagement (Park & Yun, 2018). The desire to learn more about human rights and related topics was typically driven by the scholars' personal experiences. For example:

> I'm interested in learning about human rights because I grew up as an IDP [internally displaced person], and I saw that a lot of people were treating these people in a different, bad way, so I want to do advocacy for the children. (Sami)

Malka was particularly interested in learning about gender issues:

> I find all the topics that are published online on Blackboard, they are quite interesting. All topics I find they try to give us all ideas about all the gender matters, [because] community or politics or international institutions, and feminist issues and war and all these things are linked with gender theory… all these topics are very beautiful, very nice topics., and related to our life, … related to my experience as a woman.

Zain expressed a more mixed view of the subject matter in his courses:

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I'm very happy from one side and very upset from other side because from every subject I'm reading I'm seeing my own country's name—as a terrorist or as a victim. And these two parts, sometimes it makes me happy and sometimes it makes me very upset.

These examples illustrate that learning new subject knowledge can both contribute to a student's emotional well-being and destabilise it.

Managing emotions

For some scholars, learning provided a way of managing difficult emotions caused by events outside of their studies:

After I left my home country, I ran away…, and then I came to the Netherlands. And my trauma took a long time [to deal with] and I was really feeling down, and I was not in a good mood but for sure I am someone who likes to read books... When I read in English, I don't understand everything. I'd say I understand 60 percent, 70 percent, and then I try to use the dictionary. So, for me, this challenge is also healing, because through study, you will be more positive, and you challenge yourself and it will help you to be okay. (Sol)

Similarly, Nadia used reading as a strategy to manage her grief after the loss of her grandmother:

I don't like to get behind, and I think the best way to get out of these things sometimes is to read... so reading did help a little bit. I couldn't

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see [my grandmother], she passed away in my home country. So, it

wasn't an easy month but [my assignment] went well, I tried my best.

The above sentiments demonstrate the importance of positive emotional

engagement in their learning for these scholars.

7.2.2.1 The capability for emotional health underpinning emotional engagement

The proposed capability underlying emotional engagement (see **Table 5.2**) is

the capability for *emotional health*:

> *able to experience emotions that contribute positively to learning; not*
>
> *being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning.*

This seems to be an appropriate underlying capability for the examples given

above. In cases where scholars demonstrated positive emotional engagement,

such as when Malka and Nadia managed to overcome their initial reluctance to

learn online, they experienced less anxiety and gained confidence in their ability

to learn online. In cases where the scholars' emotional engagement was

negative or frustrated, for example when Sol experienced trauma, his well-

being was clearly compromised, highlighting their constrained capability for

emotional engagement. This constrained capability was clearly not due to any

individual deficit but was rather a consequence of corrosive disadvantage

caused by structural inequities.

7.2.3 Social and collaborative engagement

In Redmond et al.'s (2018) model, social engagement is characterised by the indicators of building community, creating a sense of belonging, developing relationships, and establishing trust. Collaborative engagement includes learning with peers and relating to faculty members. As explained previously, I have combined these two elements into one in the 4D Online Engagement Framework. (**See Table 5.1**.)

Building community, creating a sense of belonging, developing relationships, establishing trust

I will deal with these indicators as a single cluster, as my data did not distinguish clearly between them. All the research participants mentioned the importance of feeling that they were part of a community of students, having a sense of belonging, and/or building relationships with peers. For example, Mohsin described how he experienced a sense of belonging within the community of students and staff:

> Every day I get into Blackboard and start doing something. I learn so many new things. It's really nice, I like how we have discussions, I like that it's very easy to approach our tutors, even to ask for feedback... Sometimes I can write something on the forum, and I ask my friends and I get very good answers, and in return sometimes when I read one of my colleague's questions and I feel that I know what they're asking about, I feel I can answer and participate myself.

However, this sense of community was not universally felt, and some of the scholars expressed a sense of isolation as distance learners, which led to

stress and anxiety, as documented in much of the literature (e.g., Hensley et al., 2022; Kara, 2022; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022; Tulaskar & Turunen, 2022). Kareem said he felt he was "totally on his own" in his learning journey. Lili recounted the following story in response to my question, "Have there been any moments in your time on the programme that made a big impact on you personally or emotionally?":

> One email I received [from the university] was about an Islamic religious holiday. I am not a Muslim, but it gave me a kind of feeling that… oh, if everything was face-to-face and I had the opportunity to go to university, on some occasions there is a party where everybody feels more together, or having such experiences that you belong to a little community, and you can feel, OK, we have some memories together, or we can celebrate something together, and there are some staff at the institute and it's important for them to build relationships with the students… I haven't had such an experience … of belonging to my university community.

In view of this desire for community, several of the scholars said they would value opportunities for virtual video meetings with their peers and lecturers; however, the learning design of the HyPIR programme did not include synchronous communication, for reasons explained in **Chapter 6**.

Learning with peers

As the discussion forum was the primary means for students to learn with their peers, I asked the scholars about their experiences there. I found that most of

them had contributed at least once to a forum, and a few were regular contributors. The scholars' experience of participating in the forums was generally positive. Nadia explained how the discussion forum changed the dynamics of student interaction and influenced her learning:

> You ask a question, your lecturer or other students get their point forward, and then you have to go back and reply back. It's all in the duration of a week, this kind of communication... But it's interesting because, in the online platform you get the opportunity to take more information or give more information, whereas in the classroom environment the contribution was minimal from certain people... here [online], it seems like it encourages everyone to contribute. You get different viewpoints, and you can learn in a way that you can go back to it, anytime you want. It helped me a lot when I was writing my assignment.

Theresa was a keen contributor to the discussion forum, and reflected that her experience of the forum was:

> Very, very helpful, because [I see that] that I am with other human beings, other people, my fellow students. I enjoy the overviews, how they see the course, you know. I like it so much. [I also post] because this is my own way of understanding...

This reference to being with other human beings highlights the value of social presence and the social construction of knowledge (e.g., Armellini & De Stefani,

2016; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Miao et al., 2022; Rienties & Toetenel, 2016), as well as the value of collective reflection (Kahn et al., 2017).

However, the constraints of irregular access to the internet, along with limited time available due to lifeload, combined with the deleterious effects of trauma on the well-being of some participants, meant that most of the scholars did not participate regularly in the discussion forums, despite having a deep desire to connect with their peers. This is in line with findings from the literature that students generally tend to prioritise lifeload over learning load (Hews et al., 2022). Consequently, there were several examples of what Lave & Wenger refer to as "legitimate peripheral participation" (1991). For example, Lili said:

> One of the interesting parts for me is the beginning of term, when I'm trying to read in Blackboard all the students' stories: Who are they, where do they live, what do they do? And I imagined there would be a time that we could see each other and become more familiar. It's really interesting that all of them have these experiences - really, it's been amazing… [I found] I could become familiar with topics that I didn't read myself, through the other students. I see that other issues or other aspects of the topic attract my colleagues' attention.

For Malka, participating in the discussion forums was accompanied by complex emotions. While she initially viewed the discussion forum as a distraction from her "real" academic work on the programme, she subsequently began to participate, and noted that her peers had given her some points to think about, and that "this helps me to open a new key on my assignment in my subject."

However, after reading her peers' introductions and finding out more about their backgrounds, she said she felt that she was "nothing" in comparison to them. This resonates with the finding by Marx (2022) that online communication can intensify negative emotions triggered by inequality. Farrell and Brunton (2020) also note the ambivalence felt by some students towards participating in discussion forums and point to the need for sensitive design and moderation of discussion forum activities.

Relating to staff members

Most of the scholars expressed positive sentiments about their experiences of relating to staff members, and there were plenty of examples of situations where academic and administrative staff had been kind and supportive. For example, Mohsin commented: "I can honestly say, [the programme] is really nice... I'm impressed by the way the programme managers are managing it… The people are really professional. I'm really happy with it." Despite these generally positive perceptions of scholars' relationships with staff, Kareem experienced an uncomfortable exchange with a staff member, where he felt that the feedback he had received was not specific enough:

> There was this one incident when I disagreed [with a staff member] about basically his assessment of something that I have done... because the criteria were very clear, but he has given me [a lower] grade, and he insisted, well it can be better... But that's not very objective. [I said,] "I would like you to point out the mistakes so that I can learn from them." And it was just really an exchange of emails that I found very… just not

really comfortable. If you're actually talking to someone, it's going to be much more likely that you will reach some understanding around this.

Kareem recounted a few such exchanges he had had with the same staff member over time; he found this communication vexing, and while he ultimately decided not to pursue the matter any further, the tension in this relationship left him feeling frustrated and discouraged.

7.2.3.1 The capability for affiliation and recognition underpinning social and collaborative engagement

The proposed capability underlying social and collaborative engagement (see **Table 5.2**) is the capability for *affiliation and recognition*, defined as:

> *able to be treated with dignity and to enter into relationships of mutual respect, recognition and trust; able to interact with others to learn new knowledge and solve problems.*

This capability seems particularly apposite to the examples given above, as it highlights the importance of students not only possessing the skills and confidence required for online interaction with peers and staff, but also the entitlement to be treated with dignity and respect by others in the online environment. If this mutual trust is absent, this impacts negatively on the students' social and collaborative engagement, as can be seen in the narratives above, e.g., Kareem felt that his queries about the rationale for marks he had received were not being addressed in a respectful manner; Malka's participation in the discussion forum was constrained by her anxiety about

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whether she would be seen by her peers as having equal worth to them; and Lili's desire for more social interaction with her peers, triggered by the email about a party that was only for on-site students, points to the difficulty of forming networks of friendship and belonging in a fully online environment.

7.2.4 Cognitive engagement

The notion of engagement with bodies of knowledge and ideas is closely associated with the potentially transformational role that a university education can play in students' lives (Ashwin, 2020). Redmond et al.'s (2018) illustrative indicators for cognitive engagement include activating metacognition, thinking critically, integrating ideas and justifying decisions.

Activating metacognition

Metacognition is a central aspect of cognitive engagement, since "[l]earners who are deeply cognitively engaged self-regulate, or 'use metacognitive strategies to plan, monitor, and evaluate their cognition when accomplishing tasks'" (Redmond et al., 2018, p. 192, citing Fredricks et al.). This strand of cognitive engagement was richly illustrated in my data. Here, I give examples of scholars activating metacognition by using linguistic strategies to learn.

Some scholars discussed the ways in which they used translation to help them understand the readings. For example, Theresa translated parts of the readings into French, which was a third language for her:

> So, all these notes, I take them in English, for me, to be able to
>
> understand very well, sometimes I translate the questions into French,

yeah. But when I'm drafting… Some [bits are] in black, and others in blue.

All the research participants recognised the need for a solid grasp of academic English, and several reported that their English had improved during the programme. However, some scholars had had fewer prior opportunities to develop their academic English, and for Sami, this was, ultimately, an insurmountable challenge. He said:

> Sometimes when you are reading some article, when you don't understand, sometimes you worry when you read the article and your understanding is like 40% or 50%."

He accepted my offer of linguistic support, which involved me giving him audio feedback on some of his draft assignments. Reflecting on the feedback I had given him in this way over the course of three modules, he commented:

> [At the start], I was writing long sentences, but what I realised is, it will be more difficult for people to understand. But when you give short sentences, even you yourself can apply those ideas and you know what you are talking about and the way that you are going.

Despite his significant progress with academic English, Sami lacked sufficient opportunities to develop his English language skills to meet the full programme requirements, and this was the critical conversion factor that forced him to leave the programme early, after achieving his Postgraduate Certificate. Sami's experience is, unfortunately, a common theme in the literature on displaced

learners in online HE (e.g., Halkic & Arnold, 2021; Moser-Mercer et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2022; Streitwieser et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2018; Younes, 2020; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018).

Thinking critically

Several scholars commented on the development of their critical thinking skills through the modules. For example, Nadia noted:

> Sometimes, you kind of get the two perspectives of how people see war and conflict. But if I relate them to what's published back home … and compare it to what's been published in the western countries, ... it gave me two sides of the world, to relate that topic back. Before studying this module, I might have been very biased, [based] on what I was taught on the [home country] side of the story. Now, I've tried to stop that habit of being biased, or one-sided. I've tried to open myself to knowing the opinions of other people - other writers [also] from African countries.

Mohsin talked about how he took a unique approach to an assignment:

> We had to review an article. Even the tutor made an introduction in a certain way and was expecting things in a certain way from our side, but I decided at that point that no, I'm not going to look at it in this traditional way, I'll review it in a completely different way, and I seriously was very much worried that it might not be acceptable to the tutor... But on the contrary, he was very open, and he gave me a good mark... It's something I really like, that I'm free to think.

These examples illustrate the intellectual journeys that were typical for the Sanctuary Scholars, as they learnt to examine their own biases while also taking intellectual risks through critical thinking.

Integrating ideas, justifying decisions

Building on critical thinking, the scholars indicated that they were integrating new ideas and learning to justify their decisions and arguments. Lili said:

> I come from a country that has multiple problems or issues, even political, economic and also human affairs, so I have some personal experience about just one country. [In the course], we are going to become familiar and learn something about international structures for all of these affairs… I saw the debates around it... I tried to find my opinion… I am trying to find out what I read or study or learn in the study programme to compare that knowledge with the real situation.

Mohsin reflected on how learning to conduct a literature review had helped him develop a more nuanced understanding of the topic:

> [We did a] literature review. So, this is one of the things I've learnt. I feel more confident, very much better… I'm now looking at things in a different way rather than the simple way I used to follow before.

These examples illustrate how the scholars were integrating new ideas into their knowledge schemas, building on their existing understanding and linking new knowledge to current events in the world around them.

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7.2.4.1 The capability for knowledge and imagination underpinning cognitive engagement

The proposed capability underpinning cognitive engagement (see **Table 5.2**) is the capability for *knowledge and imagination*:

> *Able to use imagination and thought to experience and produce academic and professional works of value to oneself and others; able to be an active inquirer without fear of reprisal or censorship.*

In the examples above, Nadia and Lili felt free to demonstrate curiosity and to reflect critically on topics that were important to them, and Mohsin approached an assessment task in a unique way. They all found that there were no negative consequences for doing so, and this increased their confidence, as they reflected in the interviews on the value of the academic works that they were both reading and producing. In Sami's case, however, the negative conversion factor of his lack of a solid foundation in academic English prevented him from demonstrating this capability fully in the English-medium context of the HyPIR degree.

7.3 Elementary capabilities

In my conversations with the Sanctuary Scholars, I frequently became aware that some of the capabilities I take for granted as a middle-class person living in a well-resourced country were either under threat, or presented daily challenges, for them. For example, the capabilities for life (being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length), for health (being able to have good

health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter) and for bodily integrity (being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault) could all be tenuous for someone like Julian living in a refugee camp without electricity, or for someone like Sol for whom trauma had taken a significant toll on their physical and mental well-being, or for someone like Zain who was homeless in a north European city in the winter.

The lack of the capability for control over one's environment affected all my research participants who did not have refugee status in their host countries in fundamental ways, such as being unable to seek work, unable to move outside of a given jurisdiction where they were subject to monitoring by sometimes hostile bureaucratic forces, and unable to plan a future for themselves and their families. The most common theme here pertained to the scholars' uncertainty around their future, associated with lack of control over their circumstances and an inability to plan. Julian is in a particularly precarious situation in a refugee camp which has limited infrastructure to support its residents and very few realistic options for future resettlement in a more permanent environment. After successfully completing the first three modules, he had to turn his attention to farming as a subsistence and income-generating activity, and he said:

I am willing to study. I want to graduate too, but situations complicate me… Psychologically I am failing.

Sami was also deeply troubled by the precarity of life as a refugee, which was exacerbated by Covid-19, as the school he had co-founded for refugee children had to be closed during lockdown. He told me:

> Now everything's locked down. Now... we have a lot of people from the community [experiencing] rental issues with the owner of the house. Some people are being [kicked out] from their own houses … I'm aware, thinking more about, because I am not earning an income, how to pay for rent.

He found that this affected his ability to concentrate on his studies:

> Now [during the lockdown] there is the opportunity to work on my course, but … it's very distracting, yeah. Even your concentration will be less. Sometimes you read, you read, you read it but your mind will not focus on it. Suddenly a problem will come up or sometimes you will feel dizziness you will stop thinking. … Now, even if we have food on our plates, you start thinking about what you will eat when the time comes… the mind will go off. Today I was planning to study. And then I started and I did a bit but then I closed everything. There are days like this, because the mind becomes totally empty. (Sami)

Some scholars feel that they are at the mercy of the authorities of their current host country, which causes them great anxiety. Malka says:

> My circumstances are quite hard because I haven't got my settled status yet. And still, I feel quite nervous and worry that I have no future. I don't

know what's going on in my future. So sometimes it makes me quite

stressed. And sometimes I'm worried, what if the Home Office sends me

back to my home country, what will happen?

Zain describes the frustration he experienced in trying to get an ID card in

Germany. He made six separate trips to different offices and waited for hours in

lengthy queues. After all this, he still did not have an ID card and did not know

whether he had passed his security interview. Lili also discussed the distressing

impact of uncertainty on her life as a student, as she waited to be resettled in a

third country. The stress of such uncertainty made it challenging for these

scholars to focus on their studies.

In all these cases, the impact on the Sanctuary Scholars was to cause

significant anxiety that acted as a severely negative conversion factor, often

preventing the scholars from engaging in their studies at all for long periods of

time, or (as in the case of Sol and Theresa), forcing them to withdraw

completely. These empirically derived scenarios help to demonstrate the

fundamental nature of the elementary capabilities in the context of forced

migrants in online HE, confirming that they provide an essential foundation for

the four capabilities that underpin the functioning of engagement, in the model

in **Figure 5.3**.

7.4 Student agency

While the analysis provided so far helps to explain the Sanctuary Scholars'

online engagement, it has not yet accounted explicitly for the role of personal

agency in relation to the outcomes of those that have graduated from the

programme, or who have exited from the programme without (yet) achieving their master's degree. I now turn to consider this element, which I placed at the heart of the capabilitarian online engagement model in **Figure 5.4.**

Redmond et al. (2018) do not provide a definition of agency but based on Sen's definition of an agent as "someone who acts and brings about change and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives" (1999, p. 19), there were several examples in my data of scholars reflecting on their agency. Nadia, for example, talked about her growing sense of autonomy:

> The first important thing I've learnt is to be independent… In the beginning when I first started, I felt like, how is it going to work? ... You know, you don't have the lecturer next door; you can't just go and knock and say, help me with this. So, the first thing is, it makes you feel responsible, to have time with your work and learn by yourself. I have personally found that learning online makes it a bit more flexible for what you want to do; it gives you a bit more space to actually learn in your style. No one imposes their style of learning on you, so you create your own methods of how you want to learn, how you want to plan your week.

Nadia's expanding ability to plan her own work and develop her own learning strategies led to her increasing confidence in her own abilities as an independent learner, echoing the importance of "learning presence" (Shea and Bidjerano, 2010) and the associated attributes of self-regulation and self-efficacy mentioned in the online engagement literature (Chung et al., 2022; Ng., 2019; Park & Yun, 2018).

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Kareem felt he had not been given sufficient academic guidance; nevertheless, he persisted:

> I really enjoy the readings, I really enjoy the fact that we have the [online] library, … which is really quite incredible. And I really find the whole process is very eye-opening, the whole process of learning itself is really great, … but to be very honest, I am totally on my own, in the sense that I design my own reading programme, if you will. I just decide when to read, what to read. That's totally my effort.

Based on the findings discussed here, I would argue that Sen's notion of "agency freedom" is at the core of engagement in online learning. As discussed in **Chapter 3**, agency freedom is "one's freedom to bring about the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce", while agency achievement is the actual bringing about of these achievements (Sen, 1992, pp. 56-57). Several research participants described instances of perseverance in the face of extreme disruption or seemingly insurmountable obstacles, demonstrating both agency freedom and agency achievement against the odds. Zain, who continued studying even while experiencing homelessness, and ultimately graduated with the HyPIR MA, commented: "Nothing is difficult with patience. You can achieve everything; you just need a little bit of heart and pride". This aligns with findings from the literature that even when students possess insufficient economic, cultural and social capital, "success against the odds" is nevertheless possible when they use their personal agency in combination with support from family and peer enablers, along with appropriate institutional interventions (Sinthampi-Banda, 2020; Wilson-Strydom, 2017a).

For Sami, Theresa and Sol, however, their agency freedom was thwarted in ways that prevented the achievement of their aspirations. An extract from my interview with Sol reveals his own conflicted perception of his personal agency as he reflects on the fact that he had to withdraw from the HyPIR programme before even starting it:

> Yeah, I feel very sorry that I didn't have that opportunity in the last years, because of my situation, but also this is not an excuse.. I should do my best because maybe … maybe they can offer it to someone else who's really willing to do [the course]. So next time, [if I am offered another Sanctuary Scholarship], I will do my best... You can see now I'm a bit insecure because... I am someone who also likes to do everything perfectly. I say to myself, ... the important thing is, do your best and do it from your heart.

In the interview, Sol debated with himself the extent to which he had the agency freedom to engage in the HyPIR MA, and he agonised over the loss of the opportunity, feeling that he might, in some sense, have been to blame, or that he had been "selfish" because he was not "really willing" to put in the effort. However, it was clear that he was so emotionally overwhelmed by his recent experience of trauma that he was not able to focus on his studies. From a capabilitarian perspective, he lacked the agency freedom to engage under those circumstances, and therefore agency achievement was also out of the question at that time.

From the examples above, I suggest that agency achievement is critical to any kind of sustained engagement in online learning and thus appropriately placed at the core of the model in **Figure 5.4**. Following Nussbaum's logic, this inner circle could equally be labelled "Practical reason", which is defined as "being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life" (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 41). Based on the examples above, I would argue that the students in this sample were driven by a conception of the good and critical reflection in the planning of their lives, and that their enactments of agency demonstrate that orientation. The empirical data thus supports the argument, discussed in **Chapter 5**, that Nussbaum's capability for practical reason is equivalent to Sen's notion of agency achievement (Robeyns, 2017). This notion resonates well with Walker's emphasis on the capability of students "to become and to be 'strong evaluators', able to make reflexive and informed choices about what makes a good life for each of them" (2008, p. 267) as an essential outcome of HE. It reflects a social justice perspective on the purpose of HE, in contrast to the dominant neoliberal foundation of HE policies in countries such as the UK (Marginson, 2012) which views HE as a private good.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided examples from the Sanctuary Scholars' online learning experiences that illustrate online engagement according to the illustrative indicators in Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework, and some additional indicators I identified in my data. The analysis goes beyond merely identifying the presence of such indicators and

consolidates my argument (put forward in **Chapter 5**) for the existence of four

specified capabilities as underpinning online engagement in the four

dimensions of behavioural, emotional, social and collaborative, and cognitive

engagement: these are the capabilities for educational resilience, emotional

health, affiliation and recognition, and knowledge and imagination respectively.

The empirical evidence also contributes to my argument for the existence of a

set of four elementary capabilities, without which any form of online

engagement is likely to be severely constrained, as postulated in **Chapter 5**.

Returning to **Figure 5.4**, my findings have shown that each of the four

engagement dimensions in the outer circle is indeed primarily fuelled by its

associated capability in the inner circle, and that this relationship works in both

directions, as a student's functioning in any dimension also helps to reinforce

the capability for that functioning. My findings also suggest the need for caution

though, in that the relationship between resources, conversion factors,

capabilities and functionings is neither linear nor predictable, since agency

freedom (or the lack thereof) can have a fundamental impact on engagement.

There is also the valid option that some students might choose of *not* acting on

their agency freedom (and thus not engaging fully, even when they have the

capability to do so), if they decide to shift their energy towards achieving a

different valued outcome that they perceive to be better aligned to their well-

being. This outcome was not demonstrated in my small sample but is

hypothetically possible. Finally, as already noted, there is an inbuilt overlap

between the engagement dimensions, with the result that some observed

enactments of engagement could be viewed as reflecting different functionings,

and therefore underpinned by different underlying capabilities - reaffirming the function of the dotted lines between segments in the model in **Figure 5.4.** Thus, the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* provides a starting point for dialogue, and not a deterministic taxonomy. The fact that the model has enabled me to provide a coherent explanation for student engagement in my sample shows its potential as a tool for analysis and understanding.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I reflect further on the findings and, to consolidate the analysis, I address **RQ4:** How does engagement fuel further engagement (*i.e., act as a fertile functioning)* in this context? I review my data for examples of engagement fuelling further engagement, or, more specifically, the functioning of engagement fuelling the capability for further engagement, either within the same dimension or across dimensions. I then further develop the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* that I presented in **Figure 5.4,** to include this aspect. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the final model (**Figure 8.2**) and a summary of both its theoretical rationale and its empirical substantiation.

8.2 How engagement fuels the capability for further engagement

In Bond et al.'s (2020) definition of student engagement, the authors maintain that "The more students are engaged and empowered within their learning community, the more likely they are to channel that energy back into their learning, leading to a range of … outcomes, that can likewise further fuel engagement" (p. 3). In capabilitarian terms, engagement that fuels further engagement would be a "fertile functioning" (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007; 2013) that fuels the capability for other functionings. Since engagement is linked to retention (Bawa, 2016; Seery et al., 2021; Simpson, 2013; Tight 2020; Woodley & Simpson, 2014), the more students engage, the more likely they are to remain on the programme and complete it, which is a highly valued functioning

for the Sanctuary Scholars. I therefore sought examples of such "fuelling" in my data, which I discuss below.

8.2.1 Behavioural engagement fuelling the capabilities for other kinds of engagement

One indicator for behavioural engagement that I identified in my data was: *applying new knowledge in real life*. Several of the scholars reflected on the practical value of the knowledge they were gaining, for example noting that their increased understanding of human rights enabled them to be more effective in their professional lives or in their voluntary activities. Julian gave a vivid example:

> What I enjoyed a lot on the course, Art of Negotiation, was how you learn to be a negotiator… In the camp, there is conflict every day all the time. For example, a couple were fighting in their homes. They came to me, so that I may hear from them, and see how I can resolve their conflict. Two, whenever there are churches that are fighting, or members of one church who are fighting, they also ask me to go there. Whenever they ask for meetings with the leaders, even myself, I'm also invited to see how we can help the members of that church.

Through applying his new knowledge of negotiation in a real-life setting, Julian was engaging behaviourally with his learning. In this case, his behavioural engagement also sparked the capability for engagement along other dimensions: the *capability for emotional health* was furthered in that Julian was able to experience emotions that contributed positively to his learning process,

and this meant he engaged emotionally. The *capability for affiliation and recognition* (underpinning social and collaborative engagement) was fuelled in that Julian was entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition and respect with other participants within his local community. Finally, the *capability for knowledge and imagination* (underpinning cognitive engagement) was enhanced, because Julian was prompted to use his imagination and reasoning skills to apply the theory to a specific context. Thus, it can be argued that behavioural engagement is a fertile functioning, in that it can fuel the capabilities for other kinds of engagement. This "fuelling" relationship is shown in **Figure 8.1** below.
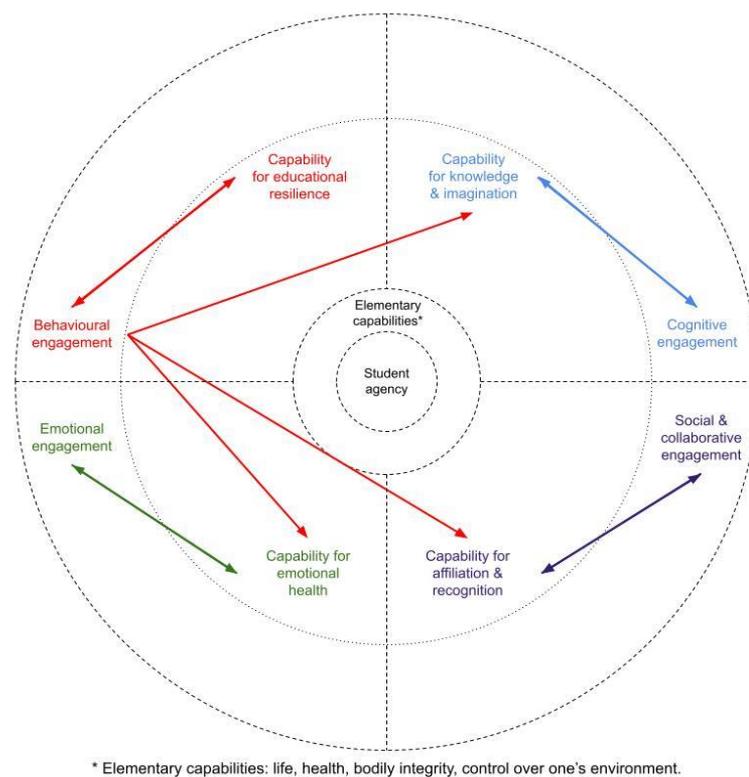
Figure 8.1: Behavioural engagement fuelling the capabilities for other kinds of engagement

The reverse of this process is also possible, as illustrated by Theresa's case, where the *capability for educational resilience* (which underpins the functioning of sustained behavioural engagement) was missing and she was not able to progress through the course. Theresa had to leave the programme midway through her first module, due to intersecting negative conversion factors which removed opportunities for behavioural engagement. Without behavioural engagement, her engagement along the other dimensions also ground to a halt. This is an example of corrosive disadvantage, where negative conversion factors combined to prevent a scholar's achievement of the valued functioning of graduation.

8.2.2 Emotional engagement fuelling the capabilities for other kinds of engagement

One of Redmond et al.'s (2018) indicators for emotional engagement that was prominent in my data is *committing to learning*, often closely intertwined with a further indicator that I identified in my data, *investing personally in the subject knowledge*. The following quote from Malka illustrates these two indicators and shows the range and depth of emotions that she experienced when persisting with a challenging reading:

> I started to write my first assignment on the paradox of political violence…. I had to write a critical review about this article [which had] a lot of academic terms and political terms… Even sometimes I asked some English friends, what does this word mean? And they said to me, oh, this is quite difficult - you need to have a political dictionary... [My

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tutor] said to me, this is a difficult article, leave it and choose another easier one. I said to her no, I don't want to give up, because I spent a lot of time translating and reading and highlighting some points... I managed in the end to write the assignment. And [my tutor] was surprised. She said, you demonstrated some critical points, and [added] some new comments… When she said this to me, I felt more confident.

This anecdote highlights the close relationship between emotional engagement and the other forms of engagement. I interpreted it as illustrating the functioning of emotional engagement because of the focus on her commitment to learning and her personal investment in the subject of the assignment. As Malka acted on that capability, she was aware of her anxiety, but she persisted anyway. Her commitment to learning fuelled the *capability for affiliation and recognition* (underpinning social and collaborative engagement), by creating opportunities for interaction with her tutor, where she was treated with dignity and respect. Her commitment to learning also bolstered her *capability for educational resilience* (which underpins behavioural engagement) and increased her *capability for knowledge and imagination* (which underpins cognitive engagement). In Malka's case, this cycle of emotional engagement fuelling engagement along the other dimensions was repeated several times, as she undertook assignments in each of her modules, and again when she eventually wrote her dissertation. Malka's story is typical of how the scholars' personal investment in the subject matter tended to be associated with an openness towards social and collaborative engagement, as well as a catalyst for ongoing behavioural and cognitive engagement. Thus, emotional engagement is a

significant dimension of the online learning experience for the Sanctuary

Scholars and can have a substantial impact on their ability to engage

cognitively, behaviourally and socially in their online learning. This reiterates

findings from the literature on refugees in HE (Bajwa et al., 2018; Brunton et al.,

2019; Farrell et al. 2020; Maringe et al., 2017).

Inasmuch as the functioning of emotional engagement can fuel other kinds of

engagement, it is also possible that constrained capability for emotional

engagement can diminish the capability for engagement in all the other

dimensions. For example, in Sol's case, where the capability for emotional

engagement was severely constrained due to his experience of recent trauma,

he was not able to even start the course, and was thus also prevented from

engaging along any of the other dimensions. In this case, trauma proved to be

a corrosive disadvantage, at least temporarily, although there were indications

that Sol could still achieve his valued functioning, as he planned to reapply for

the same Sanctuary Scholarship again.

8.2.3 Social and collaborative engagement fuelling the capabilities for other kinds of engagement

The social and collaborative engagement indicator *learning with peers*

appeared frequently in my data. One instance of this was from Nadia's

reflection on the discussion forums:

> You get a mix of opinions, a mix of information, a mix of data and
>
> statistics, history and everything. It's better that way because I can get
>
> more out of others and give more about what I know... And it's so good

that our lecturers … come back to you [on the forum] saying, "Oh well

done, I agree with this, what you've said", and you know it kind of gives

you the impression that what you've written, it's got value... So,

sometimes when I give an answer to one question, I get back another

question to work on. You have people coming from different

backgrounds, with different knowledge of life and professional

backgrounds that you can share and learn from.

This vignette points to the generative characteristics of social and collaborative

engagement: through her active engagement in the discussion forum, Nadia's

capability for knowledge and imagination was stimulated, as she was prompted

to ask more questions about the subject and seek further knowledge. Her

capability for emotional health was reinforced as she experienced positive

emotions in relation to these conversations with others, and her *capability for*

educational resilience was strengthened as she responded to the iterative

opportunities for learning via the discussion forum. However, the opportunities

for social interaction were limited, due to the built-in constraints of the learning

design, as discussed in **Chapter 6**. Lili longed for a greater sense of community

and Kareem's unresolved discord with his tutor left him feeling vexed and

discouraged. Thus, the lack of opportunity for sustained positive social and

collaborative engagement had adverse emotional effects on some students.

Others alluded to the fact that the absence of "live" (synchronous) classroom

discussions had a negative impact on their cognitive engagement. There is also

a possibility that Theresa might have decided to contend more vigorously with

the negative conversion factors that ultimately caused her to stop engaging

behaviourally, had she not been cut off from social contact with her peers through the loss of her password. As someone who valued social learning, the lack of social and collaborative engagement caused by the loss of her password likely contributed towards the corrosive disadvantage which caused her eventual disengagement from the programme.

8.2.4 Cognitive engagement fuelling the capabilities for other kinds of engagement

One indicator of cognitive engagement that appeared frequently in my data was that of *thinking critically*. Kareem reflected on how the learning was transforming his thinking:

> In academia, ... you don't actually make a claim without actually presenting why you believe this is the case.

This example, which followed on from Kareem's comment on how he felt that giving fact-based evidence for his arguments had become "part of his DNA" (discussed in **Section 6.3.1.5**), shows how cognitive engagement can fuel engagement along the other dimensions. Kareem's growing critical thinking skills enabled him to experience emotions that contributed positively to his learning (enhancing his *emotional health* and thus supporting his emotional engagement); they augmented his capability for *affiliation and recognition* (underpinning social and collaborative engagement) by increasing his ability to interact with others to understand concepts, learn new knowledge and solve problems; and they fostered *educational resilience* (underpinning behavioural

engagement) for him, as he responded to opportunities to learn as part of his professional development.

An example from Nadia showed the delicate balance between cognitive engagement and the other engagement dimensions. She pointed out that authors in the Middle East tended to express different viewpoints from those in the West and commented on the importance of knowing "both sides of the story", so that she could tailor her communication to any given audience, so as not to offend others or endanger herself. She explained that she was therefore supplementing her readings on the HyPIR programme with books from Afghanistan. She explained:

> I was not learning to take sides; my aim is to learn, so that, in the event that I need to be able to speak to either side, I will have something to talk about.

Kareem similarly discussed his efforts to participate in a range of "thinktanks" with different viewpoints, to be exposed to different perspectives and increase his knowledge. He also discussed the importance of recognising what kind of knowledge was appropriate for different audiences and what should be avoided, both on the discussion forum and in his communication with parties outside of the university. These epistemological judgments highlighted the interconnections between the capability for *knowledge and imagination* and other capabilities, particularly that of *affiliation and recognition*.

Where the capability for *knowledge and imagination* was severely constrained, as in Sami's case because of his linguistic challenges, this had a grave impact

on the functioning of cognitive engagement, with a concomitant negative effect on the other engagement dimensions: his capability for *emotional health* was strained as he experienced anxiety over the challenges he faced with academic English, and his capability for *affiliation and recognition* within his community of peers (and thereby his social and collaborative engagement) was compromised due to the negative conversion factor of less developed academic language skills. Ultimately, his *educational resilience* was also constrained, and his behavioural engagement had to be terminated as he was not able to remain on the programme. In this situation, no amount of engagement along the other dimensions could make up for the lack of this capability, highlighting that constrained capability in this domain is a severely corrosive disadvantage.

8.3 The Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model - complete version

Figure 8.2 shows how the enactment of the functionings of each kind of engagement fuels the capabilities for all the others, as described above.
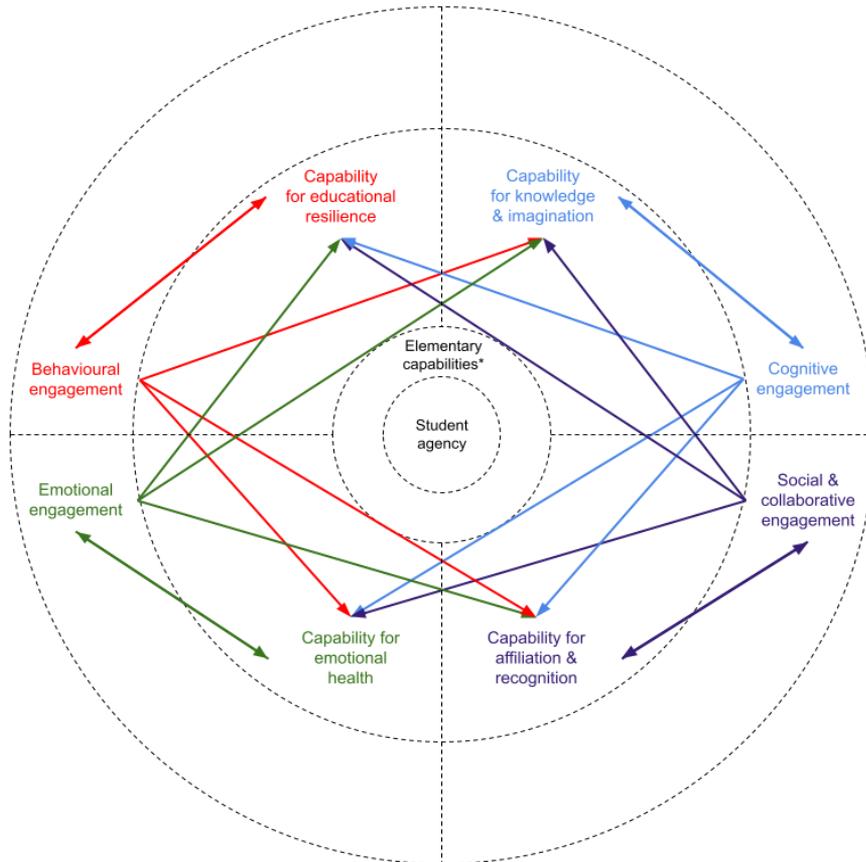
* Elementary capabilities: life, health, bodily integrity, control over one's environment.

Figure 8.2. Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model

This is the final version of the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model*,

integrating both the theoretically derived elements as described in **Chapter 5**

and which culminated in **Figure 5.4**, and the empirically derived understanding

of how engagement in one dimension can fuel the capability for engagement in

the others, represented by the coloured arrows. An alternative, simplified

version of the model has been shared in Witthaus (2023c).

8.4 Conclusion

The model developed here posits that engagement in online HE along the

behavioural, cognitive, social/ collaborative and emotional dimensions is a set

of functionings which require the capabilities for educational resilience,

knowledge and imagination, affiliation and recognition, and emotional health respectively. Development of these capabilities can enhance engagement, producing a virtuous cycle of engagement fuelling engagement, as asserted in the definition of student engagement by Bond et al. (2020). The corollary of such fertile functioning is corrosive disadvantage, such that where the capability for engagement in any one dimension is significantly constrained, there is a high probability that engagement in the other dimensions will also be curtailed or even terminated. As noted in **Chapter 7**, in addition to the four capabilities identified as underpinning online engagement, four *elementary capabilities* have been identified as being critical to a student's survival or basic level of well-being. Agency is at the heart of the model, because to the extent that each student's agency freedom is affected by their unique combination of conversion factors, their capabilities to engage will be affected, either positively or negatively. Students can also, hypothetically, demonstrate agency achievement by deciding *not* to engage, even when they have all the capabilities in place to engage.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate Nussbaum's (2000) point that any proposed set of capabilities should be subject to public deliberation in the context in which it is designed to be used and adapted accordingly. Thus the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* (**Figure 8.2**) is not intended to be static, but rather to provide a starting point for dialogue about socially just practice within HEIs and communities that are working to support forced migrants via online learning.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with a summary of my findings in relation to my research questions. It then provides an overview of the original contribution to knowledge made by this study in terms of a) the theoretical addition to our knowledge base, b) the practical implications regarding policy and practice for HEIs, and c) its social contribution as an open thesis. This is followed by a reflection on the research design, including consideration of the limitations and trustworthiness of the findings and a discussion on the potential broader significance of the research. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on possible directions for future research.

9.2 Summary of findings

This study aimed to generate theoretical, practical and social outputs to support the HE sector's understanding of online engagement amongst displaced learners. Below I summarise the findings in relation to the four research questions first presented in **Chapter 1** and elaborated in terms of the Capability Approach in **Chapter 3**.

9.2.1 RQ1: What (*conversion*) factors enable and constrain the Sanctuary Scholars' progression through the online programme?

In **Chapter 6**, I identified a wide-ranging list of conversion factors that either enabled or constrained the scholars' progression through the programme. The key positive conversion factors (enablers) were: *Personal*: persistence;

enjoyment of learning; prior university preparation programme or experience of online learning; time to study; prior opportunities to develop academic English; belief that studying is valuable/ healing. *Social:* good relationships with staff; learning with peers on the discussion forum; feedback received on assessed work; opportunities to apply new knowledge within the local community; receiving a donated laptop. *Environmental:* flexibility of online learning; access to a printer; access to a local library.

The key negative conversion factors (constraints) were: *Personal:* trauma; financial worries, food insecurity; disabilities, accident and injury; lack of time due to lifeload; challenges with academic English; anxiety about uncertain future. *Social:* illness in family/ bereavements; domestic caring duties; feeling isolated in the online environment. *Environmental*: no electricity or wi-fi at home; homelessness; bureaucratic asylum system; difficulty navigating VLE; lost password to VLE; difficulty navigating academic requirements; limited career options in chosen field. (**Figure 6.5** gives an overview of these conversion factors in the context of the Sanctuary Scholars' journeys through the MA.)

Some of the above negative conversion factors stood out as being highly significant in terms of impeding the scholars' progress through the programme. These were trauma, challenges with academic English, the loss of a password, and lifeload. Sol withdrew from the programme without starting it after experiencing severe trauma; Sami was forced to withdraw on the basis that his academic English was not at the level required to complete the programme; Theresa "disappeared" from the programme after losing her password to the

VLE and after repeated attempts at restoring it had failed. Almost all scholars in the sample requested extensions or temporary suspensions to deal with lifeload issues. Thus, not all the research participants achieved their aspiration of graduating with the HyPIR MA, and those who did graduate often did so against the odds. Each of the five graduates experienced severe negative conversion factors, which included homelessness, trauma, anxiety and associated mental health issues, time and energy constraints due to lifeload, illness or bereavements within their families, and challenges with academic English. The picture that emerges is one of a complex web of conversion factors, both positive and negative, interwoven with individual agency, that feed into the capabilities for online engagement in the scholars' journeys through the programme.

9.2.2 RQ2: How do the Sanctuary Scholars' descriptions of their online learning indicate and illustrate their *achieved functionings of* online engagement?

For conceptual clarity, I adapted Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework to create a four-dimensional version by collapsing social and emotional engagement into one dimension. The indicators from Redmond et al. remain the same in this version, the only difference being that those for social and collaborative engagement are combined into one category (see **Table 5.1**). The data from my interviews with the Sanctuary Scholars included many examples of almost all of Redmond et al.'s illustrative indicators, plus some additional indicators that I identified, such as managing access to resources and managing studies around lifeload (under behavioural engagement) and

investing emotionally in the subject knowledge and managing emotions (under emotional engagement). My data also confirmed the practical value of combining social and collaborative engagement, as the interview transcripts contained clusters of social and collaborative indicators in ways which were difficult to separate. The findings from this analysis confirm the usefulness of Redmond et al.'s framework for describing online engagement, and reinforce the logic of the adapted, 4D version of the framework as a tool for analysis. (See **Chapter 7**.)

9.2.3 RQ3: What capabilities underpin the scholars' enactments (*i.e., achieved functionings*) of online engagement?

Starting from the premise that engagement is a functioning, I argued both theoretically (in **Chapter 5**) and empirically (in **Chapter 7**) that the four dimensions of engagement are underpinned by the following capabilities, adapted from the capabilities lists by Nussbaum (2003) and Walker (2006): behavioural engagement is underpinned by the capability for *educational resilience*; emotional engagement by the capability for *emotional health*; social and collaborative engagement by the capability for *affiliation and recognition*; and cognitive engagement by the capability for *knowledge and imagination*. Furthermore, the four *elementary capabilities* proposed in the theoretical model in **Figure 5.4** were found to have explanatory power in terms of highlighting the survival and basic well-being challenges for some Sanctuary Scholars that had a cumulative effect in reducing their other capabilities to engage. The online engagement capabilities and the elementary capabilities worked in tandem with

student agency in nuanced ways to support or impede the functionings of engagement.

9.2.4 RQ4: How does engagement fuel further engagement (*i.e., act as a fertile functioning)* in this context?

RQ4 aimed to ascertain the ways in which engagement fuels further engagement, based on the definition by Bond et al. (2020). In my empirical analysis, multiple examples were found throughout the data of one form of engagement fuelling the capability for engagement in one or more other dimensions, thus confirming that engagement is indeed a rich *fertile functioning* (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2013). Illustrative examples were discussed in **Chapter 8.** The practical significance of this finding for online course providers is that, if engagement is fostered in any one dimension, there is a chance of a snowball effect in which other dimensions are also ignited. This may be particularly important in the emotional and and social and collaborative dimensions, which were often found to have a significant impact on the cognitive and behavioural dimensions.

My findings also showed that, in the same way that positive engagement can have a cumulatively positive impact on other forms of engagement, negative or frustrated engagement in one dimension can have a negative impact on other dimensions. Thus, feelings of distress or anxiety (which pointed to compromised emotional health, whether related to the course or not) could lead to a scholar withdrawing from potentially helpful social exchanges on the discussion forum, feeling unable to focus cognitively, and/ or reducing their

behavioural engagement. In all cases where the students were forced to withdraw or could only partially complete the programme, corrosive disadvantage of this nature was identified.

9.3 Original contribution to knowledge

This research contributes to knowledge in a relatively under-researched area, that of forced migrants' engagement in online HE, based on an analysis of in-depth discussions with refugees and asylum seekers about their experiences of online learning, using tools from the online engagement literature and the Capability Approach. The original contribution of this study is threefold: theoretical, practical and social. Each of these is discussed below.

9.3.1 Theoretical contribution

The study contributes to the HE sector's conceptual understanding of displaced learners' engagement in online learning by providing an original conceptual model: the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* (**Figure 8.2**). The model interweaves cross-disciplinary insights from online HE, student engagement and the social justice-oriented Capability Approach. It focuses on the interrelationships between student agency, capabilities, and the functionings of engagement in four dimensions (behavioural, emotional, social and collaborative, and cognitive), and shows how engagement in any one dimension can fuel the capability for engagement in the other dimensions.

These interrelationships are iteratively enacted throughout the student journey into, through and out of an online degree programme. To help locate this

process in the context of the student journey through an online programme, I also developed the *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map* **(Figure 5.1)**, partially inspired by Tao's (2013) flowchart. Both the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* and the *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map* have been tested in the context of the present case study and found to have explanatory power and may therefore have wider applicability as useful tools for analysis in other contexts of underrepresented students in online HE.

9.3.2 Practical contribution and implications for HEIs

As a practical contribution, the study offers insights that can inform policy and practice in the design and delivery of online learning for cohorts that include underrepresented groups such as forced migrants. In the Western press and popular media, refugees and asylum seekers are commonly viewed as "passive, vulnerable and traumatised victims" (Cin & Doğan, 2020), and are often associated with deficit characteristics such as powerlessness or precarity (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008). By contrast, this study has highlighted the agency of displaced people as they navigate the obstacles they face as online learners, while also raising awareness of the socially unjust structures that may limit, constrain or prevent their online engagement. The findings will be of particular value to HEIs committed to supporting refugees via schemes such as the Universities of Sanctuary programme and Article 26 scholarships, as well as to civic and community-based organisations that support forced migrants. Some specific implications for institutional policy and practice follow.

9.3.2.1 Create opportunities in the curriculum for strengthening all the capabilities that underpin engagement.

This study has shown that all the capabilities that underpin behavioural, emotional, social and cognitive engagement can be enhanced when students achieve the functioning of engagement in any one of these four dimensions. This finding presents a powerful argument for creating opportunities for students to strengthen *all* the capabilities that underpin engagement (educational resilience, emotional health, affiliation and recognition, and knowledge and imagination respectively) through the design and delivery of online courses. The *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* **(Figure 8.2)** can be used by academics as a heuristic to help them design for engagement. For example, course teams could discuss questions such as, "How can our course environment and activities create a culture of recognition and affiliation, bearing in mind the capabilities of all our students?" (with reference to the definition of affiliation and recognition in **Table 5.2**). This would lead to a greater emphasis on equity in course design than by posing the more commonly asked question, "How can we encourage social and collaborative engagement in the course?" The former question considers the reciprocal nature of affiliation and recognition and leads to further consideration around how to establish such a culture, both among students and between staff and students; it also requires the course team to think about wider social or political structures that may be preventing certain students from experiencing mutual trust in the learning environment, and to consider those issues when designing any activities

involving social interaction. Such an approach to course design and delivery would fall within the description of a pedagogy of care (Burke et al., 2021).

9.3.2.2 Provide online induction programmes for refugee students.

The *Capabilitarian Learning Journey Map* **(Figure 5.1)** could be used to develop learner "personas" (Lister & McFarlane, 2021) to help staff identify avoidable negative conversion factors that can be anticipated and produce an appropriate induction process for refugee students. An online induction, informed by such an analysis, would have helped those scholars who found the VLE difficult to navigate; it could also have guided students through the course handbook, helping them to understand the course structure and assessment grading system. It might also have helped manage the expectations of the two students who discovered that they could not pursue their desired careers (related to intelligence and security) because they did not meet the stringent eligibility requirements of their host countries' governments.

9.3.2.3 Create an institutional culture of "warm support" for refugee students.

While "warm" support (Baker et al., 2018) could be provided through the appointment of a dedicated staff member whose role is to assist Sanctuary Scholars with any queries or requests for support, as was envisaged by the Programme Director of the case study programme (see **Chapter 6**), a more holistic approach is needed. Teaching refugee-background students can raise difficult issues for academics (S. Reinhardt, 2018), and, since trauma is one of the most predictable negative conversion factors for such students, it is

advisable that HEIs provide training in trauma-informed pedagogy for lecturers and tutors (Palanac, 2019; Palanac et al., 2023; S. Reinhardt, 2018). However, the need to identify and mitigate the potential negative conversion factors that may affect students' progression through a degree programme requires dialogue between staff across all roles, from senior policymakers to lecturers and tutors, to librarians and IT service professionals. This was borne out in the case of the scholar, Theresa, who lost her password, and despite numerous attempts to communicate with IT Services, was unable to reinstate her university account; she subsequently disengaged from the programme.

Naidoo et al. (2018) advocate for HEIs to take "a human rights approach to HE which focuses on capability and participation" and argue that universities need to "move beyond individual student levels of support to whole university practices that are built on human rights and embedded within institutional and systemic structures to serve the common good" (p. 162). A capabilitarian approach could be applied to identifying the capabilities needed by *staff* for effective, warm support of displaced students and creating opportunities for dialogue around these needs. Such an approach would be in keeping with the notion of HEIs extending hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers (Cin & Doğan, 2021; Kontowski and Leitberger, 2018).

9.3.2.4 Develop flexible, modular online learning pathways for displaced students.

This study has highlighted previous findings from the literature that flexible, but guided, pathways into and through HE are needed for displaced people (e.g., Baker et al., 2020; Molla, 2021b), alongside more traditional routes. As noted in

Chapters 6 and 7, for the research participants in this study, the option to apply for extensions to assignment deadlines because of mitigating circumstances, or to suspend study while dealing with issues such as trauma, resettlement or income-generation pressures, was a critical positive conversion factor. However, some students were forced to withdraw early, and their options for recognition of the academic outcomes they had achieved were limited to the PG Certificate and the PG Diploma. Therefore, for HEIs that offer online Sanctuary Scholarships, an important policy consideration is around how to make the course provision as flexible as possible. Modular provision, in the form of stackable micro-credentials (European Commission, 2021; McGreal & Olcott, 2022; UNESCO, 2022), would allow displaced learners to gradually build up credits towards a full degree without fear of being forced to withdraw from the whole programme if challenges arise.

9.3.2.5 Consider establishing or strengthening institutional partnerships.

Beyond the need for thoughtful course design and a focus on relationality in the design and delivery of teaching, a more difficult question was raised by this study: What is the institution's duty of care towards online Sanctuary Scholars who experience precarity by virtue of being located in fragile contexts such as refugee camps, or who fall into precarity during their period of enrolment? Most HEIs promote their offers via a narrative of inclusion, and yet it is unclear how that inclusivity can be actualised if a scholar is suddenly plunged into food insecurity, homelessness, or destitution. This question also applies to campus-based HE (see for example Zeldin-O'Neill, 2022), and yet presents greater

challenges in the online context, since local solutions such as food banks are not possible. It points towards the need for collaborative solutions, such as jointly managed hardship funds run on a regional basis, or the pooling of efforts by all universities that subscribe to sanctuary principles. The advice from the literature for HEIs in the Global North to enter into partnerships with HEIs and community-based organisations that are local to refugees and asylum seekers enrolled on their programmes (e.g., Moser-Mercer, 2021) is also pertinent here, because in this way students can more easily access local support; such partnerships also provide potential routes into other HE programmes run by local universities for graduates.

9.3.3 National policy implications

Having noted that flexible learning pathways could enable significantly greater participation in HE by displaced learners, there is one implication for a proposed new policy in England, the Lifelong Loan Entitlement Bill (Department for Education, 2023). According to this proposal, from 2025 student loans will be granted on a modular basis, but only for modules that are at least 30 credits long and part of a larger course (Kernohan, 2023). While the move towards modularisation of the student loan system could help students with refugee status in England (as they are eligible for student loans), a lower minimum credit count and removal of the requirement for it to be part of a larger course would make this opportunity more flexible, and hence more valuable, to refugees and other underrepresented learners.

9.3.4 Social contribution

The social contribution of this study lies in the open nature of my research process and outputs, making them available to communities that do not have access to paywalled academic journals, and adding to the growing body of open research in the social sciences. Throughout the research process, I have blogged (Witthaus, 2023a), maintained an "Open Thesis" website (Witthaus, 2023b), presented at numerous conferences and webinars (e.g., Witthaus, 2022b), published two directly related papers (Witthaus, 2018; 2023c), used social media to disseminate my work, and published resources on the Zenodo open-source platform, all under an open licence. The responses I have received from others who share my research interest have confirmed for me that, by working in the open and encouraging other researchers to build on this work, the social impact of this thesis will be greater than had I not done so.

9.4 Reflection on research design: limitations, trustworthiness and broader significance

This study began as an empirical exploration of the lived experiences of forced migrants in a formal, online HE programme, and aimed to ascertain the factors that enhanced and constrained their online engagement, informed by existing literature in HE, particularly Redmond et al. (2018) and Bond et al. (2020), and the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1999; Walker, 2006). I started by examining each of these bodies of literature for salient points of reference to help understand the online learning experiences of people in situations of forced migration. While immersed in this process, I began to develop visual representations, through a capabilitarian lens, of the learners' potential journeys through the programme, and of the interrelationships between agency,

capabilities, and the functionings of engagement along four dimensions. Although I initially developed these visual representations simply as an aid to my own understanding, they gradually took on a more significant role and became central to my findings, particularly the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* (**Figure 8.2**), which encapsulates my theoretical contribution to knowledge. My initial research design did not specifically anticipate this, but also did not preclude it.

One limitation of the study was its small scale (ten student research participants and two staff participants). A small sample size is perhaps a particular drawback in the context of forced migration, since it is recognised that the global community of displaced people differs vastly in terms of culture, country of origin, host country and current living circumstances, and background in formal education. Furthermore, many of the engagement indicators found in my data may be discipline-specific, and so my findings may not translate identically across disciplines (e.g., Walkington et al., 2018). An additional limitation is that, by looking at the capabilities of forced migrants enrolled in online HE, this study only sheds light on one small, albeit important, aspect of social justice in the sector. Broader questions around equity for displaced people in online HE can only be resolved by looking holistically at the entire provision, at the level of the course, the programme, the institution and the sector, nationally and internationally (see Gasper & Van Staveren, 2003).

The use of interviews as my main data collection tool was also a limitation in terms of the potential for bias in my interpretation of the participants' responses. I mitigated this risk through providing rich, thick descriptions of both my process

and the setting, reflecting on my positionality, member-checking, triangulation, and sharing preliminary findings with peer researchers and inviting feedback. (See **Section 4.4**.)

Despite the limitations noted, the use of Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework and the Capability Approach, especially Nussbaum's (2003; 2011) core capabilities and Walker's (2006) ideal theoretical capability list for HE, enabled me to find coherence and unity in my data, and to develop a model that built logically on each of these previously established conceptual frameworks. The findings from this study may also have broader potential significance in terms of an audience beyond forced migrants. For example, while trauma is an oft-cited experience for displaced students, it has also been found to be common among the general population of students: one North American study found that 60-80% of online HE students had experienced trauma—this group included war veterans, women and indigenous people (S. Reinhardt, 2022). Digital poverty is another challenge frequently mentioned in studies among displaced people, but as Czerniewicz (2022) points out, citing figures from the World Bank, 790 million people in developing countries have no access to electricity at all, while 2.6 billion people do not have access to continuous electricity. Moreover, although forced migrants as a group are characterised by extreme heterogeneity (e.g., Baker et al., 2021; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Lambert et al., 2018; Unangst & Crea, 2020; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2019), heterogeneity is also a characteristic of the demographics of online learners in the general student population (Lee, 2017), and so it is reasonable to assume that any efforts towards more inclusive

practice aimed at forced migrants will also be beneficial to a wider cohort. This notion also coheres with Kuh's argument that "the variance within any group of students … is almost always greater than between the groups'' (2009, p. 15). The increasing diversification of the student body in HE calls for holistic support models that can serve all students (David, 2010; Streitwieser et al., 2018), and a capabilitarian analysis may be the ideal way to work towards that, as it recognises and values each individual's capability set.

Carrying out my research in the open, particularly using social media (blogging and microblogging) and sharing preliminary findings at HE conferences and webinars enabled me to obtain feedback from other scholars, helping to avoid confirmation bias. Most salient here was the presentation I delivered at the European Association for Distance Teaching Universities' (EADTU) annual conference, Innovating Higher Education (I-HE), in Athens in October 2022, in which I presented an early version of my findings (Witthaus, 2022b) and received constructive feedback from delegates. I also had an associated paper accepted for publication in the Online Learning Journal (Witthaus, 2023c), which contains a version of the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model*, and I received further feedback on drafts of that paper as part of the article review process. The fact that a substantial output from this research has been peer reviewed contributes to the trustworthiness of the thesis.

9.5 Directions for future research

This study has highlighted both the opportunities that exist for displaced people to achieve some of their valued capabilities through online HE and the

associated challenges that students and providers need to overcome. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which the *Capabilitarian Online Engagement Model* presented here can be applied in different contexts, both in terms of audience and discipline. I invite other scholars and practitioners to test the model in different contexts and to build upon it, ideally including displaced people as research partners, since carrying out collaborative research with the communities affected by the outcomes of the research is seen as central to the transformative power of the Capability Approach (Boni & Velasco, 2019; Walker & Boni, 2020).

Another direction for further research is to look at the impact that online HE for refugees is having on refugees themselves and the wider community. It is clear from the Sanctuary Scholars' narratives presented here that one of their key aspirations is to contribute towards peace-building processes in their countries of origin, their host countries, and globally. Several of the research participants sought opportunities to apply their new knowledge in their communities, thus directly contributing to the well-being of people around them. This resonates strongly with much of the literature on forced migrants in HE, across all disciplines. Wilson-Strydom and Walker argue for universities to take seriously the mission of preparing graduates to make a positive impact on society:

> Beyond individual student well-being at university how then can we expand well-being to include the well-being of those beyond the high fences and guarded gates of the university, persons whose flourishing could be enabled by graduates? We need forms of HE which not only enable individual students to flourish but which can nurture a social and

moral consciousness among those with the privilege of university

education in an unequal society. (2015, p. 320)

Even in the absence of high fences and guarded gates, this challenge is perhaps greater in the context of online HE, since each student is embedded in their own unique environment. A productive area for further research would therefore be to explore the ways in which displaced people in online HE programmes are already supporting their local communities through applying knowledge and skills gained from their courses, as this could be a way of demonstrating "how powerful knowledge disrupts inequality" (McLean et al., 2018), and obtaining greater support and momentum for Sanctuary-type initiatives.

Finally, one positive conversion factor shared by all the participants in this study was the joy they experienced in learning, which they felt both when gaining deeper knowledge about issues that they were directly affected by, and when "discovering" new knowledge. This desire to satisfy one's curiosity through learning is central to the transformative potential of HE (Ashwin, 2020). Therefore, another direction for future research would be to explore refugee students' experiences of well-being and flourishing in an online HE environment, and what this means for developing a pedagogy of care in such contexts.

Appendix A: Nussbaum's Core Capabilities

The core capabilities Nussbaum argues should be embedded in all democratic

constitutions are:

1. *Life.* Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily Health.* Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily integrity.* Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought.* Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.
5. *Emotions.* Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)
6. *Practical Reason.* Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)
7. *Affiliation. (A)* Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.) *(B)* Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species.
8. *Other Species.* Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. *Play.* Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. *Control over one's Environment. (A) Political.* Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political

participation, protections of free speech and association. *(B) Material.* Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

Appendix B: Walker's ideal-theoretical list for capability distribution and evaluation in higher education

1. *Practical reason.* Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, intellectually acute, socially responsible, and reflective choices; constructing a personal life project in an uncertain world, good judgment Being able to construct a personal life project in an uncertain world.
2. *Educational resilience.* Able to navigate study, work and life. Able to negotiate risk, to persevere academically, to be responsive to educational opportunities and adaptive to constraints. Self-reliant. Having aspirations and hopes for a good future.
3. *Knowledge and imagination.* Being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject - disciplinary and/ or professional - its form of academic inquiry and standards. Being able to use critical thinking and imagination to comprehend the perspectives of multiple others and to form impartial judgments. Being able to debate complex issues. Being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure and personal development, for career and economic opportunities, for political,cultural and social action and participation in the world. Awareness of ethical debates and moral issues. Open-mindedness. Knowledge to understand science and technology in public policy.
4. *Learning disposition.* Being able to have curiosity and a desire for learning. Having confidence in one's ability to learn. Being an active inquirer.
5. *Social relations and social networks.* Being able to participate in a group for learning, working with others to solve problems and tasks. Being able to work with others to form effective or good groups for collaborative and participatory learning. Being able to form networks of friendships and belonging for learning support and leisure. Mutual trust.
6. *Respect, dignity and recognition.* Being able to have respect for oneself and for and from others, being treated with dignity, not being diminished or devalued because of one's gender, social class, religion or race, valuing other languages, other religions and spiritual practices and human diversity. Being able to show empathy, compassion, fairness and generosity, listening to and considering other person's points of view in dialogue and debate. Being able to act inclusively and being able to respond to human need. Having competence in inter-cultural communication. Having a voice to participate effectively in learning; a voice to speak out, to debate and persuade; to be able to listen.
7. *Emotional integrity, emotions.* Not being subject to anxiety or fear which diminishes learning. Being able to develop emotions for imagination, understanding, empathy, awareness and discernment.
8. *Bodily integrity.* Safety and freedom from all forms of physical and verbal harassment in the higher education environment.

(Walker, 2006, pp. 128-129)

Appendix C: Consent form for Sanctuary Scholars

Project Title: Factors that enable and constrain refugee- students engagement in online higher education

Name of Researcher: Gabi Witthaus,

Please tick Yes or No in response to every question below.

Questions	Yes	No
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	✗	✗
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within six weeks after I first took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within six weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	✗	✗
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, presentations or blog posts by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable, unless I request attribution by saying Yes to Question 10.	✗	✗
4. I understand that any photos given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, presentations or blog posts by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable, unless I request attribution by saying Yes to Question 11. Photos given by me that contain images of humans will be manipulated by the researcher so that individuals are not identifiable if used in publications.	✗	✗
5. I understand that fully anonymised data will be offered to the University of Leicester's Leicester Research Archive and Lancaster University's Lancaster ePrints archive and will be made available to genuine research for re-use (secondary analysis).	✗	✗
6. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	✗	✗
7. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	✗	✗

8. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	✘	✘
9. I agree to take part in the above study.	✘	✘
10. In any outputs of this research, I would like to be named when my words are cited, to be confirmed after I have read the relevant outputs.	✘	✘
11. In any outputs of this research, I would like my photos to be attributed to me by name, to be confirmed after I have read the relevant outputs.	✘	✘

At all times this research study will comply with the Data Protection Act (1988) and its 2018

extension covering the new GDPR regulations.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____   Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Appendix D: Semi-structured interview questions

Interview 1

1. Greetings, introductions, etc.
2. Do you have any questions about the research?
3. Go through Consent Form
4. Why did you choose to do this programme?
5. Can you tell me a bit about your previous experience of studying at university?
6. Is this the first time you are studying online? If you have ever done an online course before, please tell me a bit about that experience.
7. What module are you currently doing? How is it going?
8. Would you be happy for me to read your personal statement on your Sanctuary Scholarship application? (Explain purpose in relation to my research.)
9. Would you like study-buddy support? (Explain.)
10. Would you be willing to take five photos for my study? (Discuss photo brief.)

Interview 2

1. How are you… How is your course going?
2. Discussion about photos (if received).
3. Where do you normally study? Can you describe the place and the facilities you have available to you for studying?
4. Do you interact with other students on the course, e.g., via Blackboard discussion forums? Can you tell me more?
5. What are the most important things you have learnt so far on the programme?
6. Have there been any highlights in your experience of the course so far? Can you tell me more about that?
7. What are the main challenges for you in learning online? How do you deal with those challenges? Can you give me some examples?
8. Where do you get support from when you have questions or concerns about the course?
9. Do you have any questions about my research?
10. Is there anything else you want to talk about in relation to your online studies?

Appendix E: Photo elicitation brief

The following photo elicitation brief was sent to research participants via email or WhatsApp. The brief was explained at the end of the first interview, and discussion of photos (if any were received) took place in the second interview.

For this part of the research, I request that you take five photos between now and [date of end of term] that will communicate to me something about the following:

1. A place where you normally learn
2. A moment when you felt highly engaged in your learning
3. Something unusual or surprising that happened that affected your learning - this could be in either a good way or a bad way
4. Something that you found confusing or puzzling while you were learning
5. Something that expresses your hopes or dreams related to learning on the master's programme

Appendix F: Coding samples

5/13/22, 8:18 PM

RP3: Yeah, I write in English, yeah.

GW: OK, so you're thinking in English as well? Or are you switching between languages in your thinking?

[handwritten: CE/BE Learning strategy]

RP3: Yeah because you say… if I start writing in another language, … it doesn't work, and sometimes when you are doing like two languages it will be interrupt each other so…Somali Arabic but in my writing I write in English. [Inaudible 17:51].

GW: OK, so you try to keep your thinking and the notes you write in English so that you don't have to do a double job of translating that?

RP3: Yeah.

GW: OK, that makes sense. OK, thank you. And then, I went into Blackboard because I've been given access by the administrator. They allowed me to go in and see the discussion forums. So I saw some of your discussion forum posts from the first module, and I found them very interesting. So I wanted to ask you a bit about your experience of writing on Blackboard in the discussion forums.

[handwritten: BE Becoming familiar with VLE]

RP3: Yeah. Really writing in the discussion forum on the Blackboard is very easy but before you start writing you need to … put your personal picture. So you need to do the weekly reading, because Blackboard has weekly readings. Sometimes it shows videos or like … you need to go there and… whatever you understand from that article… you read to write again on the Blackboard. Before you write you need to read to the comments of your friends or the discussion they had before you. Or if you are the first one you can just share your idea based on the question that are there… write your idea on the discussion based on the questions from the tutor leader. And then at that time… there's a video, like a short video. They explain more about it and if you don't know to view it or how to use the Blackboard generally… Where to find things, they give you a lot of ways to be doing research on the Blackboard. So one is you become familiar with these things, even if you want to search for something.

GW: OK. So was that a video that they sent you at the start of your course?

[handwritten: CE Academic English]

RP3: Yeah, it's already available on the Blackboard. This is like the first induction, yeah. They always have a first video. So the problem is the language barrier, but other things are very clear. English is our second language, I am aware, we are dealing with the philosophical ideas. It's very very very difficult. I understand the words but they way that they talk...

GW: Yeah. But I see that you had quite a few conversations with your friends on the… well with other students on the course. So what was that like for you? How did you feel about those conversations?

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BE
Flexibility
of online
studies

the flexibility I need, because I don't have much time. It's something very personal. Seriously, when I turn my laptop on or my iPad and start reading or studying, these are the only moments I have during the day, that I feel I'm doing something for myself. [Laughing.]

GW: That sounds hard. It's a long way from Leicester to Birmingham. May I ask, how do you commute?

RP5: I drive.

GW: That must be very tiring.

RP5: Yes, it is.

GW: OK, back to the course. Was this your first online course?

BE
Experience
of online
learning

RP5: No, I've done it before. This is the second one. I have the experience [in online learning]. I did an MBA while I was in Syria at the Syrian virtual university, from 2010-2012. So I have the experience of online courses.

GW: Great. How are you finding it in comparison?

EE
- course design
- Staff

RP5: I can honestly say, it's really nice, I really like it. I'm really impressed by the way the programme managers are managing it. I haven't ever felt bored. It's really nice and the people are really professional. I'm really happy with it.

GW: You don't have to say good things about it - you know I'm external to the university!

[Both laughing.]

GW: So, can I ask you about your devices? Earlier you mentioned that you've got a laptop and an iPad. Can you tell me a bit about how you choose which one to use?

BE
- Access to
devices
- Learning
strategies

RP5: When my study involves some writing I have to use my laptop most of the time. You know, it involves lots of reading. When I'm also, as I should be, I'm tired so I lay down on my sofa or my bed and I use my ipad to read, if I want to read maybe an article or something.

GW: So you don't really rest when you lie down on your sofa? [Both laughing.]

GW: Do you ever use your phone to learn?

RP5: Not really. just to read emails sometimes, no more than this.

GW: Do you sometimes go into Blackboard and read the discussion forums or participate in them?

SCE
- Time
- Vicarious
engagement
where possible

RP5: I always read all discussions, I always do, but like for this term, this is my third one. My participation was very few, even sometimes they don't exist. I just participate in what I should

223

CE

Online reading lists and resources

reading a long chapter of a book. So yes I do appreciate the online resources that are on the reading lists and I am following them. We get a reading list per every topic that we have. And I was using those online resources already before we went to lockdown.

GW: OK, so is there anything else... You told me last time that this is the first time you're studying online, right?

RP7: Yes, that's correct.

GW: And for you the issues initially were about navigation and making sure you knew where everything was?

BE

VLE layout
- navigation
- improved familiarity increases confidence

RP7: Yes. I do feel more comfortable, I think they changed the Blackboard a little bit. Now I think as soon as you enter your email, I can see it a bit more easier the way you access your email and Blackboard you can do it by the tabs that are...

GW: Oh, I've seen that, it's like a whole new window when you try and sign in to anything...

RP7: When you go into your email or Blackboard, which makes it a bit more easier. Before there were so many different pages that you had to get through. And I think, getting a bit more specific within the Blackboard will help students a bit more but once you get used to it I think it's alright. Now I'm used to it. In the beginning it was scattered everywhere I felt like, I just have to go from one place to another. But now it's much better, I'm used to it, I know what I'm doing. And you get an alert sometimes, you don't know where to go to find it. The discussion [forum] tab is different, then obviously announcements are different and there was so much going on everywhere. It's much better now, I'm much more comfortable using Blackboard.

GW: OK. What about other aspects of studying online, are there other... for example with other students and so on... How are you finding that?

BE

Online -
lack of immediacy

- Learning strategy

RP7: Yeah... It's, to be honest, well of course it's not like a classroom. It's different. In a classroom environment we get everything on the spot at that minute, you're looking at every person, you're asking questions. You know the lecturer is responding back straight away. The module coordinators are trying their best to be there and they have always been there for us, they are available when you are asking questions and everything. But of course, when you study online it's going to be quite different from the classroom environment, but we still get that interaction between students. We have the ability to ask questions, get answers. And you know we all can contribute within one platform to answer all the questions that we put down. But that's not a problem, we do get that opportunity. It's just the fact that the time differences, I think everybody has got a different schedule. So you don't have everyone available at that one time. You have to go back and see who was supposed to reply to what and read it.

GW: OK.

RP7: It's not like a classroom lecture of course, where the teacher just gives the lecture and everybody just follows. Any questions, any relevant questions at that time you're asking you get the answers. But it's quite different now, you ask a question, your lecturer or other students get their point forward and then you have to go back and reply back. It's all in the duration of a
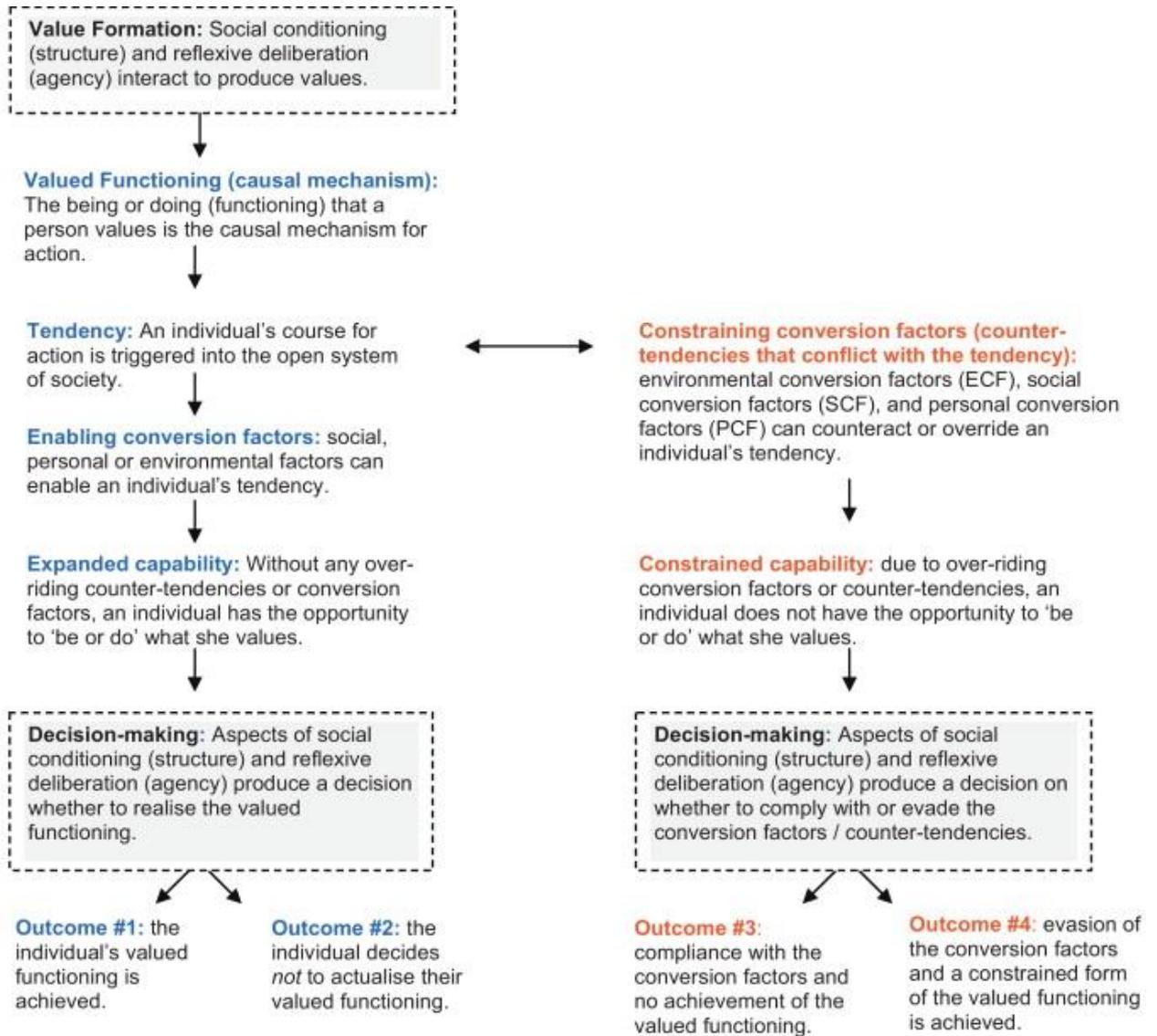
Appendix G: Tao's (2013) flowchart

Value Formation: Social conditioning (structure) and reflexive deliberation (agency) interact to produce values.

Valued Functioning (causal mechanism): The being or doing (functioning) that a person values is the causal mechanism for action.

Tendency: An individual's course for action is triggered into the open system of society.

Enabling conversion factors: social, personal or environmental factors can enable an individual's tendency.

Constraining conversion factors (counter-tendencies that conflict with the tendency): environmental conversion factors (ECF), social conversion factors (SCF), and personal conversion factors (PCF) can counteract or override an individual's tendency.

Expanded capability: Without any over-riding counter-tendencies or conversion factors, an individual has the opportunity to 'be or do' what she values.

Constrained capability: due to over-riding conversion factors or counter-tendencies, an individual does not have the opportunity to 'be or do' what she values.

Decision-making: Aspects of social conditioning (structure) and reflexive deliberation (agency) produce a decision whether to realise the valued functioning.

Decision-making: Aspects of social conditioning (structure) and reflexive deliberation (agency) produce a decision on whether to comply with or evade the conversion factors / counter-tendencies.

Outcome #1: the individual's valued functioning is achieved.

Outcome #2: the individual decides *not* to actualise their valued functioning.

Outcome #3: compliance with the conversion factors and no achievement of the valued functioning.

Outcome #4: evasion of the conversion factors and a constrained form of the valued functioning is achieved.

"How the nature of an individual generates an empirically apprehended event."

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List of abbreviations and acronyms used

EADTU: European Association for Distance Teaching Universities

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institutions

HyPIR: History, Politics and International Relations

I-HE 2022: Innovating Higher Education (EADTU conference) 2022

MENA (region): Middle East and North Africa

MOOCs: Massive open online courses

OER22: Open Educational Resources 2022 conference

PGC/ PG Cert: Postgraduate Certificate

RQ: Research Question

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VLE: Virtual Learning Environment

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