

CASE STUDY

# DIGITAL HISTORY



Qusai, 27, Syrian refugee living in Azraq refugee camp, Jordan. © UNHCR/MOHAMMAD HAWARI

War brought an abrupt end to Qusai's efforts to become a lawyer. He had been in the first year of a law degree at university in Dara'a, the city in southern Syria that was at the centre of the fighting when violence first swept through the country. In 2013, he and his family fled to Jordan, ending up in the remote refugee camp of Azraq. There, Qusai's hopes of continuing his education seemed to evaporate.

Desperate to keep learning, he signed up for every informal class he could find – English, computing, even mobile phone repair. But, unable to afford local university fees or secure a visa to study in a third country, the idea of finishing his degree remained out of reach.

That was when he heard about an initiative called InZone, backed by the University of Geneva and offering a degree-level history course devised by Princeton University. “I hadn’t thought about studying history before but there were prestigious institutions involved and I really wanted to take it,” said Qusai.

## Only one in every 100 refugee students makes it to tertiary education

Even as enrolment in tertiary education rises across the world – 36 per cent in 2016, up from 34 per cent a year earlier – for 99 per cent of refugees access to university and other forms of tertiary education is out of reach. The demand is demonstrably there: in 2016, more than 4,300 refugees received DAFI scholarships, the UNHCR higher education programme that is supported by Germany, to undertake tertiary education in 37 host countries, an increase of almost 90 per cent compared to 2015. But for tens of thousands more, fees, distance and the difficulty of completing secondary education conspired to shut them out.

InZone shows how higher education might come to those who could not normally access it. First established in Kenya’s Kakuma refugee camp in 2010, the initiative arrived in Azraq in September 2016 with the Princeton history course. Now an engineering course delivered by Purdue University is also on offer. Classroom sessions are held in a computer lab funded by UNHCR and run

by the non-governmental organization CARE International.

James Casey, a doctoral candidate in modern Syrian history at Princeton, was one of the online tutors for the Azraq course. He says that unlike normal online or correspondence courses, where retention rates are often low, the InZone approach is to foster regular engagement between tutors and students, whether online, face-to-face or via social media. That is how to keep them “engaged and on track,” he says.

## Labs, tablets and real-life teachers

Course tutors and professors try to visit students in the camp at the start and end of term, in the first case to hold selection exams and introduce those chosen to the course, and latterly to oversee an end-of-course workshop and final exams.

Apart from the computer lab, students use mobile devices to study and can access material on USB keys for when the internet is down. Tutor groups are also set up on WhatsApp to enable communication between students and teachers even when connectivity is limited.

As well as credit towards a degree, the course kept Qusai intellectually stimulated and gave him hope. “Studying with top universities and being connected to the outside world of academia makes you feel part of something bigger – not just a number in a refugee camp,” he says.

But it also brought fresh perspectives on the future. “We learned about how the countries of Europe rebuilt after World War Two. And that gave me hope that we can do the same in Syria.”