



UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON



Humanitarian
Leadership
Academy

Locally-led learning, transforming lives

Rethinking Learning and Recruitment to Improve Humanitarian Outcomes

Roundtable Discussion – 15 October 2024



HUMANITARIAN
XCHANGE

Rethinking Learning and Recruitment to Improve Humanitarian Outcomes

Roundtable Discussion – 15 October 2024

Authors:

Dominic Courage

Deputy Director – External Relations,
Humanitarian Leadership Academy.

James Weaver

Associate Director (Engagement & Insights),
University of London Careers Service.



**UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON**



**Humanitarian
Leadership
Academy**

Locally-led learning, transforming lives



Contents

1	Executive summary	1
	Brief overview of the discussion	
	Purpose and significance of the roundtable	
	Key points and conclusions	
2	Introduction	4
	Background information on the topic	
	Objectives of the roundtable discussion	
	Explanation of Chatham House Rule	
3	Participants	5
4	Discussion Summary	6
	Main themes and topics discussed	
	Key insights and perspectives shared	
	Equitable Recruitment	
	Discussion on Attracting Career Changers, Experienced Professionals, and Newcomers to the Humanitarian Sector	
	Identifying Skills Gaps in the Humanitarian Workforce	
	Providing Scholarships and Funding to Communities Affected by Crisis	
5	Potential Next Steps and Actions	10



1 Executive Summary

Brief overview of the discussion

Coordinated by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy and the University of London as part of the Humanitarian Xchange series of events this roundtable discussion was designed to bring together senior leaders and experts in recruitment and learning and development to consider the implications of current hiring and learning processes and how they impact – positively and negatively – on the equity of opportunity for people with lived experience of crisis to enter, and pursue a career in the humanitarian sector. This discussion was held in October 2024, before recent changes to funding, and may change the landscape significantly.

Purpose and significance of the roundtable

The overarching purpose of the discussion was to further the knowledge, and thinking, around this topic with a range of key individuals in the area and to see if there were particular themes and topics which can be addressed by the sector in collaboration with Training and Higher Education Institutions – in particular those involved in Transnational Education (TNE) – who may be well placed to provide structures to support pilot initiatives to recruit and develop talent into the sector.

To the best of the organisers knowledge there have been no previous roundtable discussions on this topic with such a range of organisations involved in the humanitarian effort.

Key points and conclusions of the Roundtable

1. Equitable Recruitment and Local Talent Integration:

- **Challenges:** Balancing respect for local communities while avoiding wage-driven disruptions to local labour markets and addressing the legal restrictions for employment of crisis-affected individuals.

- **Solutions:**

- Expand sector recognised flexible credentialing systems, such as micro-credentials like HPass (which has issued 100,000 digital badges since 2019, to validate diverse educational backgrounds).
- Ensure blended training approaches combine academic rigour with short-term practical modules to address immediate needs and support the range of routes through which people develop their skills.
- Advocate for supportive policies from local authorities and promote fair compensation that recognises diverse credentials to stimulate a more level playing field aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. SDG8).
- Enhance and invest in scholarship and internship programs for individuals from crisis-affected regions to improve access to educational and career opportunities in the humanitarian sector.

2. Attracting Diverse Talent:

- **Challenges:** The humanitarian sector needs an increasing array of skills to be relevant in today's context. However, the marketing of the sector along with recruitment practices and targeting of different skillsets lags behind this need.
- **Solutions:**
 - **Professional Image:** Reframe the presentation of humanitarian organisations to highlight their logistical and technical competencies, attracting skilled professionals from other sectors.
 - **Flexible Training Programs:** Initiatives like 10-week data analysis bootcamps were highlighted as effective models to bridge skills gaps for newcomers and career changers.
 - **Sectoral Synergies:** Strengthen cross-sector partnerships for knowledge exchange, innovation, and joint training through organisations like those represented on the call. Create space for collaboration to flourish through networking and ideas generation and building collaboration.



3. Identifying Skills Gaps and Relevant Training:

- **Sector-Specific Gaps:** Skills in localisation, climate adaptation, leadership, and digitalisation need more precise definitions within the humanitarian sector.
- **Flexible Academic Programs:** Addressing the evolving needs of the sector requires more adaptable academic programs, emphasising hands-on, interactive training in key topics such as negotiation and leadership.

4. Collaborative Funding and Scholarship Strategies:

- **Access and Funding for Training:** Increasing logistical and financial support, particularly in-person and context-specific programs for local workers, is essential for inclusive development.
- **Funding Coordination:** Improved communication and coordination between HR and grants teams is essential to secure and effectively use funding for capacity-building initiatives where opportunities might otherwise be missed.
- **Centralised Resources:** A sector-wide database with tagging of capacity strengthening to enable easier identification of funding opportunities could improve knowledge of and access to financial resources.
- **Sector Partnerships with Donors:** Fostering strong, ongoing relationships with donors through transparency and regular updates can maintain interest and support the long-term action that is needed to sustain high quality training programs.

Conclusions

The roundtable highlighted a strong need for collaborative, flexible, and regionally sensitive approaches to humanitarian recruitment and learning. Through implementing adaptable credentialing, enhancing cross-sector partnerships, and addressing skills gaps with relevant training, the sector can build a resilient and capable workforce. Improving access to education and careers for communities affected by crisis through scholarships, funding coordination, and preparedness-oriented training.

2 Introduction

Background information on the topic

Training and recruiting high-quality candidates swiftly and in advance of humanitarian action is a unique challenge for humanitarians that is characterised by under investment in talent, local and international imbalance, and unclear long-term coordination between actors. This roundtable discussion is to provide a platform for senior leaders to discuss how to improve talent awareness (in particular recruiting locally and increasing equity of access), align academic programs with sector needs, and refine recruitment practices to meet the demands of the sector.

The discussion was hosted by:

University of London Careers Service: As a leading global provider of transnational education, the University of London has a network of ~40,000 students and academics across 190 countries, offering a diverse talent pool that spans all levels of experience. We are well-positioned to provide insights into global labour market trends and facilitate pilot initiatives that enhance sector awareness and preparedness through work-based learning opportunities.

Humanitarian Leadership Academy: As a part of Save the Children, the Humanitarian Leadership Academy ([HLA](#)) strengthens people's skills and capabilities through learning, working with people in the humanitarian sector and beyond to prepare for and respond to crises. With over 10 years essential training in crises and over 800,000 learners on its online [Kaya](#) Platform, the HLA is one of the leading humanitarian training organisations in the world. This unique positioning allows us to contribute a wealth of knowledge on building capacity within the sector, particularly through partnerships with local organisations and communities.

Objectives of the roundtable discussion

- 1) Identify and understand recruitment challenges and opportunities in the NGO and INGO sector.

- 2) Develop strategies to diversify and enhance the quality of recruits, including attracting individuals with lived experience and from various specialisations.
- 3) Create a global network of senior leaders to foster cross-sector collaboration.
- 4) Ensure academic programmes align with the sector's evolving skills requirements and address any existing skills gaps.

Explanation of Chatham House Rule

This roundtable was hosted under Chatham House Rule:

*"When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed."**

This was to allow members of the roundtable to speak freely on sensitive topics and bring in real examples from their experience. As such this report will not feature names or specific affiliations to maintain confidentiality unless the individual has expressly given permission.

* The Chatham House Rule www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule

3 Participants

The roundtable, including the co-chairs, numbered ten in total, and included representatives from organisations based in Denmark, Poland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom who work across Europe, The Middle East and Africa. Seniority levels ranged from Heads of Learning and Development to convenors of networks.

The organisations were invited from the network of the Humanitarian Leadership Academy and the University of London to represent the range of organisations in the sector and included both large and small organisations. This was designed to provide a diversity of viewpoints, and experiences, of recruitment and development across the sector.



4 Discussion Summary

Main themes and topics discussed.

The discussion topics hinged upon the following key questions.

Equitable Recruitment

- How can we develop and attract talent from communities affected by crisis?
- How can we attract career changers, experienced professionals, and those who may not have previously considered the humanitarian sector?

Understanding the Gaps

- What are the skills gaps in the humanitarian workforce, and how can education systems help bridge these gaps?
- How can scholarships and funding be provided to communities affected by crisis to improve access to education and career opportunities?

Key insights and perspectives shared.

Equitable Recruitment

The challenges identified by participants in the roundtable was how to balance being responsible and respectful to local communities while also avoiding disruption of local labour markets with higher wages when building capacity with local partners. An additional challenge was the legal inability of some people affected by crisis to take up regular employment*.

Proposed solutions include:

- **Flexible Credentialing Systems:** Recognising diverse education and experience through adaptable credentialing, like micro-credentials and prior learning recognition.
- **Blended Training Approaches:** Offering a mix of flexible modules and comprehensive academic programs to meet both immediate and future skill needs.



- **Advocacy with Local Authorities:** Pushing for policies to remove employment barriers for community members affected by crises.
- **Capacity Building for Local Partners:** Strengthening local NGOs' capacities through training and resources for sustainable operations.
- **Fair Compensation Practices:** Promoting equitable pay for local workers to close the gap between local hires and expatriates in line with Sustainable Development Goal 8 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG[†] and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, specifically standard 3[‡] "People and communities are better prepared and more resilient to potential crises."
- **Scholarships and Funding:** Offering financial support to individuals from crisis-affected communities to improve access to education and career opportunities in humanitarian work.

Discussion on Attracting Career Changers, Experienced Professionals, and Newcomers to the Humanitarian Sector

This section of the discussion focussed on strategies around how to attract talent with experience to the sector – and touched on attracting people entering the workforce.

There were a series of key points highlighted and discussed by the group.

- **Professional Image and Value Proposition**
It was emphasised that portraying humanitarian organisations as professionally managed entities can attract professionals from the corporate world. An example from

* An example of this would be someone who has refugee status, and unable to work in the country they are based in.

† SDG8: www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals/decent-work-and-economic-growth

‡ Core Humanitarian Standards of Quality and Accountability bit.ly/emergency-unhcr-CoreHumanitarianStandardonQualityandAccountability

Denmark was shared, where billboards depicted humanitarian organisations as large logistic and IT companies, highlighting both their complexity and professionalism. This approach helped attract professionals from major corporations. Additionally, highlighting career growth, competitive salaries, and the chance to make a meaningful impact can further appeal to career changers.

- **Skills Identification and Training**

The diverse nature of humanitarian work makes uniform definition of roles and skills gaps challenging. However, identifying skill gaps and offering modular, flexible, and certified training can create a more adaptable skills match between qualification and recruitment, helping to address this challenge. This needs to also include the many informal responders who may not self-identify as humanitarian workers, and who may return to their regular occupation after their involvement in a crisis. A partnership was discussed that created a flexible training program in data analysis, catering to both newcomers and professionals. A 10-week online boot camp was developed that focused on data analysis and humanitarian needs. The program was designed to be flexible, addressing the needs of both newcomers and experienced professionals.

- **Synergies with Other Sectors**

The potential for cross-sector partnerships between private, public, and humanitarian sectors was highlighted. These collaborations can lead to knowledge transfer, innovative solutions, joint training, and a more fluid movement between sectors to improve crisis response.

- **Comprehensive and Flexible Training Programs**

The importance of combining technical and soft skills in long-term training programs was stressed. Offering a mix of in-person and online courses, along with mentoring and on-the-job training, ensures individuals are well-prepared for field challenges that go beyond the need for technical knowledge.

- **Tailored Support and Mentorship**

Providing personalised mentorship for local leaders in the sector was discussed. This fosters skill development, collaboration, and continuous learning through knowledge transfer and support networks.

- **Flexible Credentialing Systems**

Developing adaptable credentialing systems, including micro-credentials and recognition of prior learning, can validate non-traditional education and make it easier for diverse individuals to enter the humanitarian sector.

- **Blended Training Approaches**

A more intentional mix of short-term modules and long-term academic programs was recommended to meet both immediate and future skill needs, balancing the needs of people entering the humanitarian sector, from experienced professionals needing a key knowledge to adapt through to entry level individuals in need of more comprehensive support.

- **Advocacy with Local Authorities**

Increased Advocacy focus on policies that remove legal barriers and integrate local talent into the humanitarian workforce was proposed to improve the ability of people with lived experience to enter the humanitarian system.

- **Capacity Building for Local Partners**

Strengthening local partner organizations through training and resources was identified as crucial for providing a clear career pathway for those aiming to develop their humanitarian career locally.

- **Fair Compensation Practices**

Promoting equitable pay for local hires as they transition from training to work to retain skilled professionals and maintain a motivated workforce was emphasized as essential.

- **Scholarships and Funding**

Substantially increasing scholarships to individuals from crisis-affected areas was

- recommended to improve access to education and create a pipeline of skilled professionals with lived experience to offer.

Identifying Skills Gaps in the Humanitarian Workforce

In this section the roundtable looked at how skills can be identified, and predicted, and how to address these gaps through education systems. Some key challenges were identified.

- **Defining Skill Gaps:** There is need for more precise sector identification of skills gaps. Skills within areas like localisation, climate adaptation, and digitalisation need clearer definition from the sector.
- **Learning from the private sector:** The sector should gain insights into how businesses and professional bodies develop skill sets required in the market and how they design learning strategies to support this. This inter-sector understanding can inform how we approach skill development for humanitarian contexts.
- **Flexibility of Academic Programmes:** Traditional programmes can be too rigid for the fast-changing humanitarian sector. This can be the result of incentives in the academic sector linked to funding and organisational practice. More flexible, informal options were highlighted as effective alternatives that may need to be achieved through more collective and systemic or policy level approaches.
- **Relevance of Training:** There is a danger of disconnect between training provided and what the needs are of the sector. This is both in terms content and delivery method and the timing where training is delivered in response to an emergency rather than ahead of it.
- **Soft Skills Development:** Critical soft skills like negotiation and leadership require immersive, interactive learning and cannot be achieved to the right level through self-paced short courses. Whilst these are more expensive to deliver this needs to be recognised in how capacity development is designed and funded.

- **Access to Training:** There are financial and logistical challenges for local humanitarian workers to access relevant training – particularly when it occurs in person.

Proposed Solutions

- **Blended Learning:** Combining academic rigour and immersive experiences with flexible training, such as a MOOC model with self-paced and facilitated sessions has proved to be effective. This implied the need to prioritise proactive, preparedness-oriented training that: covers both technical and soft skills; uses simulations and scenario-based training for crisis readiness; partner with academic institutions for specialised, rigorous content.
- **Context-Specific Training:** Programmes should be tailored to the local needs of the humanitarian workforce and integrated where possible into preparedness efforts to equip workers before crises arise. To be most relevant effective, training must be developed or adapted in collaboration with local actors taking leading roles in ensuring that training is tailored to the practical needs of humanitarian workers in diverse contexts.
- **Partnerships with Academic Institutions:** There was a strong consensus on the need for closer collaboration between humanitarian organisations and academic institutions. One example given was a successful course on research methodologies where the participation of an EU asylum agency ensured academically rigorous, but practical learning.
- **Comprehensive Soft Skills Development:** Universities could offer long-form, immersive training focused on leadership and collaboration or work with other organisations who can add this as a compliment to syllabuses that are more academic.

Providing Scholarships and Funding to Communities Affected by Crisis

In this section the roundtable moved to discussing how to improve access to education

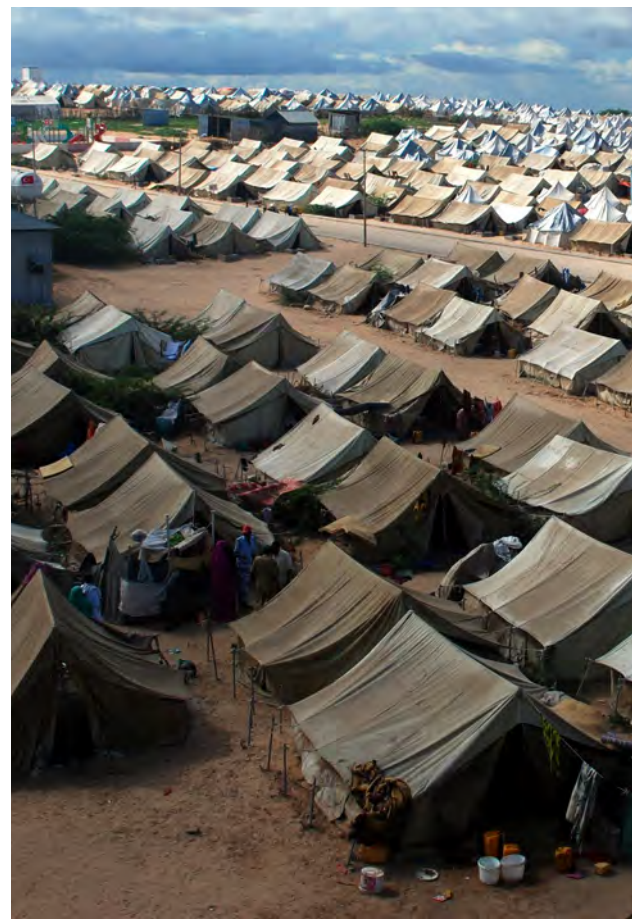
and career opportunities for communities affected by crisis.

Key recommendations for improving funding access:

- **Funding for Capacity Building:** There is an appetite among donors for funding capacity-building initiatives, there can be a lack of coordination and skills within HR departments to access these funds. Better coordination between grants teams and HR departments across a range of organisations is needed to secure funding for training initiatives as part of a consortium approach.
- Develop a sector wide centralised database for tracking funding opportunities.

Leverage donor interest:

- Create alliances between donors to evidence and build momentum around funding capacity strengthening as part of a cross-sector approach to improve preparedness and response.



5 Potential Next Steps and Actions

1. Develop Flexible Credential Programs:

Develop programs for micro-credentials and recognition of prior learning to test and refine credentialing methods that validate diverse experience and educational backgrounds. Partner with academic institutions and local training providers to develop adaptable learning models that can be scaled globally.

2. Establish Sector-Specific Skills Framework:

Develop a standardised framework identifying and categorising essential skills for the humanitarian sector, with input from local and international stakeholders. This would include defining competencies in emerging areas like digitalisation and climate adaptation, making it easier to design relevant training programs and align recruitment criteria.

3. Create Centralised Resources for Capacity-Building Funding:

Build a centralised database or enable tagging in existing databases for tracking funding and scholarship opportunities tailored to capacity-building. This resource could be used by humanitarian organisations and educational institutions to improve access to funding and streamline funding applications.

4. Foster Cross-Sector Talent Pipelines:

Develop collective initiatives between employers to attract professionals from other sectors, such as data analysis, logistics, and IT, through targeted recruitment campaigns, partnerships with corporate employers, and tailored onboarding programs that ease transitions into humanitarian roles.

5. Formulate Advocacy Strategy for Employment Access:

Assemble a coalition of humanitarian organisations to advocate for local policy changes that remove employment restrictions for crisis-affected individuals. This be incorporated into wider humanitarian advocacy efforts ensuring that a focus on lobbying for the removal of legal and logistical barriers to hiring locally is also prioritised.

6. Strengthen Coaching, Mentorship and Leadership Training:

Expand mentorship programs for local leaders and community members, including continuous skill development through on-the-job training. Integrate leadership development into work-based learning to foster long-term sector retention and build a pipeline of resilient leaders.

7. Deploy Blended Training and Learning Models:

Implement blended learning initiatives, such as a MOOC-style training program, combining self-paced modules with facilitated workshops, tailored for immediate and field-specific needs. Collaboration with academic institutions and training providers can ensure these models remain flexible and relevant across different regions.

These implications and actions lay the groundwork for a more resilient, localised, and well-prepared humanitarian sector capable of addressing contemporary challenges while fostering a diverse talent pipeline for the future.



**UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON**



**Humanitarian
Leadership
Academy**

Locally-led learning, transforming lives



**HUMANITARIAN
XCHANGE**