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Between Camp and Campus: From access to completion of higher education as form of refugee protection

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The role of higher education in refugee protection is highly contested. On the one hand, access to higher education is promoted as a tool for refugee protection and integration. On the other hand, refugees who want to participate in higher education are regularly confronted with numerous obstacles and forms of exclusion. By drawing from our panel discussion about the role of higher education in refugee protection at the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) conference in Thessaloniki, Greece in July 2018, we provide examples from Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and Finland. Our overarching question is what examples are there of effective provision of quality tertiary education in displacement and what common lessons can be learned from these diverse examples? More specifically, we analyse the initial steps of higher education programmes for refugees with a focus on access, and discuss the quality and sustainability of higher education for refugees. Furthermore, we investigate the impact of higher education regarding the integration of refugee youth, and finally outline potential ways forward to improve collaborations between different actors involved in higher education.

Introduction

The role of higher education in refugee protection is highly contested. On the one hand, ac-

cess to higher education is promoted as a tool for refugee protection and integration, and as a way for refugee students and their families to become self-sustained. Various actors, including universities and policymakers, have therefore expressed their commitment to support asylum seekers and refugees to access higher education, reflected by an increase in the number of scholarships available to refugees.

On the other hand, refugees who want to access higher education are regularly confronted with numerous obstacles and forms of exclusion, including language barriers, financial and time constraints, problems with the validation and equivalency of educational attainments, and other challenges arising from a lack of coordination between non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities and state authorities involved in the provision of higher education.

There is a need to map out strategies, priorities and practices of actors involved in the provision of higher education in the context of displacement. In this article, we do so on the basis of the perspectives shared by practitioners and researchers who contributed to a panel discussion about the role of higher education in refugee protection at the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) conference in Thessaloniki, Greece in July 2018.

In this text, we refer to a refugee category in a flexible and fluid manner. As our focus is on different geographical contexts and research projects, our definition of a refugee ranges from various policy and legal categories to our informants' self-identifications. We recognise that currently in many countries refugee status is challenging to secure, and therefore not everyone we refer to as a refugee have an official status of international protection.

In bringing these various perspectives together, our overarching question is what examples are there of effective provision of quality tertiary education in displacement and what common lessons can be learned from these diverse examples? More specifically, we aim to (1) analyse the initial steps of higher education programmes for refugees with a focus on access; (2) to discuss the quality and sustainability of higher education for refugees; (3) to investigate the impact of higher education regarding the integration of refugee youth, and (4) to outline potential ways forward to improve collaborations between universities, state authorities and NGOs in support of prospective and current students with a refugee background. We do this by providing various examples from Australia, the United Kingdom, and Finland.

Access to higher education in the context of displacement

For more than 25 years, the provision of access to higher education for refugees has been an integral part of the UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) global strategy. Refugee protection and empowerment have been the key rationales behind UNHCR's Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI). Since its inception in 1992, more than 13,500 refugee students in 50 countries have been awarded a DAFI scholarship which enabled them to study at a university in their country of asylum. Funding for the scholarship programme increased significantly in 2016, with the result that currently more than 4,000 students benefit from a DAFI scholarship every year. By improving access to higher education for refugee students, scholarship programmes help to minimise the interruption of individual education careers and open up opportunities for young refugees and their families to become self-sustained. Within the past five years, numerous new initiatives funded by international organisations and the governments of countries of asylum have helped to increase the number of scholarships available to young people affected by displacement. In most cases, however, applicants must hold a recognised refugee status to be eligible.

In the United Kingdom, the Article 26 project takes its name from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR from 1948) and adopts a rights-based approach to promoting the access, participation, and success of refugees in the higher education. The project has primarily focused on working with higher education institutions to create scholarships for individuals, whose immigration status remains unresolved and who are awaiting official recognition as a refugee, but for the purpose of this article they are described using this label. The Immigration Act (2016) came into force January 2018 and introduced new Home Office powers to impose an explicit "no study" stipulation, as part of the immigration bail conditions (these rules apply to higher education) on refugees whose asylum applications remain unresolved. This change is significant as the Home Office can judiciously exclude refugees from their higher education studies, even if a higher education institution is willing to overcome the challenges and include them through the provision of a scholarship. In addition to these explicit restrictions, implicit exclusionary measures are enacted through legislation that impact upon two key areas: finance and widening participation.

This group of refugees are categorized as international students in accordance with tuition fee regulations: this creates two significant financial barriers, 1) the rate of tuition fees for an international student is considerably higher than for a home student, and 2) their categorisation as an international student renders them ineligible for student funding required to meet living costs and university tuition fees.

In order to justify charging "home" students the highest rate of tuition fees, UK universities are required to reinvest some of this income in facilitating access to their institution, for students categorised as underrepresented in higher education. Only refugees with settled immigration status are recognised as an underrepresented group in higher education. A refugee student ineligible for the funding required to study presents no financial incentive to a university. Support for these students result in a financial loss to the higher education institution, not only in respect to the absence of income generated through tuition fees, but also the fact that these students require additional funds to meet essential study costs. The governance of UK higher education and the role universities are expected to play in relation to the management of refugees, places far greater pressure on the exclusion of this group, which creates significant challenges in terms of initiatives to support their inclusion.

The question remains as to why higher education institutions provide scholarships which include refugees, in a wider context that aims to exclude this group? The most commonly cited answer is – “public good”. Scholarships delivered by higher education institutions are often restricted to a fixed number per year or a set budget, and the process is often competitive. Whilst a diverse range of scholarships have become available in higher education institutions across the UK, following a period of exponential growth of investment in this area post-2015, refugees continue to face considerable challenges in terms of enjoying a higher education experience commensurate with their student peers.

Quality and sustainability of higher education for refugees

A recent study conducted by academics across three Australian universities examined the barriers and challenges faced by refugee background students transitioning from Australian secondary schools to university. This research found a number of successful outreach initiatives that brought the students to the university door, but there were less supports to help them succeed post-enrolment. The study findings indicated that this may be due to a mono-faceted reading of the complex lived experiences of these students which simultaneously fails to provide necessary supports as well as to access students’ considerable assets.

The researchers identified five key themes which impact upon the successful transition from secondary to higher education: prior life experiences, language proficiency, aspiration, enabling culture, and politics and policy. An “enabling learning culture” was defined as one that allowed both educators and students with a refugee background to meet their teaching and learning needs in a way that also honored and accessed the cultural and linguistic assets of the students, as they transitioned from school to university. Current practices, programmes and policies were piecemeal, had considerable gaps, and might not be best targeting the specific needs of refugee background students.

Very often students’ successful pathways into higher education were dependent upon their secondary school supports, including the completion of complex enrolment paperwork that left them dependent on school teachers who possessed the cultural capital necessary to complete the process. Once in the higher education institute this personalised support was lost. The move from a close-knit and more personal school environment to a

more distant and impersonal field of universities proved challenging for the students.

A number of structural faults were identified in the provision of higher education supports for refugee background student. The supports were, for instance, generic in nature, rather than targeted to the specific needs of refugee background students. They also were not embedded within the structure of the institution and thus remained short-term. Available support programmes were poorly coordinated and communicated to both students and staff. Moreover, they were focused on the deficits of the students and not their assets. An outcome of the study was the development of a checklist to support higher education educators to shift their policies, curriculum and teaching to both support the educational outcomes of refugee background students, but also to better utilize the assets they bring to the learning institution.

Impacts of higher education on refugee youth’s integration

In Northern Europe, and beyond, there is an increased recognition that higher education has a significant impact on various aspects of refugees’ lives, such as processes of integration. In particular young adults who arrived to their country of asylum, resettlement or family reunification as children or adolescents have benefitted from pursuing and completing higher education. The qualitative research findings of the Nordic *Coming of Age in Exile* project highlight how achieving higher education degrees in Finland have enabled young adults with a refugee background to accomplish not only their life-long dreams and aspirations, but also a sustained active position in the labour market.

The young adults interviewed for this study had completed higher education degrees at universities and universities of applied sciences. Many of them were supported to pursue higher education degrees already as a child or teenager mostly by their parents or older siblings. However, the youth were not necessarily encouraged to continue to further education by their teachers who thought their language or other skills would not be at the required level. The youth wished to prove their teachers wrong and thus built a motivation and strength from the belittling attitude they had suffered in school. In other words, they wished to leave the negative label of a “refugee” behind by pursuing higher education and independent socio-economic position in the Finnish society.

Determination to do well in life and to gain a meaningful and secure job, unlike their

parents had achieved, were the main motivations for their wish to continue to higher education. Many of the young adults worked already during their studies even though no tuition fees are charged by higher education institutions in Finland. Strong support networks were also needed to be able to combine work, studies and family life, and the encouragement from their spouse was paramount, in particular for women with children.

Some of the young adults got immediately hired after completion of their studies, some conducted work trainings before being employed. A few were offered a permanent position early on in their careers. Many young adults in this study with higher education degree argued that their displacement background as a child had proven to be a strength for them both during their studies and in finding a job, and several had pursued a professional career where they could assist others, including other refugees. Thus, for displaced children to achieve higher education degree as a young adult can be a highly meaningful way to fully integrate and to establish a sustained position in the country that provided them with international protection.

Lessons learned and recommendations

In the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants the importance of higher education as a tool for refugee protection has once more been emphasised, explicitly stating that scholarships are an important means to improve access to higher education for refugees. Despite intensified efforts to support refugees to attain a university education, globally only 1 percent of young people with a refugee background are enrolled in higher education, compared to 36 percent of their peers unaffected by displacement. In order to improve equity in higher education, there is a need to move beyond a sole focus on access.

Advocacy is key to sustaining and securing opportunities for refugees in the higher education as was demonstrated by these diverse examples from Australia, the UK and Finland. Advocacy initiatives need to be implemented both on an institutional and an individual level and they should focus, for instance, on the following matters:

- Teachers should encourage refugee background pupils in upper secondary and high schools to pursue their educational and career aspirations, beyond opportunities for vocational training and including

prospects to study at higher education institutions.

- Higher education institutions and their staff need to develop a comprehensive understanding of the rights and entitlements of all groups of refugee students, including those whose legal status is yet undecided, and the barriers they face either commencing or continuing their studies in a new country and new higher education context.
- UNHCR, other funding bodies and higher education institutions ought to challenge legal decisions/immigration status which result in the exclusion of refugees from higher education.
- Teachers need to be trained to recognise and utilise refugee students' assets. They should listen and respond to refugee students' needs to improve their experience and fully engage them in university life. They need to support and respect diverse cultures and backgrounds in order to ensure that higher education institutions are safe places for students to be themselves.
- There is a need to undertake evaluations with refugee students on initiatives' designed to facilitate their access, full participation and success in higher education.

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