

When Refugees Get the Opportunity, They Can Learn...but Barriers Need to Be Removed: Refugees' Path to Higher Education in Host Countries

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Introduction

Refugees' access to higher education is strikingly not a concern in many host countries both in political (policy) and academic arenas (Abamosa 2015, Harries & Marlowe 2011). In some countries such as Norway, for instance, refugees may be advised not to take higher education and rather search for low-skilled jobs instead. The alarming part is that even some institutions which are supposedly established to help refugees *integrate* into the host societies may demotivate refugees when it comes to participating in higher education (Abamosa 2015, Morrice 2009, McBrien 2005).

This entry is largely based on my master's thesis titled: *Refugees' path to higher education in a host country: Opportunities and Challenges-A Qualitative Study from Norway*. Due to its relevance in the contemporary refugee related issues in many host nations (particularly in Europe), I will focus on the major challenges refugees might face in their trajectories into higher education in host countries. By doing so, I try to address the question *what main challenges do refugees face in their way into higher education in host countries?* In some instances, stories of refugees participated in my study will be included in the form of verbatim quotation (cases). This article is organized into four main sections including the introduction section. The next section presents the main challenges refugees face in their way into higher education. This is followed by the conclusion of the article. Finally, the recommendation part points out some suggestions that might help in alleviating the challenges refugees may face in order to improve their participation in higher education in the host countries.

Despite the dearth of literature on refugees' experiences with regards to participation in higher education in host countries (Harris & Marlowe 2011), the already available handful of studies show that refugees are generally motivated to attain higher education in host countries (Halpern 2005, Ben-Moshe et al. 2008). In fact, one study from the UK (RCC 2012) indicates that (higher) education becomes the top priority of young refugees once they resettle in a safe host country. This is because, amongst other things, colleges and universities are places where dreams of many refugees materialize by for instance re-establishing their lives and their professional identities (Morrice 2009, p 661). However, it is not that simple for refugees to get the opportunity that others (including non-refugee immigrants) get in attaining higher education. This is due to different barriers that can be overcome should all stakeholders take their job seriously.

Barriers Refugees Face in Their Trajectories into Higher Education

It seems paradoxical to mention refugees and higher education at the same time (Zeus 2011). The former is largely associated with chaos, deprivation, mental illness and the like while the latter represents stability and scholarship where people do their best to bring about good changes to themselves and the society at large. However, in reality refugees are also capable

of learning like anyone provided that they get the opportunities to do so (Hanna 1999). For instance, one Somali refugee who studies in a host nation puts it as follows,

"As I grew up I realized that education was only a privilege of the rich, but UNHCR has spoken loudly and strongly that even the poor can perform equally or even better if given a chance" (UNHCR 2015, p.12).

Unfortunately, the way to higher education is not straightforward as it seems to be for refugees (Abamosa 2015). This is the case even in host countries which otherwise are referred to as developed and where human rights are respected and the rule of law is prevailing. While leaving the social justice issues related to refugees' *exclusion* from higher education at different levels of studies to another article, I will, as indicated above, mention here some of the most common barriers which hinder refugees' access to higher education in host countries.

Misinformation and Lack of Guidance

Refugees are among the most vulnerable groups in the world (McBrien 2005) in many aspects not least when it comes to access to information on the availability of higher education opportunities. In new countries refugees may not know "the rule of game, the norms and the expectations" in attempting to attaining higher education (Morrice 2009, p 664, Ben-Moshe et al. 2008). In addition to lack of adequate information, refugees are also subjected to misinformation from officers who hold positions and who are supposedly there to help refugees (Abamosa 2015, RSN 2012, Hanna 1999). In most cases the consequences of misinformation and lack of information are far-reaching since refugees can make ill-informed decisions with adverse impact on their life (Stevenson & Willott 2007). For example, lack of information on how to access higher education can result in indecision and delay entry into university programs (CSA et al. 2011).

Case

One day I was consulting a consultant about higher education. She asked me "What kind of education are you planning to study in the future?" I answered simply "History". She said, "Do you know how long it takes?" I said, "Yes". She said, "It takes three years to university, two years practice...." She tried to divide things and make it complicated for me. Then she asked me even, "Do you know what "history" is by the way?" I said, "Yes." Then she answered it herself the way I didn't understand. (Murata, a refugee in his 30s living in Norway)

Language Skills

Difficulty of mastering host nations' language(s) is obviously one of the challenges refugees face when they want to study at a college (Ben-Moshe et al. 2008). The language problem is actually very serious that it can negatively influence the full participation of refugees in other socio-economic aspects of the host community (Watkins et al. 2012). McBrien (2005), for example, reports that refugees with deficient language skills in their new country often suffer from high level of alienation which can in turn exacerbate exclusion from higher education. It is important to remember here that the challenge is not lack of access to the language courses in host countries per se. It is rather how the courses are delivered and to what extent they

equip refugees with the necessary language skills for higher education (Abamosa 2015, Cheung & Phillimore 2014, RSN 2012). For instance, in some cases refugees with higher education from their home countries are placed in the same classes with others who have little education backgrounds and when the former ask for the right course placement they will be ignored. Such problems have a dire negative impact on motivated refugees' decision to go to college (Abamosa 2015). (See the refugees' stories below for more).

Case

...when I went to the preparation course for the higher level test [B2 level], I met one teacher who was not qualified enough for that level. First we discussed with the teacher about this. But nothing happened. Then we complained it many times to the school. But nobody would hear us. At the end, the whole class failed the test. That was the teacher's fault, not our fault. (Darartu, a refugee in her 30s living in Norway)

Case

When I went to learn the language, I was assigned in a class with students who had different educational background, some were illiterate and others were fast learners. So I told the teachers to help me by placing me in the right class. I told them many times, but they did not hear me. (Murata)

Difficulty of Getting Foreign Qualifications Recognized in the Host Countries

Refugees who have earned a university degree in other countries (including in their home countries) face a huge problem to get their qualifications recognized in host countries. Many refugees may arrive in the host countries without taking their educational credentials and therefore they cannot easily document their qualifications. This in turn makes the recognition process very difficult, if not impossible (Dryden-Peterson 2011). In addition to this, refugees may not have adequate information on how to get their qualifications recognized (Banks & MacDonald 2003). The end result of such problems is not only exclusion from higher education, but also fewer employment opportunities and resignation to low-skill jobs (Banks & MacDonald 2003).

Case

When I gave the certificates to my contact person, she said, "Ok, we have to fill in some forms from NOKUT and then we send to them." Then we sent to NOKUT. But just after short time a negative decision came from NOKUT. My certificates were not accepted. It was disappointing. I was disappointed because my papers were original and I was ready to begin my study at a university since I had already taken and passed the Norwegian B2 level test. After that we tried many times with my contact person but they did not accept my papers. Where could I go then if they didn't accept my papers? (Jara, a refugee in his 30s living in Norway)

Financial Difficulties

In many parts of the world where there are tuition fees, financial hurdles are not easy to overcome for refugees. For instance, studies from Australia (Ben-Moshe et al. 2008) and the UK (Banks & McDonald 2003) indicate inability to cover tuition fees and related study material costs as a barrier for some refugees in accessing and pursuing higher education. The

financial problem may seem natural since it is also what other (non-refugee) traditional students might face. What is more worrisome though is the exclusion of refugees as beneficiaries from funding schemes established to help ethnic minorities to access financial resources for purpose of education (Stevenson & Willott 2007). However, in some countries - such as Norway - where there is no tuition fee, financial difficulty is not the main problem. In such countries social, cultural, motivational etc. factors may explain the exclusion of refugees from higher education (Abamosa 2015, Opheim 2004).

Discouragement and Discrimination

Not surprisingly, in addition to discrimination in the labour market (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006), refugees encounter serious racism, discrimination and discouragement in schools. These problems are resulted mainly from the baseless perceptions others have about refugees such considering refugees as a real or symbolic threats (McBrien 2005) and/or perceiving them as too inferiors to go to colleges (Earnest et al. 2010) despite the absence of evidence for such claims. McBrien (2005, p 350) states,

“[...] many teachers and administrators perceived the immigrants and refugee students as having low intelligence and learning disabilities, although the researchers noted that’s school personnel, including the school psychologist, could not diagnose the presumed disabilities.”

In addition this general evidence about discrimination against refugees at lower schools, refugees also encounter discrimination at a university level irrespective of their educational background. For instance, Earnest et al. (2010, p 167) states,

“Some participants felt that they had experienced some form of prejudice from academic staff who assumed that students from refugee backgrounds possess basic or little knowledge, skills and education, despite some refugees having had degrees in their former countries.”

The hardworking refugees are often discouraged by the discrimination and other negative treatments in the schools and such things may eventually lead to drop out (Kanu 2008). There is no doubt that this will lead to social injustice against refugees by denying them the right to education. While sometimes discrimination and discouragement against refugees are subtle, indirect and more systematic (Khawaja et al. 2008), often times concerned authorities are well aware of the problems but unfortunately they do little, if anything at all, to solve the problems. In other words, refugees are ignored when they raise the problem of discrimination and bullying from teachers and other officials such as program advisors who are working with refugees (Abamosa 2015). It is worth remembering the fact that refugees get protection from both physical and psychological harm.

Case

When I discussed my plan together with my contact person and a teacher, the teacher asked me what my plan was. I told her, "My plan is to go to a university." Then the teacher said, "There are many refugees who came from their country without completing their upper secondary school but they have this big plan to go to a university to be a doctor in Norway. But most of them end up like doing nothing." The teacher continued "Since you have a child and you are a grown up woman, it is difficult for you to attend a university." My answer was that even if I was not good at the Norwegian language, I was

not stupid that I couldn't attend a university. I knew that I could. So I didn't hear the teacher's advice because I knew education was the key for everything (Baredu, a refugee in her 30s living in Norway).

Case

When you want to study to become an engineer or a doctor, then they will tell you, "You can't. Why you need to study? You can take one year courses to work in the elder people's nursing homes." Those who tell you this know exactly what they need for the coming 20 years and they know exactly where they get it from. Then they ask you, "How old are you?" then you will say, "I am 35." Then they say, "It is not fair for you to just waste another four, five years to study. It is better to take just one year course and then start to work as a cleaner because you can make money." That can turn your idea from education; but I advice everybody to learn the [Norwegian] language and get the certificate even if they have to pay for it and to go to higher education [institutions]. You learn for yourself not for them (Na'ol, a refugee in his 30s living in Norway).

Ignoring Legitimate Requests of Refugees

The other major challenge refugees encounter in their trajectories into higher education is the problem of not getting their voices heard when they ask for things and services they are entitled to as per the laws of host nations. Refugees may be ignored in many organizations some of which are established to serve the refugees' integration into the host societies. In Norway, for instance, adult education centers and NAV (or in some cases refugee centers in municipalities) are the most common places where the refugees not treated the way they should have been treated in line with the Norwegian law. Sadly, given that many refugees may not have enough linking social capital, the consequence of being ignored is serious since it impends their journey into higher education (Abamosa 2015).

Case

Every time I wanted to discuss with my contact person about my education, my future, and everything. But, you know, every time I met her, she used to say, "I am busy, I am busy." I don't know what she was busy with. It was only me and some few students who consulted her at that time (Murata).

Case

When I took the Norwegian language test 3 [Norskprøve 3], I was in a low level classroom. So I told the teacher that it was not my level and I needed to go to an upper level. But my request was not accepted by the teacher. I had to stay in that class. It was like fighting a war (Darartu).

Long waiting time at asylum seekers reception center

Waiting in asylum seekers reception centers for unreasonably longer period of time with valid residence permits is another challenge refugees have to face in host countries such as Norway. The convention refugees (i.e. refugees who get international protection after applying for an asylum in Norway) who live in the camps narrate the waiting time between the positive decision on their applications for protection and moving to the municipalities to be longer than they expected. Sometimes, they have to wait for more than two semesters without any good schooling. This has

without doubt a negative impact on the refugees' participation in higher education because there is a negative correlation between staying in camps for a longer period of time and mastering a host country's language (van Tubergen 2010, p 531, Bakker et al. 2014, p 435). In addition to this, disrupted schooling impedes further studies (Hanna 1999) that putting refugees in asylum seekers reception centers while they want to study is in no way different from excluding them from higher education (Abamosa 2015).

Conclusion

The way to a goal is as important and decisive as the goal itself. Given the above mentioned barriers refugees face in host countries, it is possible to argue that granting a residence permit to refugees is not a guarantee to protect them from harm in the host countries, for instance when they want to achieve self-realization through participation in higher education. In fact, refugees may be subjected to ill-treatments which can constitute violence. This can be an indication of the presence of (academic & self-realization) oppression of refugees in the host countries. Freire (2005, p 55) convincingly describes such situations in his book titled "Pedagogy of the Oppressed",

"Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of the oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already begun."

Furthermore, it is convincing to argue that availability of resources (in the form of free language courses, for example) or even access to them does not guarantee the success of refugees in accessing higher education; rather what matters most is the meaningful utilization of the necessary resources by the refugees. By ignoring the legitimate request of motivated and hard-working refugees in their way into higher education, the members of the dominant group may practice social closure (Murphy 1988). Once the social closure, which is the antithesis of social inclusion, of refugees with respect to participation in higher education is in place, the very protection refugees get because of their race, religion, nationality, religion, political opinion or membership in a social group loses its importance. This is mainly because the exclusion of refugees from better opportunities such as higher education is based on one or more of the same reasons they get protection for.

Indeed, refugees can learn but barriers need to be removed to let the refugees utilize their full potential at all levels of study (undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate levels).

Recommendations

UNHCR (2012) states higher education to be its priority in the Education Strategy edition 2012-2016, forming an integral part of UNHCR's protection and solutions mandate. Needless to say, it is commendable that the UNHCR focuses on higher education even before the so called "*refugee crisis*" phenomenon over the last couple of years. Higher education

institutions and other stakeholders should focus on refugees' (both Syrians and non-Syrian refugees alike) access to higher education than targeting only one group of refugees.

Host nations should devise clear policies explicitly aiming at including refugees into the higher education community at different levels. To ensure that the refugees are beneficiaries of the policies, the states should make sure the executions of the policies are in line with the way they should be. This can be done for instance by taking legitimate grievances of refugees seriously and responding to them rather than ignoring them.

State nations should also make sure that no refugee is left behind. This can be done by working on the participation of refugees in higher education and reducing waiting times in asylum seekers reception centers and fighting discriminations which can contribute to exclusion of refugees from higher education just because of their race, religion, nationality, religion, political opinion or membership in a social group.

Higher education institutions in the host countries should do their fair share through for example developing the preparatory language course where refugees can learn the language of instruction in a more academic way with a good quality. Furthermore, the higher education institutions should develop scholarship schemes particularly for refugees across the world - in line with scholarships for international students - or at least for refugees residing in the countries of the institutions.

The language schools such as adult education centers should have rather clear and transparent teaching-learning processes which can help highly educated refugees to get the relevant language training. This can be done for example by putting in place regulations which can enable the centers to report refugees with higher education qualifications from their home countries to higher education institutions than teaching themselves so that the refugees can get better language training.

All concerned stakeholders (governmental and non-governmental) which are working with refugees' settlement should explicitly include refugees' access to higher education into their main tasks.

Organizations such as NAV and refugee centers in municipalities should balance their focus in refugees' access to higher education and job than just focusing on pushing refugees to low-skilled and less-secured job market. Furthermore, the role of program advisors in NAV and refugee centers need to be scrutinized to bring about good practices by challenging status quo and practices which may result in exclusion of refugees from higher education.

Finally, funding organizations and institutions should support further studies related to refugee education in general and refugees' access to higher education in particular. The advancement of evidence based knowledge on refugees and higher education can help decision-makers and policy makers to deal with issues related refugee education in more productive ways. This is the case also in for refugees settled in developed nations.

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