**Refugee & Asylum Seeker Integration – The (Proactive) Role of Higher Education Institutions**

Developmental Paper:

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**Abstract**

In this developmental paper we discuss the challenges of access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers during the current extra-ordinary crisis in the middle east. Empirical work is underway, but in the meantime, from a review of recent accounts we set out the challenges faced by students escaping conflict in their homeland. After describing the general current state, we examine and briefly report on a small number of initiatives that have put in place to address this pressing crisis. The issues raised provide the grounds for our empirical study that examines individual’s perceptions of the proactive role of institutions in providing access to higher education to almost overwhelming numbers of asylum seekers and refugees fleeing conflict. The empirical context is our own institution in Helsinki, Finland. The key informants are decision-makers and principal actors who are engaged with students from overseas, albeit not asylum seekers and refugees in particular. These informants understand the institutional processes that are currently in place, and could have a role in instituting new and innovative meaningful action that creates solutions that breakdown the barriers that institutionalized processes have, often with the best intentions, put in place,

**Introduction**

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. …Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (Article 26 (1). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: United Nations 1948)

Don’t let the fear of what is difficult paralyse you… if an obstacle cannot be overcome right away, one must determine what steps to take toward becoming better capable of overcoming it tomorrow. (Freire, 1998:27 – Teachers as Cultural Workers)

This developmental paper discusses work in progress[[1]](#footnote-1) that examines access to higher education for asylum seekers and refugees, particularly in the context of the current crisis resulting from the ongoing conflict in Syria and surrounding lands.

In this respect, the focus is not on examining the issues that result from a relatively steady flow of people fleeing their homeland in the face of personal persecution – frequently based on individual political, ethnic or religious affiliation, which unhappily has been a fact for many years – but rather exploring the issues from the position of an unprecedented and immediate crisis, the like of which has not been witnessed in Europe for perhaps 75 years.

In its empirical setting, the paper examines the Finnish context; exploring the views of individuals at a single higher education institution. The focus is on individual’s perceptions of the proactive role of the institution in providing access to higher education to acute numbers of asylum seekers and refugees fleeing conflict and or persecution in their homeland. In other words, rather than the institution enacting wider policy (such as that emerging from a government ministry), the focus is on how the institution takes a lead role in addressing a pressing societal issue. The research plan is reported at the end of the paper.

The Finnish case is interesting because although the real numbers of asylum seekers and refugees does not match that of many other European states, the country has a small population of 5.49 million (Statistics Finland 2016), and therefore the proportional response is comparatively favourable. In this respect, a March 2016 OXFAM report that examines ‘rich countries’ and the notion of ‘fair share’ pledges based on size of economy, places Finland, along with Australia, Iceland, Sweden, and New Zealand in a second tier of countries pledging support for Syrian refugees. This follows the first tier group of Canada, Germany, and Norway. However, based on the ‘fair share’ criteria, only the first tier receives any praise for having achieved or exceeded their portion. The second tier have pledged in excess of 50 percent of a ‘fair share’, while some countries, such as the UK, has achieved only 20 percent. [Statistics relevant to the crisis are presented later in the paper]

Before examining issues pertaining to access to higher education, setting the refugee context serves to underline and illustrate the enormity of the crisis.

To start, we offer some clarification of the terms refugee, asylum seeker, and migrant, terms that are often used inconsistently, interchangeably and incorrectly in both official and lay (e.g. media) communications and poorly understood by the public.

In the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), The United Nations define a refugee as an individual who:

…owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

However, this does not mean that all those who are fleeing their homeland are considered to be 'refugees'. They must first go through the process of seeking asylum, and having their claim for asylum accepted.

An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for asylum and is **waiting for a decision** as to whether or not they are a refugee. In other words, in the UK an asylum seeker is someone who has asked the Government for refugee status and is waiting to hear the outcome of their application (UNHCR !951 - emphasis in the original).

Clearly, asylum seekers have basic rights, for example consistent with those set out in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), however in many states they may be held in detention (albeit that the UNHCR oppose this approach), settled in poorer housing, and are not permitted to work.

A positive decision for asylum (from the government of the state in which asylum is being sought) then affords the asylum seeker the status of ‘refugee’,which provides with rights (economic & social) and protection; ‘*Refugees should receive at least the same rights and basic help as any other foreigner who is a legal resident’* (United Nations 1951).

Those who are not given the status of ‘refugee’ are required to leave the country, albeit there may be a lengthy appeal process. The outcome for individuals not granted refugee status is repatriation, sometimes to their home state and sometimes to a third state willing to accept them, which may be voluntary or forced.

In contrast, the term migrant conveys a meaning of free choice to travel outside of one’s homeland – frequently this is an economic concern:

… “migrant” in article 1.1 (a) should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of “personal convenience” and without intervention of an external compelling factor. (UN: International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, 1990)

In this context the notion of migrant should be avoided; clearly those fleeing conflict are not freely choosing to better themselves, economically, by moving to another place.

**The Crisis in Numbers**

The numbers of people fleeing Syria and areas of Iraq are staggering; as is the rapid, year-on-year, multiples in growth over a five-year period. Prior to the conflict, the total population of Syria was approximately 23 million (UNHCR). In August 2015 the UN estimated 7.6 million people to be displaced within the country, with an additional approximately four millions having fled their homeland. Most escapees are found in Turkey; Lebanon; Jordan, EU28 + Norway & Switzerland; Iraq; Egypt (see Table 1 below). Combining people displaced within Syria and those who have left the country results in figure of over 50% who have been uprooted.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Syrians Seeking Protection (Cumulative Numbers)** |
| July 2012 | 115 000 |
| July 2013 | 1 500 000 |
| July 2014 | 2 950 000 |
| August 2015 | 4 375 000 |
| March 2016 | 4 837 000 |

Table 1: Syrians Seeking Protection (Figures drawn from: Migration Policy Centre – Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies; European University Institute) - ‘Focus on Syrians’

Notably, the countries with the largest number of Syrians seeking protection are their immediate neighbours, Turkey (2.75 million); Lebanon (1 million); Jordan (638 000); Iraq (246 000). The total numbers for Europe are considerably lower; within Europe, between April 2011 and Jan 2015 there have been 935,000 asylum applications from the Syrian conflict alone (UNHCR).

More locally, in Finland the statistics provided by The Finnish Immigration Service show that numbers seeking asylum in Finland increased substantially in 2015 (almost ten-fold), which is consistent with the broader set of figures of people fleeing the worn-torn region.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Annual Asylum Seekers** |
| 2013 | 3238 |
| 2014 | 3651 |
| 2015 | 32476 |

Table 2: Annual Asylum Applications in Finland (Finnish Immigration Service, 2016)

Note: These Finnish figures are world-wide asylum seekers. The almost ten-fold increase in 2015 mostly represent arrivals from regions of conflict in Iraq, but also increased numbers from Syria.

**Higher Education in Syria**

The empirical context is higher education (HE) in Finland, but first offer a brief overview of the situation of HE in Syria, which provides context to the challenges faced by Syrian students. In 2011 – in other words, at the start of conflict – there were approximately 355 000 undergraduate and postgraduate students in Syria (European Commission 2012)

In May 2013, Watenpaugh and Fricke (2013) reported that ‘*the institutional framework within which higher education takes place has begun to collapse and, in some parts of the country, has disappeared entirely’…The general climate of insecurity has led to the internal displacement of university students and academics’.* At that time in the conflict the authors perceived the difficulties within Syrian HE to be ‘*a generally unacknowledged and unmet component of the larger civilian Syrian humanitarian disaster’.*

Reminding us of their value in terms of their human capital (not least with regard to their role to rebuild the country when the conflict is ended), Watenpaugh and Fricke (2013) continue …’ ‘*These constitute a special group within the conflict’s victims because they include Syria’s brightest and most ambitious young people’… …‘their forced separation from their studies constitutes a cause of their suffering, and thus, a violation of their human rights and an assault on their dignity’.*

With regard to continued education, or access for students reaching university age, Watenpaugh et al., who have written a series of reports and have accumulated knowledge of Syrian students and academics in Jordon (Watenpaugh & Fricke 2013), Lebanon (Watenpaugh, Fricke & King 2014a), and Turkey (Watenpaugh, Fricke & King 2014b), report that *‘The overwhelming majority of displaced Syrian university students… are not continuing any form of higher education or advanced training’* (2014a: 32). In Turkey, for example, using historical statistics to calculate the approximate proportion of students who had previously been ‘qualified’ to attend university in Syria (26% of the 18-22 age group) the authors (2014b:11-12) estimate that although there may be ‘*as many as 20,000 to 30,000 “university-qualified” Syrian students… less than 10% … were enrolled’* with women being ‘*particularly vulnerable’*,despite gender parity in Syrian universities prior to the conflict.

In terms of access in nearby host countries, and discussing the barriers to access – not least discrimination, but also bureaucratic barriers – there is some irony in the idea that ‘*the country’s (Lebanon) weak regulatory system allows for flexibility and innovation in creating solutions at local levels*’ (Watenpaugh, Fricke & King 2014a:6). As discussed later, the issue of (rigid) regulation, emerges in our discussion of the potential barriers to making access easier in Western European HE institutions.

**Refugees’ Barriers to Higher Education**

We start our examination of the barriers to education for refugees and asylum seekers by introducing a project – The Article 26 Project – operated by a British charitable foundation, The Helena Kennedy Foundation (HKF). The rationale for starting here is, of course, that the project is named after the Article of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948) that relates to individuals’ rights to education. Put simply, the objective of the foundation is; *…to promote access to Higher Education for people who have fled persecution and sought asylum in the UK.* (The Article 26 Project). Set up in 2010, the project identifies two principle barriers to HE education for refugees and asylum seekers; fees (university imposed fees – usually per annum) and finance (cost of living).

What is perhaps interesting here, as that these barriers are purely financial and somewhat ‘orderly’– there is no explicit mention of the potential ‘chaotic’ state for students seeking HE education. What for example, of ‘proving’ that the student has the required qualifications from their homeland? – It is, after all, challenging to obtain certificates of education from a country whose infrastructure is almost entirely destroyed.

Working in partnership with HE institutions the project has managed to attract an increasing response from these institutions - a rather unscientific count (based on website information) indicates that in 2015 there were 28 places offered across the whole sector of UK HE providers (approx. 130 institutions). For the 2016 student intake this has increased to 98 places at bachelor level (notably 20 from a single institution – The University of Wolverhampton) – plus 28 post-graduate places, a figure that may well increase given that the 2016 academic year will start in the autumn. Within this framework, some institutions offer a fees only bursary, others offer fees and living expenses support.

While not wishing to undermine the creditable efforts of initiatives from organizations such as HKF, the overall effect is rather small given the total numbers of refugee and asylum seeker numbers (in the UK approx. 155 000 in mid-2015 – all ages and from all regions). As Brewis (2015) remarks, …*University students form a highly skilled and motivated group of refugees which has historically given back to receiving societies much more than they have received in aid’* Moreover *‘ many will eventually return to help with economic and social reconstruction in the countries they left as refugee students, even if this is decades later.’*

As a second example, the German government funded initiative DAFI[[2]](#footnote-2) (The Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) nicely sets out the obstacles faced by refugees with respect to university access.

* Expensive university fees
* Restrictive entry policies of universities (quotas, high fees for foreigners, requirements for documentation that refugees may not have)
* Language skills
* Disruption of education due to displacement
* Inconsistent quality of secondary education

(DAFI 2014)

Here we see a successful model (albeit there are no Western European Institutions in this scheme) where ‘*each year over 2,000 students follow courses at universities in 42 countries’*. However, the leaflet also exposes the challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees currently located in Europe. Firstly; the instruction that…‘*Asylum seekers who have not (yet) been recognised as refugees as well as refugees seeking resettlement in a third country are not normally eligible for a DAFI scholarship*’ and secondly, the advice that… ‘*Because of its financial limitations, competition for scholarships is high and only a portion of the qualified candidates can be admitted to the programme’*. (DAFI 2014). In the first instance, the problem of access to HE for asylum seekers (rather than recognized refugees) remains, and in the second case, the admission that even ‘qualified candidates’ face competition highlights one of the obstacles to education, ‘*lack of documentation*’, because this may well dis-qualify the candidate.

These issues are not raised here as a critique of DAFI, far from it, but rather to illustrate the very challenges faced by aspiring or continuing students seeking refuge during the current crisis.

Our third example considers the role of a single institution, rather than the initiatives of NGOs/ charitable foundations. In the context of the refugee crisis, the European Commission maintain a list of ‘Inspiring Practices’ (European Commission). The University of Bremen IN-Touch programme example is drawn from this list.

The IN-Touch programme permits students (with either asylum seeker or refugee status) and who have commenced studies at a university elsewhere to continue their studies. Other than proficient language skills in German or English (in addition to status and being a continuing student) there are no other requirements. The initiative recognizes the wider problems surrounding displaced students. For example, the problems with access to status/prior learning documentation from their home institution.

Perhaps the singlemost value in the programme (notwithstanding the impressive numbers who are enrolled – 140 places for 2016) is that the bureaucratic hurdles, while not dismissed, are set aside as much as possible. So currently, although a final university degree is not awarded, students receive a certificate. Acknowledging that this is not ideal, the Vice-Rectress for International Affairs and Diversity, Professor Yasemin Karakaşoğlu, has stated: ‘*I ask you to be patient …everyone concerned is trying to find a quick solution. However, there are some legal hurdles we have to overcome first*.’ (University of Bremen: IN-Touch)

**Refugees’ Access to Higher Education – A Conceptual Framework**

Discussing refugee integration, Penninx (2003) nicely draws out and details the roles of the two principal parties at play; (a) society, and (b) the refugees themselves. In terms of ‘society’ he discusses ‘*two broad types’,* of which the first is relevant to our context. In his own words:

The first are general public institutions of receiving societies or cities, such as the education system… Laws, regulations, and executive organizations, along with unwritten rules and practices, are part of such institutions. These, however, may hinder access or equal outcome for newcomers, or even completely exclude them. The functioning of these general public institutions (and the possible adjustment of them in view of growing diversity) is thus of paramount importance. It is on this level that integration and exclusion are mirrored concepts.

Reflecting on the above, we introduce a useful framework that serves to uncover the barriers for asylum seekers and refugees, and how these may be addressed. In 2001 Katarina Tomaševski, then the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, developed the Four As framework covering human rights obligations. Making education available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable (Tomaševski 2001). The context is rooted in children’s’ education, but the framework has transferability to the HE level.

The first two dimensions reflect the rights to education, and the latter two the rights in education. In the context of this paper, we place focus on the rights to education. In within the two dimensions, we concentrate on accessibility. Tomaševski’s (2001) framework offers four themes within this dimension (of which the fourth is perhaps more relevant to primary and secondary education:

* elimination of legal and administrative barriers
* elimination of financial obstacles
* identification and elimination of discriminatory denials of access
* elimination of obstacles to compulsory schooling (fees, distance, schedule)

This conceptual framework, together with understanding the context of Finnish HE (see below) guides our empirical work.

**Higher Education in Finland – A Brief Overview**

Higher education in Finland is provided by universities and universities of applied sciences. The role of universities of applied sciences (UAS) is to give higher education qualification and practical professional skills (Ministry of Education and Culture). Master’s level studies in UAS requires that the applicant has a bachelor’s degree and at least three years of subsequent work experience in a relevant field (Ministry of Education and Culture). The Ministry of Education and Culture report that … *‘For those who wish to study in English* *UAS’ in Finland provide around 100 Bachelor’s degree programmes and over 20 Master’s degree programmes’.*

Our own institution Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (HMUAS) –within which the empirical case is examined – offers 15 international degree programmes in the English language at Bachelor and Master’s levels. In addition,free-of-charge courses are offered with the purpose of preparing immigrants and providing them the skills (including language) required to study at a UAS.

At present, Finnish university education is free, however students are required to cover their own living expenses. Finnish students receive some state support (covering some living expenses) and although this does not extend to non-Finns who have come for the purpose of study, in some cases non-Finnish residents (for example, refugees) can receive financial support for living expenses.

However, fees are being introduced from 2017 (for those from outside the EU/EEA). The legal minimum is 1500 €, but early indications are that fees across the country’s HE institutions will range from 10,000 and 15,000 euros per academic year (YLE News: 3/2/2016). Institutions are able to offer scholarships, but it remains to be seen whether these will follow disadvantaged groups groups such as refugees. In any event, it is unlikely that an institution will make guaranteed offers of scholarship support at the time when applications are being considered.

Perhaps no different to other countries, the application process is bureaucratic; with increased burdens placed on those from foreign nations (particularly outside the EU/EEA). For example, there is a national prerequisite that… ‘*applicants who are applying based on a qualification completed outside the EU/ETA-area will be required to pay an application fee of 100 €’* (studyinfo/ Finnish National Board of Education) The fee is non-refundable: it ‘*is charged to help to cover the costs of online application and information services.’*

In addition; applicants from abroad are required to obtain official translations of certifications that are not originally in the Finnish, English or Swedish language. If they wish to transfer from another institution, they require an up-to-date transcript of records together with a certificate proving resignation from their previous institution. In the case of HMUAS, the institution *‘only accepts exchange students from higher education institutions abroad with which it has a valid student exchange agreement’.* As we touched on earlier in the paper, standardized prerequisites may add to the barriers to access to an HE institution.

We leave it to the empirical work to examine whether ‘bureaucratic’ issues are discussed by our respondents, and whether there are views on overcoming barriers that result from regulatory frameworks both within and outside the institution.

**Research Plan**

As briefly mentioned above, the paper examines the Finnish context; exploring the views of individuals at a single higher education institution. The focus is on individual’s perceptions of the proactive role of the institution in providing access to higher education to acute numbers of asylum seekers and refugees fleeing conflict and or persecution in their homeland.

As depicted in the examples above – for example that of the University of Bremen IN-Touch programme – our interest is on the actions of the institution in terms of taking a lead role and ‘real’ action, rather that following a policy that is set from an outside, perhaps higher, authority (e.g. government?).

Data will primarily come from interviews of key personnel – to date informants identified include Degree Programme Managers whose programmes attract an international cohort of students (these programmes are in the English language); the coordinator of a project (within the institution) that seeks to support ‘Immigrants in Higher Education’; the international office that administers and supports programmes, including some elements of student applications; and senior university leaders. In addition, relevant documents have been and will be analysed.

**In conclusion**

As an interim conclusion, the situation is changing very quickly – for example, a British Council conference session in May 2016 poses the question in its theme title: Responding to the refugee crisis: what role for HE? New initiatives emerge fairly frequently, for example institutions replicating the ‘Inspiring Practices’ of others that are presented by the EU. Proactivity does not require something new and innovative; indeed, it can result from observing the action of others, but it requires some meaningful action that creates solutions that breakdown the barriers that institutionalized processes put in place, sometimes for the best of intentions.

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1. The empirical work continues during April & May 2016 and will be reported in a full paper at the conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **‘**Funded by the German Government since its inception (1992), the programme provides scholarships for refugees to study at universities and colleges in their host country and sometimes in their country of origin upon return’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)