

Rethinking Universities

A Reflection on the University's Role in Fostering Refugees' Inclusion

ROSA DI STEFANO AND BENEDETTA CASSANI



Refugees' Participation in Higher Education: Limits and Obstacles

Starting from the evidence shown by the InHERE project,¹ this chapter reflects on the role of higher education in fostering inclusive societies and the way in which universities have managed to adopt tailored initiatives to facilitate refugees' participation in the European university system. Despite the fact that international studies have identified the role of education as crucial for the inclusion of refugees, their access to higher education is still hindered by several obstacles (UNHCR 2019a). Moreover, a common strategy to support universities in setting up an accessible and inclusive university system is currently missing. The analysis carried out by the InHERE project on initiatives implemented in Europe for refugee students has not only demonstrated the ability of EU universities to act autonomously in response to emerging issues, but it has also shown some limits. Within this context, this chapter aims to provide an opportunity for reflection on the strategies that universities can put in place to further strengthen their support for the inclusion of refugees.

In the Strategy for Refugee Inclusion 2030, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees set the ambitious goal of 15 per cent of refugees participating in higher education over the next ten years (UNHCR 2019b). The higher education system has been identified as having a key role in achieving the successful incorporation of refugees into the host country (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2012) and in ensuring that the entire community can experience an inclusive economic growth in refugee-hosting areas (in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable De-

velopment). Nevertheless, the rate of refugee participation in tertiary-level education is still significantly lower than global averages: only 3 per cent of the world's refugee population has access to university, compared to a global picture of 37 per cent of people in 2018 (UNCHR 2019b). As pointed out by UNESCO's 'Global Education Monitoring Report 2019', the chances for refugees to access tertiary education are hindered by several obstacles: lack of documentation (particularly school certificates), linguistic barriers (little or no knowledge of the language of instruction), insufficient financial resources (to cover university fees as well as other education-related costs such as textbooks) are among the most common (UNESCO 2018). Such obstacles are strictly related to the displacement condition of refugees, who are often forced to flee their country with no preparation. This has several consequences: they may not be able to choose their final destination and they may settle in a country where they have no knowledge of the local language, making it difficult for them to access information on education opportunities and enrolment requirements, or to have the language level required to enrol in a university course; and they may leave behind documents proving their former education experiences (documents that might not be possible to retrieve once settled in another country), limiting the possibility to obtain recognition of their qualifications and apply to a higher education institution (Bajwa et al. 2017).

A recent survey² conducted in seventy European universities also points to four main systemic barriers faced by refugee students: (1) information barriers; (2) non-recognition of former educational paths; (3) linguistic barriers; and (4) financial barriers (Soberon, Reuter and Chibuzor 2017). Information on higher education opportunities for refugees is often reported to be unclear or confusing for prospective refugee students. One reason for this is that refugees may not be familiar with the educational systems of their host country and may need more thorough information than that provided on institutional websites and leaflets. The non-recognition of former educational paths is another issue that affects both refugees who lack or have left behind their educational certificates and those who can provide documentary proof of their qualifications; in both cases, the procedure for recognition is lengthy and may result in delayed access to higher education or in repeating studies (UNHCR 2013). Concerning the linguistic barrier, lack of proficiency in the language of instruction not only affects students' performance and success (Bajwa et al. 2017), but may also represent a barrier to inclusion in the educational system in the first place (UNESCO 2018). This is because enrolment procedures in European Higher Education

Initiatives (HEIs) tend to have high language requirements, in some cases involving two languages. Finally, the fact that refugees may not be able to count on financial support from their families and may not meet the requirements to access national scholarships is yet another obstacle (Soberon, Reuter and Chibuzor 2017).

Even though refugees who have finished secondary school almost universally express the desire to attend university (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2012), they may ultimately decide to abandon their aspirations as a result of such obstacles. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), around 450,000 Syrian refugees are of university age and about 100,000 are eligible to enter university, but only a few have been able to enrol in an HEI in their host country (UNESCO 2018). The danger of ‘missing out’ an entire generation of potential university students is exacerbated by what has been defined as a ‘lock-in’ effect: after five or six years working in unskilled jobs, it is almost impossible to take up further education (UNHCR 2013), with potentially major consequences for the process of inclusion in the host country as well as for the rebuilding efforts and future prosperity of their home country (UNHCR 2019a). It is also important to note that over 50 per cent of asylum seekers in Europe are aged between eighteen and thirty-four, which is the age range identified with tertiary education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019). The need to act quickly to ensure the inclusion of refugees in higher education has been reaffirmed in the ‘Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals’ (June 2016), a plan in which the European Commission urges member states to guarantee the timely recognition of refugees’ academic qualifications and to provide language integration programmes as soon as possible (European Commission 2016).

Universities’ Initiatives to Foster Inclusion

Despite the recommendations of the European Commission, many member states are still lagging behind in regard to the implementation of measures aimed at facilitating academic inclusion of refugees. As pointed out by a recent Eurydice Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019), the incorporation of refugees and asylum seekers into higher education is approached at different degrees across Europe, and only a few countries have adopted specific strategies at national or regional level to facilitate refugee access to universities. Moreover, even among those countries that have adopted national policies, there are substantial differences concerning the levels and scope

of such policies (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019). As a result, in many cases support to refugees has been left to the action of individual institutions, which have tried to fill the gap of missing national and European policies by putting in place new procedures and services to support the inclusion of refugees.

Based on initiatives collected through European University Association's (EUA) Refugees Welcome Map Campaign, the InHERE project carried out an analysis of such actions, which have been put in place unilaterally by European universities in their attempts to make their institutions more accessible to refugee students. Several good practices have been showcased in the InHERE Catalogue³ that could be used as an example to inspire other universities. Helping refugee students to access and understand information concerning their academic opportunities and requirements is essential to facilitate their access. The Harokopio University of Athens has launched an initiative called Study in Greece (SiG), which aims to provide comprehensive instructions and support to third-country nationals wishing to enrol in Greek universities. The initiative has since grown and SiG is now set up as a non-profit, non-governmental organisation, serving as an official gateway for information related to studying in Greece; a special section is dedicated to services for refugees and their integration into the education system. Websites such as the one provided by the SiG initiative⁴ are certainly an important and far-reaching means of communication. However, information should also be distributed through more traditional means that allow two-way communication and tailored support. Through the Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland (SIMHE) project, the University of Jyväskylä hosts an info-desk where refugees can seek information and personal guidance on suitable higher education and career paths, as well as support with recognition of prior learning. Heedful of the fact that refugee centres are spread all around the country and often far from academic institutions, the Arctic University of Norway (UiT) has set up an interesting strategy to reach out to potential refugee students. They organise 'information campaigns' through which they travel to refugee centres and deliver half-day information sessions.

Setting up fast-track procedures for the recognition of previous learning and qualifications, either with or in the absence of documentation, is another crucial aspect for the inclusion of refugees in higher education. Despite the provisions set in article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, most European countries are still not fully complying with

its application (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019). European HEIs have therefore tried to fill this gap, either by putting in place new procedures or strengthening existing ones. For example, the University of Bari set up a procedure that goes beyond the recognition of formal education permitted by Italian regulations. Through the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CAP), it is performing the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and its translation into credits towards a university programme. At Ghent University, refugee researchers can have access to doctoral training and be integrated into a research group even though they do not own legal diplomas from their previous studies, as normally required in Belgium.

Paying attention to the fact that having a good command of the language of instruction is one of the main aspects that determine the access and future success of students in a university programme, many HEIs have created 'ad hoc' language courses for refugees. In Hungary, the Central European University has launched a Weekend Programme and a University Preparatory Programme for refugees, offering (among other activities) English and academic English classes. Similarly, the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne offers a twelve-week intensive language training course for refugees as well as access to the 'learning French online' platform through the computer room of the Language Department. A different approach to language training has been adopted by University West. It allows asylum seekers to realise internships in different university sectors (faculties, library, administration office), covering various tasks (IT support, teacher assistant or administrative duties), so they can practise Swedish while they become familiarised with the university system and its functioning.

To foster refugee inclusion in higher education, it is essential to make university an economically viable option. Yet funding for institutions to support refugees as well as direct funding for refugee students is still very limited, and several universities in Europe are resorting to their core budget to offer scholarships or fee waivers to refugee students. To broaden the scope of the financial support provided, some universities have combined different sources of funding. The University of Porto, for example, is offering scholarships that also include accommodation, food, transportation and language training, on account of its collaboration with a Portuguese non-profit organisation. The university has allocated a special budget to cover the costs of academic fees and language programme, while students' subsistence is covered by the Global Platform for Syrian Students.

An Overarching Strategy for More Inclusive Universities

The analysis developed through the InHERE project has revealed the capacity of the academic community to act in response to emerging issues and to act autonomously, despite the limited support at national and governmental levels. It is interesting to note that the entire university community (students, academics and administrative staff) have mobilised and engaged in providing a response to the challenges described above. However, it must be said that only rarely has a single university been able to tackle all of them at once. The fragmentation of the university response to the needs of and challenges faced by refugee students stresses the necessity to develop a more integrated approach, that would allow the university to go beyond the single emergency.

Aware of these criticalities, the InHERE project has developed a set of recommendations to inspire universities' future actions.⁵ In particular, the recommendations, which were presented in Brussels in September 2018, have indicated a number of key elements to make the university system more accessible. These include: improving access to information through the provision of comprehensive information and advisory services; increasing the funding for universities to support refugees; enhancing the harmonisation of procedures; supporting the employability and the overall incorporation of refugees into societies. To ensure sustainability and continuity of actions, the recommendations stress the importance of including initiatives for refugees in a broader overarching strategy, as part of universities' social responsibility under their Third Mission, as this would enable the different departments and stakeholders of institutions to collaborate in providing the best possible support to refugee students and scholars.

In Italy, the recommendations have been incorporated in an initiative promoted among Italian HE institutions by UNHCR to create a 'Manifesto of Universities' to foster the access of refugees to higher education and research, and to encourage their social inclusion and active participation in academic life. As mentioned in the Manifesto itself, through its adoption universities contribute to realising their Third Mission, by favouring the valorisation and the use of knowledge for the social, cultural and economic development of society (UNHCR 2019c). Several universities have embraced the Manifesto, which represents an important example of synergy between European projects and national initiatives, in view not of duplicating actions but rather multiplying their overall effects and impact. Through its implementation, the Manifesto led to the establishment of a permanent task force at Sapienza

University that, in collaboration with UNHCR and other stakeholders, aims at sharing good practices and promoting common initiatives with other Italian universities.

The recommendations also inspired a new project called ‘UNI(di)VERSITY, Socially responsible university for inclusive societies in the era of migration’ that wishes to contribute to the European debate on the development of an integrated approach to the issue of migrant and refugee inclusion in HE. The project, funded by the European Commission, builds upon the results of InHERE with the aim to support HEIs to integrate initiatives addressed to refugees and migrants in a broader approach to diversity. To this end, UNI(di)VERSITY will analyse some of the most relevant social responsibilities and diversity approaches adopted by European HEIs, design instruments to integrate issues related to migration holistically and develop a methodology for socially responsible universities in the era of migration.⁶

Much remains to be done for universities to fully embrace an exhaustive approach that goes beyond single initiatives and builds inclusive HEIs and societies. The results of InHERE projects and the subsequent initiatives put in place show the need for a common path that leads towards the institutionalisation of a systemic approach, integrated in the universities’ Third Mission. Today, such an approach may identify refugees and migrants as the main actors, but it can open the way to include a wider pool of beneficiaries, keeping in mind that internationalisation, diversity and inclusion are part of the enrichment of society and that ‘the student body within higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe’s population’ (European Commission 2017).

Rosa Di Stefano obtained a double major in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Toronto (2010) and later specialised in development studies and project cycle management at the Institute for Advanced Study of Pavia-IUSS. She worked in Ecuador in the field of international cooperation for various NGOs and she joined Sapienza International Office as European Projects Officer in 2015. She has been actively contributing to projects and initiatives dedicated to the social inclusion of migrants and refugees (InHERE, Higher Education Supporting Refugees in Europe; Manifesto of Inclusive University-UNHCR; UNI(di)VERSITY).

Benedetta Cassani graduated in Economics and obtained a PhD in Economic Geography. Before joining Sapienza IRO Office, she carried out research activities in collaboration with several institutions (Council of Europe, Sapienza

University, UNESCO Chair) focusing on migration and development issues. Since 2011, she has been working at Sapienza University International Office providing support to the submission and management of European projects mainly in the area of social sciences and humanities. She is actively involved in several projects dedicated to the social inclusion of migrants and refugees such as InHERE, Higher Education Supporting Refugees in Europe; Manifesto of Inclusive University-UNHCR; and UNI(di)VERSITY.

Notes

1. InHERE is co-funded with support from the Erasmus + programme of the European Union during the period September 2016 to September 2018. The project has been implemented by UNIMED (coordinator), Sapienza University, University of Barcelona, Campus France, EUA and UNHCR (associate partner). More information can be found at www.inhereproject.eu.
2. The survey has been realised in the framework of the Erasmus + S.U.C.R.E. project: <http://sucre.auth.gr/>.
3. InHERE's Good Practice Catalogue is available at <https://www.inhereproject.eu/outputs/good-practice-catalogue>.
4. The SiG website is available at <http://studyingreece.edu.gr/>.
5. InHERE's recommendations are available at <https://www.inhereproject.eu/outputs/recommendations>.
6. The results of the project will be publicly available by the end of 2022 at www.university.eu.

References

- Bajwa, J.K., S. Couto, S. Kidd, R. Markoulakis, M. Abai and K. McKenzie. 2017. 'Refugees, Higher Education, and Informational Barriers', *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 33(2): 56–65. doi:10.7202/1043063ar.
- Dryden-Peterson, S., and W. Giles. 2012. 'Higher Education for Refugees', *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 27(2): 3–9. <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/34717>.
- European Commission. 2016. 'Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals', EU COM (2016) 377 final.
- European Commission. 2017. 'A Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education', COM (2017) 247 final.
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. 2019. 'Integrating Asylum Seekers and Refugees into Higher Education in Europe: National Policies and Measures', Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Eurostat. 2017. 'Asylum and First Time Asylum Applicants by Citizenship, Age and Sex: Annual Aggregated Data'. http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en.
- Soberon, M.A., L. Reuter and A. Chibuzor. 2017. 'Accessing Higher Education in Europe: Challenges for Refugee Students and Strategies to Overcome Them'.

- University of Cologne. https://www.portal.uni-koeln.de/sites/international/aaa/92/92pdf/GlobalSouth_pdf/92pdf_SUCRE_Publication2017.pdf
- UNESCO. 2018. 'Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Migration, Displacement and Education – Building Bridges, Not Walls'. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNHCR. 2013. 'A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe', September 2013. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/522980604.html>.
- UNHCR. 2018. 'Global Compact on Refugees'. New York: United Nations. https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf.
- UNHCR. 2019a. 'Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis, 2019'. New York: United Nations. <https://www.unhcr.org/steppingup/wp-content/uploads/sites/76/2019/09/Education-Report-2019-Final-web-9.pdf>.
- UNHCR. 2019b. 'Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion, 2019'. New York: United Nations. <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>.
- UNHCR. 2019c. 'Manifesto dell'Università inclusiva. Favorire l'accesso dei rifugiati all'istruzione universitaria e alla ricerca e promuovere l'integrazione sociale e la partecipazione attiva alla vita accademica'. New York: United Nations. https://www.unhcr.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2020/09/Manifes-to-dellUniversita-inclusiva_UNHCR.pdf.