CHAPTER 17

The Importance of the Locality in Opening Universities to Refugee Students

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Refugees in the Locality

This chapter highlights the importance of analysing the inclusion/ exclusion of refugee students within the university in relation to the shifting socio-economic and political dynamics of the locality. It discusses how a focus on the territorial embeddedness of higher education communities contributes to our understanding of the internal and external borders of universities.

In recent years, the importance of the locality for immigration management is increasingly acknowledged within migration and multi-level governance (MLG) studies. Cities, in particular, are recognised as active agents in addressing the challenges related to diversity accommodation and in developing policies that can influence state-based models of governance (Hepburn and Zapata-Barrero 2014; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio and Scholten 2017). While nation-states remain central in policy-making processes (Caponio 2018), reception policies, legal recognition and cultural diversity management are partially devolved to sub-national levels (Adam and Torrekens 2015; Scholten and Penninx 2016). A focus on how different municipalities engage with migration and refugee flows holds relevance in order to overcome a dominant focus on global cities, and to delve into the 'specificities of localisation' (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2009: 196): it allows us to unravel the peculiarity of the history and present socio-cultural embeddedness of immigration in the local fabric of different cities. Recent work on urban migration policies and sanctuary cities shows how the locality is 'not inherently more inclusionary or progressive with respect to the nation state' (Garcia and Jørgensen 2019: 201). The tensions emerging from a phenomenon increasingly perceived as problematic among local polities can lead

cities to enact restrictive and exclusionary policies (Ambrosini 2012; Gallo 2016; Gattinara 2016). Yet municipalities also need to counterbalance the state's orientation or inertia with local pragmatism and inclusiveness, by developing collaborations with the local civil society networks and non-governmental organisations (Bauder 2016; Hoekstra, Kohlbacher and Rauhunt 2018).

While MLG literature does not problematise the 'integration' paradigm overall, it questions the cohesion of the national 'whole' against which the incorporation of immigrants/refugees is usually measured (Schinkel 2018): it problematises the organicist representations of receiving states as integrated bodies, highlighting how inclusion becomes a contested subject between different territorial levels and social actors. Differential access to socio-economic and cultural capital emerges in local contexts of prolonged displacement, where inclusion largely remains a 'forbidden solution' (Long 2014: 476). While it is at local level that refugees try to negotiate possibilities, this process is often 'between and beneath the law' – with the locality becoming a space where refugees are 'trapped in a prolonged state of limbo' (Long 2014: 481; Fielden 2008). Overall, within migration studies, the role of the locality in the development of tertiary education policies for displaced people has received limited attention. Interesting insights come from pioneer work within higher education literature. The latter highlights, on the one hand, how refugee access to higher education (HE) in many European and North American contexts is fostered through strict collaboration between municipal/regional governments, universities and civil society organisations (Streitwieser et al. 2019; Baker et al. 2018; Ferede 2010). On the other, it also stresses how these initiatives have remained largely invisible within and beyond local higher education communities as well as the local society (Crea 2016).

Drawing from the programme 'Refugee and Asylum Seekers at the University' (RASU) at the University of Trento (north-eastern Italy), this chapter reflects on the importance of the locality in opening universities to students with a refugee background. The 'locality' refers here to the context of a particular historical and political relationship between the provincial government, the university and the city. A multi-level analysis of educational policies for refugees is beyond the scope of this contribution. However, it is important to look at receiving HE communities alongside the specific web of relations in which they are historically located, and at how their connections with the locality may influence regional and national policy orientations. Universities do not operate in a vacuum but have been integral to the history, socio-economic de-

velopment and cultural outlook of local urban environments in many European contexts. This holds relevance for the analysis of the relationship between refugees and HE communities. The opening of universities to displaced students constitutes a process that goes beyond the physical and intangible borders of academic institutions to reflect their broader embeddedness. The RASU programme aimed to bring HE communities closer to refugees' lived realities, and to strengthen the collaboration between the university, the Autonomous Province of Trento (PAT) and local civil society. It faced challenges emerging from within the higher education communities as well as tensions with the provincial and national governments, illustrating the importance of analysing the opening and potential closure of universities to refugees not only in relation to changing academic culture but also to shifts in local and national politics.

The Italian Multi–Level Government System, Refugees and Higher Education

The Italian state includes fourteen regions, four 'special statute' regions, and the two autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano. Federal reforms (1971, 2001) devolved legislative and administrative powers, including on social policy matters, to sub-national governments.[1] On immigration, multi-level government alternates between devolved and centralist turns. Although the Italian state formally has exclusive jurisdiction over immigration,[2] issues of reception, legal recognition and 'public security' were transferred to sub-national levels throughout the 2000s up until 2017.

The 2002 National Asylum Program, subsequently renamed the 'Protection system for asylum seekers and refugees as well as for migrants with humanitarian status' (SPRAR), demonstrates the growing multi-level approach to refugee policies. SPRAR was originally subscribed to by the Interior Ministry, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the National Association of Italian Municipalities, and by 2014 it also included the Regional Coordinating Groups on Asylum. It reflects a decentralised multi-level governance model: vertical coordination of the Interior Ministry and UNHCR is integrated with the horizontal activation of sub-national authorities in collaboration with local public institutions, NGOs and private actors (Giannetto, Ponzo and Roman 2019). However, particularly after the 2015 'refugee crisis', the system increasingly operated with an emergency approach and was

often unable to ensure a balanced regional/municipal redistribution of asylum seekers (Kuschminder 2019).

The effects of the 2008 economic crash, the moral panic generated by the perceived 'mass influx' of refugees, and political concerns over the loss of electoral consensus combined to determine a more centralist turn in 2017. The Minister of the Interior in the centre-left Gentiloni government, Marco Minniti, promoted policies designed to increase repatriations, reduce inflows through agreements with origin/transit countries, centralise economic and administrative control of the Italian reception system, and prioritise international protection holders over asylum seekers in accessing SPRAR. The 2017 bid scheme harmonised SPRAR across regions but limited sub-national actors' involvement in decision-making (Giannetto, Ponzo and Roman 2019). Space for multi-level consultation was further diminished during the populist coalition government of the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Lega Party in 2018, exemplified by Law 132/2018. This excluded 'humanitarian protection' holders from reception services, suppressed inclusion/support services for asylum seekers, and reduced refugees' income per capita from 35 euros to 19–26 euros.

To our knowledge, there are no previous studies on refugee inclusion in Italian HE, and statistics are currently unavailable. However, looking at different programmes as described on university and government websites,[3] it seems that since 2016 universities have initiated processes of 'opening' to refugees in response to two factors: first, the realisation that students with a refugee background were already present in the university, but had largely been invisible;[4] and second, the pressing expectations of both internal members and local polities in promoting more inclusive educational policies. Fostering collaboration with sub-national governments and SPRAR was key for universities entering into dialogue with refugees wishing to enter or resume higher education. With limited public investment in HE, private foundations and enterprises have been important in terms of establishing fellowships, while civil society associations have provided students with linguistic and psychological support. Since 2016, however, a national programme of 100 yearly fellowships has been launched by the Interior Ministry and the National Conference of Italian Rectors (CRUI). The recruitment basin varies considerably, ranging from the municipal to the national level (through the SPRAR network) and, more recently, to the international level by way of humanitarian corridors. The process of opening universities to refugees involves the locality in terms of both economic

and organisational support as well as pedagogical initiatives. Overall, it is highly probable that local university initiatives for refugee students have inspired – and impacted on – national policy developments. At the same time, as we will show in the context of Trento, centralist turns may deeply affect the premises and feasibility of HE programmes for refugees gradually developed in sub-national territories.

The University of Trento: Between Autonomy and Dependence

The University of Trento is unexceptional with respect to the national trends outlined above. However, its location within an autonomous province and status as the only HE institution in the city offers insight into the limits and potentials of its embeddedness within the locality. In line with the national context, the university's spatial organisation reflects a 'diffuse campus' model (Di Lorenzo and Stefani 2015), and academic, cultural and social activities are considered part of the urban tradition. Established in 1962, it has increasingly attracted students from outside the province (around 56 per cent), although its recruitment basin remains relatively confined to the north-eastern regions. In 2019, it had 16,531 students, with 847 foreign citizens mainly from South Asia, Central Asia and West Africa.

The university is part of the Italian state university system but enjoys a special autonomy under Legislative Decree no. 142/2011, which followed the 2009/42 'Milano Agreement'. The latter assigned to the Autonomous Province of Trento (PAT) the responsibility for financial programming and funding of the multiyear strategic plan, which takes into account four macro-areas: course provision, research orientations, recruitment and career development, and knowledge transfer on the socio-economic situation (University of Trento 2012). The statute emphasises the importance of the university's role as an agentive partner of the local political and civil society, and its commitment to economic and socio-cultural development. While this change encouraged a synergistic collaboration between the university and the province, it also increased the former's (economic and political) dependence on the local government in marked contrast to other regional contexts.

The 2008 economic crisis has visibly affected access to HE in Italy. At national level, the European University Association notes a 9 per cent decrease in registered students between 2008 and 2017 (EUA 2018), whereas the National Institute of Statistics reports a 13.2 per cent fall in registration, particularly in the south (ISTAT 2019). This data reinforces a longstanding national trend. An average of 15 per cent of those aged

between twenty-five and sixty-four hold a university degree in Italy, compared with 28 per cent in Europe. Between 2012 and 2017, Trento reportedly lost between two thousand and three thousand students, while registering a mild increase of 0.6 per cent in 2017 (ISPAT 2018) and maintaining an overall percentage of graduates slightly higher than the national average (22 per cent to 19 per cent). As in other Italian universities, access to the university is also regulated by an annual quota and entrance exam.

Opening the University to Refugees

In 2019, immigrants accounted for 8.8 per cent of the total population in Trento, with immigration flows having increased constantly since the 1980s. Trento joined the national protection system for asylum seekers and refugees in 2006, and since 2014 the province has agreed to accept 0.89 per cent of forced migrants in Italy. In 2019 there were around 1,600 asylum seekers, mostly from Central Africa and South Asia, with nearly 1,100 in the SPRAR system (CARITAS 2019). Although the numbers between 2015 and 2019 have remained low (relative to the national average), the presence of refugees was viewed locally as an emergency situation requiring intervention (Ambrosini, Boccagni and Piovesan 2016).

The 2016 Memorandum of Understanding between the University of Trento and the PAT initiated a four-year plan of refugee-oriented initiatives. Importantly, this responded not only to the commitment of internal members but also to the PAT's expectations towards the university in terms of its contribution to managing the perceived 'refugee crisis'. The Memorandum stressed the growing refugee quota assigned to the province by the 2014 State-Regions agreement. The 'relation of reciprocity' between the PAT and the university required the latter to run educational programmes aimed at valorising refugee skills, and to train the broader student community in migration-related issues in order to acquire necessary labour market entry skills.

The locality has been involved in two main ways. First, it provides the university with legal and organisational support through local associations and migration offices as well as information about possible difficulties or requests involving displaced students. Second, the university is committed to developing pedagogical initiatives raising awareness of forced migration beyond its traditional audiences by supporting students who undertake internships within the SPRAR system and local NGOs and associations. Pedagogical initiatives also arise from

student association activities, such as the 'SuXr – University Students for Refugees' programme, an interdisciplinary evening course attended by students involved in local organisations.

Established as a pilot programme, 'Refugee and Asylum Seekers at the University' involves Year 5 students who, until 2018, could be both international protection holders and asylum seekers within the province's SPRAR system. RASU circumvented the national regulation that formally required students to obtain international protection status in order to register for a university degree, although students must still obtain this (or another form of residence permit) before their course ends in order to graduate. Orientation includes intensive Italian and IT classes, a course on the Italian migration/refugee system, subject-oriented classes and individual tutoring. An annual quota is reserved for students with a refugee background, subject to their passing an entry exam. Students have four attempts to pass the entry exam within one year or they have to leave the programme. The programme includes university tax exemption, free accommodation, a daily meals card, transport card and university sports card. Students may also work between 150 and 400 part-time hours (yearly) within the university.

Between 2016 and 2020, the programme involved nineteen students in total (fifteen men and four women) aged between twenty-one and thirty-four, with most coming from West African and South Asian states. Only seven students remained in the programme in 2020. Of these, two students hold refugee status, one subsidiary protection status and four humanitarian protection status. The high drop-out rate reflects several issues including economic precarity, difficulties in balancing study and family life, and institutional failures involving the provision of educational support.

Internal Challenges

The Memorandum of Understanding between the Trento Province and the university was implemented in a context of limited exchange between similar initiatives in Italy. Trento's experience was marked by a 'learning by doing' approach, with many predicaments affecting the actual openness of the university to refugees. We focus here on three interrelated aspects: the balance between humanitarian and academic approaches; difficult transitions from reception centres to the university community; and the tensions between 'special attention' and invisibility as experienced by refugee students.

Between Humanitarian and Academic Approaches

RASU faced the problem of balancing considerations of academic assessment with those relating to students' backgrounds. Oversimplifying access to the university for students with a refugee background, for instance, would have risked tensions within the broader student community, as well as scepticism – or paternalism – among teaching staff. This problem became clear in relation to the conditions students had to meet to remain in the programme. The yearly credit target proved to be too high, particularly in the STEM disciplines, where the tutoring support offered to close the gap between students' educational backgrounds and the departmental average was probably inadequate. The time constraints of the programme, combined with students' own academic anxieties, and uncertainties around their legal status, led to frequent drop-outs.

Internal regulations generated a higher drop-out rate among the first two student cohorts (2016–2018). This was partly because these students entered the university sooner after arriving in Italy, with lower language skills and limited knowledge of the university system. Further, institutional inexperience in dealing with the specific requirements of refugees affected the degree and quality of support provided. Although drop-outs persist in the more recent cohorts, these have benefited to some extent from the prior experiences and lessons at the individual and institutional level.

Transition from Reception Centres to the University Community

The move from the 'centre to the classes' is far from smooth. This was partly due to students' limited familiarity with Italian university culture, although some of them had experiences of higher education in the original and transit countries. Partly, entering the university transforms students' relationships with other refugees at the reception centre and produces uncertainty around their renewed identities. Some students reported that their decision to enrol for a degree was not always understood by their peers, who were more concerned with finding employment and supporting their families. They were not always encouraged by reception centre workers, who sometimes underlined that employment might be found more easily in domestic or care work. Nor did they always feel guided within the university. Students' insecurities in dealing with paperwork and training were increased by limited knowledge of the Memorandum within the university, inefficient communica-

tion between offices, or difficulties in identifying an appropriate tutor. Teachers' responses have also differed widely: while some empathised with students and actively supported their inclusion in departmental life, others remained relatively detached.

For refugee students, the move into university residences further increased the sense of uprooting and the difficulty of establishing new relationships. Rarely able to count on family support or other forms of income, they also faced additional economic pressures. While some found part-time jobs, economic reasons, alongside feelings of guilt for being 'unproductive', pushed some students to leave the programme.

Exceptionality and Invisibility

The visibility of refugee students as an exceptional category within the university community emerged as a key issue in our experience (on the issue of visibility, see also Aparna, Kramsch and Kande, this volume). While entering university often requires specific administrative, academic and psychological support (Ramsay and Baker 2019), we also need to consider refugee students' concerns regarding potentially paternalistic attitudes from their teachers and supervisors, and their wishes not to be evaluated on 'special' terms. Students often expressed the desire to hide their histories from peers and to establish relations free of charitable or suspicious attitudes. However, this combined with the equally widespread request for spaces within the community where they could feel at ease in communicating anxieties about their education and futures. This tension between the search for ordinary student life and the desire to share experiences of forced mobility requires the university to implement strategies aimed at transforming the overall image of refugees within the local community.

Opening in Times of Crisis

The Memorandum was implemented in a period of prolonged economic crisis, with declining university access mirroring wider growing inequalities. The initiatives locally developed by the PAT and the university triggered tensions with the state, as they were deemed to contravene specific national interests, and critiques of RASU have increased since 2016 at multiple government levels. Members of both the national parliament and the provincial government raised formal questions about the programme. It was argued that, in attending specifically

to refugee-related issues, the university had failed to take into account other forms of marginalisation or disadvantage.[5]

These critiques called for the university to extend similar inclusion initiatives to other sections of the locality and the country more broadly.[6] With respect to the SuXr programme, for instance, the awarding of extracurricular credits to students who volunteered with refugees was questioned. The lack of similar programmes to support elderly or disabled people was highlighted, with the university accused of 'indifference to the increasing malaise and instability of the national society'.[7] The university's response to these criticisms stressed that both RASU and SuXr developed on the bases of international convention, its constitutional commitment, and its special status within the province. It also stressed that a system of scholarship traditionally supports disadvantaged students, with other extracurricular programmes existing to support disabled students.

Changes in national and provincial politics further highlighted the limits of a dependent relationship between the PAT and the university. Up until 2018, the centre-left coalition in the provincial government partially ensured the continuity and legitimacy of the RASU programme. However, the 'reciprocal relation' between the two parties changed after the radical-right Lega Party won national and provincial elections in March and October 2018. In the same year, the national Law 132 cancelled the humanitarian protection status, rendering it non-renewable and meaning it could not be converted into a study permit. While the effects for refugee students at national level are still unclear, University of Trento students holding humanitarian protection status can no longer be enrolled in RASU.

At provincial level, the impact of the immigration policies developed since 2018 overlaps with the end of the Memorandum in 2020. In the last eighteen months, CINFORMI and several reception structures have radically reduced or transformed their mandates. These changes raise concerns for the university around the sustainability of the projects and the continuation of collaborations, as the relationship with political and civil society is increasingly fraught. This demands the development of a more outward-looking approach from the university. In-depth dialogue and collaboration at inter-regional and national levels is needed in order to foster economic, organisational and pedagogical initiatives to sustain the programme in the long term. Currently, the university is exploring collaborations with UNHCR in order to reach out to refugee students in Italy or through international university corridors.

Conclusions: The Meanings of Openness

The locality is a context of waiting and agentiveness for refugees, where juridical and socio-economic uncertainties combine with aims of retrieving educational projects. Drawing from the recent experience of Trento, this chapter has discussed the meanings of 'opening up the university to refugees', taking into consideration the particular relationship between higher education (HE) communities, the provincial government and the city, and with regard to broader national orientations. The aim was to contribute to a bourgeoning literature on the local turn in migration/refugee studies – within and beyond an MLG perspective – by delving into the relatively little-studied dimension of the tertiary educational experiences and prospects of displaced people within the university community and the city. The present discussion cannot be generalised, and further analysis is certainly required in order to map the specificities and continuities of localising HE strategies for refugees across different cities, regions and in regard to shifting national policies. However, we can say that refugee policies in Italy, including those related to HE, have been open to the inclusion of sub-national actors and initiatives to a substantial degree. National fellowship schemes have been developed in parallel with – and partly influenced by – university programmes developed at sub-national levels. The Italian case thus seems to confirm wider trends in the key role of sub-national governments and local civil society networks in fostering university programmes for refugees (Streitwieser et al. 2019). Yet we must also note that consultations with lower government levels and non-public actors in Italy are not constitutionally binding, and ultimate decisions remain highly centralised in the hands of the national government and Interior Ministry. As such, national-level changes can deeply influence local initiatives and plans, enhancing and inhibiting sub-national programmes.

In Trento, the opening of the university to refugees was primarily a response to local transformations and perceptions. It reflected a distinct relationship between the university and the PAT, which called upon the university's commitment to provide services to the wider community. Several challenges have emerged from the relative 'novelty' of the initiatives and the difficulty of balancing approaches centred on the 'special' needs of refugee students with the need to meet the criteria of selection, competitiveness and performance that increasingly characterise academic culture in Italy. While the system values the swift completion of credits, this contradicts the complexities students face in transitioning from refugee situations to membership of an HE commu-

nity – as the high drop-out rate illustrates. Internal regulations combine with economic problems and prolonged legal uncertainties to cause student outflows.

Other challenges result from a lack of cross-regional dialogue and national coordination (Ramsay and Baker 2019) on common challenges and good practices (see Di Stefano and Cassani, this volume). Without diminishing local initiatives' importance in responding to specific territorial concerns, the risk of a monadic approach to refugee students and higher education should be considered. So far there has been limited national political and academic debate about refugees' access to HE. Many universities tend to approach the presence of displaced students in the educational community and the city through a short-term 'everlasting emergency' approach, which side-lines the longer-term presence of students with refugee backgrounds in Italian universities and limits discussion of the pedagogical possibilities of a more inclusive university. The 'Manifesto for an Inclusive University' promoted by UNHCR-Italy (UNHCR 2019) is a first important step in this direction, although it is too early to predict its potential national and sub-national impacts.

Changing local and national political scenarios – partly induced by radical right parties' prolonged influence on migration politics, policies and discourses – contribute to further weakening the legitimacy of inclusive educational policies and the openness of universities to refugees and asylum seekers. Trento's experience shows how the relationship between the university and the provincial government, together with national political shifts, may easily translate into closure. It raises broader questions about the autonomy of the university, and demonstrates the need to implement national-level policies that can configure and sustain local initiatives in future. The language and content of national and provincial parliamentary interrogations outlined above oppose refugees to a more 'legitimate' community of university learners and beneficiaries. It creates a hierarchy between deserving national subjects and 'external' bodies deemed to be seizing educational opportunities from nationals. These critiques disregard the multi-level legal frameworks (local, national and international) requiring host societies to work towards refugee inclusion, as well as the initiatives developed by universities towards other disadvantaged groups.

At the same time, however, the challenges of widening educational access in a context where university study has traditionally been a privilege of the few, and where prolonged economic crisis has led, in turn, to public higher education cuts, cannot be easily dismissed (cf. Loher

et al. 2019). Future implementation of expansive national policies in HE aimed, among other things, at 'opening' universities to traditional and newly marginalised groups would reduce the risks of making refugee students the scapegoats of a more general malaise. As such, future analyses of the meanings, outcomes and challenges related to 'opening up universities to refugees' will need to address the growing inequalities and marginalisation – across class, ethnicity, nationality, gender and religious differences – that characterise European universities and societies more broadly.

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Notes

1. In Trento, issues otherwise devolved by the state to regional or municipal governments usually become competencies of the provincial government.
2. Title V, Art. 117, Comma 3 of the Italian Constitution.
3. For an overview from the Italian government website: http://www.integr azionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Approfondimenti/Pagine/Borse-di-studio-per-beneficiari-di-protezione-internazionale.aspx (accessed: 13 March 2020).
4. This crucial aspect addresses the ambivalent construction and categorisation of students as 'refugees', and requires further reflection.

5. Inquiry no. 047 made by senator De Bertoldi (FdI) on 16 October 2018 to the Ministry of Education, University and Research.
6. Inquiry made by provincial councillor Fugatti (Lega) to the Provincial Autonomous Province on 30 November 2016.
7. Inquiry no. 047 made by senator De Bertoldi (FdI) on 16 October 2018 to the Ministry of Education, University and Research.

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