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Building a pathway to belonging: the role of higher education in supporting refugees' inclusion

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Introduction

Over the last decade, the world is facing an unprecedented flux in refugee flows due to persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations; a flux that has magnified to a “global crisis.” It is notable that more than 117.2 million people will be forcibly displaced or become stateless in 2023, according to UN Refugee Agency’s estimations (UNHCR, 2023). In this climate, states and societies across the globe are facing the challenge of successfully managing this ‘crisis’. Success involves nothing less than the proof that states and societies can successfully include refugees, while pursuing social cohesion and sustainable development.

In the light of these circumstances, on December 17th in 2018, the United Nations General Assembly voted in favor of the new refugee agreement, also known as the “The Global Compact on Refugees,” which aims to improve the international response to existing and new refugee flows (UN, 2018). The Compact calls for greater support for refugees from their host countries and aims to strengthen refugees’ self-reliance and resilience, enabling them to contribute as much as possible both to their own future and the host society. In this context, the UN has called higher education institutions (HEIs) to support the implementation of the Compact by playing a proactive role in supporting refugees in their journeys to inclusion and belonging. In response, HEIs around the world have partnered the United Nations in promoting the Global Compact at national level. In many countries, UNHCR has concluded memoranda of understanding and collaboration with academic institutions aiming to enhance refugees’ access opportunities to HEIs, and at the same time, to prepare students, but also the leaders of the younger generation, through the cultivation of specialized knowledge and skills in managing the refugee issue. It is thus an imperative need to explain in more detail the ways HEIs may support refugees’ social, economic, and academic inclusion.

In this context, HEIs can and should contribute in the management of the refugee crisis by developing actions aimed at the populations in move, and by implementing actions directed toward the receiving society (Finatto et al., 2023). Therefore, this opinion article aims, on the one hand, to examine in what ways HEIs around the world are currently working toward supporting refugees in their efforts to become socially, economically, and academically included. However, on the other hand, this article aims to urge higher education stakeholders around the world to put the necessary structures, policies, and practices in place for their institutions to make an impact both on the receiving societies, and on refugees’ lives. Although this article seeks to inter alia highlight best practices that may be endorsed by HEIs, it should be noted that there is still a long way to go for HEIs to indeed play a catalytic role in the academic and socio-economic inclusion of refugees (Finatto et al., 2023). Arguably, there is still a strong need for more initiatives and support from HEIs toward refugees.

How can HEIs support refugees' journeys to belonging?

Past research and literature has accrued the social and economic benefits of access to higher education for both refugees and the receiving societies (i.e., Unangst and Crea, 2020; Martin and Stulgaitis, 2022). Research findings link higher education to refugees' greater social, economic and civic integration, healing of post-traumatic experiences, smoother resettlement process, wellbeing, and livelihoods, while leading to broader social inclusion and cohesion (i.e., Fincham, 2020; Kingston and Karakas, 2022; Finatto et al., 2023). Nonetheless, past research also cautions about the barriers refugees are facing in accessing and successfully completing higher education including limited understanding of the higher education system of the host country, financial and information barriers, language and cultural obstacles, psychosocial difficulties, complex family dynamics, and colonial knowledge systems prevailing in HEIs (i.e., Lambrechts, 2020; Kingston and Karakas, 2022; Martin and Stulgaitis, 2022).

For all the above reasons, it is important for HEIs around the world to adhere to policies of non-discrimination in admitting students without reference to race, color, religion, or refugee status. By incentivizing the expanded admission of refugees to university, VET, and non-formal programmes, they seek to enhance the opportunities given to diverse generations of refugees to develop skills that are considered essential in the labor market, such as cognitive, interpersonal, social, academic, and digital skills (Fincham, 2020). In this direction, the UNHRC has concluded Memoranda of Understandings with many universities to benefit refugees and to increase opportunities for refugees to access tertiary education. UNHCR (2019, p. 8) notes the following with regards to the matter:

"The inclusion of refugees in [...] higher education programmes helps ensure that younger generations develop problem-solving and other cognitive, interpersonal, social, civic, academic and computer/digital literacy skills needed for the labor market."

For example, a number of universities across the world offer full scholarships, both for conventional and distance-learning programmes, to newly arrived refugees, who meet the academic criteria, but do not have the opportunity for higher education mainly because of economic reasons (i.e., Détourbe and Goastellec, 2018; Kingston and Karakas, 2022; Finatto et al., 2023). It is notable that for the same reasons some HEIs offer access flexibility and distance-learning opportunities to refugees living in countries different to the location of the HEI, or to refugees located in rural areas or even asylum seekers located in refugee camps. However, many refugees cannot access higher education or take advantage of scholarship schemes as they are unable to obtain the necessary documentation and qualifications to enroll in universities (Kingston and Karakas, 2022), while some scholarships do not cover living costs (Lambrechts, 2020). HEIs often show lack of flexibility on these matters, while their bureaucratic structures are inhibiting refugees' access. Moreover, it should be noted that although technology-supported programmes (i.e., online courses, MOOCs)

have a positive effect, they require financial resources, equipment, and digital literacy on the part of refugees (Bolon et al., 2020).

Beyond admission services, to help refugee students excel academically and avoid the risk of dropping out, some HEIs provide tailored-made academic advising services and other support structures (Unangst and Crea, 2020). In this way, they wish to help their refugee students to better choose their classes so as to suit their interests, needs, and personal circumstances (that also relate to their refugee status). Moreover, personalized tutoring services are provided by HEIs to help refugee students accelerate in their learning and performance. Effective tutoring programmes offered by HEIs to refugees should have the form of supplementary teaching offered on one-to-one basis or in small groups. In some cases, refugee students' advising and tutoring is complemented by psychological counseling, psychotherapy, and mentoring services. As refugee students may experience post-traumatic stress (due to their experience of war) that negatively impacts on both their studies and inclusion, such provisions are an imperative need. Accommodations should also take place at the classroom level, as lecturers will have to reflect on the teaching and learning process. As the need to decolonise academic knowledge in HEIs is imperative, faculty should design curricula that foster diversity in the university classroom, and cultivate culturally-responsive teaching as essential components of this process.

Secondly, perhaps the greatest contribution of HEIs to the successful management of the refugee crisis lies in carrying out empirical research on the subject. The results of such research may inform interventions mainstreamed by tripartite alliances between the government, the civil society, and HEIs (Jungblut et al., 2018). Research on possible ways to promote the socio-economic and academic inclusion of refugees can enhance efforts to help refugees maintain and sustain their livelihoods, wellbeing, and social cohesion. Unfortunately, however, the restricted funding resources for conducting research projects in the field of Humanities is often a barrier to extensively researching this field. The research programmes that had been already implemented or are currently being implemented draw on funding mainly coming from European and international sources such as the European Refugee Fund and the UNHCR. The conclusions reached so far by the research carried out in the field by academics and HEIs, caution about the insufficient and tokenistic structural, fiscal, legal and psychosocial support provided to refugees to reach out their autonomy, resilience and socio-economic inclusion (i.e., Bolon et al., 2020; Lambrechts, 2020; Finatto et al., 2023). At the same time, research findings warn that in our western world, paternalistic and stereotypical attitudes toward those who are considered as the social "other" continue to haunt our societies.

In overcoming racism as barrier, academic research focusing on refugees' inclusion proposes innovative and creative solutions (Unangst and Crea, 2020). What this research suggests is that HEIs need to keep educating themselves on racism, establish institutional mechanisms to defend the victims of racism, and develop pertinent accountability systems and review processes. Suggested tools for uprooting discrimination between students include developing awareness and solidarity on campus (Kingston

and Karakas, 2022), and building social networks between refugees and local students (Unangst and Crea, 2020). Similarly, training faculty and HEI staff to build their intercultural competence is necessary for combating discrimination between students and HEI personnel. Faculty should also be trained in scaffolding diversity in their classrooms, and also in second-language acquisition as means to overcome cultural and linguistic racism, respectively. Thirdly, HEIs, as part of their social corporate responsibility policies, implement initiatives that target the broader populations of refugees. Some examples of best practices are the provision of socio-psychological support to refugees by university psychologists and Psychology students, and the organization of recreational (i.e., sports and arts) and cognitive activities by academics and students (e.g., language seminars; Finatto et al., 2023). An example coming from my institution in Cyprus, is that the Mobile Clinic of the Medical School of the University of Nicosia visits regularly the Reception and Accommodation Centers for Asylum Seekers in order to conduct diagnostic tests, but also informative sessions on health, sex education, and nutrition. It is notable that some of these sessions are conducted in the Arabic language, which is widely used by residents of the Centers. Of major importance are some information and lifelong learning programmes for immigrants and refugees in which some HEIs participate. For example, our University participated in the programme “Migrant Information Centers” aiming at the creation of information and support centers for migrants and refugees, their families and communities, as well as the “Digital Inclusion” programme which sought to develop digital tools for the better education and training of migrant and refugee populations.

Last but not least, HEIs are called to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities for successfully managing the refugee crisis among their future graduates through intercultural and other programmes (Crea and McFarland, 2015). These graduates may have an influential socio-political role in decision-making processes for refugees. Understanding the causes and consequences of forced migration, as well as acquiring intellectual and practical skills to address its challenges more effectively, play an essential role in developing and implementing effective refugee assistance and support programmes. Therefore, some HEIs have included in their curricula courses in cognitive areas that contribute to the multifaceted preparation of students, but also of the civil society, to support refugees (Crea and McFarland, 2015). Typically, actions developed include the teaching international law for refugees through regular lectures and workshops, the participation of postgraduate students in UNHCR internship programmes, the development of joint programmes with other universities abroad in Refugee Studies, and the delivery of programmes postgraduate programmes in intercultural education and intercultural mediation. To better prepare the state authorities and the civil society toward this direction, HEIs hold conferences, seminars, and workshops in thematic areas such as Human Rights, the processes of globalization and social transformation, crime and trafficking of persons, and intercultural education.

Despite the potential HEIs have in supporting refugees' inclusion, they face a number of challenges in implementing best practices toward this direction. To begin with, Brown (2004, p. 25)

cautions about the “attitudinal obstacles faced by the institutions of higher education in forging ahead with an agenda of diversity.” This translates not only into the resistance to change, but also into the “white culture” that characterizes the faculty of many western universities. Furthermore, the legal system of the host countries is often restrictive to HEIs being flexible toward refugees' needs (Martin and Stulgaitis, 2022). For example, some groups are not granted the right to use financial-support sources or even enroll in HEIs because of their status (i.e., asylum seekers with pending claims). Additionally, some HEIs face financial barriers that are restrictive to their efforts to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, but also in providing financial support to refugees.

Conclusions

In this article, we examined the ways higher education currently contributes to the management of the refugee crisis around the world. For this to happen, societies should become socially cohesive by providing the necessary “resources of hope” that would allow for refugees' inclusion, wellbeing, and livelihood to flourish. These “resources of (strong and well-founded) hope” include an interrelated set of structural, cultural, and social strategies and practices that should be based on social justice and interculturalism (Finatto et al., 2023). Arguably, HEIs may endorse an influential role in developing and implementing intercultural and socially-just strategies and practices. It is thus also important to record future prospects and ways in which HEIs may contribute to the effective management of the refugee crisis, while focusing on social cohesion and sustainability. The issues discussed in this article need to be thought through in the contemporary context of far-right populism, the subsequent rise of neo-nationalism and neo-xenophobia, and the closing of borders to migrants, regardless of whether they are refugees or not.

According to recent research and societal debates, support to refugees may be achieved through their unhindered admission to HEIs, the provision of free information, counseling, advocacy, mediation and support services, but also the implementation of empowerment and capacity building actions (Unangst and Crea, 2020). At the same time, higher education should take actions toward the development of appropriate socio-political and institutional conditions to support the inclusion of refugees by sensitizing the society about refugees' needs, providing research-based suggestions and support to structural, political and jurisprudential changes, fighting against discrimination, racism and trafficking of persons, and finally by networking and cooperating with the state and the civil society in actions supporting refugees' inclusion, wellbeing, and livelihoods (Jungblut et al., 2018).

In this endeavor, we argue that there is an imperative need for HEIs and the broader academic community to get deeply involved in the following actions: (a) research evaluation of the implementation of refugee rights and standards of treatment for asylum seekers, (b) consultation with the Parliament and other state and civil society bodies for the purpose of improving the current legislation on refugees and asylum seekers—at the

national, European, and supranational levels, (c) provision of technical assistance, legal advice and other forms of support to the authorities for quality decision-making aimed at the refugees' inclusion, (d) educating various state and civil society leaders and stakeholders on key protection issues, such as the rights of refugees, reception conditions for asylum seekers and child protection, (e) raising public awareness, and (f) offering market-targeted vocational training and lifelong learning programmes to refugees.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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