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The socio-economic integration of refugees involves recognising know-how, qualifications and skills

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Although higher education institutions have been called upon to recruit more students, refugees face multiple obstacles when it comes to accessing them. This is a clear sign that European countries, on this matter as elsewhere, are not without paradoxes or renunciations. And yet, the tools do exist.

Across the world, the university enrolment rate is increasing¹. Its global average of 36% rises to 76% in regions such as Europe and North America. But this is a movement from which refugees are excluded². Of the 25 million refugees in the world in 2018, 61% are young people³. But only 1% of them have access to higher education. In the United Kingdom, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) has highlighted the scale of this difference between refugees and the rest of the population in order to formulate recommendations for a more open, diverse and inclusive university system⁴. Globally, according to a 2016 UNESCO report, refugees are five times more likely to be out of school⁵.

Yet the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit” (Article 26.1)⁶. In 1997, to make it easier for refugees to exercise this fundamental right, the European countries ratified a joint convention by the Council of Europe and UNESCO called the Lisbon Recognition Convention, dedicated specifically to the “recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region”, inviting the fifty-three countries that ratified it to take:

“all feasible and reasonable steps [...] to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or

¹ The gross enrolment rate indicates the number of students in higher education institutions, expressed as a percentage of the age group for this level of education, <http://uis.unesco.org/fr>

² In international law, according to the 1951 Geneva Convention, a *refugee* is a person who, if they return to their country, “has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group”. An *asylum seeker* is a person who has filed an individual asylum application with a State in order to be granted the status of refugee. A *migrant* is, according to UNESCO’s definition, “any person who lives temporarily or permanently in a country where he or she was not born, and has acquired some significant social ties to this country”.

³ “We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. An unprecedented 68.5 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 25.4 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18”. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018. www.unhcr.org/fr

⁴ Higher Education Policy Institute-HEPI, “Reaching the parts of society universities have missed”, Report 106, 2018, www.hepi.ac.uk

⁵ UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM report), 2016, <https://fr.unesco.org/gem-report/>

⁶ www.un.org/fr/universal-declaration-human-rights

to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence” (Section VII, Art. VII)⁷.

Regardless of these shared declarations and commitments, the different countries’ legal and regulatory frameworks fail to guarantee this right to education, thus slowing down refugees and asylum seekers’ access to the labour market⁸.

Material hurdles

The members of the European Union are faced with a paradox. Under the influence of their governments, global rankings⁹ and the hegemony of the Anglo-American model¹⁰, higher education institutions are increasing their efforts to enrol more international students – indicators of a country’s quality and attractiveness¹¹. However, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) keeps generating hurdles for this particular category of potential international students, namely refugees.

Economic studies agree on migrants’ positive impact on growth and job creation in the host countries and in the countries of origin¹², but also on the strong correlation between the migrants’ level of education and their capacity to contribute to the economy¹³, while intra-European mobility is insufficient to respond to the needs of the labour market, particularly in sectors under stress¹⁴. There is thus a strong incentive to suppress these¹⁵, especially as delays – namely the increasingly lengthy asylum processes – weaken physical health¹⁶, cause psychological despondency and slow down future socio-economic integration opportunities¹⁷. The prospect of starting or continuing studies is seen by asylum seekers, refugees and economists as a key factor of success and integration – as important as basic needs and safety¹⁸.

⁷ Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, STE n°165, Lisbon, 11 avril 1997, www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/lrc_FR.asp

⁸ Alastair Ager, Alison Strang, “Understanding integration: A conceptual framework”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.21-2, 2008, p.166-191, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>

⁹ Philip G. Altbach, “The past, present, and future of the research university”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.XLVI, n°16, 16 April 2011, p.65-73.

¹⁰ Simon Marginson, “Vers une hégémonie de l’université globale”, *Critique internationale*, n°2, 2008, p.87-107.

¹¹ Jane Knight, “Updated definition of internationalization”, *International Higher Education*, n°33, 2015.

¹² Francine D Blau and Christopher Mackie, “The economic and fiscal consequences of immigration report”, Washington, DC, The National Academies Press, 2017.

¹³ Holger Bonin, “The Potential Economic Benefits of Education of Migrants in the EU”, *EENEE Analytical Report*, 2017.

¹⁴ Martin Kahanec and Klaus F. Zimmermann (ed.), *Labor Migration, EU Enlargement, and the Great Recession*, Berlin, Springer, 2016.

¹⁵ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. *The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration*. The National Academies Press, Washington, DC, 2017.

¹⁶ Laurent Chambaud and Fabienne Azzedine, “Santé des migrants: les préjugés ont la vie dure”, *The Conversation*, décembre 2017.

¹⁷ Graham R. Davidson and Stuart C. Carr, “Forced migration, social exclusion and poverty: Introduction”, *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, vol.4, n°10, 1 May 2010; Jens Hainmueller, Dominik Hangartner, Duncan Lawrence, “When lives are put on hold: Lengthy asylum processes decrease employment among refugees”, *Science Advances*, 3 August 2016 ; Olena Havrylchyk, and Nadiya Ukrayinchuk, “Living in limbo: Economic and social costs for refugees”, SSRN, 1 November. 2016.

¹⁸ Thomas M. Crea, “Refugee higher education: Contextual challenges and implications for program design, delivery, and accompaniment”, *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol.46, 2016, p.12-22.

But, in a fragmented European higher education landscape that is still insufficiently clear in terms of access criteria and procedures, national regulations and practices currently complicate the refugees' experience¹⁹.

Among the most visible obstacles are language level and financial resources. In addition to a good average level of understanding and expression, access to higher education involves mastering the administrative and academic codes and the capacity to undergo various assessment tests. The costs of these tests come on top of school fees and tuition, which vary depending on the country. Academic cooperation organisations such as Germany's DAAD or the Netherlands' Nuffic²⁰, private foundations and various non-profit organisations have created dedicated scholarship funds. However, many refugees do not have the necessary budget to cover their daily expenses during their studies.

The gaps in terms of information, guidance and counselling also constitute a hurdle. Understanding the host country's school system means gaining familiarity with its evaluation and grading criteria, transport assistance schemes and other aspects of student life²¹. Finally, refugees have to deal with discrimination based on the perceptions of the host country's population regarding migrants, according to the European Network Against Racism. In a 2017 report, this organisation warned about the consequences of the anti-migrant political discourse and of exclusionary migration policies which, added to the racial discrimination and restrictions associated with the migrant status, widen the gap between migrants' employment rate and that of nationals – thus paving the way for exploitation²².

Equivalence problems

Throughout the past decade, many initiatives have tried to overcome these obstacles. The Refugees Welcome Map²³, created by the European University Association (EUA), aims to identify, document and update all of the facilitation mechanisms. Informed by education institutions, it gathers together more than 250 initiatives from thirty-one countries, and serves as a model for many other maps that associations and local authorities now offer.

To simplify refugees' transition toward their host country's university system, digital platforms and hybrid programmes – such as the University of Geneva's LearningLabs InZone²⁴, the Coursera for Refugees initiative²⁵ and the University of Gothenburg's Jamiya project²⁶ (all initially

¹⁹ Eva Alisic and Rianne M. Letschert, "Fresh eyes on the European refugee crisis", *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 12 May 2016.

²⁰ DAAD stands for Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service), www.daad.de/en/; Nuffic stands for Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education, www.nuffic.nl/en

²¹ Lukas Eckhardt, Jens Jungblut and Karol Pietkiewicz, *Refugees welcome? Recognition of qualifications held by refugees and their access to higher education in Europe: country analyses*, 2017.

²² "Racism and discrimination in the context of migration in Europe", *ENAR Shadow Report 2015-16*. ENAR stands for European Network Against Racism, www.enar-eu.org

²³ <http://refugeeswelcomemap.eua.be/Editor/Visualizer/Index/48>

²⁴ www.unige.ch/inzone/resources/

²⁵ <https://refugees.coursera.org/>

²⁶ www.jamiya.org/

designed for African and Jordanian residents' refugee camps) – have been redeployed and adapted to include language training and individual support²⁷.

Founded in Berlin in 2015, the social startup Kiron Open Higher Education²⁸ aims to improve the coordination between these primary training modules and European degree courses. Its strength comes from a partnership network with Europe's most prestigious institutions, NGOs and major international MOOC providers²⁹.

While these organisations – which understand the situation of asylum seekers and refugees and its legal intricacy – are critical for ensuring individual support, the main difficulty today is the inefficient and incomplete recognition of qualifications, particularly in the absence of official documents. This recognition is included in the Lisbon Convention, but it is faced with the heterogeneity of practices and resources inside the European zone³⁰, or even between two different institutions within the same country.

A lack of coordination

The European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENIC) and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARIC) are tasked with coordinating the implementation of a European qualification passport, launched in 2017 at the initiative of the Council of Europe³¹. Specifically developed for refugees with no original documents proving their qualifications, this document should allow a certified verification of language, professional and academic capacities. Its issuance relies on an interviewing process and the recognition of a wide range of proofs and self-assessment methods. However, with no official legal or administrative status, its potential recognition by universities and employers remains questionable. Although agencies in Germany (ANABIN), the UK (NARIC) and Norway (NOKUT) have succeeded in defining clear procedures for such certified assessment, the plan remains largely ineffective in many other countries.

In the field, however, a variety of actors have mobilised. In France, these interventions – often uncoordinated – have mainly been supported by higher education institutions, mostly through volunteers among student associations. While they play a leading role in integrating refugees locally, none of these actions have yet been studied in terms of their impact, which would allow a transfer of knowledge.

More than an objective in itself, access to higher education is above all the first step toward the socio-economic integration and empowerment of migrants, particularly refugees. The scale of the current and future economic, political and security challenges demands an increased involvement of beneficiaries in the evaluation and monitoring of both the actions taken and their impacts before they can be deployed on a wide scale.

²⁷ Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Meghan Benton and Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *Rebuilding after Crisis: embedding Refugee integration in migration management systems*, Washington DC, MPI, 2017.

²⁸ <https://kiron.ngo/>

²⁹ Franziska Reinhardt, Olga Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Tobias Deribo *et al.*, "Integrating refugees into higher education – the impact of a new online education program for policies and practices", *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, vol.2, n°2, 2018.

³⁰ Bernhard Streitwieser and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "Higher Education's Response to the European Refugee Crisis: Challenges, Strategies and Opportunities", in *The Globalization of Internationalization*, Routledge, 2017, p.53-63.

³¹ www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications

Translated from the French by Benjamin Richardier

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Deputy Director and Dean of Academic Affairs at the EHESP French School of Public Health. Alessia directed and developed the Alliance programme, a multilateral innovation incubator in research and training, at Columbia University in New York. She teaches comparative public policy at Sciences Po Rennes, having been Associate Professor at Columbia University and at the Beijing University of Tsinghua. A graduate from Sciences Po and LUISS, she has a PhD in sociology and is a world-renowned expert in development and education. She is a member of the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations (CSO) and UMR Arènes, as well as many international reading committees and boards. She participates in the “Migration and Asylum” scientific committee of the Italian social cooperative Lai Momo, and she represents the EHESP on the executive board of the Fondation Croix-Rouge française.

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