ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES:
A Review of Interventions in North America and Europe

BERNHARD STREITWIESER
BRYCE LOO
MARA OHORODNIK
JISUN JEONG
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AUTHORS

Bernhard Streitwieser, The George Washington University
Bryce Loo, World Education Services
Mara Ohorodnik, Master’s Student, GW International Education Program
Jisun Jeong, Doctoral Student, GW PhD in Education

AUTHORS’ NOTE

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Questions and comments should be addressed to streitwieser@gwu.edu.
ABSTRACT

This paper examines current interventions to reduce barriers to higher education for refugees in North America and Europe. We analyze a diversity of interventions sponsored by host governments, higher education institutions, and non-governmental organizations, among others. These interventions differ in size, delivery method, focus, and extent of support, and range from a single language course or limited online learning opportunity to fully accredited higher education programs. However, significant problems hamper the efficacy of current interventions. Many efforts are limited in scope and ambiguous on credit transfer. Others provide full scholarships but no living expenses, constraining refugees’ long-term planning. Many lack transparency about their funding support and impact on intended beneficiaries, which makes it difficult to determine their efficacy. To widen refugees’ participation and success in higher education, we recommend that policy makers and administrators adopt a longer-term perspective, increase transparency, and use an evidence-based approach to developing and evaluating refugee programming.

Keywords: refugees, higher education, integration, Europe, North America

INTRODUCTION

Within the last five years, the global refugee population has increased by a staggering 65%. By the end of 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recorded 22.5 million refugees worldwide, the largest number in the agency’s history and unprecedented since the end of the Second World War (UNHCR, 2017). The UNHCR classifies refugees as those who have fled their countries to escape persecution, war and violence due to political, racial, religious, social and other affiliations.

While the global refugee crisis today reaches into nearly every corner of the world, since the beginning of its civil war in 2011, Syria has provided an especially acute and vivid picture of misery: more than 220,000 Syrians have been killed, 4.8 million have become refugees throughout North Africa and the Middle East (MENA), and more than 1.1 million have applied for asylum in Europe (Craddock and Luo, 2016). In Europe, Germany has absorbed the largest number of refugees in absolute numbers, 860,000 in 2015, and processed the largest number of asylum applications, 722,400 in 2016; nearly half came from Syria (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2017). Other European countries, notably Sweden, also took in large numbers (Loo, Streitwieser & Jeong, 2018). Outside of Europe, in 2016 the United States processed 262,000 asylum applications, half from Central America, while Canada by the end of 2017 reached a new intake record, processing 300,000 immigrants (Canadian Council for Refugees), and 40,000 Syrian refugees, twice the number it had initially signaled it would resettle (Government of Canada, 2017).

While securing shelter and safety is the primary concern of refugees following displacement, beginning or resuming education is often an immediate next step for successful integration.
Countering the Effects of Forced Migration Through Educational Interventions

Much of the extant literature on refugee education has focused to date on access to primary and secondary education, which indeed captures the largest demographic of refugees seeking educational access. However, that research is generally focused on education in refugee camps or on countries of first and temporary asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Talbot, 2013). Within these locations, the literature points to a wide range of barriers to education, including limited availability and accessibility of schools (Dryden-Peterson, 2011), problems with curriculum choices and language of instruction (Talbot, 2013), and issues of certification and recognition of studies (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Talbot, 2013). According to the UNHCR (2016), only 61% of refugee children have access to primary education and 23% to secondary schooling.

However, while the challenges of access to primary and secondary school are indeed great, among refugees of university age, the statistics are even more depressing: according to the UNHCR, only 1% will ever transition into, or back into, tertiary education, compared with the global average of 36%. Relatively little attention has been focused on refugee access to higher education so far, and little in the academic literature investigates the scope and nature of interventions that may exist to help provide pathways for this demographic into university studies (Dryden-Peterson, 2012; Felix, 2016; Zeus, 2011).

Challenges for Higher Education Access

Scholars have identified unique educational needs and challenges facing refugee students who seek entry to higher education. Five challenges are noteworthy. First, acquiring general proficiency in the local language, as well as learning the language of academic communication (Shakya et al, 2012; Felix, 2016). Second, gaining understanding of the system of higher education in the host country, including the application process, the educational culture, grading, credit accrual, and much more (Shankar et al., 2016; Loo, 2016). Third, financing education (Shakya et al, 2012; Loo, 2016), which tends to be a greater challenge in tuition-driven, high-cost systems like the U.S. than in tuition-free systems like Germany. Fourth, getting institutions in the host country to recognize the qualifications of students who often are forced to flee without documents that verify their previous educational accomplishments (Loo, 2016; Streitwieser & Taylor, 2016). For resettled refugees, documents proving their refugee status are not always issued uniformly (Tobenkin, 2006; Felix, 2016). Fifth, obtaining supports to integrate into higher education, such as
general academic support; housing, transportation, and other factors; support to help manage family responsibilities; and, if necessary, culturally sensitive psychosocial counseling.

In this discussion we focus on the literature regarding challenges for resettled refugees and asylees in developed areas such as Europe and North America, rather than those settled in neighboring host countries in developing regions. Only 16% of the world’s refugee population is hosted in developing regions of the world, according to the 2016 UNHCR Global Trends Report, and more focus has been on education in camps or in developing regions than in the developed world. Furthermore, most existing studies on higher education initiatives for refugees focus on a single country, such as Germany, Australia, Sweden, or Canada, rather than on a region or with an international focus. For example, a report from Jigsaw Consulting (Gladwell et al, 2016) is comprehensive but does not include the developed regions of North America and Europe. The European University Association (EUA) Welcome map, on the other hand, is regularly updated and can be filtered by several characteristics, but users must navigate multiple layers to locate more detailed information (EUA, 2017). In this review, we describe a wide range of services that currently exist to help refugee populations access and participate in higher education.

THE CURRENT STUDY

We have chosen to focus on universities, which are often international institutions and tend to be better resourced, more flexible, and better able to manage additional enrollments than other types of institutions (HEIs) (Streitwieser, Miller-Idriss & deWit, 2017). In the age of rankings and competition for world-class excellence (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010), universities have significant incentives to become global players and to attract new kinds of students. While refugee students do not generate short-term revenue but rather initially imply additional costs to an institution, over time studies have shown that they add value in important ways, from contributing new knowledge to an institution’s intellectual base to making the institution more diverse (Streitwieser, Brück, Moody & Taylor, 2017).

Since there are more global higher education interventions for refugees than this paper can adequately cover, we chose to review and categorize efforts that were initiated by, originate from, or operate within North America and Europe (excluding Turkey). We focused primarily on interventions that have targeted asylum-seekers or asylees and resettled refugees on these two continents. However, we also included interventions that originated in North America or Europe but provide higher education opportunities for refugees in developing regions and also in refugee camps.

We chose Europe and North America because they are particularly well resourced and have unique capacities that distinguish them from Africa and the Middle East, where the vast majority of refugees reside. Europe and North America have launched some of the largest higher education interventions for refugees and also house a notable segment of refugees
who seek access to the region’s diverse and well-known educational institutions. There is a need to examine what these regions are doing and the educational challenges they face.

We primarily analyze higher education interventions within the last five years (2013-2017) but also include some that were initiated earlier and that have continued. Due to the nature of the topic and availability of public information, our list of interventions is not exhaustive. Our intention is to offer a catalogue of efforts to show what is currently being done and thereby to identify what we believe must still happen. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of our review and recommendations for action and future research.

**Conceptual Framework**

The framework we use to nest our review of interventions in this study was inspired by Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, and Bereded-Samuel’s “integrative approach to quality higher education informed by social inclusion theory and practice” (2010). Echoing Ager and Strang’s promotion of education as a marker and mean of successful integration, Gidley et al. also posit that while access is often the predominant concern of disadvantaged groups, higher education opportunity is an especially important first step toward meaningful inclusion in society. Writing predominantly about Australian and European higher education systems, Gidley et al.’s nested schema of “degrees of inclusion” (p. 131) for higher education consists of three levels. First, Equitable access, which is the most basic form of social inclusion. Second, Engaged participation, which is rooted in social justice theories and concepts surrounding human rights and individual dignity. Third, Empowered success, which is the most inclusive and recognizes that individuals are complex and must be enabled to participate in society to the fullest extent possible. Adopting our categorization of interventions, which we illustrate in detail below, in Gidley et al.’s first category, interventions that increase access include scholarships, other forms of financial aid, improvements to infrastructure affecting institutions such as public transportation, and learning assistance to people with disabilities, among others. In their second category, relevant interventions include community partnerships, social entrepreneurship, mentorship, and arts and sports interventions. In their third category, relevant interventions overlap with efforts to increase participation, including interventions to increase feelings of empowerment, efforts to ensure that underrepresented voices are heard, and cultural festivals.

It is also important to examine the rationales of institutions and other providers for working with refugees. Jane Knight & Hans de Wit (1995) classified the predominant rationales for internationalization of higher education into four interrelated categories: academic, political, economic, and socio-cultural. We believe refugee interventions span all four rationales, and to that we suggest a fifth necessary rationale: humanitarianism. We will return to the fifth new rationale as part of our Discussion.
Knight (2008) updated the 1995 previous classification to include multiple levels of actors, most notably the national level and the institutional level. At the national level, rationales for internationalization of higher education are often concerned with improving the country’s economy and diplomatic relations, while rationales at the institutional level focus on improvements in international ranking and reputation, recruitment of top scholarly talent, and revenue generation, among others. This framework provides opportunities to analyze the multiple ways in which various actors approach the refugee crisis.

**Method of Developing Intervention Groupings**

The refugee and migrant crisis in Europe, which began with the war in Syria and accelerated particularly dramatically in the summer of 2015, has led to a significant increase in interventions within the higher education sector (Dragostinova, 2016). This is why we mainly examined interventions that were actively aiding refugees and asylum-seekers in that region between 2013 and 2017, regardless of whether they started earlier. Since Europe has recently experienced a particularly large influx of refugees, it was logical to begin our focus on that region. However, we soon also added a focus on North America in order to be able to compare interventions in both regions of the developing world.

The review in this paper is based on information that was publicly available in English. For a variety of reasons, the details and credibility of some of the information may vary to a small degree since public information is regularly updated, changed, corrected or removed. Our analysis also looked at interventions that work across multiple institutions or were advertised as being innovative in reaching a substantial numbers of refugees in individual settings, such as on a university campus. We characterized “innovative” as being a new type of program or method, or the adaptation of an idea put into practice in a new or novel way (see White & Glickman, 2007).

Finally, our review intentionally left out efforts to support refugee scholars, postdocs, and faculty. While these are critically important efforts, they were beyond the scope of our survey but might be taken up in a subsequent study. Our review also omitted re-certification or bridging programs aimed at professionals with degrees, as well as technical and vocational education programs.

The research team reviewed scholarly articles and journals, other publications, and institutional or organizational websites to learn more about how various actors were providing assistance for refugee education at the tertiary level. As we began to notice interventions common in both Europe and North America, we developed a system to categorize them based on the type of educational assistance being offered. Ultimately, we developed six categories of interventions to describe common types of support: (1) accredited on-site or blended learning programs; (2) international online learning platforms;
Although we are unable to provide a completely comprehensive overview of all interventions in North America and Europe, we have identified a wide range of current interventions to illustrate the broader efforts that are underway, which we have examined in greater depth than the aforementioned lists and maps have done.

**INTERVENTIONS BY CATEGORIES AND TYPE**

Appendix 1 illustrates the variety of interventions related to higher education that serve refugees in North America and Europe or that originated from these regions. The table is organized by our six categories and shows the key characteristics for each category, along with examples of specific interventions for that category that are described later in the text. Examples of the interventions are first divided by the region (North America, Europe), then by type of actors implementing the interventions. This includes Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), regional institutions (i.e., EU), government, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Private sector and Civil-Society Organizations (CSOs). The table is not intended to be exhaustive.

**Accredited On-Site or Blended Learning Programs**

Our study included accredited on-site or blended learning programs that originated in North America or Europe. Some of these interventions target resettled refugees and asylum seekers in these two regions, while others serve refugees in developing regions including in refugee camps. Unlike scholarship programs, these accredited on-site or blended learning interventions are often designed outside of traditional university programs to meet the specific circumstances of refugee students. Although some of these programs offer degrees and certifications from North American or European HEIs, the on-site learning usually takes place in developing regions, where students participate in face-to-face education with peers and teachers or tutors, as well as significant online learning components.

These programs can often reach greater numbers of refugee students than can be done through individual scholarships to traditional university-based programs and are often designed to include further study or employment in host or resettlement countries (Gladwell et al., 2016). Although some of the interventions described below started around the time of the Syrian refugee crisis, many began earlier to help refugees across the world.

Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER), formed in 2010, is one such intervention. It was initiated by York University in Canada, in partnership with Kenyatta University and Moi University in Kenya, Windle Trust Kenya, and the UNHCR. It is designed mainly for untrained teachers in refugee camps, who can then contribute back to the community (BHER, 2017). BHER is distinctive in that it provides various levels of internationally recognized university
programs, from certificates to bachelor’s degrees. BHER has supported up to 300 students since 2013 (O’Malley, 2016), and about 80 students are expected to earn bachelor’s degrees in 2018 from one of its three partner universities (Redden, 2017). Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Higher Education at the Margins (JWL), which originated in North America, offers English-language programs, certificate-level courses, and diploma programs to refugees in camps. After its three-year pilot since 2010, JWL has offered its own curriculum for a diploma in liberal studies, consisting of 45 credits of coursework over three years, and the degree is awarded by Regis University in Denver, Colorado (JWL, 2017).

Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) launched its global initiative for refugee higher education in July 2017, after receiving a $10 million donation (Keane, 2017). Their goal is to enable 50,000 refugees to earn degrees from accredited American universities in 20 locations by 2022 (Redden, 2017). SNHU has piloted a blended learning approach in two refugee camps in Rwanda, in cooperation with Kepler, a nonprofit university program based in Africa. The program plans to expand into four additional sites, including Kenya and Lebanon, in the next two years. Individual refugees receive tuition benefits worth $3,000 per year from the program (Redden, 2017).

InZone’s Rapid Response Module for humanitarian interpreters, which started in Europe in 2005 during the Iraq crisis, shows how a program can be adapted and expanded to meet changing humanitarian needs. Initially, the University of Geneva in Switzerland designed an innovative blend of face-to-face tutoring and online courses aimed at learners in fragile contexts (InZone, 2017). Currently, InZone offers various programs for refugees in developing regions as well as for resettled refugees, diasporas, tutors of refugees, and humanitarian professionals working with refugees.

There are also examples of accredited on-site or blended learning initiatives that have been developed since the Syrian refugee crisis. The Certificate Program in Community Mobilization in Crisis (CMIC), initiated by the University of Ottawa and World University Service of Canada, offers a 30-credit, 16-month online and on-site certificate program for Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Duval, 2015). In addition to providing refugees with accredited higher education opportunities, the program provides seed grants to design and implement community mobilization projects. Arizona State University (ASU), in partnership with Kepler, is piloting the Borderless Opportunities for Learning and Development (BOLD) project in Rwanda’s Kiziba refugee camp. Upon successful completion, students are expected to use the credits at ASU or transfer to their home institution (Lingenfelter, 2017). Finally, the Jamiya Project was found in Europe by two professionals with experience in researching and working with Syrian refugees. The pilot began in September 2016 with a 12-week blended program in applied IT for refugee students in Jordan (Emma, 2016). The online courses were certified by the University of Gothenburg in Sweden in collaboration with the Norwegian Refugee Council and Jesuit Refugee Service. The project is being designed as a diploma that can
fulfill the first year of a university degree program, and is expected to expand beyond Syrian refugees (Emma, 2016).

**International Online Learning Platforms**

International online learning platforms are particularly promising because they can be accessed anywhere a refugee has an internet connection and are more flexible than traditional on-site higher education. The opportunities described below originated in North America and Europe and serve refugee learners across the globe. Often they rely on partnerships with existing MOOC (massive open online course) providers, HEIs, and NGOs based in different countries. Most provide courses that are accredited by a participating or partner academic institution, but the level of accreditation and scope of interventions varies. Not all of the online accredited courses lead to completed degrees from higher education institutions.

One promising global initiative that provides accredited online associate’s or bachelor’s degrees to refugees and asylum-seekers is the University of the People (UoPeople). Based in the U.S., this nonprofit, online accredited university has been dedicated to providing global access to higher education since 2009 (Vanunu, 2015). Although its courses are tuition-free, the university charges a $100 exam fee per course, which adds up to $4,000 over a four-year degree (Vanunu, 2015). The university currently enrolls over 1,000 refugee students, of which about half are Syrian refugees (Redden, 2017). According to the website, refugee students can have the total cost of $4,000 waived to pursue an associate’s or bachelor’s degree in computer science or business administration. UoPeople and UNHCR have established a special policy, approved by a U.S. distance education accrediting organization to admit refugees and asylum seekers when official transcripts and documents cannot be obtained (Vanunu, n.d.). The university is supported by various foundations and has extensive academic partnerships that enable its graduates to continue their education at several well-known universities.

Other initiatives in this international online learning platforms category offer a catalogue of courses from various universities worldwide. Some online programs grant credits that can be transferred to offline university programs, while others provide non-credit course certificates.

The EdX platform, for example, founded in 2012 by Harvard University and MIT, offers access to online courses that earn college credit from top universities around the world. In 2016, EdX began supporting newly arrived Syrians and other refugees in Europe through a partnership with MOOC providers based in Germany (Kiron) and Jordan (Edraak) (Lapal, 2016). As of June 2017, refugee learners had taken 30 different courses from 13 EdX partners. After completing online courses from EdX-Kiron for two to three years, refugees can complete their studies on the campuses of several partner European universities (Lapal, 2016).
Coursera for Refugees initiative began in 2016 with funding from the U.S. Department although the original Coursera platform was founded in 2012. Coursera for Refugees offers MOOCs through partnerships with nonprofits that can host in-person cohorts of refugees taking the same course (Taber, 2017). According to the website, as of June 2017, Coursera has offered more than 1,300 course certificates to over 5,000 refugees through more than 30 nonprofits. Refugee students who complete a course receive an electronic certificate from an accredited institution but do not receive official academic credit. Rather, the initiative emphasizes opportunities for refugees to build career skills and transition into new host communities (Taber, 2017).

Kiron Open Higher Education was founded in March 2015 by Kiron, a Berlin-based startup. The program currently partners with 53 universities and MOOC providers to help refugees, internally displaced persons, or asylum-seekers continue or begin university-level studies; about 2,700 refugee students have benefited since the launch (Kiron, 2017). According to the website, the program provides certificates that meet European Higher Education Area standards but are not a full university degree. However, offline support is available to help refugees living in Germany, France, or Jordan to transfer their credits to official universities after one or two years of online study.

Open University, based in the UK, has offered flexible distance learning degree programs since 1969 (Clifton, 2015). More recently, it became part of the Language and Academic Skills and E-learning Resources (LASER) program funded by the EU through the British Council (Bubbers, 2015). LASER provides English, French, and German language courses to Syrian refugees temporarily residing in Lebanon and Jordan. The plan as of September 2015 was to select the 300 highest-achieving Syrian students, out of the 3,000 in the language course, to participate in Open University-accredited online degree programs and to select more than 400 language course completers to participate in Open University’s FutureLearn program, a non-accredited online course focused on employability and employment skills (Clifton, 2015). Information on the project’s outcome was not publicly available.

**Scholarships**

This type of intervention directly tackles the financial challenges of higher education by providing full or partial scholarships to refugees to attend HEIs. Most, if not all, of the scholarship interventions provide refugee students with access to the same degree programs in mainstream institutions as any other students. Although these interventions vary in their requirements, their intended outcomes are often the same—an accredited diploma or undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. Some institutions provide stipends as well as full scholarships. Scholarships specifically for refugee students have expanded in North America and especially in Europe.
Some higher education scholarships for refugees are provided by host country governments. Two standout institutions are the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and the World University Service of Canada (WUSC). In Germany, government and other actors have responded remarkably to provide services for the nation’s large number of refugees. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) devoted €100 million through 2019 to integrate refugees at all levels of education. Of that amount, €29 million was directed to the DAAD to offer competitive grants to German higher education institutions via the “Integrating Refugees in Degree Programs” (Integra) initiative intended to set up pathways to university. Most Integra programs begin with German language training. In 2016, more than 130 higher education institutions in Germany had initiated training programs, and more than 6,500 refugees had enrolled in additional language and content-specific preparatory programs. The DAAD “Refugees Welcome: Students Helping Refugees” initiative also provided funding to support university students coordinating language classes and social programs for refugees in the summer months.

In Canada, the Student Refugee Program (SRP) from the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) serves a dual focus of helping young refugees access Canadian higher education and resettling refugees into Canada as permanent residents (Peterson, 2012; WUSC, 2017). WUSC’s ability to resettle refugees through higher education is an outflow of Canada’s unique model allowing private entities to sponsor refugees. WUSC has been designated by the Canadian government as a Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH), meaning it can sponsor and resettle refugees. Using staff on the ground in first countries of asylum and refugee camps, WUSC identifies potential program participants. Student-led committees at participating campuses across Canada then sponsor refugee students on behalf of WUSC. These local committees agree to provide refugees with a minimum of 12 months of full financial support, beginning with their arrival on campus, and with other support services. Many committees extend their support beyond this initial year. Funding levels and sources vary among participating institutions. One unique approach to funding is through student and/or faculty levies, which are nominal fees, voluntarily added onto students’ tuition bills or deductions from faculty salaries that fund one or a few refugee students. The WUSC program supports 130 students per year on 80 campuses, and since its founding in 1978 has hosted about 1,700 refugee students from nearly 40 countries (WUSC, 2017). Other Canadian HEIs also provide scholarships for refugees (Ferede et. al., 2017).

European HEIs have been particularly active in providing scholarship programs to address the influx in Syrian refugees. Assistance may take the form of waiving fees, providing tuition scholarships, or offering free courses for refugees and asylum seekers. Among the many European HEIs that provide scholarships to refugees are the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Sussex, and Warwick. The University of York in England has promised $750,000 USD to help Syrian refugees (Cremonini, 2016). In Germany, many universities, including the Technical University of Munich, University of Tuebingen, and Bielefeld University, are offering free language courses in German. Some universities are providing not only tuition-based
scholarships but also additional financial aid to help with wider needs. For example, the University of Barcelona (UB), with support from various stakeholders, has launched an impressive combination of assistance for Syrian refugees. The program pledges to take in 100 refugees and offer 20 rent-free apartments, full tuition scholarships, free courses in Catalan and Spanish, and mentoring programs (UB, 2015). These students will also have access through UB to legal advice on obtaining refugee status, psychological support, and dental care.

The oldest refugee organization in the Netherlands, Foundation for Refugee Students University for Asylum Fund (UAF), provides support, academic counseling, and employment opportunities to refugees and asylum seekers who wish to study in the country. UAF also offers grants and loans for higher education courses to highly qualified refugee students. In 2016, UAF began the Refugees@campus program, which connects 500 refugee students to Dutch student mentors (UAF, 2016).

Another funding program is HOPES (Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians), which is implemented by the DAAD in collaboration with its partners from the British Council, Campus France, and Nuffic, the Dutch organization for internationalization in education. Higher education institutions and organizations in host communities receive financial support to provide these educational offerings and improve their own capacity. As an EU regional trust fund, HOPES has a €12 million project to provide academic counselling to up to 42,000 young Syrians, as well as 4,000 language courses, more than 300 full academic scholarships for study in the region, and higher education short courses for more than 3,500 student refugees (HOPES, 2017).

On the other side of the Atlantic, in the U.S. the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) developed the Syrian Scholarship Initiative in partnership with Jusoor, a Michigan based NGO (Jusoor, 2017a). This initiative provides Syrian students with need-based scholarships for all of ITT’s degree programs. Since 2012, at least 40 students have received scholarships, and some earlier graduates have been employed by major U.S. corporations (Jusoor, 2017a). Jusoor, a Michigan NGO, is helping Syrian refugee students to engage in university study in the U.S. and elsewhere by increasing scholarships, advising students during the application process, and sponsoring other academic programs (Jusoor, 2017b). According to their annual report, over 3,400 Syrian students have enrolled in Jusoor programs, 490 scholarships have been awarded, and 600 students have been mentored as of 2016. In total, Jusoor has provided almost $656,000 in higher education scholarships for Syrian refugees. Additionally, IIE has partnered with Jusoor to create “100 Syrian Women, 10,000 Syrian Lives,” a new scholarship fund designed for Syrian women to study at U.S. and Canadian HEIs (Milner, 2016).

Civil society organizations based in both North America or Europe also provide scholarships for refugees, mostly in collaboration with HEIs. For example, the Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis, led by the U.S. Institute of International Education (IIE), offers full and
partial scholarships for Syrian refugees at 60 member HEIs (IIE, 2017a). The program has served more than 500 Syrian refugee students and has spent upwards of $4.5 million largely through grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the U.S. Department of State (IIE, 2017b).

Through the IIE Syria Consortium, member institutions have made commitments to accept Syrian refugees, provide them with financial support, and support their integration into the campus community. The consortium’s top five hosting institutions are the Illinois Institute of Technology (USA), Monmouth College (Illinois, USA), Montclair State University, University of Saint Joseph, and the University of Evansville (IIE, 2018). A new student-led campaign called Books Not Bombs urges universities to join the IIE Syria Consortium and provide scholarships for Syrian students. The campaign is active in 170 universities and is supported by over 16,000 students in the U.S. (Books Not Bombs, 2017). Currently, 28 U.S. institutions are participating, as are universities in other countries (Heim, 2016).

Inter-governmental organizations have also stepped up their efforts. The UNHCR’s DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative), one of the most established interventions, grants scholarships to recognized refugees to attend HEIs in their host countries, and offers education opportunities to refugees considering repatriation in their countries of origin. Since 1992, more than 13,500 refugee students in 50 countries of asylum have been benefited from DAFI (UNHCR, 2018).

**Information Sharing Platforms**

Comprehensive online platforms do not typically provide direct access to higher education enrollment but rather connect refugees to information and resources for accessing higher education. These online platforms are geared toward refugee students who may be unfamiliar with the higher education systems of their resettlement country and need assistance. A few comprehensive online databases in North America and Europe support refugees in this way. The Refugee Center Online platform, for example, provides resources to help newly arrived refugees build a better life in the U.S., including providing information about educational scholarships, financial aid, and online courses. Their website lists dozens of scholarships for refugees and immigrant students, categorized by state, nationality, field of study, and more; and resources for learning English, including free online classes, videos, and apps (Refugee Center Online, 2017).

A comprehensive online Refugees Welcome Map, mentioned previously, was created by the European Universities Association in 2016 to identify higher education interventions for refugee students that are being offered by more than 200 education institutions in 27 countries (EUA, 2017). HEIs that offer support to refugee students voluntarily complete a short survey to add their initiative to this map, which gets continuously updated. The Catalyst Foundation for Universal Education and IIE are also developing the Platform for Education in
Emergencies Response (PEER), a web-based tool that helps refugee students identify scholarships and other higher education resources. Currently this database hosts scholarships and other learning opportunities. Once it is fully developed, it will include student advising, translation services, education advocacy groups, access to online courses, and more (University World News, 2016).

Assessment of Credentials and Qualifications

Policies for recognizing the educational qualifications of refugees vary from country to country. In Europe, collaboration among various nations and UN organizations has increasingly led to a European-wide response to recognizing refugee qualifications, particularly among the network of national education information centers, known as the ENIC-NARIC Networks. Efforts in North America are more fragmented, although actors in Canada and the U.S. are working on the issue.

One of the most innovative interventions is the new European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, which verifies higher education credentials for refugees through an authorized assessment. The Council of Europe is working with the Greek Ministry of Education and UNHCR to recruit students for the self-assessment. The council aims to expand this service to other countries and to implement a new policy, in coordination with the UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention, that calls for a fair and quick assessment of higher education credentials for refugees and displaced people (Custer, 2017).

The European Qualifications Passport has built on the efforts of individual bodies in various countries. For example, Norway’s main national education information center, NOKUT, has developed one of the most streamlined processes for refugees and other migrants who lack official or verifiable documentation of their qualifications. Applicants who lack necessary documentation for a regular procedure are routed to an alternative procedure through which they can present whatever documentation of academic credentials they have (Skjerven & Malgina, 2015a, 2015b). In Germany, the Anabin database provides a similar service.

Institutions in Canada and the U.S. vary tremendously in their responses to credential issues in applications from some resettled refugees and asylum-seekers. Most institutions do not make their policies publicly available. A few have signaled that they are willing to look at applications on a case-by-case basis from displaced individuals without documents. Ryerson University in Toronto and the University of Colorado Boulder, for example, have developed limited policies and methods for working with refugees without full credentials (Loo, 2016).

Some organizations that evaluate foreign education credentials have attempted to aid institutions in recognizing refugee qualifications in the absence of full, official documentation. World Education Services (WES), which operates in Canada and the U.S., piloted a project for Syrian refugees in Canada beginning in the summer of 2016 (World Education Services
Community partners, such as refugee resettlement organizations, in certain metropolitan areas have worked with Syrian refugees who lack full documentation but have at least some evidence of their educational backgrounds. The partners have connected these refugees with WES, which produces an alternative assessment that could be used to access higher education. As of September 2017, the project was being evaluated, and little is yet known about its impact.

Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE), based in the U.S., has focused more on the substantial costs of credential evaluation. Its ECEAid initiative raises funds to cover fee waivers for refugees. As of June 2017, the initiative hoped to provide an additional 50 evaluations to refugees ECE (2017). Vouchers for fee waivers are distributed through partners. Unlike the WES initiative, ECE apparently provides the same type of credential evaluation report to participants in the refugee initiative as it does to its regular applicants. The impact of ECEAid is unknown so far.

Addressing Other Barriers to Access

Our final category covers interventions that support refugees in adjusting to undergraduate or graduate life in North America and Europe. These interventions aim to mediate challenges such as language difficulties and psychosocial issues. HEIs often provide language support programs to prepare students to pass language tests that may be a condition for entry into regular degree programs. Universities in Germany, for example, have provided language programs for refugees before they apply for degree programs. Interventions in this category may also help refugee students with their social and emotional integration into higher education.

Many innovative solutions have been created to address language barriers for refugees. For example, Paper Airplanes, an American NGO established in 2016, connects college-aged refugees with one-on-one virtual tutoring by volunteers around the world. Tutoring sessions mainly focus on language learning and help refugee students prepare for higher education and employment at no cost. They also help students prepare for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam, which many universities require for entrance. According to their website, 1,200 students have benefited from their programs (Paper Airplanes, 2017). Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) in the U.S. is preparing to open a Center for New Americans at the YWCA New Hampshire (Plourde, 2017). The Center will increase access for local refugees and immigrants to education and other services in the state. Services will include accredited English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programming, mentorship, coaching, college preparation, cultural orientation, and college-level courses, and degrees.

The University of Paris 8 is launching a University Diploma (DU) in "French as a foreign language" for refugee students. While this is technically a scholarship, it is being created
specifically for refugees who have little knowledge of French, the university’s language of
instruction. Once students complete this language instruction, they will be able to enroll in
additional courses (University Paris 8, 2017). In Canada, Ryerson University’s Lifeline Syria
Challenge (RULSC) provides comprehensive support to help resettle refugees (Ryerson
University, 2018). Other universities in Toronto are also participating. The universities provide
information about resettlement and an online fundraising platform. More than 400 student
volunteers from the universities provide various support to refugee students and families,
such as assistance with translation and interpretation, tutoring, financial literacy, civic
engagement, employment support, peer mentoring, and English language support.

DISCUSSION

While UNHCR figures indicate that a mere 1% of the global refugee population will eventually
manage to access higher education, our review of the scope and nature of efforts by
various providers to provide access has shown that many parties are interested in helping
refugees. A wide range of interventions are underway in the six broad categories described
above. These interventions use different and often creative approaches and serve diverse
populations. Some of these interventions consist of individuals helping people in need, while
others were launched by teams of engaged personnel at specific universities. Some are the
products of NGOs and foundations and help locally, while others are multinational and span
continents. The interventions also differ by mode of delivery: some serve individual refugees
at brick-and-mortar institutions, while the majority are virtual and therefore accessible to
anyone with a computer or mobile device.

We found strong examples of policies and programs developed by government and regional
institutions in North America and Europe, particularly the latter. Regionally coherent policies
and programs exist throughout the EU on such issues as documenting refugees’ educational
qualifications. At the national level, the DAAD in Germany and NOKUT in Norway are shining
examples of government-level leadership. At the institutional level, coordination is more
adhoc, but promising examples can also be found there, such as the IIE Syria Consortium in
the U.S. or the Refugee Welcome Map in Europe.

Many of these efforts have been the result of collaborations across governments, HEIs, and
civil society organizations. However, coordination can be vastly improved through more
stable and dedicated leadership. While there are examples of good coordination in higher
education for refugees, more is needed to understand which actors are doing what, to what
extent, and for how long, in order to avoid overlap and to learn from one another. For
example, higher education might learn from the cluster approach, which was introduced in
2005 to enhance predictability, accountability, and partnership in humanitarian responses.
Clusters, comprised of UN and non-UN humanitarian actors and led by mostly a single
agency, have been successfully used to improve information-sharing among humanitarian
actors and to better coordinate their responses using tools like 3W, or “who does what, where” (Steets et al, 2010).

We found little evidence, however, at least in the form of publicly available data and information, about the outcomes of most of these interventions. While sponsors of interventions described their plans for supporting refugees, they often did not share the actual amounts of funding, number of beneficiaries reached, and other key data. This makes it difficult to know what is and is not working. More evidence-based approaches are necessary to learn from these interventions.

Many of the interventions we reviewed were one-offs that appeared to have a short-term focus. For refugees, the completion of a few online courses offered by international learning platforms or MOOC providers did not necessarily lead to an accredited diploma or degree program. Therefore, money spent on these efforts might not effectively serve refugees who aim to enter or reenter higher education. We believe that a longer-term perspective is needed to design and support opportunities for refugees that are likely to have a meaningful impact on their higher educational prospects.

We also found that the extent of support varies greatly. Some programs provide full scholarships but not living expenses, while others provide only one or two years of scholarship support. While covering full or partial tuition may make higher education possible for some individuals, there is still a fine line between support that opens opportunity and support that looks promising but ends up being insufficient. More promising are the comprehensive examples, like the World University Service of Canada’s student refugee program, that integrate higher education opportunities with broader resettlement assistance.

The four rationales for higher education internationalization identified by Knight and DeWit (1995) that we alluded to in our conceptual framing indeed offer a cogent framework for exploring institutional-level factors that shape efforts to integrate refugees into higher education. Their first rationale is academic/educational. Two often-cited and interrelated academic rationales are 1) the internationalization of the curriculum and 2) the addition to classrooms of diverse voices of students from various cultural backgrounds. For many institutions, the latter is typically a way to achieve the former. Refugee students certainly can be part of these goals. In fact, many scholarships and other interventions that bring refugees directly onto campus emanate from these two goals. Another, more practical, academic rationale is to further scholarship and practice in related fields of study, such as refugee studies, international development, and international education. For example, InZone, a research center at the University of Geneva, offers innovative approaches to multilingual communication and higher education in communities affected by conflict and crisis. The university launched different modules and curricula according to the needs of specific contexts, including Rapid Response for Humanitarian Interpreters, a degree-level history course designed with Princeton University, a MOOC on resilience in a refugee context, an
engineering course designed with Purdue University, and an applied arts curriculum in partnership with the Flux Foundation.

An important rationale, though largely unstated, is that assisting refugees may help improve what Knight (2008) refers to as the “profile and status” (p. 25) of institutions, particularly higher education institutions in Western countries sometimes seen as elitist or, in some countries, focused mostly on generating revenue. Although this motive may be seen as self-serving, institutions and organizations may also regard assistance to refugees as a “win-win” scenario.

The next two types of rationales, political and economic, have a strong national dimension. National, regional, and local governments may have a strong interest in ensuring that refugees who settle within their borders become integrated and do not pose a security risk by radicalizing or turning to crime. The UK’s “Prevent” strategy and the EU’s Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) illustrate this rationale. Many political leaders also feel the need to demonstrate to their constituencies that refugees contribute to society. For some governments, allowing refugees to settle, finish their education, and work may help fill labor market shortages.

A strong economic rationale for internationalization at the institutional level—generating revenues—seemingly runs counter to the notion of assisting refugees. While international students at an institution typically bring in personal funding or large scholarships from their home country governments, most refugees cannot easily afford higher education, particularly in more expensive institutions in the UK or the U.S. While institutions that provide scholarships or fee waivers are not generating revenue from refugee students, they may have a financial incentive for assisting refugees who bring with them generous grants from other government or private sources.

Finally, the two socio-cultural rationales laid out by Knight (2008) that most pertain to refugee integration are citizenship development and social and community development. Many, if not most, of the refugee initiatives we surveyed are designed to help refugees integrate into their new host societies and become contributing community members and in some cases citizens. But many of these interventions also affect students, faculty, and other members of higher education communities. These individuals develop knowledge and skills by working directly with refugee students and interacting with them in the classroom and beyond.

**A Fifth Rationale: Humanitarian**

Knight’s four types of rationales explain many interventions from Western countries. However, we feel it is important to posit a fifth, as yet missing rationale exemplified by working with refugees, which are clearly their own category of “international” people. We call this missing rationale humanitarian, and propose it is based in human and civil rights, notions
of social justice, and the desire to simply “do the right thing.” This rationale may encompass, for example, the desire of institutional leaders to express core principles or live out the stated or historical mission of the institution if humanitarian values are at their core. Some organizations or individuals may act out of a conviction that higher education is a public good (Marginson, 2011). In other cases, institutions may be motivated to help refugees when there is “bottom-up” pressure from students or faculty to act out of social urgency. All of these rationales may overlap and combine with other rationales. An institution may concurrently help refugees to act on humanitarian convictions, enhance its profile, and diversify its campus community. It may be easy to be cynical about the true motivations of many universities and colleges, but they may act from multiple motives that are not necessarily incompatible.

Economics has become a strong driving force for internationalization. Globalization has spread neoliberal economic ideas and created competition among institutions for students, funding, and prestige, as noted by Gidley et al. (2010). It has also made local conflicts, such as the Syrian Civil War, into challenges for the international community, as refugees and asylum-seekers are forced to flow across borders. But globalization has also given higher education institutions and other providers an opportunity to express a humanitarian mission as part of their larger efforts to internationalize.

Throughout our process of searching and categorizing efforts to provide refugees with access to higher education for refugees, the framework provided by Gidley and colleagues (2010) has been useful for thinking about the subject more holistically. As their argument suggests, access to higher education is only a first step for refugees. As the refugee crisis began to climax in 2015, access was the predominant concern. Scholarships, as Gidley et al. discuss, are a predominant intervention to provide access for disadvantaged groups because cost is one of the top barriers. Credential evaluation interventions and information platforms similarly focus on access and address initial barriers to entry. Increasingly, however, program providers are focusing on higher levels of refugee integration, most notably what Gidley et al. call engaged participation and empowered success. Accredited on-site or blended education programs, for instance, could be seen as efforts to develop human potential because they are specifically designed for refugees, particularly those in camps, whose voices were traditionally not heard. An example is the blog initiated by Syrian refugee students at the Illinois Institute of Technology, which enables refugees to contribute to the discourse about the role of higher education in the refugee crisis.

Even among efforts focused on participation and empowerment, only a few small-scale programs take a holistic approach. Not many interventions seem truly intent on learning from the needs and experiences of refugee students. More holistic and comprehensive approaches are still needed for refugees to achieve true empowerment and genuine participation. We advocate that interventions become more relevant and accountable to refugee students themselves.
Often the interventions we found seemed to be designed and implemented by humanitarian actors, whether from government, higher education institutions, or civil society organizations. But the specific needs of refugee students were hardly mentioned or found in the publicly available information we studied on each intervention. Refugee students were often considered the “beneficiaries” of the interventions. We advocate that refugee students should be part of the assessment, design, monitoring, and evaluation of impact of interventions themselves.

CONCLUSION

Our study was unable to be truly comprehensive, but instead sought to provide powerful and relevant examples of some of the current efforts that exist to help refugees find pathways into, or back into, higher education. The initiatives we identified took different forms—innovative uses of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), large-scale efforts coordinated across governments, policy formulation by foundations and think tanks, regional and community action, efforts by individuals to make a difference for people they will likely never meet, and many other approaches. We believe these efforts, even if they help a mere 1% of refugees, demonstrate that the world community cares to help refugees regain a foothold to a stable life, including educational access and career advancement.

Remaining Questions

Many of the interventions we found were catalyzed by the Syrian refugee crisis, and we hope that these efforts will grow and continue, rather than be short-term, one-time interventions. But even more importantly, we hope that these well-intended and often creative interventions will be greatly expanded to be able to serve refugees from other crises spots and contexts that lie outside the public spotlight.

As indicated in the Discussion above, many gaps remain and unresolved questions abound. These include whether scholarships are providing the level of access, sustainability, and quality that refugees really need; whether online courses accessed by refugees in camps will translate into legitimate credit and eventually into university degrees; whether mentorship programs at universities are providing refugees with the academic and social support, network building, psychosocial counseling, and other services they require to feel accepted and integrated; and whether efforts that seem to be working can be scaled up to have a greater impact.

Not surprisingly, our study suggests that more money needs to be invested in refugee support services so they can be sustained and, in some cases, scaled up. These investments will happen only if there is greater policy attention to the challenges created by influxes of refugee flows, which UNHCR figures show are more urgent than ever. We also recommend
that existing refugee services be assessed by internal or external review in order to understand their efficacy and make improvements where necessary. The most important outcomes are to know the impact on refugees entering higher education—whether those who seek to become university students are getting what they need and whether the impressive attention to their cause is making a tangible difference.

**What Happens Next?**

The world is witnessing the largest refugee crisis in recorded history. This crisis is likely to grow with increasing global instability on nearly all continents, including from environmental destruction. It remains to be seen how higher education will react to refugee challenges in the future. The projected increase in refugee streams will significantly challenge current demographics. Refugees who are fortunate enough to be able to seek a pathway to higher education and find support through interventions like those covered in this paper also have widely varying needs and profiles. As we have shown, some countries have stepped in and developed clearer pathways for these potential students. Germany and Canada are the most notable, and examples can also be found in Sweden, the U.S., and other countries.

This review of interventions has sought to provide a snapshot of what is being done at this moment in time and to develop a system for classifying disparate efforts. We have also sought to offer insights about the characteristics, advantages, and limitations of current interventions. It is our hope that the various actors involved, from policy makers and entrepreneurs to researchers, students and ordinary citizens, will build upon the existing momentum, make interventions more robust over time, evaluate their efficacy, and give them the financial viability they need to become sustainable and impactful for the lives of those who need them most.
REFERENCES


UAF. (2016). Refugees@Campus. Netherlands: UAF. Retrieved from https://studentmentoring.uaf.nl/over


### APPENDIX 1. CATEGORIZATION OF REFUGEE INTERVENTIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/type</th>
<th>Key characteristics</th>
<th>Interventions</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **1. Accredited on-site or blended learning programs** | + Created to meet specific circumstances of refugee students beyond traditional university programs  
+ Once completed, students receive accredited degrees or diplomas  
+ Mostly use blended learning, which combines on-site learning with online modules  
+ Can reach greater numbers of refugee students than providing individual scholarships | **North America**  
HEIs | E.g., Borderless Higher Education for Refugees; Jesuit Worldwide Learning: Higher Education at the Margins; Southern New Hampshire University; Community Mobilization in Crisis; Arizona State University  
CSOs | Jamiya Project  
Private sector |  
Private |  
Private |  
HEIs |  
Global |  
DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative), UNHCR (United Nations Refugee Agency) |
| **2. International online learning platforms** | + Mostly in partnership with existing MOOC providers  
+ Advantage of flexibility and availability when internet permits  
+ Although online courses are usually accredited from participating or partner institutions, level of accreditation may vary. Accredited courses may not lead to completed degrees or diplomas. | **North America**  
HEIs | University of People  
Private sector | EdX; Coursera for Refugees  
Private sector | Kiron Open Higher Education  
HEIs | Open University  
Private sector |  
Private sector |  
Private sector |  
HEIs |  
Global |  
IGOs |  
DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative), UNHCR (United Nations Refugee Agency) |
| **3. Scholarships** | + Provide full or partial scholarships to attend higher education institutions  
+ Although selection criteria and mandates vary, their | **North America**  
HEIs | University of People  
Private sector | EdX; Coursera for Refugees  
Private sector | Kiron Open Higher Education  
HEIs | Open University  
Private sector |  
Private sector |  
Private sector |  
HEIs |  
Global |  
DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative), UNHCR (United Nations Refugee Agency) |
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<tr>
<th>Category/type</th>
<th>Key characteristics</th>
<th>Interventions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>outcomes are often accredited diplomas, undergraduate or postgraduate degrees</td>
<td><strong>North America</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ Conditions and terms of scholarships vary by institution and may include full and partial scholarships and/or additional stipends</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consortiu m of HEIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>HEIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CSOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Information sharing platforms</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Europe</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ Do not provide direct access to higher education but serve as gateways to information</td>
<td>Regional institution (EU)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ Offer resources and assistance on accessing higher education and navigating available resources</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>HEIs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**North America**

- **CSOs**
  - Refugee Center Online; Institute for International Education; Platform for Education in Emergencies Response

**Europe**

- **HEIs**
  - Refugee Welcome Map
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/type</th>
<th>Key characteristics</th>
<th>Interventions</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **5. Assessment of credentials and qualifications** | + Assist refugees in having their qualifications recognized to access higher education  
+ More coordinated approach in Europe than in North America, where recognition of entry qualifications is the responsibility of individual HEIs  
+ Foreign credential evaluation organizations have assisted refugees in gaining recognition of their qualifications in the absence of full, official credentials | **North America**  
**HEIs**  
Ryerson University in Canada  
University of Colorado Boulder in US  
**CSOs**  
World Education Services in Canada  
Educational Credential Evaluators in US  
**Europe**  
Regional institution  
European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (ENIC-NARIC)  
Government  
Greek Ministry of Education, NOKUT (Norway), Nuffic (Netherlands) |
| **6. Efforts addressing other barriers to access** | + Support refugees in adjusting to undergraduate or graduate life in HEIs  
+ Aim to mediate challenges, such as language difficulties and psychosocial needs | **North America**  
**HEIs**  
Southern New Hampshire University  
**CSOs**  
Paper Airplanes  
**Europe**  
Government  
DAAD  
**HEIs**  
University of Paris 8; Foundation for Refugee Students University for Asylum Fund  
University of Paris 8  
Foundation for Refugee Students University for Asylum Fund |