HIGHER EDUCATION'S RESPONSE TO THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS:
Challenges, Strategies, and Opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

This paper broadly examines higher education's role in responding to refugee crises generally and the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe in 2015 in particular. Our analytic focus is on the range of shifting responses by international and domestic organizations and higher education institutions in Europe. We characterize European country responses as a gradual evolution from emergency based responses—most clearly illustrated through the funding of limited numbers of competitive fellowships and university slots—to more coordinated efforts that address the large-scale educational needs of displaced university-aged youth.

We argue that universities' reception of refugees ought to be understood within broader higher education internationalization frameworks and global engagements, because receiving countries' efforts to help refugees maintain and acquire high-level skills during periods of crisis and displacement will have a significant and ongoing impact on the recovery and reconstruction efforts of sending regions once the conflict ends. While developing countries are usually the primary senders and receivers of refugees, the crisis that began in Europe in 2015 has changed that pattern once again.

Although we focus on the Syrian refugee flow to Europe as our empirical case, the challenges we analyze and the recommendations we identify have application to refugee situations across national contexts and conflicts more generally. In broad terms, we suggest that the Syrian refugee crisis, which is characterized as the worst refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, offers valuable lessons for ways universities can most comprehensively respond to high-skilled migration during crisis and conflict situations.

As part of the response process, universities must consider not only the impact which migrants have on receiving countries, but also what the broader impacts are and will be for migrants themselves and for the labor market and educational needs in sending countries. The latter two factors highlight why this issue is so relevant to the internationalization of higher education more broadly: receiving countries' efforts to help refugees maintain and acquire high-level skills during periods of crisis and displacement will have a significant and ongoing impact on recovery and reconstruction efforts post-conflict. This approach is consistent with other emergent literature on the topic. In separate reports looking at the Syrian refugee crisis and its relation to higher education by the Brookings Institution and World Education Services, for example, universities' response efforts are characterized as being critical strategic initiatives aimed at wider recovery efforts for Syrian students, academics and their country (Barakat & Milton, 2015; Magaziner, 2015).

We aim here to extend such analyses and explore how the higher education sector's response to refugee crises might be understood in light of broader internationalization initiatives and goals. Additionally, we suggest that as receiving countries begin to develop higher education refugee policies, universities in these countries will take on an increasing role in longer-term reconstruction efforts in sending regions. In other words, opening access to higher education for refugees not only solves an immediate problem for any given individual, but also helps to ensure that as political stability returns to countries in conflict, formerly-displaced citizens will be able to return with skills and knowledge—in engineering, medicine, international law, democratic governance, or primary and secondary education, for example— and transition more smoothly back into their society in tandem with reconstruction efforts.

THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS IN EUROPE

The Syrian refugee crisis escalated rapidly in 2015, as the Syrian civil war entered its fifth year and it became increasingly clear that adequate options for safety and stability in the surrounding region were unlikely to improve. Over the course of 2015, hundreds of thousands of Syrians began making the perilous journey to Europe, arriving on Greek islands and at the Hungarian border and trying with mixed success to move further into the European Union. Of course, Syrians are not the only ones fleeing their country and looking for refuge, safety and economic livelihood in Europe and other industrialized countries. But the scope and intensity of the Syrian refugee crisis has brought the issue of refugees into sharper relief.

Examining the Syrian refugee crisis' impact on higher education policies in receiving countries is particularly critical in light of the fact that research and policy responses by the higher education sector to refugee education needs generally have received insufficient attention (Magaziner, 2015). Most of the attention in educational policies and practices around refugee flows attends to the needs of younger children and adolescents in primary and secondary schooling. The Syrian refugee crisis—which has displaced millions of its most highly educated citizens—is an ideal case to examine because, perhaps more than any other refugee group, the influx of high numbers of university-educated and university-eligible Syrians into receiving countries means that the higher education sector is being called upon in new ways, compared to previous migration flows. We broadly characterize these responses as a gradual evolution from emergency based responses—most clearly illustrated through common strategies of funding in the form of limited numbers of competitive fellowships and university slots—to more coordinated efforts that address the large-scale educational needs of university-aged youth, seen as a "lost generation" (Watenpaugh, Fricke; & King, 2014) and estimated to be around 100,000 currently displaced from Syria (Redden, 2015).

The Refugee Crisis in the Context of Global Immigration Patterns

Migration flows comprise millions of people around the world at any given time, who are driven to move between and within countries for a variety of reasons that are both voluntary (for labor, as students) and involuntary (as political or economic refugees). The United Nations (2013) estimates the total number of refugees globally to be 15.7 million, which is approximately 7% of international migrants more generally. However, according to experts at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only 1% are able to access higher education (Lambrechts, 2015). Following a period of decline between 1990 and 2010, the number of refugees has been rising in recent years. Nearly 90% of these refugees live in developing areas of the world; 87% of all refugees worldwide reside in the global South.

Several points from the data on refugees are important as context for this chapter. First, "economic refugees" and "political refugees" – two terms with contested distinctions that are sometimes difficult to discern – constitute only a small proportion of total migration patterns. Second, in periods of relative political calm and economic development, the number of refugees declines. And third, in periods of increased political, social and economic tension, it is in fact developing countries that are ultimately both the primary senders as well as the primary recipients of refugees.

Global Mobility and the Higher Education Sector

In many ways, higher education institutions are better equipped and more flexible than other sectors to handle unanticipated, large enrollments of new international students. Many universities already have well-developed infrastructures in place, from classrooms and libraries to assistance with housing and meal services, along with other key resources and trained support personnel. Universities dealing with the mass influx of refugees are more likely to need to augment their existing infrastructures and creatively adapt rather than develop entirely parallel systems devoted only to refugees. The problems are likely more of scale and scope than of substance.

Universities have a long history of receiving international students, and the recent acceleration in globalization has led to even greater mobility by individuals seeking better educational opportunities. Ethnic conflicts, religious strife, and economic hardships have been major drivers of educational migration even in periods with smaller refugee flows. Universities also have an incentive to become increasingly global more generally, particularly due to heightened competition driven by advances in information sharing, competitive rankings/league tables and the search for world-class excellence and lucrative partnerships that are believed will lead to new sources of prestige and revenue. These last two rationales appear to drive most of the agenda of higher education and national governments in stimulating mobility, resulting in 5 million students studying currently in a country other than their own, an increase from 2 million at the turn of the century and expected to increase to 8 million in the coming decade. Refugee students are a negligible proportion of these numbers, as they do not generate short-term revenue but rather add costs for the receiving institutions and governments.

While diaspora patterns are traditionally from the Southern hemisphere to the Northern (i.e., from Africa into Europe, from Latin America into North America) but also occur laterally (from Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe into Western Europe and North America) (ICEF Monitor, 2015), mobility happens for many reasons today that include but go far beyond forced migration (Agarwal, Said, Sehoole, Sirozi, de Wit, 2008; Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010; Deardorff, de Wit, Heyl & Adams, 2012; Knight, 2008; Streitwieser, 2014). For Syrian refugees heading into Western Europe today, while their migration has unquestionably been forced, one can regard them, because of their added diversity, as a dimension of university internationalization and as connected to broader issues of global stability. Developing and maintaining high skills for refugees also promises to have a significant impact on sending countries once their internal conflict has ended and the reconstruction and restored stability they bring to their own countries again makes them viable economic and political partners. Over the years several NGOs and institutions of higher education around the world have promoted and realized the integration of refugees into higher education, but only in very small numbers. The European refugee crisis creates challenges for how to make that happen for much larger numbers.

Despite possible advantages in terms of existing infrastructures in the higher education sector, a large inflow of displaced persons has the potential to strain any economic, social, and political system. Integrating new arrivals into European society generally, and into the many receiving countries' higher education institutions specifically, will require a unique combination of thoughtful policy making, government and institutional funding, and social tolerance and patience. We suggest that there are particular areas that will prove challenging for universities integrating larger numbers of refugee students in particular.

Language training, integration and credentialing: The rapid integration of tens of thousands of refugees into higher education brings particular challenges related to language, integration into coursework, and credentialing.

Ensuring adequate translation and interpretation of existing university transcripts and credentials will be a large administrative task. European universities are also faced with a rapid need to develop language courses and help new refugee students gain the necessary language skills to transition into the language of their host country. Securing adequate space and instructors for intensive language classes is also a pressing challenge in many already overcrowded institutions.

Broader social context: Universities do not exist in isolation; they must enact policies and practices that are situated within the broader social, political, and cultural contexts of their respective communities and nations. Public reaction to the influx of refugees to Europe has been mixed. Initial reactions to the Syrian refugee crisis in general were quite positive in some countries, particularly compared to previous negative reactions to economic and political refugees. However, anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiment has grown significantly since the migration crisis began. University decision-making about refugee policies and integration must be made with an understanding of these broader political and social contexts and the ways they may impact all students, whether they are refugees or not.

Competition for Talent

As indicated above, revolutionary advances in technology and communications brought about by globalization over the last quarter century have led to new workforce needs that young people with IT skills address particularly well, especially for the aging populations of Western Europe and its declining birth rates. Although their studies have been interrupted, the existing skills that university-eligible refugees bring with them into European higher education institutions can be seen as enrichment to those institutions. Rather than burdening their faculty and curricula, they ideally help to broaden and enrich what is on offer to the entire student body. While political refugees typically eventually return to their sending countries, many thousands will also stay in their receiving countries for a longer period of time, particularly if violent conflict and warfare continues over multiple years and refugees begin to integrate into their host communities. Many Syrian refugees arrive with marketable skills—in IT or software development, for example—which position them to meet many of the workforce needs in countries throughout Europe. Current discussions about how best to recruit and retain high-skilled migrants to Europe—and what role the higher education sector can and should play in this process—are thus quite relevant for the issue of universities' responses to the refugee crisis.

The knowledge economies of the OECD countries—due to falling birth rates and aging populations in some countries (Germany), suffering economies and partial brain drain in others (Spain and Ireland), and general decline in interest in science and engineering (across the board)—face an urgent need for a more highly trained and skilled workforce. Immigrants who arrive with or quickly gain the requisite training and skills are urgently needed to fill these gaps (De Wit and Ripmeester, 2013). De Wit and Ripmeester cite a 2012 McKinsey report, *The World at Work: Jobs, Pay, and Skills for 3.5 Billion People* (Dobbs et al., 2012), which refers to a mismatch between jobs and graduates. The report claims that despite 75 million unemployed young people globally, 39% of employers complain they cannot fill vacancies with skilled labor. De Wit and Ripmeester also cite the 2012 European Commission report, *Employment and Social Developments in Europe*, that documents this skills mismatch. They point out that countries are increasingly aware that skilled migration often fails, thus international students have become an attractive group of prospective skilled migrants because international students become trained to local standards and are already integrated into local communities.

The age of arriving migrants is also an important factor that mediates the success of their integration in the host economy over time. Those who arrive as children and young adults and complete their schooling in the host country, versus those who arrive as adults, "confront few of the barriers experienced by foreign-trained professionals, in terms of host country language ability, qualification recognition, or acculturation. Their productive lives will be longer, given their youth at point of enrollment" (Hawthorne, 2012). According to de Wit and Ripmeester (2013), the percentage of international students who stay after graduation in the country of study, known as the "stay rate," is on average 25% for OECD countries, whereas the regional and local alumni retention rate in general is much higher (60%) for all graduates and even higher for masters and doctoral graduates (70%). Clearly there is room for skilled refugees to stay on and support their host country's economy if prevailing governing policies are supportive, the population is receptive, and refugees see an advantage to staying on even after their home countries become stable again.

These arguments, relevant in the case of attracting and increasing the stay rate of international students, are also relevant in the case of refugees who arrive with higher skills developed in their home country or who demonstrate the potential to develop these skills quickly based on previous education. Refugees who already have labor experience and secondary or undergraduate education that has prepared them to become highly skilled working members of society are attractive to economies experiencing labor shortages. How the education sector in general, and in particular the higher education sector, will address these obstacles and find innovative pathways for refugees to enter higher education and to utilize their skills to advance their prospects and potentially meet economic needs in receiving countries raises interesting questions.

The obstacles noted above—becoming integrated, learning adequate language skills, facing discrimination, and most importantly understanding how to access the local job market—are realistic challenges that face newly arrived refugees. These challenges, however, are only some of the larger issues related to even bigger questions of who gets to be part of upward mobility and why, what adaptation and belonging really means, how to square allegiance to home country and adapting to the new host country, and other very difficult questions that lie beyond the scope of this paper but stand to be acknowledged.

Higher Education's Response to the Refugee Crisis

As we suggested above, the current refugee crisis has shed particular light on the role of universities to act as early responders to mass displacement caused by internal conflict. Twenty-six percent of the college-age population in Syria was enrolled in tertiary education in 2010, just prior to the beginning of the civil war (Trading Economics, n.d.). Approximately half of these youth are currently displaced, meaning there are anywhere between 100,000-200,000 youth—among the estimated 12 million Syrians, or roughly half the country's population before the crisis began, who have fled their homes during the crisis – whose university education has been either interrupted or postponed (Horn, 2015; Karasapan, 2015). The vast majority of these youth are in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, which together house 4 million Syrian refugees. Although thousands of Syrian refugees are in 2016 enrolled in Turkish universities (4,600 estimated), this number represents only 1-2% of university-aged refugees in Turkey (IIE, 2014), meaning that there are enormous gaps in educational opportunities for refugee youth (Karasapan, 2015; World Bank, n.d.). In addition, a larger group of young refugees who are now in secondary education will soon be ready to enroll in higher education, and there are already highly skilled older refugees who require support in adapting their education to the requirements in the receiving countries.

Responding to refugee inflows is thus not only an issue of border-control, visa, and other restricting measures, but also one primarily related to educational provision. Discussions about controlling or accommodating refugee flows, dealing with resettlement challenges, and fostering successful short- and long-term integration need to include education as a central factor. We argue that universities should be seen as essential sites during refugee crises and be able to respond quickly and independently from the red tape that often hampers responses by federal or state-level bodies. Universities have resources that can be deployed to assist traumatized students and their families (de Wit and Altbach, 2015). But if the higher education sector is to fulfill this mandate, universities must go beyond merely offering policy seminars and conference panels on refugee issues and must also implement meaningful pathway programs that go far in addressing the real and pressing needs of newly arrived immigrants.

It is unrealistic to expect universities to fulfill such roles without financial support, however, and here the European Union and its member states have a vital role to play. Although by 2014 the EU had already pledged over 1.1 billion dollars toward relief efforts that included educational programs both within the Middle East and for those displaced in other areas (European Commission, 2014), more targeted efforts are needed. Rather than directing billions of euros toward border controls and refugee camps, targeted investments in education create meaningful immediate but also lasting opportunities for refugees resettling elsewhere or even eventually returning home to rebuild their countries (de Wit, 2015). Reducing EU policy red tape can prevent refugees from wallowing away their educational years waiting for resettlement in refugee camps when their real need is for direct and concrete support from international organizations, including the United Nations and the World Bank, who can create massive scholarships and pathway programs for refugees as a potential solution. Other observers of the crisis have also advocated a relaxation of the usual procedures for processing eligible students into higher education and the need to suspend customary rules to relax admissions standards at a time of extreme crisis (Grove, 2015).

Efforts by International and Domestic Organizations

Early responses to the Syrian refugee crisis by international and domestic higher education organizations focused primarily on establishing and funding direct scholarships for Syrian refugees to relocate to third countries. As Syrian universities closed down or were the sites of targeted violence during the early years of the civil war, international higher educational organizations responded by opening opportunities for Syrians to temporarily relocate to foreign universities. The German Academic Exchange Service launched a direct scholarship program, which funded 200 Syrian students to come to Germany; individual German states offered dozens of additional placements at their universities. Organizations like Scholars-at Risk have helped to relocate Syrian professors and academics through visiting appointments and fellowships. The Dutch Foundation for Refugee Students (UAF) (n.d.) directly supports 60 refugees on an annual basis in their resettlement into society in the Netherlands and the transition back into higher education institutions.[1] The British-based Council for At Risk Academics (Cara) has helped 140 refugees and their families—predominantly Syrian academics—relocate to UK universities. Other groups and organizations—such as the Global Platform for Syrian Students, the Institute for International Education (IIE)'s Syrian Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis, the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund in partnership with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation's Phillip Schwartz Initiative—have provided scholarships, fellowships, emergency grants, test preparation courses, mentorship programs, and more for Syrian students. The European University Association has created an interactive Refugees Welcome Map that highlights how universities across Europe are helping and engaging refugees as they seek to continue their academic careers (EUA, 2016).

However, such efforts to offer scholarships and fellowships to a few hundred Syrian students pale in comparison to the tens of thousands of displaced university students arriving in nearby countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and elsewhere in the region, which have even fewer resources to offer in response to refugee student needs. The individual scholarship and university placement model that characterized the initial response to the refugee flow by international and national organizations simply could not respond to the scale of the crisis.

As a result, international higher education organizations started to shift their strategy by the latter part of 2015, looking for ways to open up higher education placements for thousands more students. Qatar and Turkey have been collaborating on a plan to establish an independent university for Syrian refugees, which would employ the 400 Syrian academics who are currently refugees in Turkey. At least three Islamic foundations are reported to be building similar universities in Turkey. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is currently seeking a more coordinated response by collaborating with government agencies in the UK, the Netherlands, and France, and is shifting their own strategy to fund language, tutoring, and mentoring classes at universities throughout Germany as well as supporting "third-country" scholarships to pay university tuition and living expenses for refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. The Open University (n.d.) has partnered with the British Council to provide academic programs to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon; the current plan provides access to 3,000 students, from which 300 of the highest performing will then get access to online degree courses and programs. Each of these efforts reflects a shift in strategy from "helicoptering" in a few thousand Syrian students to select spots at European universities to developing broader, scaled-up approaches that have the potential to reach all university-aged refugee youth within Europe and across the Middle East and North African region.

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1   Note: An "Additional Resources" list appears at the end of this paper that includes all internet-based sources that were consulted, but not directly quoted, for this chapter.

Moving Forward: Crisis, Challenges and Opportunities

The university sector in Europe has been called upon to respond to a refugee crisis that has presented European countries with a diversity of new challenges. The tendency to act only in crisis mode may prevent German and other European universities from more careful reflection and long-term planning. The opportunity to help Syrian academics and displaced students in this war-torn region in this time of need, but also to foster partnerships between institutions in the Middle East housing them and universities abroad should not be overlooked.

In looking at policy statements by leading European and North American organizations that work directly on issues of international higher education, and despite some laudable programming initiatives noted above, the rhetoric promoting accommodation of refugees appears to be louder than the current reality of creating actual programing to address their immediate and concrete needs. Calls to integrate refugees without actually providing programs—perhaps mostly because they are expensive and require the kind of funding that only governments and the largest international agencies can provide—carry with them a subtext of urgency and fear: abandoning young men to wallow in resettlement camps for too long may increase the risk that extremist groups will provide a space for marginalized men and women to vent their frustrations, as witnessed in attacks in Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016.

There have been some efforts to produce concrete recommendations for the higher education sector. The European University Association (EUA) has urged universities and EU governments to facilitate refugee access to higher education through information, flexible admissions, and language help with the goal of rapidly integrating refugees so they may contribute to the economy and society. They warn that not doing this could result in "resignation, failure, and social marginalization" of current and future generations (CEU, 2015). In its October 23rd press release, the EUA issued a number of recommendations, focused on offering language training and foundational courses, waived entrance requirements and expedited or flexible review and credential recognition, and funding support (EUA, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This chapter illustrates that there are many ways that governments, higher education as a sector, and individual universities can respond positively to the presence of large numbers of refugees. One cannot ignore the challenges, which are enormous and not only related to structural and institutional issues like language training, accommodation, credentialing, and funding, but also to issues like cultural sensitivity, integration, discrimination, and adaptation. It is that kind of humanitarian support that governments, institutions and individuals through means of soft power can contribute that is needed most by many international students arriving in their host countries. Indeed, some universities are providing such support. The challenge is partly the rapid increase in numbers but also a broader set of issues facing displaced, and possibly traumatized, people rather than those who have chosen to migrate for study purposes (Stevenson & Willott, 2015). Indeed, there is a world of difference between those who choose educational mobility for reasons of enlightenment and experience in another culture, and those who are forced into it out of desperation and the desire simply to survive.

But one should not look away from the opportunities that education in general and higher education in particular can provide in these times of crisis. If we invest in the further education for this group of newly arrived refugees—as in the best of times enlightened governments have done with past migration flows—instead of letting them spend years idling in refugee camps or in abandoned housing on the outskirts of Europe, it stands to pay dividends.

European societies that open themselves up to the benefits of multiculturalism will gain not only by accepting and building their economies through the assistance of skilled migrants, but also by taking in and training refugees in need of shelter who will either stay and through their training and expertise fill a skills gap to alleviate the economic needs of their receiving host countries, or else eventually return home, reconstruct their own countries, and exhibit their gratitude by helping to build a more stable and peaceful world for generations to come.

We believe the Syrian case has helped to showcase on a grand scale—arguably unprecedented in modern times—how university internationalization can be connected to broader issues of global stability in the short- and the long-term. When universities open up opportunities for newly arrived, university-eligible migrants to develop and maintain high-skills, they positively impact not just the migrants themselves, if and when they are able return to reconstruct, rebuild and restore their civil societies, but they also provide benefits over the long term for the host societies. The challenges are indeed vast, but the opportunities are also significant.

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