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Refugees and Higher Education: Selected themes and research questions

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Abstract

This working paper addresses three overarching themes of refugee higher education as elucidated in our recent coedited publication, *Refugees and higher education: Trans-national perspectives on access, equity and internationalization*. These themes are expanded upon to point toward critically-oriented future research, and include: education as a human right constrained by legal status, fee-based provision, and sector differentiation; considering the intersection of different "displacements;" and wrap-around services as both essential and requiring cross-disciplinary work

Introduction

This paper outlines some of the pressing research questions around displaced learners and higher education access and experience that are indicated by our recent edited volume, *Refugees and higher education: Trans-national perspectives on access, equity, and internationalization* (Unangst et al., 2020). We hope that the questions and frameworks proposed in the paragraphs that follow will prove provocative for researchers not only of education, but also of public policy, sociology, social work, and other fields that already engage with questions around educational policy, experience, and trajectory among marginalized groups.

Education as a Human Right Constrained by Legal Status, Fee-Based Provision, and Sector Differentiation

We have noted the layered set of agreements and conventions that frame education as a human right (Unangst, 2020), indicating that tertiary education should be "equally accessible to all" (United Nations, 1963). Across national contexts, higher education access is differently problematic for displaced learners who themselves hold distinct legal statuses across borders. Oliveira and Kentor (2020) point to this as *the artificiality of legal status that nevertheless has profound implications for lived experience and possibilities of higher education access.* Others have pointed to racialized immigration policies as informing these statuses and liminalities (Erel et al., 2016; Hua, 2010; Villegas & Aberman, 2019). In addition, a willingness to engage in "victim narratives" can have a direct impact on the adjudication of an asylum case (Mayo, 2012), and poor legal advice has also been cited as one of many possible reasons that an otherwise valid claim for asylum may be denied (Irish Refugee and Migrant Coalition, 2019).

Each status a displaced person might hold – among others immigrant, refugee, asylee, temporary protected status – invokes a certain set of *de facto* and *de jure* higher education access pathways. Indeed, those pathways may vary within a single national tertiary landscape, dependent both on centralization/decentralization as well

as the presence of public and private providers. For example, within the United States recent research has shown that among the states hosting the highest number of refugees on an absolute and per capita basis, fewer than half allow for in-state tuition at public institutions for temporary protected status holders or asylum seekers with an in-progress application (Unangst, Casellas Connors, & Barone, forthcoming). Education as a human right is, at present, constrained by legal status, fee-based provision, and tertiary sector differentiation across national settings. As a first step, and in the mode of applied research, we advocate for greater visibility of these constraints in order to make relevant policy silences and gaps clear to policymakers, educational stakeholders, and voters alike.

Considering the Intersection of Different "Displacements"

In a chapter discussing refugee protections in the Irish case, Cronin et al. (2020) observe that schools serving migrant students frequently enrolled refugee children, and that these school "principals… had a heightened awareness of the inadequacies of the education system in meeting the needs of a diverse body of students" (p. 164). This points to the current state of play across educational institutions – which will frequently enroll migrant and refugee students in tandem. It also indicates that there are programs serving both groups of learners, though these are generally not discussed in the refugee higher education scholarship since 2015.

Separately, literature focused on education in humanitarian settings has described effective supports for migrants and refugees learning alongside each other (Karamperidou et al., 2020), however there is very little scholarship on higher education curricular or co-curricular programs that support refugee and migrant groups concurrently. This relates to refugees being constructed as distinct from other migrant groups, some of whom may be supported by international offices, and others who may not be supported by existing student services initiatives at all. These institutional silos may inhibit the consideration of overlapping student needs and intersectional identities.

A Biased Focus on the Global North

As argued by Ergin (2020), a common bias of current scholarship is that much focuses on displaced learners in the Global North, though the very large majority of refugees not only come from but also are displaced in the Global South. Access to education in general and to higher education in particular is distinct across the various Global South countries hosting displaced peoples as evidenced by, for example, the role of remittances in supporting refugee student tuition costs in Ethiopia (Tamrat & Habtemariam, 2020) and the movement of the centralized Turkish higher education system to initiate new Arabic language programs at universities along the Syrian border (which has been described as an example of "Forced Internationalization") (Ergin et al., 2019). HEIs in less economically developed contexts encounter different challenges than, for example, those in Australia or Germany, which are comparatively well-resourced and where mechanisms of coloniality continue to be enacted through both existing and absent support mechanisms.

Wrap Around Services Require Cross-Disciplinary, Cross-Sector Work

Many authors writing on displaced learner success implicate a lack of wrap-around services as contributor to student drop-out or, indeed, a prospective student's change in course from higher education aspiration to early labor market entry; our recent book is no exception (Borg, 2020; Tozini, 2020). Nationally-specific menus of programs supporting displaced populations span national, state, and local government, the non-profit and religious sectors, etc. and also involve social workers, career civil servants, and both HEI and private counselors, among other actors. Services may include: food banks, transportation services, child care, job boards/advising, mental health services, tutoring in a range from more (1:1) to less (peer group) intensive, emergency funds for unexpected expenses, athletics/recreation programs, and more. Further, online providers including Kiron

have begun to make some of these services available to some course registrants (Halkic & Arnold, 2019).

An understanding of how these fragmented support structures operate across the public and private sectors is both vital and lacking. We point to the need for participatory data collection in this area: understanding from the perspective of displaced learners how support structures function to promote or inhibit higher education access and success will have indications for government and higher education actors alike. This should be separated from a blue sky call for increased resources. Rather, we advocate for an understanding of already dedicated resources in order to understand gaps and overlaps in service, pointing towards resource optimization from the perspective of displaced learners. This will necessarily involve an understanding of student support constellations as defined by learners themselves: the family members, friends, religious mentors, and other individuals in immediate and distant geographic contexts who share information and provide advice relevant to higher education entry and attainment (Evans & Unangst, 2020).

Discussion and Conclusion

We have pointed to entrenched categories of legal status that, though capricious, have real effects on a prospective university student's ability to enter and afford their preferred course of study. We have also pointed to funding streams and support programs at HEIs separately targeting different groups of displaced students, who might be parsed by legal status, willingness to self-identify, linguistic preferences, or other categories. It seems clear that an urgent question, given the centering of "top down categories," is how displaced learners themselves would describe educational success. With whom would they prefer to study, and in what setting? What sorts of supports would they find most helpful?

These questions are best addressed, we posit, through participatory approaches to research. A lack of participatory data on refugee student enrollment and experience inhibits iterative support program development and, therefore, student success.

Emphasis must be placed on research with and research as, rather than research about displaced learners (Tuck & Yang, 2014), as well as the interrogation of power structures. Further, emphasis in research, policy and action must be placed on access to higher education for displaced learners in the Global South.

While improved data in this area is urgently needed, an exclusive focus on the reporting of student data also obscures emphasis on power and hierarchy; a bureaucratization of diversity work has already been identified in the tertiary sector and must be guarded against in future work around displaced learners (Smith, 2016). Again, centering student experience – through co-creation of relevant support programs – is indicated.

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