



Original Article

Higher Education for Forcibly Displaced Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers

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Political, economic and ecological upheavals accompanied by developments in transportation and communication around the globe have created a constant flow of people from one country context to another. Although it is very difficult to measure the size and direction of international migration, estimates by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggest that 3.3% of the total global population, or 244 million people, are on the move (IOM, 2018). Overwhelmingly, international migration flows from low-income to high-income countries highlight the key role that economic concerns play in decisions to migrate, along with choice of destination for migration. Displaced people form a distinct group within the total number of international migrants. According to the IOM (2018), of the total number of migrants, 40 million are classified as being “displaced”; meanwhile, the total number of refugees currently registered exceeds 22 million. Future estimates do not envisage a decrease in international immigrants nor in the number of documented displaced people. Hence, the reality of international migration calls for effective policies that can manage international migration (IOM, 2018; OECD, 2016).

There is general agreement that international migration generates economic and social benefits to both origin and destination countries (IOM, 2018); however, those who argue this (e.g., OECD, 2016; IOM, 2018) warn that its benefits go unrealized. There are numerous reasons for this. For one thing, forced displacement that results from political conflict, persecution, environmental degradation and insecurity does not produce desirable benefits for countries and individuals. For another, the perception that immigrants threaten national security in the host country is a position most often articulated by populist politicians through social and conventional media as another way in which migrants are stigmatized and excluded. Although the scholarly community provides ample evidence of the benefits of migration on societies, populist politicians relish in characterizing international migration as a threat to development, integrity and security to the homogenous societies they seek to preserve. As a result of these skewed perceptions toward displaced populations, host country education systems in turn



may refuse to recognize the educational credentials of immigrants (IOM, 2018). In addition, promoting the erroneous view that forced migrants cannot possibly have the skills necessary to access social and economic structures in the host country (including its education system) is another impediment to operationalizing the benefits of international migration. As a consequence, either failing to or refusing to help forced migrants access the social and economic structures within host countries not only marginalizes them, but also eliminates any potential contributions they might be able to make to the host society.

Gaps in Policy for Education of Displaced Immigrants

One key argument about education for migrants and displaced people is that education provides a unique service that accelerates adaptation and improved life standards in the host country (Aras and Yasun, 2016; Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016; Erden, 2017). Education services are particularly significant for displaced school-age populations because almost half of these demographics are of school age (Arar and Haj-Yehia, 2016; Arar *et al.*, 2019). In general, education is one of the key public services that act to mitigate the impact of displacement (Sinclair, 2001). Depriving refugees and at-risk migrants of the opportunity to pursue education will have severe implications for the future of the countries from which they have come and also for the countries that are hosting them. However, a true integration of displaced people into the economic structures of the host country is possible if they are integrated into higher education (Kondakci and Onen, 2019; Streitwieser *et al.*, 2018). This argument has been articulated for disadvantaged students in other contexts, and a plethora of scholars have stated that the main way to eradicate negative images of disadvantaged students is to provide them with extensive higher education opportunities, which then also serve to enhance the prospect of their employability (Williams, 2007; Shah *et al.*, 2011; Streitwieser and Brück, 2018). Higher education can be used as a tool to ensure that they can use, adapt and improve their qualifications, training and previous experiences to benefit their host societies.

Another benefit of extending higher education access for displaced people relates to their decision to migrate and the routes they choose for migration. The IOM report states that many people who have taken dangerous routes to migrate to new places would have traveled safer routes had they only been better informed (IOM, 2018). Building upon their higher education skills would help both origin and destination countries cooperate around a policy for migration. As a result, these policies would contribute to the safety of the immigrants as well. Finally, for those who are forcibly displaced, building skills and competencies through higher education fosters the possibility of reversing migration after conflict has ceased in the home countries. Being equipped with up-to-date skills and competencies as a



result of higher education in the host country helps migrants more realistically consider returning home. Higher education therefore serves as a powerful tool to help them reintegrate into the economic, social and cultural systems in the home country.

Research Gap on Higher Education and Displaced Immigrants

In spite of the centrality of higher education for successful integration of displaced people, there have been only a limited number of analyses that have so far been undertaken. At the same time, research on international migration and internationalization in higher education (IHE) has been growing exponentially but in two different streams without informing each other. (e.g., Arar *et al.*, forthcoming; Barnett *et al.*, 2016; Brooks and Waters, 2011; Chen and Barnett, 2000; Knight, 2004; Kondakci *et al.*, 2018). Failing to tie the existing body of knowledge on international migration and IHE weakens the policy formation toward displaced groups around the world. Despite the fact that research in international migration and IHE is relevant to understand the educational experiences of displaced people, the unique condition of this particular group of people deserves its own scholarly research category. Several factors set them apart: the fact that they have to leave their countries without adequate preparation; that they are not prepared in order to be accepted to host country's higher education system; that they do not have the economic means necessary for access to higher education; and that their credentials (e.g., diplomas, certificates) are generally seen as inferior compared to the those of the host country; these are but some of the challenges displaced groups face with when they attempt to access higher education in the host country. Access for international migrants, specifically access for displaced students, has so far largely remained underexplored in the literature. It is evident that the large group of displaced people of higher education age forms an "atypical group of international students" and cannot be investigated with the analytical tools applied to conventional international students. More importantly, this group requires different policies, pathways and practices in order for them to be able to integrate into the higher education systems of their host countries.

Many scholars highlight the fact that there are parallels between international migration patterns and international mobility trends and tendencies (Hudzik *et al.*, 2018; Kondakci 2011; Li and Bray, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; McMahon 1992). As a result, it is a valid claim that international student mobility corridors follow migration corridors built around geographical proximity, economic factors and ethnic and historical ties. Despite proven ties between international migration and international student mobility, these two topics are still isolated and so miss opportunities to inform one another and create better policy and practice to serve displaced people around the world. This is the issue that has not yet been handled



adequately with regard to studies on access of migrants and refugees into higher education (Arar *et al.*, 2019; Banks, 2017). Specifically, close ties between forced displacement and internationalization of higher education demand further integration in order to identify access patterns of students into higher education and to reveal factors that contribute to their satisfaction and success in their higher education.

Based on the research and policy gaps identified above, we argue in this special issue that in an era of deepening globalization and widening international migration, higher education can play a critical role for displaced people, both for their home countries and for their host countries alike. Nevertheless, there has been little research so far on equitable access for displaced people into higher education; nor on the specific constraints that shape their choices and opportunities to advance their education; nor on the push factors that force them to leave their former homes and their pathways to higher education in the host country (Hatton, 2017; Waite, 2016). This special issue is inspired by the continuous increase in the movement of international migration due to globalization, economic and ethnic discrimination, political conflicts, economic strains and natural disasters. Migrant students, refugees and international students strive to realize their equal and just right to higher education in the host states where they are absorbed. This special journal issue therefore aims to fill a gap in what we know and practice in terms of addressing the higher education issues that are related to mass migration and displacement of various populations in different countries, especially as they relate to opportunities for higher education. Prominent scholars in the higher education internationalization recommend policies and practices in different countries (including Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Turkey, the USA and the UK) for forcibly displaced people, which facilitate dialogue and the cross-fertilization of ideas on international migration, forced displacement and higher education. The countries covered in this special issue represent the top receiving countries of refugees and asylum seekers. The articles in the issue aim to reveal the experiences of these students and the unique issues they face in seeking access to higher education. Unlike mainstream analysis of international student mobility, this issue will focus on forcibly displaced students, who we argue form an atypical student group. More specifically, the articles in this special issue aim to answer key questions relevant for access to higher education and the experiences of these atypical students in higher education. Our main focus will therefore address: (1) What are specific higher education access challenges that atypical students face in the heaviest immigrant-receiving countries? (2) How are these challenges addressed at the individual level (the immigrant himself/herself), at the institutional level (the higher education institution itself) and at the national level (state policies)? (3) What is the value and meaning of the qualifications they receive for their future? Seven articles, which provided responses to these questions, are included in this special issue.



First, Streitwieser, Duffy-Jaeger and Roche look at the current context of resettled refugees in the USA under the Trump presidency. Basing their discussion on two major new studies by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers and the University Alliance for Refugees and at-Risk Migrants, they argue that in the face of already massively reduced numbers of refugees being allowed entry into the USA, those who seek access to higher education are being simultaneously included and excluded from opportunity. While there are indeed initiatives by higher education institutions to address this issue, the lack of overall awareness and a standardized protocol for their specific needs serves to exclude them from succeeding in higher education. They outline the unique needs and barriers faced by resettled refugee students, the actions of some educational institutions to promote inclusion and success, and offer policy recommendations for much-needed support mechanisms that can help resettled refugees enter higher education. In the second article, Unangst and de Wit conducted a comparative case study on a partnership between community-based organizations (CBOs) and private institutions on enrollment of refugee students in the USA and Canada. The authors discussed the possibility of scaling the best practice and elaborated on the role of national- and state-level policy in guiding organizational-level policies and highlighted the broad landscape for the contribution of both CBO and private organizations to leverage higher education experiences of refugee students. In the third article, Dunwoodie, Kaukko, Wilkinson, Reimer and Webb highlight the critical role of higher education for refugee and asylum seeker well-being, resettlement and integration in the host country, and the problems in social inclusion policies for refugees in Australia. The authors conducted a case study to investigate the admission of asylum seekers to higher education. Theorizing on organizational theory, the authors highlighted the potential of organizational learning to build policy and practices for wide inclusion of asylum seekers into higher education. In the fourth article, Arar, Kondakci, Kaya-Kaşıkçı and Erberk investigated the case of a public university in Turkey with regard to accepting and hosting forcibly displaced students, and based on the findings, they proposed insights upon the policy and practices of higher education for forcibly displaced people in Turkey, a country which hosts around 4 million Syrian refugees. Higher education is conceived as a tool for building a new life, either in Turkey or in another country. Arar *et al.* suggest that the higher education policy of Turkey follows an evolutionary trajectory and it is largely as a collection of incremental steps, which has been characterized as reactions to the problems encountered by the migrants. In the fifth article, Saiti and Chletsos investigate access and opportunities for refugees in Greece, another country on the track of mass migration originating from the Middle East and Africa and heading toward Europe. The results of their study provided insights into the impact of higher education policy and practice for displaced people. In the sixth and final article of this special issue, Lee and Sehoole survey the factors pulling students to South



Africa, the main regional hub for migrants and refugees in the sub-Saharan region. Political safety and physical safety are the prime pulling factors for students choosing South African universities for higher education. Although the students reported some challenges in their academic and social life (i.e., disrespect and labeling), the students are satisfied with their experiences at their host universities.

The studies included in this special issue offer discussions around higher education policies and practices for migrants, refugees and displaced people who come from key destinations and/or countries on their paths of mass international migration. The articles provide three particularly key insights on policy and practices for access and experiences of forcibly displaced people around the world that we highlight below. As indicated above, the studies represent cases from different countries, which indicate both the challenges in access to and the tenacity of refugees who are intent on finding access into higher education and succeeding. The first key insight is that the cases we have profiled clearly suggest that key countries receiving migrants and displaced people often lack clear policies for responding to their special needs. Hence, it is difficult to see a clear inclusion policy for displaced migrants to ensure that common practices for enrolling them will be developed. Countries such as Turkey, Germany and the USA each need to develop these policies as a response to the challenges of taking in displaced migrants. (2) The second key insight is related to institutional-level practices. The institutions initially applied the policy and practice of receiving typical international students for forcibly displaced migrants. However, particularly the cases in Australia, Germany and Turkey extended their practices and broadened their organizational capacities of receiving forcibly displaced migrants. The third key insight across the articles in this special issue is related to the meaning that the displaced migrants attribute to their higher education experience. They perceive higher education as a key mechanism for restarting their lives and as critical for being able to successfully integrate into the social and economic fabric of the host country. However, the skills and competencies they develop are perceived as instrumental to migrate to a third country, as in the case of Turkey for example, or to prepare them to contribute back to their home country when they return after cessation of the political crisis that drove them away. The articles we have included in this special issue verify the vital role of higher education in mitigating the impact of displacement and ensuring the integration of the migrants into the social and economic structures of their host countries.

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