

Refugee Students' Experience with the European Higher Education System. A Belgian Case Study

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Introduction

Many people fleeing warzones remain displaced within their own countries and regions and seek shelter in humanitarian and urban settings. Yet also the significant increase in the number of refugees coming to Europe over the past few years poses a challenge including for domestic institutions such as universities.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that only 1% of refugees attend university at the tertiary education level, compared to 34% of young people globally (2016). Dryden-Peterson (2011a) draws attention to the tertiary education policies for refugees and argues that post-secondary education remains underfinanced compared to the primary and secondary level. It is perceived as a benefit for only a small and elite group of people at high cost. In countries of the Global South, and particularly in conflict-affected countries, investments in higher education by donors and agencies are not in line with the equity-in-education-goal set in the Dakar Framework for action of the Education for All Movement (EFA) and in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of 2000 (Dryden-Peterson, 2011b). In 2010, for example, the

The 'Welcome Student-Refugee programme' was developed by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in 2015-2016 as a response to the great arrival of refugees to Belgium, mainly fleeing the war zones in the Middle East. The major goal of the programme is to help recognized refugees start or proceed with their studies in the Belgian higher educational system. This policy brief assesses the progress of the programme, and the challenges the refugees have faced at the VUB. The responses are collected through a questionnaire about the obstacles refugee students faced while trying to get access to the university through the programme. The conclusions revolve around three aspects: (1) The enrolment and adaptation to the EU schooling system, (2) the finances and housing issues, and (3) the integration within the university and into Belgian society. To overcome these challenges, we suggest a strategy that not only contributes to the development of the VUB refugees programme but also provides systematic indications for other European universities wishing to improve educational programmes for refugees.

global education budget represented only 4% of the total UNHCR budget. The high demand for education cannot be satisfied with these numbers.

Yet, the picture is not entirely bleak. In response to the challenge of integrating refugees, several programmes and initiatives have been

developed and launched by higher educational institutions and other organisations in Europe and beyond to help newly-arrived refugees access and integrate higher education¹. In Belgium, with some exceptions, the decision-making competences regarding education are with the communities. An overall and comprehensive strategy has not been proposed yet by the Flemish government. By now, the main initiatives to expand access to higher education for refugees have mainly been bottom-up (Vukasovic, 2017). Demand for this kind of initiative is high. The number of refugees who were already enrolled at university level in their country of origin is considerable within the total of the refugee population.

The Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) reacted to the large influx of refugees in Belgium by developing the Welcome Student-Refugee programme in 2015-2016. Its aim has been to support the integration of refugee students. This programme has also wanted to give a fair chance to prospective students with a refugee background to start or continue their studies. Ideally, they build a future for themselves, irrespective of whether they stay in Belgium or return to their home country one day. The application procedure has exclusively been for refugee students through a separate online registration. This 'special' application programme has started with a pre-screening of the refugee who applies for a study place. In this context, the emphasis has been placed on whether the candidate fulfils or comes close to the requirements of the Belgium educational system based on what he or she

had done before. Based on such research, a pre-admission check has been performed to analyse the academic credentials of the refugee students. A positive recommendation during these pre-screenings has been given in case the student can provide an official proof that he or she would be allowed to start a tertiary education in the country of origin. Upon such a positive recommendation, the student can submit an application via the regular application system of the university similar to all other international students at the VUB. This initiative of the VUB has received a substantial amount of attention in the media² and from the higher education community (including European organizations)³. As the VUB still receives a considerable number of applications from students with a refugee background, the initiative continues. Since 2017-2018 (second semester), the VUB has expanded the refugee programme with 'InCAMPUS'. Standing for INclusive AcadeMic Programme for University Students, InCAMPUS is a preparatory pathway for refugee students to acquire the skills required to complete a study in Belgium.⁴

Hearing the voice of the refugee students

During the academic year 2016-2017, 45 recognized refugees started Bachelor or Master courses at the VUB: 40 Master and 5 Bachelor students. The majority (41/45) followed the courses in English. More are expected to enrol in the coming years thanks to the refugee programme and the new InCampus programme.

The Institute for European Studies (IES) conducted a study through semi-structured

interviews of registered refugee students to gain a better understanding of the main difficulties these students encountered during their first semester at the VUB. Out of the 45 students accepted to participate in the study, 13 of them were interviewed between February and May 2017. These respondents were between 23 and 40 years old, from Syria (10/13), Egypt (1/13), Rwanda (1/13) and Iran (1/13). Two were women and eleven were men. Most of them already held a Bachelor's (5 years in Syria) or Master's degree attained from their country of origin. Some respondents had been working in their country for a few years, making it somewhat harder for them to start studying again. Although the total number of respondents was limited, the interviews have provided a valuable source for gaining insight into the challenges experienced by the refugee students.

Self-reported challenges and solution recommendations

1) Academic recognition and the 'new' education system

As mentioned by the respondents, there were usually no problems with the **enrolment procedure**, on the condition that the refugee students had the required documents in their possession. Three respondents noted that if the refugee students did not have the required documents, they would have more difficulties enrolling for a programme.

Furthermore, some refugee students who had already started or obtained a Master degree in their home country could not get any **exemptions** for previously completed courses.

Having to start over in Belgium again made some students feel frustrated in terms of losing time. Therefore it is necessary to communicate clearly about possibilities for exemptions for some courses.

Other challenges reported by the majority of the respondents related to **the assessment and examination method**. The interviewees noted that they would not be familiar with oral exams, open book exams or presentations. Consequently, they reported that such assessment methods would increase their anxiety. Moreover, **writing academic papers** – with correct references, citations and academic vocabulary – seems to be another source of problems for the majority of the respondents. Even though many students had completed online English courses for Erasmus or taken paid language classes to pass expensive English proficiency tests (i.e. TOEFL, IELTS), many still felt their level of academic English was insufficient. For these reasons, some expressed a need for an “academic adaptation course” to be taken before the start of the academic year to help them with: the online platform (Pointcarré), academic English, examination methods, preparing a presentation, how to communicate with the professors, etc.

Apart from the need for more English academic knowledge, some of the interviewees stated a desire to learn **French or Dutch**. The students living in Flanders have been obliged to take Dutch classes, but students living in Brussels usually have to pay for courses, and some fail to find appropriate courses altogether. Some would like to participate in courses over

the summer, since they have had too many assignments or study work during the year.

2) Financial and housing

Financial difficulties was another category discussed by the 13 student refugees. All of the respondents have been living from social welfare (OCMW/CPAS) to cover living expenses such as rent, food, electricity, water and internet. The amount they have received depended on their housing situation and family status; whether they cohabit, living alone or have at least one dependent minor child, for which the figures are 578, 867 and 1,156 EUR respectively in 2018.

Besides OCMW/CPAS, the Flemish government can grant a study allowance to those in need of a scholarship, the so-called “studietoelage”, which entitles the students to a reduced subscription fee (105 EUR) in 2018 and money to cover study related expenses (between 200 and 3000 EUR). While waiting for payment of the scholarship, students can request an advance payment made by their higher education institution (or the OCMW/CPAS) that will be refunded directly to the higher education institutions by the Flemish government and deduced from the initial scholarship. However, only two interviewees had benefitted from this scheme. The others were still waiting for an answer and two of them had not filed the application due to the administrative challenge it presents. Some (5/13) were still waiting for an answer for the scholarship yet had received a loan of about 1000 EUR from the VUB for study-related expenses. This loan has to be repaid once they receive the scholarship.

Every interviewed refugee expressed that the living wage (even with the loan) would not be enough to finance their student life (pay for copies, books, public transport subscription, laptop, etc.). After key expenses, they would only have a small amount to survive, sometimes only 70 EUR/month. Many students would like to combine their study with work. The main challenges, however, have been the lack of time due to the amount of studying and the fact that the OCMW/CPAS cuts its financial aid once a refugee has a job.

Due to dependence on social welfare it is also difficult to find appropriate **accommodation/housing**. As the students depend on social benefits, many landlords do not want to sign a contract with them. Only one interviewed student resided at the VUB student residences. In the 2018-2019 academic year, the interested students were offered a room at the VUB residences. Seven out of thirteen are living outside of Brussels (Antwerp, Leuven, Genk) and underlined their discontent about the long distances they have to travel by public transport. They also mentioned that they heard from the VUB about the decision on their application file later than they found accommodation in different cities.

3) Social and cultural integration

Since social and cultural capital is very important for the integration process, especially in the labour market, a first challenge is the **mandatory integration courses** that are offered by the Brussels reception agency for integration (BON for Flemish, Bapa BXL for French).

Refugee students were not satisfied or happy with these integration courses. They expressed serious doubts about the functioning and the efficiency of the courses. The integration courses were considered to be a waste of time by many students. One of the respondents criticised the fact that all refugees would receive the same integration course despite the socio-economic differences amongst them. This student mentioned that they were required to take a course on how to use basic authorized machines, in spite of his background as a professional software developer.

Also the **social experiences** of the students during their first academic year at the VUB are worth discussing. The interviews reveal that the majority of respondents felt lost as a result of not knowing anyone and not knowing the university. One respondent compared the feeling to being “thrown in the middle of the sea”. The respondents appreciated the help they received from the staff and the professors. However, they described this help on an academic level and stated that they do not know to whom they should direct “basic questions” (i.e. about where to make copies, how to find a book in the library, how to make a presentation, course-specific issues, etc.). Furthermore, the majority of the students had difficulties with developing social connections with the Belgian classmates/students. For the refugee students living alone, the lack of social connections had a negative impact on their self-confidence and their stress levels. Therefore, many students expressed the benefits of having a buddy that could be a first social contact with the university, a first help

for the “basic” questions; someone with whom they could practice Dutch, French or English; and someone that could introduce them to activities. Some respondents also mentioned their desire to participate in activities, but also the lack of information on such topics.

Conclusions

Our study has analysed the challenges experienced by refugee students both inside and outside the university. If integration is not well-achieved inside the university, more difficulties may also occur outside the university premises. Inside the university, academic adaptation is highly important. Based on our results and also previous experience and benchmarking with other initiatives, we suggest that refugees get as much information as possible about the higher education system such as methods of teaching and assessments, academic English and using the online platform, as early as possible and in a comprehensible way. When the students feel comfortable with the education system, they can focus more on integration – like social interactions. One recommendation is organising a specific “orientation day” before the start of the semester to bring together refugees, other international students and the locals.

Students differ in terms of English and Dutch language proficiency. If students face problems, a compulsory academic English course during the academic year may be a solution. For the Dutch-taught programmes, a preparatory year for Dutch is crucial. However, prolonging the study duration is a disadvantage for many

students as they aim to finish their studies and enter the job market. Students are expected to take proficiency exams, which are costly for a student budget. For such exams, a scholarship could be offered by the university or the university language institutes could provide free-of-charge proficiency tests valid for applications to the VUB programmes.

Considering the high number of students living in other cities, VUB administration could speed up the admission process and inform the students in advance of their settlement. Some of the students have families and live outside Brussels to save money. For those students who are willing to move to Brussels a housing opportunity in Brussels would save time and money spent on transport.

The most common problems that were noted by the respondents were finances and social integration. All of the respondents unanimously stated their struggle with insufficient income. The loan provided by the VUB is vital for all refugee students and enables an easier transition to educational life. We suggest to maintain this loan and make it more easily accessible.

Based on the responses from the students, we recommend developing skills-matched integration courses upon arrival based on the needs of the refugees. This way, the integration process can be speeded up. Furthermore, we underline the need for psychological support to have a better personal life quality and social support to establish proper interaction with local students. The communication gap is due to language barriers on the one hand, and personal and cultural differences on the other hand. Language courses and integration courses are organised in separate ways. We suggest improving the existing language courses by establishing active and dynamic links with the integration courses – to involve not only contextual information but also cultural aspects of daily life in Belgium. Lastly we would like to mention the lack of practical knowledge with the refugee students. This gap exists for the education system, labour market, bureaucracy and their social rights. This point requires a systematic approach and a framework to develop sustainable information flows between the governmental offices, higher education institutes, NGOs and the refugees.

Endnotes

- ¹ For a list of inspiring practices by the European Commission and the Refugees Welcome map campaign of the European University Association : http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/higher-education/doc/inspiring-practices-refugees_en.pdf, <http://www.eua.be/activities-services/eua-campaigns/refugees-welcome-map>
- ² E.g., <http://www.flanderstoday.eu/education/refugees-head-back-school-brussels-university> or <https://www.hln.be/nieuws/binnenland/onderwijs/vub-biedt-vluchtelingen-kans-om-te-studeren~a0babe2e/> (in Dutch) (last accessed March 2018).
- ³ <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160527182707707> (last accessed March 2018).
- ⁴ Have a look at: <http://www.vub.ac.be/en/welcome-student-refugees-programme#refugee-students> (last accessed January 2019)

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