

The Peripherality of Social Inclusion of Refugees into Higher Education: Insights from Practices of Different Institutions in Norway

Abstract Refugees must deal with various institutions in host countries for a variety of purposes. These institutions' policies and practices may facilitate or impede social inclusion of refugees into higher education. This article explores the practices of different public institutions in Norway to understand their roles in social inclusion of refugees into higher education. A theoretical framework constructed from two elements — social inclusion and agency theory — is used to analyse the institutions' practices. Qualitative research design was used where semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts in nine institutions in four municipalities in Norway to gather data. Moreover, various institutional documents were consulted as supplementary sources of data. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis. The article argues that social inclusion of refugees into higher education remains ad hoc and marginal practice of public institutions in Norway hitherto; and efforts to integrate refugees into higher education are framed within a neoliberal principle of qualifying people for the labour market. The article accentuates the importance of a clear policy on social inclusion of refugees into higher education at national level to facilitate a better cooperation among various institutions on refugee higher education.

Keywords: agency theory, higher education, public institutions, refugees, social inclusion

Introduction

Refugees must deal with various institutions¹ in host countries for a variety of purposes (Brown, 2011). These institutions play different roles in integrating refugees into host societies. However, due to their asymmetrical power relations with refugees, these institutions can influence refugees' opportunities for integration. Integration may be defined here as a process in which all, irrespective of origin, have 'equal opportunities, rights and obligations to participate' in society (Brochmann and Hagelund, 2017, 184). Some institutions may steer the refugees towards low paying employment (Harvey and Mallman, 2019) instead of higher education (Brown, 2011) thereby restricting refugees' access to vital resources for self-realisation. Other institutions, by contrast, may facilitate the transition of refugees into higher education through specific policies and practices (Kreimer and Boenigk, 2019; de Wit and Altbach, 2016).

An existing literature on refugee higher education (Ramsay and Baker, 2019) can be categorised into three major areas. The first comprises studies of refugees' experiences attempting to access and within higher education (Ferede, 2014; Hannah, 1999; McBrien, 2005). The second category comprises studies of good practices and interventions aimed at the inclusion of refugees into higher education (Streitwieser *et al.*, 2019). The third, more recent, category includes studies of policies aimed at the social inclusion of refugees into higher education in host countries (Abamosa *et al.*, 2020; Goastellec, 2018). Little research has been done on the roles public institutions play not only in facilitating but also in hindering the social inclusion of refugees into higher education in Norway. This article attempts to fill this gap in the literature.

Drawing upon a theoretical framework constructed from elements of social inclusion theory and agency theory, the current article addresses the following research questions: How do institutions understand and operationalise the social inclusion of refugees into higher education? How do institutions integrate the social inclusion of refugees into higher education into their core practices? How do institutions respond to the higher education needs of refugees?

The article argues that the social inclusion of refugees into higher education has hitherto remained a marginal concern of public institutions in Norway. Nevertheless, this is likely to change as many key institutions — such as the Ministry of Education and Research — appear to realise that the demand for low-skill workers is diminishing, so refugees will require formal qualifications to keep them in the in the labour market (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2018). However, this frames social inclusion of refugees into higher education within a neoliberal context, ignoring the principles of social justice and human potential.

Refugees settlement process in Norway

In Norway (and in this article), the term refugee refers to asylum seekers who have been granted protection or a residence permit on humanitarian grounds. It also includes ‘quota’ refugees who have been settled in Norway in cooperation with the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees and family members of the above-mentioned groups (Østby, 2013). Until the late 1960s, virtually all refugees in Norway were from Eastern European countries; those refugees from outside Europe only arrived in the 1970s (Østby, 2013). Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, and Syria have been the main source countries in recent times. As of January 1, 2020, refugees accounted for 30% of all immigrants in Norway and 4.5% of the total Norwegian population of just over five million (SSB, 2021. <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/innvandrer/statistikk/personer-med-flyktningsbakgrunn>). Refugees are settled in municipalities, in cooperation with the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi), where they are assigned contact persons who assist them with various issues such as registering for language courses. Some municipalities have separate refugee centres while others serve refugees within the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) offices. Refugees must begin an introduction programme to attend the Norwegian language and social studies after settlement. Language courses are generally offered in adult education centres (AECs), although it is not uncommon for refugees to attend language courses at ordinary schools or universities. Regarding the recognition of refugees’ qualifications, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) developed a centralised Recognition Procedure for Persons without Verifiable Documentation in 2013. In 2015, NOKUT proposed a Qualifications

Passport for Refugees, which sped up the procedure for recognising refugees' educational qualification (Pietkiewicz, 2017).

Refugees generally fare worse than non-refugee immigrants and the rest of population when it comes to participation in both education and the labour market despite their full legal access to both and significant integration efforts (Djuve and Kavli, 2019). Therefore, the practices of public institutions which are directly or indirectly involved in the integration of refugees worth examining to better understand the roles public institutions in Norway play in social inclusion of refugees into higher education.

Literature Review

Many institutions and actors in host societies construct refugees through deficit-based approach and consider them as burden on the host community (Butler, 2005). Parada *et al.* (2020) argue that the deficit-based approaches to service delivery are 'demeaning and make access to settlement services more ambiguous and confusing for refugees' (p. 1). Even interventions to help refugees access higher education generally position refugees more as 'beneficiaries than valued assets', and refugees do not generally have any input into the programmes designed for them (Streitwieser *et al.*, 2019, 487). Institutions can therefore act as gatekeepers that often question refugees' abilities and ignore refugees' requests (Perry and Mallozzi, 2017).

There has been a surge of studies on refugee higher education since 2015 (Berg, 2018; de Wit and Altbach, 2016; Kreimer and Boenigk, 2019; Lenette, 2016; Unangst and Streitwieser, 2018). Some studies have urged higher education institutions (HEIs) to facilitate refugees' transition to higher education, and HEIs in some countries (e.g., France), have developed common frameworks and identified actors to work together to facilitate refugees' access to higher education. York University in Canada tries to address the exclusion of certain groups of migrants from higher education by devising 'a bridging program and a process for admission to undergraduate degrees' (Villegas and Aberman, 2019, 79). Elsewhere (e.g., Switzerland), however, few universities have opened their doors to refugees by developing specific admission programmes. Many German universities are willing to participate in a national programme to facilitate refugees' access to higher education. The measures implemented by HEIs in various countries include specific admission processes, tutorials, mentoring, tests and interviews for refugees who cannot document their previous studies, housing, and financial support (Goastellec, 2018; Jungblut *et al.*, 2020; Pietkiewicz, 2017; Streitwieser *et al.*, 2019; Unangst and Streitwieser, 2018).

In addition to these institutional initiatives, cross-sectoral practices involving HEIs, local governments, non-profit organisations, and other local partners led to the successful implementation of a programme at a German public university to improve access to higher education for refugees (Kreimer and Boenigk, 2019). Streitwieser *et al.* (2019) review a wide range of initiatives and practices across North America and Europe and find that various actors have participated in developing interventions to help refugees ‘find pathways into, or back into, higher education’ (p. 489). The authors stress the importance of collaborations between actors, including HEIs, governments, and public and civil society organisations for realising the sustainable social inclusion of refugees. However, only a small number of studies have systematically analysed the cross-sectoral roles in the social inclusion of refugees (e.g., Kreimer and Boenigk, 2019). The current article will contribute to the literature in this regard.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on a theoretical framework constructed from social inclusion theory and agency theory. The three-dimensional social inclusion theory is employed to assess the institutional practices or lack thereof, regarding refugee higher education. Social inclusion in this context is different from the integration concept defined above in that the former deals more specifically with higher education. The relationships between institutions are analysed using agency theory — an ideal lens for analysing the ‘formal’ contractual relations between institutions (Ferris, 1992, 334).

I draw on Gidley *et al.*’s (2010) social inclusion theory, which can be understood through three dimensions: access, participation, and empowerment. The *access* dimension is grounded in neoliberal ideologies and is primarily concerned with increasing enrolment into higher education to secure human capital for economic development. Individuals are held responsible for their failures, while social contexts, such as power imbalances, are considered to play a minimal role in the creation of inequalities (Kilpatrick and Johns, 2014). The *participation* dimension is more inclusive than the access dimension and is grounded in principles of social justice, including human and democratic rights, dignity, equal opportunities, and fairness for all. Participation-oriented institutions collaborate to increase the participation of underrepresented groups such as refugees in higher education (Kilpatrick and Johns, 2014). The *empowerment* dimension of social inclusion is embedded in the principle of human potential and is aimed at increasing the personal and political power of people to enable them to make informed decision in ways that improve their lives and self-realisation. This dimension of social

inclusion appreciates and considers diversities and differences as resources in the context of higher education (Gidley *et al.*, 2010; Kilpatrick and Johns, 2014).

Agency theory refers to contractual relationships in which one party (the principal) engages another party (the agent) to perform certain tasks or services on its behalf. This may involve delegating decision-making authority (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). Goal conflicts and information asymmetry between agents and principals are underlying assumptions of agency theory (Nikula and Kivistö, 2020). Jensen and Meckling (1976) argue that these agency problems exist in all cooperative efforts, such as those in universities, governmental authorities and bureaus, and unions. In this article, I apply agency theory to examine the roles played by Norwegian public institutions involved in refugee integration. These institutions are interrelated in ways which can be partly explored through agency theory. Jungblut (2018) states:

In Norway...coordination is mainly achieved through hierarchy. In this, rules and process about how to deal with the integration of refugees into higher education are defined on a national level, which are then executed by local authorities (p. 81).

The coordination — or lack thereof — of activities undertaken by different institutions is a crucial factor in advancing — or hindering — the transition of refugees to higher education. ‘Sometimes simple paperwork, lack of data or bureaucratic and uncoordinated systems mean many people fall through administrative cracks’ (UNESCO, 2019, iii). For instance, a refugee may be excluded from higher education due to insufficient language training as a result of a lack of cooperation between responsible institutions, such as language training centres and HEIs (Perry and Mallozzi, 2017).

Methodology

I employ a qualitative exploratory research design, addressing the topic by explicating the meanings people ascribe to activities (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). I used purposeful sampling to select study sites, institutions, and informants. This is a powerful technique for selecting ‘*information-rich cases*’ to understand a topic (Patton, 2015, 401, emphasis in original). The research was conducted in four municipalities in Norway, which have high numbers of refugees (Olsen, 2019). Having obtained the email addresses of the relevant contact persons of 13 public institutions from the institutions’ websites, I sent requests for interview introducing myself and explaining the nature as well as purpose of the study. Nine institutions agreed to face-to-face interview. One institution was not contacted for interview as the documents were considered as the main sources of data. Moreover, I used documents of two of the institutions which I could not conduct interview with (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Data sources. (Acronyms: NAV= Norwegian Public Welfare Agency; IMDi= Directorate of Integration and Diversity; NOKUT= the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education).

No	Institution	Role of contacted person	Gender, age, and education level of respondents	Type of data used
1.	University of Oslo	Project leader	Female, age 40-50, BA degree and above	Interview, Document
2.	University of Bergen	Admission officer	Female, age 40-50, BA degree and above	Interview, Document
3.	Oslo Metropolitan University	-	-	Document
4.	Adult Education Centre	Teacher and advisor	Female, age 40-50, two years of higher education	Interview
5.	NAV1	Programme coordinator	Female, age 40-50, BA degree and above	Interview
6.	NAV2	Programme advisor	Female, age 30-40, BA degree and above	Interview
7.	NAV3	Programme advisor	Female, age 50-60, College education	Interview
8.	Refugee Centre 1	Programme coordinator	Female, age 50-60, BA degree and above	Interview
9.	Refugee Centre 2	Programme coordinator	Female, 30-40, BA degree and above	Interview
10.	IMDi	Settlement expert	Female, 50-60, College education	Interview, Document
11.	NOKUT	-	-	Document
12.	Ministry of Education and Research	-	-	Document

I chose face-to-face interviews as they facilitate a ‘free flow of in-depth information that addresses the issues or concerns that lie below the surface’ (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015, 58). The interviews were conducted between December 2017 and May 2018 at the respondents’ workplaces and were audio recorded. The average length of the interviews was 70 minutes. I took fieldnotes throughout the interviews to document contextual information (Phillippi and Lauderdale, 2018). I prepared semi-structured interview guides customised to the different institutions, which included questions on the main purpose of the institutions, policies and practices regarding refugee higher education, the availability (or lack thereof) of durable initiatives concerning refugee higher education, and relationships with other institutions on matters related to refugee higher education.

Data sources such as strategic plans, action plans, qualification recognition procedures, and other documents of different institutions were used to ‘supplement interviews’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, 296). Relevant key words used to trace necessary documents and other useful information on institutions’ websites (Hox and Boeije, 2005) included: ‘refugees’, ‘refugee inclusion’, ‘social inclusion’, ‘strategic plan’, ‘diversity’, and ‘immigrants’ along with equivalent Norwegian words and phrases.

Thematic Analysis

I undertook a step-by-step inductive thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An inductive strategy is an approach whereby researchers ‘begin with detailed bits or segments of data, cluster data units that seem to go together’, then label the clusters which become categories, themes or findings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, 210). The analysis processes were iterative involving many back-and-forth activities, rather than linear. I began familiarising myself with the data during the early data collection phase by transcribing the interviews verbatim and reviewing the documents. The interview transcripts were checked for accuracy against the audio recordings (Sutton and Austin, 2015) and integrated with the field notes taken during the interviews (Creswell, 2012). The transcribed interviews and the documents were coded manually. I began with open coding, identifying sentences and paragraphs according to their meanings and relevance to the research questions (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). The voluminous data set was reduced and classified during this phase but was not sufficiently organised enough into clear patterns or categories. In the next phase, I grouped the codes under broader themes using axial coding (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, 206). These codes were then grouped into the broader themes which were later related to the elements of the theoretical framework. To make sense of the data in a way that addresses the research questions, I interpreted the themes as the

findings of the study. Finally, I produced a report detailing my ‘findings’ with evidence from the data, including examples and verbatim quotations. I translated all Norwegian texts, including interview transcriptions, into English. I made slight modifications for grammatical and comprehension reasons in both verbatim and translated quotations.

Ethical Considerations

I obtained ethical approval for the study from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. All informants consented to participate and received written information about the purpose of the study, measures to ensure confidentiality – including secure storage of data obtained through interviews – and their unconditional right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Findings

The social inclusion of refugees into higher education as a peripheral concern

Given the significant cost of failing to comprehensively integrate refugees into host societies, including into higher education (Dobson *et al.*, 2021), public institutions should have clear policies and practices on refugee integration, including integration into higher education. However, many institutions examined in this study have no or only marginal policies on the social inclusion of refugees in higher education. Most of the institutions either have no concrete initiatives to socially include refugees into higher education or engage superficially in activities that help refugees access higher education. The organisation responsible for coordinating the settlement of refugees in municipalities, IMDi, – does not consider access to higher education when deciding where and when to settle refugees.

If a person has higher education and a paper confirming that, it is important that we get information about this...But if it is only a wish [to pursue] higher education one day [we do not consider it as a criterion for settlement] ... IMDi has no separate dedicated department focusing on refugees with higher education (Interviewee, IMDi).

The same trend exists in organisations which have daily contact with refugees, where participation in the labour market is often seen as the central issue, even when refugees have a plan to pursue higher education. In some of the organisations, the personnel working with refugees indicate that they lack expertise in dealing with refugees who want to pursue higher education,

...we want to help the refugees come as far as possible [in life] ...If you want to take a higher education in Norway, the state does not offer you enough loan and scholarship that can enable you to provide the whole family. That is why we focus on extra jobs (Interviewee, Refugee Centre 2).

The centre's focus on extra jobs for refugees is not surprising because it is not uncommon in Norway to combine paid (extra) jobs with studies. In 2016, one in three full time students had paid work in Norway (Keute, 2017. <https://www.ssb.no/en/utdanning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/too-much-time-spent-on-paid-work-leads-to-a-reduction-in-study-time>).

...we feel that we lack expertise to help the refugees with higher education (Interviewee, NAV1).

...the strategy [to help refugees access higher education] is not there yet [at the organisational level] (Interviewee, NAV2).

Higher education institutions are no exception either,

As far as I know, we do not have a formal policy on this [social inclusion of refugees] at the moment...In the current strategic plan...nothing particularly mentions refugees (Interviewee, UiO).

When it comes to social inclusion policy, I would say there is no UiB policy for this (Interviewee, UiB)

However, many organisations acknowledge the importance of refugee higher education as a future focus, though it has hitherto been a peripheral concern. One of the main reasons given for such a shift in focus is the challenges refugees will face to participate in the labour market without formal educational qualifications in the years to come. Another reason for emphasising refugee higher education mentioned in the interview is to avoid the creation of an underclass society.

...in NAV and in the introduction programme it is required from us to send a high percentage of refugees to work or education, but most to work. But education is becoming [more and more] important...because...we know that the refugees need education to be able to compete in the labour market...for the next year [of our planning] ...education will be one of the important goals (Interviewee, NAV2).

This year there is much focus on education...refugees with low educational background do not stay in the labour market very long...[therefore] we are focusing on...higher education (Interviewee, Refugee Centre 1).

There is a dilemma on whether to get the refugees into job or education...higher education is vital not to create underclass in our society. There are very few jobs today which secure good salary without educational credentials. (Interviewee, Adult Education Centre).

Many HEIs plan or at least want to make refugee higher education an integral part of their core mission. The social inclusion of refugees into higher education has not been part of universities' strategic plans for long. However, this seems to change now particularly after the 2015 refugee crisis. Ensuring equal access of refugees is identified as an international duty.

We don't have formal policies when it comes to refugees. With a sudden increase in the number of incoming asylum-seekers and refugees...we are preparing decision on how what we have been doing can become part of the regular business of the University...we have an international duty to have systems that ensure equal access (Interviewee, UiO).

This indicates that the 2015 refugee crisis triggered, at least at the conceptual level, an institutional focus on the social inclusion of refugees into higher education at the University of Oslo (UiO).

The University of Bergen (UiB) has included refugees as one of its target groups in its recent Diversity and inclusion action plan (2017–2020), which focuses on activities to promote equality and diversity.

UiB shall...develop measures for refugees...as well as cooperate with the reception apparatus and municipal services...Intensify and systematise places available on schemes for...refugees (Document, UiB).

Similarly, the University's post-2015 Action plan for internationalisation (2016–2022) identifies refugees as one of the priority foci for internationalisation.

UiB will actively contribute to refugees in Norway obtaining education [...] Produce a specific action plan aimed at refugees in Norway (Document, UiB).

It should be noted that the UiB documents from which these excerpts are taken were issued after the 2015 refugee crises in Europe and elsewhere.

Principal–agent goal (in)congruence

The institutions involved in the study are linked through various agency relationships. Institutions with legally binding contracts have a clear goal congruence, in the sense that the agents perform the activities required of them by the principals. Such relationships follow a solid order where the principal's goal is implemented by the agents, leading to goal congruence. A document analysis indicates that two years after the 2015 refugee crisis, Oslo Metropolitan University (agent), commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research (principal), developed a complementary study programme for refugees in selected fields of study, representing the first of its kind in the country (OsloMet, Document; Thorud, 2019). Thus, the

Ministry of Education and Research (principal) can play a critical role in initiating the social inclusion of refugees into higher education by formally ‘commanding’ HEIs (agents) to establish customised programmes, including bridging courses.

Similarly, the relationship between the Ministry of Education and Research (principal) and NOKUT (agent) is characterised by clear goal congruence. In 2013, NOKUT was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research to develop the Recognition Procedure for Persons without Verifiable Documentation. Refugees from certain countries can apply to have their qualifications assessed even if they have no formal credentials to prove their education. Under the procedure, refugees must fulfil certain requirements and undergo expert evaluation and extensive testing. They must have completed a higher education degree, have language proficiency in either English, Norwegian, Swedish or Danish, and be permanently resident in Norway (NOKUT, Document; NOU, 2020).

Other agency relationships are vague and are characterised by goal incongruence between principals and agents. The relationship between NAV and AECs is a case in point. While NAV seeks the rapid transition of refugees to the labour market or formal education, AECs want refugees to remain at the centres as long as possible as sources of income, resulting in goal incongruence.

...I work with introduction programme. The adult education centre and the introduction programme have different systems, different plans, [and] different goals...the [introduction] programme advisors have another idea of how it should be...From my experience, the adult education centre holds back refugees for too long from developing themselves (Interviewee, NAV2).

At adult education centre everything has to do with economy because the centre gets money for every refugee attending the language courses...At the end, it is just about money... we [NAV] can do nothing because...if we give them [refugees] private Norwegian courses, they will not be accepted as valid requirement for processing permanent residence permit (Interviewee, NAV3).

The retention of refugees in AEC for long periods has been understood by principals from at least two perspectives. The first relates to systemic differences between the principals and agents, which highlights the goal incongruence between the parties. The second perspective relates to the resource-driven interest of the agents. This represents a typical agency problem, whereby agents perform in ways that maximise their profit, even if this means overlooking the goals of the principals.

Refugees sandwiched between institutions with different goals

The interviews reveal that not all organisations emphasise the transition of refugees into higher education. Some organisations aim to place refugees in the labour market while others stress the importance of higher education. This means that refugees must navigate the policies and practices of different organisations characterised by conflicting goals (Baker *et al.*, 2019). Some respondents highlight that it is refugees, as in the in-between parties, who suffer most. The overall goal of settling refugees in municipalities across Norway is described as follows:

Refugees we settle can access the introduction programme through which they participate in the Norwegian society and work, which is important in Norway (Interviewee, IMDi).

This is broken down into at least two sub-goals: education and/or job, at a lower level in the hierarchy of integration.

Introduction centre is working according to the law and guidelines. The aim of the law is to get refugees into job or formal education normally within two years (Interviewee, Refugee Centre1).

The goal [of the organisation] is to get the participants in the introduction programme into education or work ... this may take long time (Interviewee, Refugee Centre 2).

...the main goal is to qualify refugees for work or education but getting job is always the first priority (Interviewee, NAV2).

The closer a programme is to implementation, the more complex it becomes as the divergence of organisational goals widens. In other words, organisations at the implementation level often have different goals than those at the statutory level, and refugees are left sandwiched between the organisations.

The adult education centre and the introduction programme are going in different directions and the refugees are in the middle... (Interviewee, NAV2).

Refugees are prevented from progressing to higher education by some organisations. For instance, an interviewee from NAV3 states that adult education centers receive money per refugee for language courses. Therefore, the centres will not let refugees learn language courses at other places such as universities because they lose money if refugees leave the centres, 'everything has to do with economy'. Such practices hamper the goal of integration policy, which is that 'everyone shall have equal opportunities to succeed, regardless of background' (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2018, 13). An interview from NAV3 indicat

...refugees at higher level of Norwegian language will be held back in the same classroom with new beginners rather than going to the next level...[and] we cannot push the adult education [centre] (Interviewee, NAV2).

This is in contrast to the overall goal of IMDi regarding settlement of refugees,

IMDi works to achieve speedy...and stable settlement of refugees. This is done through a collaboration between the municipalities and the directorate...The goal of IMDi is for refugees to settle in well and quickly become integrated into the local community (IMDi, Document).

Some organisations feel powerless to oppose what they see as injustices against refugees, particularly regarding language acquisition. One of the main contributing factors in this regard may be an absence of direct formal line of command between institutions.

Loose cooperation between organisations on refugee higher education

Virtually every organisation working with refugees cooperates with at least one other organisation. Such cooperation may be understood as loose insofar as there is generally no legally binding procedure aimed at a definite goal. One of the key players in the settlement and integration of refugees, IMDi, states that 'joint efforts in formal education are important measures' for the successful transition of refugees into the labour market or further education (IMDi, Document). Collaborations between many organisations focus on specific issues which may have some significance for refugees' access to higher education. However, there is a lack of commitment to refugee higher education as a common agenda for all involved parties.

Adult education centre is our main cooperation partner...we participate on conferences with NOKUT...we have cooperation with a university in three areas: the Norwegian language at higher level, information exchange on refugees who will study there, and possibility of apprenticeship for refugees as a part of Academic Dugnad (Interviewee, Refugee Centre1).

We have no permanent contact with NOKUT...we have a tripartite meeting with teachers at adult education centres...the only [cooperation] we have with universities is through Academic Dugnad and through the complementary programmes [for refugees] (Interviewee, NAV1).

We have cooperation with NAV...but [regarding] higher education we do not have that much experience. (Interviewee, Adult Education Centre).

University practices do not differ much from that of other institutions. Even though universities cooperate with other institutions, the focus is generally on single events and particular issues rather than a comprehensive plan to facilitate refugees' transition to higher education or their success therein.

...we have [cooperation] to varying degrees with different groups...mosques, churches in Oslo...with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice and we stay in touch with IMDi, with municipalities, with NAV, with political parties to create a systemic change. (Interviewee, UiO).

... [the cooperation is] not on institutional level but we arrange something like an open day...we cooperate with adult education centres...with NAV on matters related to academic and language practice...also with NOKUT on many levels, with refugee coordinator around Bergen and so on...so we invite a lot of people from different areas [for information]. (Interviewee, UiB).

Through its Diversity Focus in Academia project, UiO cooperates more robustly with the Adult Education Centre in Oslo by providing information about the Norwegian higher education system to refugees participating in the Norwegian language training at the center (UiO, Document). Similarly, UiB has a durable relationship with the Refugee Centre in Bergen, enabling refugees to access Norwegian language training at the University as a part of their introduction programme.

In sum, the social inclusion of refugees into higher education is a peripheral focus of many institutions. Goal incongruence between principals and agents exists when there is no clear line of authority. Such cooperation is often loose, and refugees are trapped between institutions which have different goals.

Discussion

Social inclusion perspectives

One of the main findings of the thematic analysis relates to the approaches and perspectives regarding the social inclusion of refugees into higher education. The social inclusion of refugees into higher education has not yet been incorporated as an integral part of many institutions' policies and practices. This indicates the invisibility of refugee higher education enrolment and attainment rate in Norway. This is remarkable given the significant number of refugees in Norway. At least three factors can explain this. First, there is no clear social inclusion policy at a national level to guide public organisations involved in integrating refugees into higher education (Abamosa *et al.*, 2020). Second, refugees in Norway are expected to be economically

self-sufficient as soon as possible, and the easiest way of ensuring this is to work towards labour market participation of refugees (Djuve *et al.*, 2017). Finally, the government may have an implicit plan to use refugee admission in Norway as ‘a backdoor to access workers’ (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018, 396), particularly for low-skill jobs. Some host nations have the tradition of boosting the supply of labour market using refugees. For instance, between 1946 and 1948, around 100,000 refugees from different countries were recruited to work in ‘labour-starved areas of the British economy, including agriculture, hospitals, and the textile, building and coal industries’ (Gibney, 2004, 109). In Norway, an integration policy document (WP, 2016) clearly states that refugees may cover the labour demand at local and regional levels in nursing and the care sector (‘pleie- og omsorgssektoren’) and other fields ‘which are not done by others’ i.e., non-refugees (p. 58).

Nonetheless, refugee higher education has not been ignored entirely. It has been included, albeit to a limited degree, in the policies of some institutions and is being considered by many others. However, the perspective(s) from which institutions address the social inclusion of refugees must be considered. The most significant driving factor behind institutions’ practices and policies on refugee higher education is to increase the labour market participation of refugees in the future. Institutions have begun to realise that it will be increasingly difficult for refugees to secure a place in the labour market without a qualification due to reasons such as diminishing job opportunities for ‘job-seekers without a formal education’ (Djuve and Kavli, 2019, 38). Such practices related to refugee higher education can be framed within the *access* dimension of social inclusion theory, which is based on neoliberal principles. Thus, the social inclusion of refugees into higher education is not only a marginal concern but also narrowly defined within the organisations. This is reflected in the discourses on higher education and integration policy documents in Norway (Abamosa *et al.*, 2020).

The lack of a proactive focus on refugee higher education, even after 2015, places Norwegian institutions at odds with institutions in other countries, such as Austria (Kontowski and Leitsberger, 2018), Belgium (Jungblut *et al.*, 2020), Germany, and France (Goastellec, 2018). Some of these countries have focused initiatives to facilitate the transition and inclusion of refugees into higher education for reasons other than increasing labour market participation. For instance, in Austria and Poland, universities have framed inclusion of refugees ‘within hospitality (in the language of ‘refugee welcome’) rather than...utilization of refugees (for the society or economy)’ (Kontowski and Leitsberger, 2018, 19). In France, the notion of ‘social

responsibility' and social justice is a driving principle for inclusion of refugees into higher education (Goastellec, 2018, 24).

Agency relation issues

The thematic analysis also highlights that agency relation is real in the institutions, albeit with different degrees of clarity and agency problems. The more powerful a principal is — where authority and the chain of command are clearly defined — the more concrete are the steps required of an agent. In such cases, initiatives regarding the social inclusion of refugees constitute the core activities of the agents even though they have not necessarily been proposed by the agents themselves. Such initiatives are top-down but may still become central activities of agent institutions. This is often due to the financial assistance the agents secure from the principals by implementing the latter's goals. Therefore, powerful principals, such as the government, should be proactive in setting agendas and specific initiatives for the social inclusion of refugees into higher education and delegating their implementation to their agents along with the necessary financial resources.

When principal-agent relationships are weak and there is no direct chain of command, goal incongruence occurs whereby agent institutions do not necessarily operate in ways which reflect the principals' goals. The principals may be interested in political gain by appearing successful in integrating refugees into the labour market in shortest possible time and reducing costs related to refugee integration, even if it is at the expense of refugees' self realisation. Agents on their part may be wary of the potential loss of revenue incurred if they comply with the principals' goals. The retention of refugees by AEC (agents) is a concrete example. The sooner refugees leave such centres to enrol in higher education, the more revenue the centres lose. Thus, the agents will keep refugees as long as it is assumed that they are sources of income. Such practices exacerbate the exclusion of refugees from higher education (Perry and Mallozzi, 2017). This is in contrast to the overall Norwegian higher education landscape where the government plans to increase people with high professional competence to serve the knowledge nation (Kunnskapsdepartementet, n.d. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/utdanning/hoyere-utdanning/id1415/>).

The analysis also reveals that institutions cooperate directly or otherwise on certain refugee-related issues. However, the types and purposes of such cooperation are not sustainable or well-defined. Notably absent is the social inclusion of refugees into higher education in Norway as the main common goal on which the organisations should have cooperated. Certain organisations excel in specific activities aimed at facilitating the social inclusion of refugees

into higher education, but no efforts have been made to coordinate these activities towards a common goal. For instance, NOKUT recognises the qualifications of refugees who do not have papers documenting their qualifications. This is undoubtedly helpful as it tackles one of the serious challenges facing refugees in their higher education trajectories (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Nonetheless, this alone is insufficient to ensure the successful social inclusion of refugees into higher education. Bonin (2017, 2) notes that ‘advancing education of migrants...requires coordination of different policy areas and involvement of many stakeholders’, such as the state, refugee centres, language schools, HEIs, and non-governmental organisations (Kreimer and Boenigk, 2019; Naidoo, 2018).

One may genuinely question the importance of investment in refugee higher education given the temporariness of refugee protection (UNHCR, 2010, see Article 1C). However, refugee higher education must still be one of the prime foci of host countries for at least two reasons. First, despite the possibility of ceasing refugee status under certain conditions, many host nations have typically granted refugees permanent residence either ‘immediately or at least predictably within a relatively short time’ (Schultz, 2021, 172; see Brochmann and Hagelund, 2012 for more on Norway). Second, even if host nations choose to implement the cessation clause, as some nations have begun to do since the 2015 refugee crisis (Brekke *et al.*, 2020), higher education remains useful for refugees in reconstructing ‘their home countries if and when they are able to return’ (Brewis and Bergan, 2020, 2438).

Conclusion

This article explores experts’ perspectives and institutions’ documents on policies and practices of institutions regarding social inclusion of refugees into higher education. It also attempts to identify how institutions respond to the higher education needs of refugees. In Norway, qualification for the labour market is the main, if not the only, reason for many institutions’ efforts regarding refugee higher education. Thus, organisations’ understandings of the social inclusion of refugees into higher education are embedded in neoliberal principles and a narrow interpretation of social inclusion based on ensuring the availability of a qualified labour force for economic reasons. The social justice principle of equal opportunities for all and the self-realisation principle of empowering refugees to reach their potential are missing from this picture.

Even though refugees make up a significant minority in Norway (SSB, 2021 <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/innvandrere/statistikk/personer-med-flyktningsbakgrunn>), refugee higher

education remains marginal in both research, policy, and practice. In comparison with other host nations such as Canada, Germany, France, and the US, most Norwegian institutions — including higher education institutions — have hitherto done less to facilitate social inclusion of refugees into higher education (Jungblut *et al.*, 2020; Streitwieser *et al.*, 2019). However, there are indications that refugee higher education will become an integral part of the institutions' core practices in years to come. Currently, many institutions respond to the higher education needs of refugees in unorganised and ad hoc ways as it is not regarded as a strategic issue by many institutions. Exceptions occur when the Government directly orders its agents to address refugee higher education in specific fields, resulting in well-organised programmes that provide complementary courses for refugees. The diverse representation among principals and agents also means that refugee higher education policies and programmes are too weak to channelise the organisations towards a common goal.

Norway is signatory to both the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, both of which encourage equitable access to higher education by all irrespective of social background (United Nations General Assembly, 1948; United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Hence, the main onus of facilitating social inclusion of refugees into higher education rests on the government. Refugee higher education should be framed within the principles of social justice and human potential when designing initiatives to facilitate refugees' integrations into higher education. The Government, through the Ministry of Education and Research, must establish a clear policy and funding for institutional initiatives to ensure cross-sectoral cooperation among institutions towards the common goal of integrating refugees into higher education. Higher education institutions should genuinely open their doors to refugees by creating permanent initiatives, such as preparatory programmes where refugees can learn academic languages — both Norwegian and English —, get insight into campus culture, take certain courses such as academic writing, practice oral presentation and the like. Such initiatives from higher education institutions should be integrated with practices of other key institutions involved in refugees' integration in Norway so that refugees can use the opportunities without much difficulty. More comprehensive studies using a collective impact concept and involving contemporary and historical institutional memos, interviews with various stakeholders including faculty and staff at various levels as well as other bureaucrats working in different sectors is recommended. Moreover, experiences of refugees with these institutions would be imperative in helping us comprehend the overall situation of refugee higher education in Norway.

Notes:

1. Institutions refer to public organisations in Norway, which play roles in refugee integration. The terms institution(s) and organisation(s) are used interchangeably and refer to the same thing.

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