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Social inclusion of refugees into higher education: policies and practices of universities in Norway

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ABSTRACT

Pursuing higher education is one of the top priorities of many refugees after settlement in host countries. However, refugees' participation in the labour market is the prime focus of integration policies and practices in various host nations, including Norway. This coupled with some complex challenges embedded in institutional policies and practices impede social inclusion of refugees into higher education in host countries. There is hitherto less attention on the role higher education institutions play in social inclusion of refugees into higher education. Hence, this article aims at exploring policies and practices of two universities in Norway regarding refugees' access to, participation and success in higher education. To address this purpose, the data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with experts at both universities. Moreover, diverse institutional documents were consulted as supplementary to the interviews. The data were analysed through a step-by-step thematic analysis. The study reveals that the universities' roles are characterised by ad hoc, spontaneous, and lack of durable initiatives and many of the existing initiatives are aimed at refugees' access to higher education without considering the participation and empowerment dimensions of social inclusion. Therefore, it is recommended that universities should have clear comprehensive social inclusion policies specifically targeting refugees as equity groups. In addition to this, it is important that the universities implement concrete initiatives such as opening dedicated centres focusing on refugee (higher) education, English language, acculturation and bridging programmes for refugees, to contribute to the empowerment of refugees through higher education.

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Access; empowerment; participation; refugee higher education; social inclusion policy

Introduction

The 2015 refugee¹ crisis has highlighted the importance of effective integration of refugees into host societies (De Haene et al., 2018; Hernes, 2018) with much attention focused on increasing the participation of refugees in the labour market (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). Accordingly, in many host nations, "policies for the professional development of refugees favour ... short-term vocational pathways" (Koehler & Schneider, 2019, p. 12) rather than higher education. In addition to this, refugees face other challenges in their

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trajectories into higher education, including difficulties of mastering academic language, inaccessible educational credentials, a lack of information, financial insecurity, discrimination, demotivation, and lingering traumatic experiences (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Hannah, 1999; McBrien, 2005).

Most of these barriers are embedded in the practices of institutions, which may contribute to the exclusion of refugees from higher education – either directly or in subtle ways. For instance, institutions offering language training in host countries may design their language courses in line with labour market requirements and not necessarily for the purpose of pursuing higher education (Koyama, 2015). Other institutions regard refugees as victims to be pitied rather than considering them as survivors of adversity (Harrell-Bond, 2002). The sum effect of all this is the marginalisation of refugee higher education at a global level, which is reflected in the fact that only 3% of refugees had access to higher education compared to the global enrolment rate of 37% as of 2018 (UNHCR, 2019).

Higher education institutions can play a key role in facilitating refugees' transition to and success in higher education (De Wit & Altbach, 2016) and “in restoring hope in the lives of refugees through education” (Lenette, 2016, p. 1313). However, the role that universities play in social inclusion of refugees into higher education is not well understood in many host countries (Ramsay et al., 2016), with Norway being no exception. This article aims to improve our understanding in this regard by addressing the following questions: In what ways do public universities deal with social inclusion of refugees into higher education in Norway? How can these ways be interpreted through the social inclusion theory?

This article argues that the role played by the universities in Norway in facilitating the social inclusion of refugees is characterised by ad hoc and spontaneous initiatives and absence of durable initiatives. Viewed in light of the social inclusion theory – which can be understood through three dimensions *access*, *participation*, and *empowerment* – many of these initiatives can be said to focus on the access dimension, which is the narrowest aspect of social inclusion.

Refugee integration and education in Norway

As of 1 January 2021, there were 240, 239 people with a refugee background living in Norway, which accounted for 4.5% of the Norwegian population (SSB, 2021). Refugees in Norway have weaker links to the labour market compared to both non-refugee immigrants and the native population (Djuve & Kavli, 2019) and often occupy low-skill and low-paying positions (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018). Hence, refugees tend to be considered a financial burden on the state (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018) and are expected to be economically independent as early as possible after settlement (Djuve et al., 2017). Norway introduced a two- to three-year programme called Introduction Programme for newly arrived immigrants² in 2004 partly to lessen the economic dependence of refugees on the state. Refugees have rights and duties to participate in the programme. All municipalities settling refugees are obliged to offer the programme to newly arrived refugees. The programme incorporates classes on the Norwegian language and Norwegian society and work practices (Blom & Enes, 2015). The Directorate of

Integration and Diversity (IMDi), The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), and the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) are among public organisations playing key roles in refugee integration in Norway.

Refugees do not pay tuition fees to attend public higher education institutions and pay only a modest contribution to their university's student welfare organisations each semester. Moreover, refugees are entitled to take up loans from the State Educational Loan Fund for subsistence during their studies. Hence, financing is generally not considered a barrier to accessing higher education in Norway (Opheim, 2004). However, this is not always the case for refugees because they are not eligible for financial support – i.e. loans and grants – from the State Education Loan Fund if they live at a refugee reception centre (Lånkassen, n.d.). In Norway, it is not uncommon for many refugees with valid residence permits to stay at refugee reception centres for months before they are settled in municipalities (Robleda, 2020). In other words, refugees must delay their admission to higher education for some time if they need financial assistance from the state. In this sense, financing may constitute a barrier for refugees in pursuing higher education in Norway. As part of the criteria for admission to higher education, refugees must document proficiency in both English and Norwegian at the B2 level of the Common European Framework for Reference for Languages or equivalent (Pietkiewicz, 2017; Staver et al., 2019).

Literature review

Although literature on refugee higher education is emerging, it is still scant and further research is required on the topic (Arar, 2021; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Various actors have launched initiatives in host countries to help refugees access higher education, especially since the 2015 refugee crisis (Agrusti, 2018; Goastellec, 2018). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are undoubtedly the prime establishments that can facilitate refugees' access to, participation, and success in higher education through practical measures and policy relevant research outputs (Berg et al., 2021; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Stevenson & Baker, 2018; De Wit & Altbach, 2016). For instance, several universities in Germany provide language courses, preparatory academic programmes or bridging courses, peer and academic mentoring, and psychological support to refugees to facilitate their transition to higher education (Jungblut et al., 2020; Streitwieser & Brück, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2017). In France, universities have responded to the need for refugee higher education through diverse mechanisms, such as adapted admission processes, French language training, tuition fees waivers, ad hoc preparatory programmes (Goastellec, 2018), the recognition of previous educational documents, cultural events, and the provision of information on the French higher education system in various languages (Sontag, 2019).

In the Flemish Region of Belgium, higher education institutions have developed what Jungblut et al. (2020, p. 332) call a “bottom-up approach” whereby, rather than being steered by national policy as is the case in both France and Germany (see Goastellec, 2018), the institutions themselves take initiatives to include refugees. Some examples of such initiatives are a one-year preparatory programme – including language training, cultural events, and dissemination of information on the higher education system in

Flanders –, assistance with admission processes, information on study programmes, study-skills training, guidance and counselling, optional modules in English, mathematics, and research skills (Jungblut et al., 2020).

Irish universities provide scholarships and other assistance to aid “refugees ... in overcoming the significant financial, structural, cultural, and digital equity barriers to accessing higher education” (Brunton et al., 2019, p. 398). In the Netherlands, refugees can get language support, participate in various events related to stress relief, time management, academic writing, and examination preparation in the first semester at some universities (Unangst, 2020). In Greece, a university has planned “to provide education to refugees in order to enhance their linguistic and computer skills” (Tzoraki, 2019, p. 7). Austrian universities provide language and integration courses, recognition of prior learning, academic preparation, and mentoring through buddy systems (Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018). In England, the provision of a tuition fee waiver scholarship is the most common measure undertaken by universities to help refugees pursue higher education (Streitwieser et al., 2017). However, universities may still be more interested in recruiting fee-paying students to secure their financial resources in the long run. Therefore, refugees’ access to higher education “depends highly on local initiatives ... or other forms of targeted support” that are based on social justice principles rather than the current system, which “favours competition and market logics” (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018, p. 13).

Turkish universities provide free language courses and scholarships while lifting tuition fees to lessen the barriers refugees face in pursuing higher education in Turkey (Cin & Doğan, 2021). Universities in the US, despite lacking clear policies on refugee inclusion, provide scholarships, tuition waivers, housing, and flexible admission requirements to refugees (Streitwieser et al., 2020). In Canada, among others, York University 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 & Aberman, 2019, p. 79). Several Australian universities offer fee-waiver scholarships, discounted application fees, English language courses, and paid work opportunities to students with refugee backgrounds (Baker et al., 2020; Webb et al., 2019).

In other countries, higher education institutions trail behind in terms of facilitating the inclusion of refugees into higher education. For instance, Marcu (2018) notes that few Spanish universities have established plans to help refugees access higher education in Spain. Nevertheless, a handful of Spanish universities have introduced some initiatives, such as the recognition of previous studies, financial support, and preparatory and bridging courses targeting refugees (Marcu, 2018; Siviş, 2019). Finnish higher education institutions have taken a different approach to dealing with what Vaarala et al. (2017) – referring to the 2015 refugee crisis – describe as a “new situation that they had no experiences of in recent history” (p. 161). The higher education institutions act as societal actors rather than educational actors, participating in the work of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and promoting interaction between asylum seekers and the Finnish community. While this may be seen as a promotion of the institutions’ third mission, failure to see asylum-seekers as future students could be another reason why the institutions have inclined more towards societal responsibility than educational issues (Vaarala et al., 2017).

There are diverse reasons why universities adopt initiatives to include refugees. Kontowski and Leitsberger (2018) argue that measures taken by the Austrian universities are embedded in the hospitality concept in the sense that refugees are acknowledged as “strangers with a specific background that need to be welcomed” (p. 265). In France, refugee human rights seem to be a key factor driving various initiatives (Goastellec, 2018). Streitwieser et al. (2017) note that the main reason for the inclusion of refugees into higher education in Germany is “a desire for peace and openness and the need to know others to reduce mistrust, hatred, and war” (Streitwieser et al., 2017, p. 246). In contrast, Goastellec (2018) argues that the rationale behind initiatives to include refugees in higher education in Germany is to respond to the needs of the national employment market.

Pietkiewicz (2017) and Toker (2019) describe some ad hoc and short-term initiatives taken by higher education institutions in Norway in response to the 2015 refugee crisis. Some universities run government-mandated bridging courses focused on the labour market, which generally prioritise refugees with teaching, engineering, or health educational qualifications. However, to date, little is known regarding the comprehensive and strategic roles higher education institutions in Norway play in the social inclusion of refugees into higher education. This article will increase our understanding in this area by systematically exploring policies and practices of two universities through the lens of Gidley et al.’s (2010a) social inclusion theory.

Theoretical framework

The basic assumption underlying the theoretical framework in this article is that access to higher education is only the first step in social inclusion of refugees into higher education (Gidley et al., 2010a; Mestan & Harvey, 2014). Caidi and Allard (2005) define social inclusion as an attempt to “break down barriers that prevent full participation” (p. 312) of immigrants in their new countries. Therefore, analysis of social inclusion in the context of higher education should exceed theories of human capital, which stress the importance of qualifying people for the sake of the labour market and limit the scope of social inclusion to neoliberal principles while overlooking the social aspects of higher education (Gale & Hodge, 2014).

According to Gidley et al. (2010a), social inclusion can be understood through three dimensions: access, participation, and empowerment. The access aspect of social inclusion is rooted in neoliberal ideologies of investing in human capital and improving skills primarily for the sake of a nation’s economic competitiveness in the global market. The focus is generally on increasing enrolment in higher education, which is based on competition where “the best and the brightest” are selected and the impact of power imbalances in society is disregarded. However, a group of people in society may be regarded as “disadvantaged and with particular needs” (Gidley et al., 2010b, p. 11). To ensure the access aspect of social inclusion, such groups require deficit-based interventions, such as more equity scholarships or income supports for underrepresented groups, additional teaching assistance and translation for struggling students, material and architectural modifications for students with disabilities, and health services for students with mental and physical challenges (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014, p. 30).

The participation dimension is a more inclusive interpretation of social inclusion and is embedded in social justice principles. Although the economic goals are not irrelevant, the main purpose of this dimension is to enable full participation of people in society through equal opportunities, fairness for all, and respect for human dignity. Nunan et al. (2000) argue that this type of inclusion is concerned with “successful participation which generates greater options for all” based on “the basic human values of participation, democracy, [and] equality” (p. 65). Interventions include university–community partnerships and collaborations, peer mentoring programmes involving new students from under-represented schools, school outreach programmes, and alternative pathways to higher education, such as bridging courses (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014, p. 30).

Finally, the empowerment dimension, embedded in the ideology of human potential, focuses on maximising the potential of individuals by addressing issues of power and dominance in society. It is based on the idea that all human beings, irrespective of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, are “multidimensional beings, who have needs and interests that go well beyond their role in the political economy of a nation” (Gidley et al., 2010b, p. 14). In contrast to the neoliberal oriented access dimension, the empowerment aspect regards “strength-based and value difference and diversity as an important resource or source of social transformation” (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014, p. 30). Providing opportunities for different voices to be heard at different levels of decision making, facilitating dialogue between competing interests, prioritising underrepresented groups at an institutional level, designing programmes or pathways that facilitate hope of the target groups, and organising cultural festivals for people to express their values in their own ways are some interventions aimed at empowerment (Gidley et al., 2010b). In practice, a university may undertake initiatives addressing all the three dimensions of social inclusion. Therefore, it is necessary to closely examine the main interventions that universities have in place to determine the extent to which they facilitate the social inclusion of refugees. To this end, this article employs a qualitative research design.

Methodology

As there is little existing research on this topic, I chose a qualitative exploratory research design, which is appropriate for addressing a new or underresearched topic (Leavy, 2017). It is also an appropriate design for understanding the meanings experts ascribe to the universities’ policies and practices concerning the social inclusion of refugees into higher education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used purposive sampling in selecting the two largest universities in Norway, which are located in cities with relatively high numbers of refugees (Olsen, 2019). Having obtained the email addresses of relevant persons in the universities, I invited them to participate in face-to-face interviews. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their expertise regarding admission processes, university initiatives to integrate refugees, or lack thereof, and the general situations of refugees in Norway. Both interviewees were females aged between 40 and 50 years with educational levels of bachelor’s degree and above.

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 & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 58). Interviews were conducted in January 2018 and May 2018 at the University of Oslo (UiO) and the University of Bergen (UiB), respectively. The average length of the interviews

Table 1. Main documents analysed as supplementary data (sources: the universities' websites).

University	Documents considered for analysis
University of Oslo (UiO)	Handlingsplan for likestilling, kjønnsbalanse og mangfold 2018–2020 [Action plan for equality, gender balance, and diversity 2018–2020] Strategy 2020 Årsplan 2020–2021 [Annual plan 2020–2021] Likestillingsrapport for 2017 [Equality report for 2017]
University of Bergen (UiB)	Action plan for internationalisation 2016–2022 Diversity and inclusion action plan 2017–2020 Handlingsplan for likestilling 2012–2015 [Action plan for equality] Strategy 2019–2022

was 109 minutes. I prepared semi-structured interview guidelines, which contained questions on the main purposes of the universities, policies and practices related to the social inclusion of refugees into higher education, the availability (or lack thereof) of durable initiatives concerning refugee higher education, and the universities' cooperation with other institutions on matters related to refugee higher education. I took fieldnotes during the interviews (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). I also used strategic plans, action plans, and other documents of the universities as data sources to supplement the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) (see Table 1). Relevant keywords, including "refugees", "refugee inclusion", "social inclusion", "strategic plan", "diversity", and "immigrants", were used to trace the necessary documents on the universities' websites in both Norwegian and English (Hox & Boeije, 2005).

Thematic analysis

I undertook a step-by-step, iterative, and inductive thematic analysis of the data set (Braun & 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 to form categories, themes or findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 210). During the early data collection, I familiarised myself with the data by taking notes, transcribing the interviews verbatim, and reviewing the documents. I checked the interview transcripts against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy (Sutton & Austin, 2015) and integrated them with the notes taken during the interviews (Creswell, 2012). I coded the transcribed interviews and documents manually beginning with open coding to identify sentences and paragraphs according to their relevance to the research questions (Cohen et al., 2018). During this phase, the data set was reduced and classified but not sufficiently organised into clear patterns or categories.

In the next phase, I grouped the codes under broader themes using axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 206). For instance, the interviewee from UiB explained that the university ran Norwegian language courses for refugees, and the interviewee from UiO stated that refugees were on a priority list for Norwegian language courses. I consulted documents to obtain supporting information in this regard and aligned similar sentences with the interview-excerpts to form a primary code *Norwegian language for refugees*, which later became one of the findings of the study. This finding was then categorised under a wider theme, which I labelled *Facilitator initiatives*. To make sense of the data in a way that addressed the research questions, I situated this within the context

of the literature and the theoretical framework, which indicates that the provision of language courses for refugees is a typical example of the *access* dimension of social inclusion theory (see Gidley et al., 2010b). Another indication was that the interviewee from UiB stated that it was not possible to identify refugees from the list of applicants or students as there was no practice of registering students based on their refugee status. I found a similar response from the UiO's interviewee, and I eventually coded this as *Refugees as an invisible group of students*, which became another finding of the study. The invisibility of refugees could prevent possible initiatives aimed at facilitating social inclusion of refugees into higher education. Hence, the finding was categorised under a wider theme, *Constraints to the social inclusion of refugees into higher education*. I followed the same procedure for the remaining data. Finally, I produced a report presenting the findings categorised into two overarching themes: *Facilitators* and *Constraints to social inclusion of refugees into higher education*.

This article is in part shaped by a critical constructivism paradigm and I, as a researcher, take the experts' views and various documents into account in addressing the research questions and creating a broader understanding of the issue under study (Bentley et al., 2007). Moreover, I do not detach myself from the research, and hence my values, backgrounds, and biases have undeniably had impact on and become part and parcel of the article. I understand that the interpretations and knowledge derived from the interpretations of the data set in this article are relative and other researchers with different backgrounds, exposures, and values from my own may come up with different interpretations of the data set I have used (Foote & Bartell, 2011).

Ethical considerations

I obtained ethical approval for the study from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The informants consented to participate and received written information about the purpose of the study, the 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 data analysis resulted in findings, which can be broadly categorised as Facilitators and Constraints. Facilitators in this article refer to the initiatives taken by universities that can assist social inclusion of refugees into higher education. Constraints in contrast refer to challenges identified from the analysis that can deter transition of refugees into and their success in higher education.

Facilitators

Norwegian language courses for refugees

The University of Bergen has a long tradition of offering free-of-charge Norwegian language courses to refugees who fulfil certain criteria.

A fixed number of places per semester are reserved for refugees ... who fulfill the basic general entrance requirements for post-secondary studies in Norway. (Document, UiB).

... we have the Norwegian language course for refugees. It is for refugees who already have further education. Its goal is to get the people qualified for work or further education. It is free of charge ... [and] there is a priority for health workers. (Interviewee, UiB).

The University of Oslo also offers Norwegian language courses to refugees who fulfill the basic university entrance requirements.

... refugees have priority, they are on priority list for our Norwegian language courses. But they have to meet English language requirement in order to be able to get admission to the University. (Interviewee, UiO).

However, refugees are third on the list of student groups who are prioritised for admission to the courses; self-financing bachelor's students in Norwegian language programmes and exchange students are ranked first and second, respectively. Thus, refugees are not guaranteed a place on the free-of-charge Norwegian language courses at UiO.

... the Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies [at UiO] regret that we do not have the capacity to offer free Norwegian courses to everyone who wishes to attend. (Document, UiO).

In 2015, following the refugee influx, UiO announced that it would consider opening its Norwegian language courses to refugees (Document, UiO).

Academic Dugnad

Academic Dugnad – initiated at UiO – was arguably the most popular project adopted by higher education institutions across Norway following the 2015 refugee influx. The target group of the project was refugees with higher education from their home countries who wanted to continue their studies in Norway. A document from UiO describes Academic Dugnad as,

... an extraordinary effort to welcome refugees and asylum seekers into our society. Working together with other universities and university colleges, as well as municipalities and other relevant organisations and offices, we aimed to remove barriers for the integration of refugees with a focus on students and scholars.

One of the initial aims of the Academic Dugnad project was to integrate its initiatives into the university's core activities, but this aim was abandoned in 2017. The task force behind the project states that the final goal of the project is "to reach inclusion where we no longer cooperate to help these potential students and employees [people with refugee background] but compete to admit and employ them" (Document, UiO). The UiB participates in the Academic Dugnad project through its *UiB for Refugees* initiative. The university had established a special committee that meets regularly to discuss relevant issues and coordinate necessary refugee-related activities. Admission to higher education, recognition of foreign qualifications, and Norwegian language training were among the main activities addressed by the committee (UiB, Document).

UiB for Refugee is part of Academic Dugnad project and we participate in the national network [of higher education institutions] ... there is also a student representative in this network. (Interviewee, UiB).

Academic Dugnad is a specific and temporary initiative aimed tacitly at Syrian refugees, and it might have served as a smokescreen for inclusive initiatives where the universities – rather than investing in permanent inclusive programmes – have adopted it to appear inclusive to refugees.

Cooperation with other organisations

Both universities cooperate with various organisations on refugee issues. In some cases, the cooperation is ad hoc and lasts for only a short period. In other cases, a more strategic cooperation is established. The University of Oslo cooperates with religious institutions, non-governmental organisations, asylum seeker reception centres, government agencies, political parties, and municipalities around Oslo. The long-term objective of this cooperation is to bring about systemic change to make it easier for refugees to access higher education.

We have been in touch with mosques and churches in Oslo . . . we have been working with the Red Cross, we are members of the Refugee Welcome community. We have been working with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, we stay in touch with IMDi, with municipalities outside Oslo, with NAV, with political parties to create a systemic change . . . We also work with International Organization for Migration . . . and of course, with NOKUT. So, what is the most important thing in the long term is to change the system to make [higher education] more accessible. (Interviewee, UiO)

Moreover, UiO has a programme called MiFA (Diversity in Focus in Academia) which is aimed at increasing cultural diversity at the university. The programme communicates with adult education centres and informs participants at these centres – including refugees – about higher education in Norway (Document, UiO).

The University of Bergen also engages – albeit at a lesser magnitude than UiO – with other organisations to facilitate refugees' access to higher education as early as possible.

. . . we have cooperation with Nygård school, and we work with Etat for inkludering [Agency for inclusion] at Bergen municipality to try to reach out to refugees at an early point so that, if they plan to get into higher education or want to finish education, then we make sure that [they] get the needed information as soon as possible. (Interviewee, UiB)

In addition to the above-mentioned organisations, UiB works closely with NAV to offer refugees academic and language practices on campus and engages with NOKUT regarding the recognition of refugees' foreign education.

Constraints to the social inclusion of refugees into higher education

A dearth of policies on refugee social inclusion at the institutional level

Neither UiO nor UiB has an explicit institutional level policy dedicated to the social inclusion of refugees.

As far as I know, we do not have a formal policy on this [social inclusion of refugees] at the moment. (Interviewee, UiO)

A recent strategy document from UiO (Strategy 2030) makes no mention of refugees despite stressing the importance of diversity and inclusion at an institutional level. It emphasises “a recruitment practice that creates diversity and ensures equal rights”. The university’s action plan (2018–2020) does not include the word “refugee” either (Documents, UiO).

Similarly, UiB has no concrete policy on the social inclusion of refugees at institutional level. However, UiB is a step ahead of UiO insofar as it mentions refugees as target groups in its Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan (2017–2020), which focuses on activities that the university plans to undertake to promote equality and diversity. The action plan states,

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).

The university’s Action Plan for Internationalisation (2016–2022) also mentions refugees as a priority area for internationalisation.

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

Nevertheless, concrete actions to realise the plans remain to be seen, as no new initiatives have yet been established at an institutional level (October 2021). This highlights many potential areas on which universities can focus to become more inclusive (Nunan et al., 2000).

A lack of bridging programmes for refugees

The universities do acknowledge the necessity to design special programmes to facilitate the transition of refugees to higher education, partly to fulfill international duties and equality principles.

Those [refugees] who move to Norway after finishing high school, do not have equal access to higher education because it is difficult to qualify for higher education . . . we are working to ensure that there are ways of bridging those hurdles. When it comes to refugees, we [also] have an international duty to ensure that we have systems that ensure equal access. We should have systems that show that everyone has been given a real chance to move on. (Interviewee, UiO)

I wish at some point UiB would also seek to work with complementary education in which [refugees would] take language training as part of the education. (Interviewee, UiB)

This is significant considering the current failure to specifically include refugees in existing initiatives, such as bridging courses or programmes in specific fields of study;

... we have one programme ... that is especially designed for, not for refugees, but for immigrants. It is specialist education in dentistry ... which is our only programme to top-up, so if you have dentist degree from other country ... then you can be admitted to take this one-year programme but ... we don’t have any quotas for refugees, and we are not giving any advantage [to refugees] in the admission. (Interviewee, UiB)

More specifically, the universities aim to offer certain courses to refugees with bachelor's degrees from their countries of origin and who plan to enrol in programmes leading to master's degrees in Norway. This is mainly because it is difficult for refugees to compete for available places with students from non-refugee backgrounds.

... we haven't found solutions ... we are trying to find ways to make it easier to bridge competences ... they need something extra to be able to apply for masters, we are trying to find ways of giving access to courses to enable refugees [to] take university courses while they are still in the introduction programme. (Interviewee, UiO)

... we don't have any ... special programme to offer [to refugees]; and this makes recruitment more difficult because ... you [as a refugee] will still need to meet the requirements as every student or applicant with a Norwegian [as mother tongue]. (Interviewee, UiB)

However, the universities are preoccupied with refugees' "lack of necessary language skills" to successfully complete courses and, thus, are hesitant to admit refugees over other students who fulfil the admission requirements.

But ... we are concerned that if we allow people into our courses ... and they do not fulfill the language requirements, we are afraid that the majority will fail and that will discourage people instead of encouraging people to continue studies. (Interviewee, UiO)

... many [refugees] come from the Middle East ... so if you offer something in English that is easier, but ... their [the refugees'] English is not good enough ... they are not capable to study in English ... (Interviewee, UiB)

In Norway, pre-tertiary education takes 13 years. Therefore, refugees from countries with only 12 years of pre-tertiary school must bridge the one-year difference to enrol in higher education institutions in Norway. Hence, the absence of organised bridging programmes at universities remains a significant challenge for refugees in such situations.

The interviewee from UiO highlighted that some refugees struggle to adapt to the academic environment at the university, particularly regarding academic text production. However, the university provides no help to mitigate this challenge. The interviewee suggested that "some kind of bridging [course] is important". To establish such courses, refugees first need to be identified as a unique group of students because they have "specific experiences that make access to and participation in higher education distinct for them" (Ramsay & Baker, 2019, p. 65).

Refugees as an invisible group of students

The interviewees noted that it is impossible to track refugee students on campuses, as it is illegal to register students by refugee status. This has resulted in the standardisation of services for all students, irrespective of their background, and a failure to offer refugee-oriented services on campuses.

... we have no way to find [out] a refugee student in our system ... so we have to reach out to everybody because we cannot [specifically] target refugees ... (Interviewee, UiB)

We are not allowed in the Norwegian system to say this is a refugee ... we have no ways of making them say 'I am applying as a refugee or have a refugee status that is why I am applying'. (Interviewee, UiO)

Due to this invisibility of refugees as a group of students, the universities have no special windows or service centres targeting refugees. Consequently, refugees must take the initiative to obtain the assistance they need, which may not always be available.

... they [the refugees] will go to the same places as everybody and ... if they tell us their background ... then we will try to provide what we can. (Interviewee, UiO)

... there is no [special focus on refugees] ... everything is accessible for everybody ... (Interviewee, UiB)

The failure to distinguish refugees as a group that faces specific challenges in pursuing higher education may downplay any possible future efforts of the universities in alleviating those challenges. The lack of English language courses specifically for refugees is an example of this failure.

A lack of English language courses for refugees

Refugees in Norway face double challenges concerning language because they must document both Norwegian and English language proficiency to gain admission to universities. English is as important as Norwegian for refugees who want to pursue higher education. The interviewee from UiO stated,

... the most important thing is English. I cannot stress that enough. If refugees with a bachelor ... got access to English first, then they could ... take courses that qualify them [for further studies] while they are still in the introduction programme.

Although the universities are aware of how challenging the English language is for many refugees, there are no English language qualification programmes targeting refugees who aspire to pursue higher education.

The single most challenging part of access is language, especially English language because there are no study programmes in Norway that are accessible if you do not have the adequate English level. There is nothing you can apply for without the English language. (Interviewee, UiO)

... as we also see ... many immigrants these days come from the Middle East, they also have [to document] the English requirements, so it is an obstacle ... to be qualified for higher education admission. (Interviewee, UiB)

At least two factors make this challenge even more complicated. First, refugees do not receive adequate and timely information on the English language requirement for accessing higher education in Norway. Second, it seems from the interviewees' responses that policy makers do not heed the seriousness of the challenge and, thus, fail to address it.

... we have found that a lot of refugees would come, and they will be told ... 'you have to first take Norwegian language'; and they think [then] they can apply. But [later] they are told 'you have to do English' ... and eventually people give up. (Interviewee, UiO)

... this [English language requirement] has not been properly explained to the policy makers on different levels; and we have been fighting so hard to make this message known. (Interviewee, UiO)

The presumed lack of academic English language may also lead to refugees' self-exclusion from relevant apprenticeship opportunities at universities.

I know for instance, one refugee who has a master's degree in education ... he came here [UiO] to practice at the Department of Education and they were interested in having him into a project, but he himself said, 'no my English is not good enough yet ... maybe I come back ...'. (Interviewee, UiO)

This may eventually lead to a wider, more complex issue whereby refugees blame themselves for their failure to access higher education. In so doing, refugees may accept their subordinate position as legitimate and, in turn, contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Discussion

The 2015 refugee crisis is behind many of the initiatives at both UiO and UiB, and many of such activities are rather ad hoc in the sense that they have either since been discontinued or continue to be marginal activities of the universities. The absence of policies for the social inclusion of refugees at the institutional level also indicates how non-systemic the social inclusion of refugees into higher education is at both universities. This has multiple impacts. First, universities may continue to rely on unsustainable initiatives every time a "crisis" happens to address the issues at hand rather than establishing durable, integrated solutions. The universities' commitment to championing social justice for one of the most vulnerable groups of people in the world (McBrien, 2005) is thus questionable. Second, refugees may find it difficult to access and use necessary resources if initiatives are not integrated into the core businesses of the universities. Finally, the faculty and other university personnel may fail to acknowledge the importance of refugee higher education and may, therefore, hesitate to contribute to the inclusion of refugees into higher education (Nunan et al., 2000).

Examined in light of the social inclusion theory, the universities have not adopted a complete approach to even the narrowest dimension of social inclusion: the access dimension. This is evident from the absence of a bridging or enabling programme, which is one of the most common initiatives at many universities in other countries (Goastellec, 2018; Streitwieser & Brück, 2018). A bridging programme is a sustained and proactive special programme comprising different courses and activities organised to achieve the specific goal of facilitating refugees' successful transition into higher education. It is one of the focus areas of the access dimension of social inclusion theory and it often includes language courses, academic writing and literacy skills, study and time management skills, acculturation to a university culture, and advice on academic and social issues.

However, a small number of initiatives have been implemented at the universities, which go some way to improving the social inclusion of refugees into higher education. The University of Bergen's long-time initiative of offering Norwegian language courses to refugees is a prime example. In the same vein, UiO has some Norwegian language courses that refugees can attend free of charge. The drawback of these initiatives is that they are

meant only for refugees who are already in a relatively advantageous position to access or continue their higher education in Norway. In some cases, the language courses are aimed at helping refugees access the Norwegian labour market. In any case, the universities' provision of Norwegian language alone for refugees falls short of constituting the access dimension of the social inclusion theory (Gidley et al., 2010a).

Apparently, the universities engage in activities, that touch on the participation dimension of social inclusion. Both universities participate in the nationwide Academic Dugnad project. Although the project has no direct activity aiming at refugees' access to or success in higher education, its role in filling an information gap that many new refugees experience (Hannah, 1999) is undoubtedly constructive. The buddy system enables refugees to share their experiences with fellow students, and the academic practice is useful for refugees to familiarise themselves with the Norwegian education and labour market systems. The universities' cooperation with various organisations is another example of a certain level of engagement with the participation aspect of social inclusion (Mestan & Harvey, 2014). The outreach activities of UiO in nearby schools and adult education centres to provide information on higher education to underrepresented groups and UiB's cooperation with several establishments to provide information on higher education to refugees are examples of this engagement.

However, these initiatives are far from enough given some exemplary practices – both in Norway and other countries –, which refugees can benefit from in pursuing higher education. In Norway, there are government funded specific “bridging program[me]s” aimed at refugees with higher education in nursing, teaching, and engineering from their home countries (Staver et al., 2019, p. 10). In Germany, universities have been offering support programmes in the form of language and maths courses, access to infrastructure like libraries and Wi-Fi (Berg, 2018), mentoring programmes, and individual consultation services (Unangst & Streitwieser, 2018). In the US, various universities such as Rice University and University of Maryland cooperate with other actors to establish academic and career counselling to refugees to facilitate their transition into and success in higher education (Streitwieser et al., 2020).

The findings also indicate that refugees are not a target group of any diversity policies or practices at UiO; and although, UiB mentions refugees in both its diversity and inclusion and its internationalisation action plans, it has not yet (October 2021) implemented concrete measures on campus to help students with refugee backgrounds. In fact, it seems impossible to offer services to refugees on campuses because, according to the universities, it is illegal to register students' refugee status. This has in part resulted in difficulty accessing the exact number of refugees enrolled in the universities, a situation also reflected in other countries such as Germany, where “no statistical information is available on the actual number of refugees in higher education” (Berg et al., 2021, p. 2). It is striking that refugees, as one of the most recognised immigrant groups among politicians, media, and academia in host countries (De Cock et al., 2018; Philo et al., 2013), lose their identity as a group when it comes to higher education. The failure to provide supportive initiatives specifically focused on refugees leads to standardised services for all students, irrespective of their experiences or background. Naidoo et al. (2018) recommend that universities abandon a “one-size-fits all approach and understand the nuanced experiences of all students” to ensure success of students with refugee backgrounds (p. 160).

Hannah (2008) argues that while universities' avoidance of the term "refugee" may stem from a legitimate desire "not to separate out or stigmatise those from migrant and refugee backgrounds", it also "results in an absence of any acknowledgement of the specific problems that such students may face" (p. 45). It is worth noting that universities "were not designed for LSES [low socio-economic status] students, but their opposite" (Hughes, 2015, pp. 306–307). Hence, the failure to clearly define refugees as a group with particular experiences at universities may not necessarily reflect an act of social justice. On the contrary, it may be "a mechanism" by which dominant groups oppress refugees (Naidoo et al., 2018, p. 105).

The provision of Norwegian language courses to refugees is a clear indication that it is possible to launch more comprehensive bridging programmes for refugees at the universities. The fact that universities use the term "refugee(s)" to offer language courses is inconsistent with their failure to use the same term to establish centres dedicated to refugees on campuses. In fact, the two universities seem to lag behind many European higher education institutions in terms of introducing long-term initiatives aimed at integrating refugees into higher education (Jungblut et al., 2020; Goastellec, 2018; Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018; Streitwieser & Brück, 2018). In many other countries, governments take bold measures to directly finance various on-campus initiatives to include refugees. Against this backdrop, the lack of earmarked funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research may be one factor explaining the absence of such useful initiatives.

It also seems that the universities operate with a deficit-based approach to some extent, particularly when it comes to English language requirements. Refugees – mainly those from the Middle East – are assumed to lack necessary English language skills by the universities. Moreover, refugees who completed upper secondary school in countries with 12-year pre-tertiary education programmes are ineligible to apply for higher education in Norway because they are considered not qualified enough. The main issue here is not about setting requirements for admission to the universities, it is rather the failure to set up systems that can help refugees meet the requirements. The absence of customised programmes to address these challenges may exacerbate, or even amount to, exclusionary practices embedded in the universities' structures (Villegas & Aberman, 2019).

Conclusion

A couple of limitations must be acknowledged. First, the article explores the roles played by two universities in Norway in the social inclusion of refugees into higher education and the findings might not be generalised. Second, an embedded case study approach may be needed to produce a more comprehensive picture of multidimensional contexts. Despite these limitations, the article offers some interesting findings and conclusions. Overall, as can be seen from the findings, the universities' roles lack both depth and breadth of initiatives and, hence, fall short of representing the complete social inclusion dimensions discussed in the theoretical framework. The access dimension of social inclusion – albeit to some extent – is overrepresented in the roles of the universities. Social inclusion has diverse connotations and levels of implementation and is not necessarily limited to the institutional-level activities and plan of universities. However, as Kilpatrick and Johns (2014) conclude, social inclusion activities may be less sustainable if they are not adequately supported at "the highest level of university, by articulation in strategic or other high-level university plans" (p. 42).

The provision of Norwegian language courses to a select group of refugees is the only initiative that can be categorised as a sustainable and integral part of the universities' activities. Cooperation with various organisations and the Academic Dugnad, initiated after the 2015 refugee crisis, have either been phased out or remain peripheral activities of the universities. This indicates how little the universities do to directly facilitate refugees' access to, participation in, and empowerment through higher education in Norway. Existing initiatives can be categorised under the access dimension of social inclusion. However, some initiatives, such as UiO's outreach to adult education centres, touch on the participation dimension of social inclusion. These practices are in line with trends in the Norwegian higher education and immigration policies documented in a recent study (Abamosa et al., 2020). All this indicates that the universities must do more to be inclusive to refugees.

There are some initiatives that both the state – as the main funder of public higher education institutions – and universities should implement if they are to genuinely facilitate the social inclusion of refugees into higher education in Norway. The state should devise policies and fund universities to realise the access, participation, and empowerment of refugees in sustainable ways. For their part, universities should develop a durable, proactive, institutional-level social inclusion policy defining refugees as a specific target group. Universities should also integrate social inclusion initiatives into their core activities, focusing on both the pre- and post-admission phases. They should have dedicated centres or units working entirely on refugee inclusion into higher education at an institutional level. The centres could coordinate, among others, bridging or enabling programmes, which should include both Norwegian and English language courses designed for refugees. It would also be beneficial for universities to communicate with universities in different countries on how to successfully integrate refugees into higher education, not only for the purposes of the labour market or neoliberal principles but also for reasons of social justice and realisation of human potential.

Notes

1. In this article, refugees may refer to people who have been granted asylum, “quota refugees” or people who have been settled in Norway in coordination with the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), people who have been granted residence permits on humanitarian grounds after applying for asylum (although these are excluded from certain rights such as the refugee scholarship at upper secondary school), and family members reunited with the above people (udi.no)
2. New law has been in effect since 1 January 2021 regarding the introduction programme with some amendments on the length and contents of the programme (<https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2020-11-06-127>).

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