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When Forced Mobility Challenges Neoliberal Globalisation: Translating UNESCO's Agenda for Fair Access to HE into National and Institutional Internationalisation Strategies

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This paper examines how the UNESCO Global Convention and concurrent introduction of the UNESCO Qualification Passport for refugees are being translated into HE national and institutional policies. We seek to unravel how national systems and their orientation towards internationalisation and the level of autonomy granted to HE institutions hinder or facilitate the recognition of forced migrants' qualifications and their integration in universities. Using national contexts of contrasting HE features, we undertake a critical discourse analysis of policy materials ranging from UNESCO and international organisations reports, government white papers to institutional corporate plans and internationalisation strategies in order to understand how contexts define responses to calls and pressure to further open HE systems to forced migrants. Our critical perspective on policy translation and enactment aims to move away from normative conceptualisations of mobility and to illustrate responses to 'forced mobilities' in contexts of neo-liberalism and growing neo-nationalism.

Full paper

Background to the Study

The unprecedented increase in the number of forced and vulnerable migrants has shifted the debate about higher education mobilities from international relations and economic perspectives to a right-based, humanitarian reflection on barriers to movement.

Simultaneously, the legal definition of who qualifies as a refugee, asylum seeker, or displaced person has varying implications on how the displaced person obtains successful integration through education. In comparison to the global average of 36% gross enrolment rate in higher education, only 1% of refugees will ever transition into or back into tertiary education (ibid. p. 10). There are many well documented challenges facing vulnerable migrants for entering into higher education in host countries including legal rights challenges (Goastellec 2018), language barriers (Ashour, 2022), financial obstacles (Murray, 2022) and the challenge of recognition of qualifications, particularly where migrants fled without education documentation (Stamenka, 2020, Streitwieser et al., 2019, Webb, 2021). It is in response to these challenges that the UNHCR and the UNESCO introduced initiatives and adopted a roadmap towards increasing refugees access to HE up to 15% by 2030 (UNHCR, 2019). Among those initiatives, the 2019 Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (hereafter the “Global Convention”) and the UNESCO Qualification Passport stand out as instruments seeking a renewed global understanding of academic mobility incorporating ideals of inclusion and integration. Our paper examines the complex translation of the UNESCO Global Convention and concomitant introduction of the UNESCO Qualification Passport into HE national and institutional policies. Our approach seeks to reveal how national systems in particular, their orientation towards internationalisation and the level of autonomy granted to HE institutions hinder or facilitate the recognition of forced migrants’ qualifications and their integration in universities.

UNESCO’s 2019 Global Convention and Qualification Passport for Refugees

Since 1947, efforts to remove barriers and ensure qualification recognition have been pursued (UNESCO, 2016 p.19). Several regional conventions were held up to the most recent such as Addis Ababa, Tokyo, and Lisbon, referred to as the ‘new generations of conventions’ enacted in the context of mobility, fluidity and

flexibility promoted by the dominant neoliberal ideology.

A Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education was adopted at the UNESCO General Conference in Paris in November 2019, "making it the first legally binding United Nations treaty on higher education." This Global Convention builds on and expands the remit of existing regional conventions to establish a framework for the fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education credentials. The document sends a dual message of facilitation (further easing student mobility globally) and rights (ensuring equity in the recognition of educational credentials and the right to access to HE for all). Crucially, article VII of the convention addresses the recognition of a vulnerable segment of the population, refugees and displaced persons. A UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants (UQP), developed concomitantly on the model of the European Qualifications Passport (EQP), supports the inclusion objective of the Global Convention .

Researching forced mobilities in HE

Accepting such passports will necessitate changes to legal regulations in most countries, as well as changes to internationalisation practices in higher education institutions. Ratification of the Global Convention may signal a country's open orientation to the recognition of prior learning for forced migrants, but the question of how this translates into policies and institutional practices remains and needs to be considered on a national case by case basis, taking into account the pressure countries face from forced migration and "forced internationalisation" (Ergin et al. 2019) of their HE system, as well as key features of their state-university governance (Austin and Jones 2016). Forced internationalisation therefore imposes a shift in how research thinks about international higher education and mobilities, incorporating the possibility of constrained mobility.

Our analytical framework considers the policy trajectory of the 2019 Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education and UNESCO UQP initiative from a global context of

enunciation to an institutional context of implementation. Our approach draws on theories of “enactment of policy” (Ball et al., 2011). It conceives policy as a process and seeks to document the different moments of a policy cycle (Stone 2012).

Applying critical discourse analysis to policy material (UNESCO and international organisations reports and statements, university and national policy documents), we investigate how and why universities and national governments respond to the Global Conventions from 3 national contexts, namely the UK, Turkey and Zambia and how their response deals with the question of access to HE for refugees.

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