

313 Refugee transitions to English Higher Education (HE): Towards an intersectional social justice framework (PART OF THE SYMPOSIUM Reimagining Transitions in and out of Higher Education: Empirical and theoretical considerations)

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

In the global context of unprecedented migratory flows, the refugee education is gaining increased research and policy attention. The paper sheds light on the under-researched topic of refugees' access to HE. It is based on a wider ongoing project that comparatively examines HE refugee governance in England and Germany, focussing on student refugee voices, on HE institutional structures and cultures of support (or lack thereof) and on discourses and management of diversity. The methodology includes in-depth interviews with key institutional actors and refugee students, along with Qualitative Content Analysis of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion documents, seeking to unearth the 'more tacit, culture and system-level assumptions' that may lead to unintended exclusions (Hartley et al 2023; Stevenson and Baker, 2018). Drawing upon the lived experiences of refugee students as they transition to two English HEIs, the paper's goal is to identify the barriers and enablers to their access and participation.

Full paper

In the global context of unprecedented migratory flows, the education of refugees is gaining increased research and policy attention. Access to education for refugees remains in a state of an 'entrenched crisis' according to the UN Refugee Agency's latest report, notably with access to tertiary education being globally at 6% (UNHCR,2022). The paper will report on an ongoing project that seeks to contribute to the under-researched area of refugee HE, through comparatively examining refugee governance in two key resettlement countries, Germany and England and their respective High Participation systems of HE (Marginson, 2016). Further, in employing a qualitative case study design the project focuses on four universities in Midlands, England and in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, examining their institutional structures and cultures of refugee support (or lack thereof) and their discursive constructions of refugee students. The methodology includes in-depth interviews with refugee students and with key institutional actors, along with Qualitative Content Analysis of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) documents. The latter aims at identifying the prevailing discourses around the management of diversity and discursive construction of refugee students. Further, the project explores the key institutional actors' perspectives seeking to unearth the implicit, cultural, systemic assumptions that may lead to unintended exclusionary practices for refugee students in HE (Stevenson and Baker, 2018).

For the purposes of the presentation, the focus will be on the case of English HE and the marginal place of refugee students as a Widening Participation and EDI target group. Until recently, refugee students were invisible in Widening Participation policies and only in 2017 they were added by the Office for Students as one of the under-represented groups, albeit still remaining undefined. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with refugee students the goal will be to document their lived experiences and the interplay between the intersecting regimes of the ever-tightening migration control and English higher education. Centring on refugee voices, the presentation will identify the enabling and constraining factors affecting displaced students' access and participation in two English universities. In the context of hyper-marketised and neoliberal English HE, it will be argued that a radical reimagining of HE policies and practices is needed that, in going beyond access and the rhetoric of EDI, recognises the unique, intersecting disadvantages that refugee students face and challenges the entrenched inequalities and epistemic injustices that they have to grapple with within Universities.

References

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Stevenson, J., & Baker, S. (2018). *Refugees in higher education: Debate, discourse and practice*. Emerald Publishing

UNHCR (2022) *All inclusive: A campaign for refugee education*