

The Other Internationals?

Support For Refugees On Their Way To German Higher Education

Introduction

During the years 2014-2016, the numbers of new Asylum applications peaked in the EU and in Germany. Many of the newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers have high educational aspirations; about one Third hold school or academic degrees that are likely to be acknowledged as University Entrance Certificates (Brücker et al. 2016). Generally, refugees are treated as international students throughout their application process and their studies. Nonetheless, their specific situation differs from international students with no experience of forced migration. Supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the German Academic Exchange Service German, higher education institutions (HEI) and preparatory colleges started programs to assist prospective refugee students on their way to and through higher education. In 2016, 6806 refugees, mostly from Syria, took part in academic and/or language classes offered within the federally funded "Integra" program (Fourier et al. 2017). The well funded systematic support for refugees on their way to higher education is a new and unique initiative.

Research Interest

- What do members of higher education institutions (HEI) identify as crucial challenges for prospective refugee students compared to international students with no background of forced migration?
- How do HEI organise their support for prospective refugee students?

Methods

- 10 Qualitative expert Interviews with heads of international offices and first contacts for refugees at 5 German HEI between August 2017 and July 2018
- Document Analysis (Mission-Statements, Website Information for Refugees)

Sample

- 3 Universities, 2 Universities of Applied Sciences from 4 German states ('Bundesländer')
- Sampling based on support for refugees, diverse mission statements, one university of excellence

Institutionalisation of Support for Refugees at German HEI

First Steps

Refugee influx

High numbers of (expected) applicants, presumably with specific needs

Challenges

- Hardly any previous programs for refugees: No experiences
- No best practice examples, only few networks to exchange ideas and experiences
- Resources (finances, personell...)
- Insecurity about legal framework and scope of action
- Insecurity about specific challenges and adequate support
- Internal and external need to justify special support for one group

Internal Motivation

- (Top down and/ or bottom up) Pioneer activity
- Voluntary work

External Motivation

- Policy regulations offer scope of action (e.g. modes of acknowledgement for
- Integra and other financial support programs are implemented

Learning by Doing

Establishment of (part time) positions

First contacts counsel refugees and manage special programs

Establishment of specific offers for refugees

Focus on prospective students and study preparation

Path dependency: Support builds on pre-existing structures

Generally offered:

- Counselling
- Study Preparation: Language classes, Academic preparation
- Social integration
- Access to infrastructure

Examples for HEI-specific offers:

- Strong inclusion of students in support structures
- ECTS points for active students
- Offers for traumatized students
- Strong collaboration with local businesses (Funding and Internships)
- Information available in a variety of languages
- Online Courses

Further Approachs

Study preparation programs seem established

First refugee students finish study preparation

New focus on support for refugee students throughout their studies

Aim to improve offers for other groups based on experiences with refugees

Insecurities about further funding and continuation of existing programs

2015

2018

Compared to international students with no experience of forced migration, refugees...

- face similar and partly amplified challenges (language, finances, social isolation)
- face specific challenges due to the circumstances of migration (gap in educational biography, missing documents, psychological distress, contradictory rules and requirements of different institutions)
- prepare under different circumstances (in Germany but often with no specific previous planning or preparation)
- are eligible for specific support and for public loans to financially support students (BAföG)

Only some of the challenges refugees face can directly be met by HEI support.

(Berg 2018)

Conclusion

Even though refugees had previously studied in Germany, they were not registered and generally treated as international students. The refugee influx caused the initialisation and institutionalisation of specific programs, accompanied by growing academic interest in a previously understudied topic (Berg et al. 2018).

The newly implemented programs were often based on voluntary initiatives of pioneers; their institutionalisation largely depends on external funding. All interview partners describe initial insecurities and a lack of experiences or best practice examples. Recently, their focus shifts from study preparation to student support.

Refugees are described as a group with specific challenges and needs, but also as potentially beneficial. Even though they describe emphasize the importance of specific support, most interview partners argued to quickly include refugees in mixed courses to support social inclusion.

Implications

- HEIs should be funded to continue their support for refugees
- Funding should cover continued study preparation for refugees as well as further support throughout their studies
- All relevant actors (including Jobcenters, Funding Services, the Ministry of Migration and Refugees etc.) should be included in supporting refugees on their way to German higher education
- Further investigations of the needs of international students and possible improvements of their situation should be made.

Further Research Questions

This research is part of an ongoing PhD project on refugees in the context of the internationalisation of German higher education. Further research will deal with the organisational governance of responsibility for refugees at German HEI and discuss possible changes of concepts and practices of internationalisation and diversification. Along with field-dynamics, it can be assumed that the utilisation of experiences with refugees for other groups will be an interesting topic of further studies.

References

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