Support for Prospective Refugee Students in Germany: Quo Vadis?

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Abstract

Social engagement can be seen as a crucial part of the third mission of higher education organisations. One aspect of adopting social responsibility is supporting access to higher education for marginalised and underrepresented groups. This chapter describes the introduction and development of support structures for refugee students in Germany. It identifies the principal challenges for and influences on such structures and makes recommendations on how to support their continued existence.

Keywords

refugee students – third mission – access to higher education

1 Introduction

Social responsibility has many facets within higher education – it can be realised in research topics, in promoting and facilitating innovation, in methods and content of teaching, but also in ensuring access to knowledge and formal learning environments, i.e. higher education organisations (HEOs).¹ In recent years, access to higher education for refugees has become a priority for politicians and HEOs alike. Since the peak of asylum applications in 2015 and 2016, many German HEOs have implemented strategies to support refugees in entering higher education (Schammann & Younso, 2016; Schröder et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2018), in the majority of cases by addressing a group that had not been specifically supported or targeted in this context before 2015.

Based on a research project on support for refugee students in Germany, this chapter seeks to contribute to the discussion on social responsibility in higher education by discussing support for refugee students in the context of

HEOs' third mission and examining the organisational challenges faced in initiating, formalising and maintaining programmes for refugee students. Finally, it suggests how HEOs could be helped to maintain their support for refugee students.

2 Third Mission

Traditionally, the primary objectives of HEOs were understood to be teaching and research. An additional, third, mission has become increasingly important in recent decades – “the dialogue between science and society” (Predazzi, 2012, p. 17). HEOs are expected to leave the safety of their ivory towers and engage with society in order “to take a more visible role in stimulating and guiding the utilization of knowledge for social, cultural and economic development” (E3M, 2012, p. 5). This includes a broad range of activities in the areas of “technology transfer and innovation, continuing education and social engagement” (E3M, 2012, p. 8). The latter may include research and output on relevant and critical topics, teaching strategies such as service learning (Berthold et al., 2010, p. 31), and community engagement. It may also include widening participation and critically questioning the status quo, as well as normative and hegemonic knowledge. HEOs are likely to approach their third mission in close connection to their first two missions, research and teaching (Henke et al., 2016, p. 14). Their engagement with refugee students can be seen as an example of this approach – the majority of support structures address study preparation, with current developments extending support throughout their studies. This creates a “mission overlap” (E3M, 2012, p. 8) between teaching and social responsibility, related to the internationalisation and diversification of the student body.

However, although a general expectation prevails that HEOs will fulfil their third mission, their first mission – research – carries the greatest incentives. With few exceptions, their ratings, reputation and funding are linked to their research performance and output and, to a lesser extent, to excellent teaching (Schneidewind, 2016). Social dimensions are underrepresented in devising university rankings (Nyssen, 2018). Based on a systems-theoretical understanding of HEOs as organisations, this chapter looks at the introduction and development of support for refugee students. It identifies changing focuses and practical concerns, as well as the factors influencing the realisation and modification of support structures for refugee students. Finally, it asks how HEOs may be supported in realising their third mission.

3 Data and Methods

This chapter is based on 25 expert-interviews at eight German HEOS, including four universities and four universities of applied sciences, located in seven different German states across the country. One university and one university of applied science are located in the same German city and cooperated in introducing a support programme for refugee students. The remaining HEOS are located in different areas. The HEOS were selected based on their regional distribution and emphasis on either internationalisation or diversification in their mission statements. In order to be included in the sample, they needed to offer support for refugee students.

Between the summers of 2017 and 2018, I conducted interviews with the heads of the international offices and the counsellors for refugees, hereinafter referred to as the first contact, at each HEO. At two HEOS, two first contacts were interviewed. Additionally, I conducted follow-up interviews with the first contacts of seven of the sampled HEOS in late 2019 and early 2020. The timing of the interviews allows an insight into the early development (2017), adjustments and further development (2018) and late stages (2019–2020) of the programmes. During the last interviews, the majority of HEOS were awaiting the outcomes of their funding applications for often adapted follow-up projects.

Building on a previous analysis of challenges for refugee students (Berg, 2018), the introduction and formalisation of the support offered at German HEOS (Berg et al., 2021) and organisational semantics on supporting refugees (Berg, *in press*), this chapter investigates the organisational challenges and factors influencing the realisation and maintenance of support structures, as well as the possibilities for supporting HEOS in order to ensure ongoing support for refugee students. Based on these research interests, a deductive coding scheme was developed, and the follow-up interviews were partly transcribed, with a focus on the changes in existing plans, the plans for new programmes, the challenges in realising them, the aspects influencing the development and realisation of programmes, and structural factors, such as personnel, networks and resources. All interviews were coded according to those topics. For each HEO, a case description was written and, finally, those descriptions were compared in order to identify and generalise the central topics.

4 Higher Education for Refugees

In its fourth sustainable development goal (SDG), the United Nations (UN) aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong

learning opportunities for all” by 2030 (United Nations, 2019). However, in 2019 only 3% of refugees had access to higher education. By 2030, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) aims to increase this number to 15% (UNHCR, 2019). UNHCR’s measures to support higher education for refugees include providing guidelines for countries and HEOS, and information on scholarships for refugee students, such as the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium and the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI), which offer scholarships for undergraduate refugee students. During recent years, the European Union has also increased its support for refugee students, for example, by funding research as well as funding projects to support HEOS in integrating refugees through the Erasmus+ programme. In Germany, the peak of new asylum applications sparked a discussion on the importance of supporting refugees’ education, and also on the potential of refugees for the German labour market (Streitwieser & Brück, 2018). At the same time, many of the newly arrived refugees intended to start or pursue higher education, and approximately one-third were expected to hold the necessary formal entrance qualifications (Brücker et al., 2016). In this context, the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) started funding schemes to support study preparation for refugees at German HEOS. Similar programmes were made available at a regional level in some states (‘Bundesländer’), leading to the formalisation of support programmes at HEOS throughout the country within a similar timeframe.

In German higher education, the authority for many decisions, such as admission criteria and procedures for individual study programmes, or the eligibility of foreign documents, lies primarily with individual HEOS. Thus, whether and how policy implications and guidelines are implemented depends directly on individual institutional policies.

However, it can generally be stated that, irrespective of their residence status, refugee students are formally treated in the same way as international students from countries outside the European Union. In most cases, that means that they can apply in the usual way as soon as they fulfil the admission criteria, which usually include language certificates and an entrance qualification. Students with credentials that do not meet the criteria for direct entrance have to take an assessment test (‘Feststellungsprüfung’). Preparatory colleges (‘Studienkollegs’) offer courses for international students to help them prepare for this test (Grüttner et al., 2018). Before the refugee influx in 2015–2016, refugees were barely recognised or supported in the context of German higher education. Instead, they competed with all international students for a limited number of study places.

Generally, refugees face similar challenges to other international students, such as social isolation, financial challenges and lack of language proficiency. Due to the circumstances of forced migration, the rules and restrictions of the asylum procedure and their often-precarious situations, they also face a number of additional challenges, such as trauma or psychological distress, gaps in their educational biography, missing documents or contradictory formal requirements from different organisations (Berg, 2018; Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Grüttner et al., 2018; Unangst & Streitwieser, 2018). Further, the processes and requirements of HEOs are built on organisational assumptions about typical students, which can create difficulties for those who do not fit these norms (Baker & Irwin, 2019).

5 First Steps, Experiences and Structural Changes: The Development of Support Offers for Refugee Students

The interviews with HEO members offer an insight into what can be seen as four stages of programme initiation and development at German HEOs. These are preceded by the identification of a topic and a need to act which, in this case, was closely connected to the public discourse on educating refugees as well as to practical demands, such as a rapidly increasing number of counselling requests from prospective refugee students. This identification of a topic means that HEO members become aware of an issue and not only of the need to act, but also the need to do so in the context of their HEO's mission and scope of action. Previous research has shown high levels of ambition to support refugees among HEO members at all hierarchical levels and has emphasised the importance of this engagement in establishing support structures (Webb et al., 2019). When asked about their reasons for supporting refugee students, HEO members often referred to internationalisation, diversification and a third mission or social responsibility and, from these points, referred to formal self-descriptions of their respective HEOs, such as internationalisation strategies or mission statements. Moreover, refugee students were seen as enriching the diversity and internationality of the student body and as potentially highly motivated new students (Berg, in press). As one interviewee stated:

As I said, those two aspects, this is just a, a not necessarily new group, but an increasingly important group. Precisely in this entire area of diversity of internationalisation. And in the area of social responsibility. (U1E2)²

This shows that the need to support refugee students is understood and communicated within the context of organisational goals and strategy papers

which already exist. Although refugees are not specifically addressed by existing strategies, these are sufficiently vague to allow refugee students to be newly established as a target-group within their context. This is not merely understood as an act of kindness, but rationalised within the organisation's aims and expected benefits. For example, some participants explicitly highlighted the potential, created by their current experiences with refugee students, to improve the support offered to all international students by raising awareness of their situation and needs (Berg, in press).

5.1 *Four Stages of Programme Initiation and Development*

As previously mentioned, pioneers initiated decentral voluntary engagement. Academic and administrative staff from a range of hierarchical levels, as well as students, became active (Berg et al., 2021). Their engagement included initial networking, counselling refugees after hours, mentorship initiatives and social activities such as sports groups. Law students started refugee law clinics to provide legal counselling for refugees. The importance of these initial decentralised actions was emphasised throughout the interviews and demonstrates that people are crucial in providing these initial impulses and initiating direct action for HEOS' social engagement. The principal challenges faced during that time were on the individual level, working extra hours or managing insecurities in how to address the specific issues of this target-group:

In summer 2015, many more people that had fled came to the university to get information. And nobody knew where to send them. Everybody felt that this was a completely new topic and, somehow, nobody felt it was their responsibility. Then the state announced that each university should name a contact for refugees [...] In summer 2015, that was sort of pushed on to my colleague [...], who welcomed the task. But it quickly became clear that it was too much, because he could not manage the number of people in addition to his regular job. (U2T1E1)

Yeah, in the beginning it was resources. Because we had to see how to counsel all those people that turned up in our office. And yes, that was the main issue. (FH4T1E2)

Secondly, this first stage of engagement was followed by the formalisation of offers for refugee students (Berg, 2018; Berg et al., 2021; Iwers-Stelljes et al., 2016; Schammann & Younso, 2016, 2017). Early support offers focussed primarily on study preparation for refugees, in order to facilitate their social and academic integration in German HEOS. The offers of support were typically based on needs ascribed to refugee students and were dependent on local factors,

such as existing support or networks. They often included language classes and academic preparation courses. At all the HEOs in the sample, one or more first-contact positions were established, whose tasks included counselling, the coordination of all support for refugee students and the establishment and maintenance of relevant contact networks (Berg et al., 2021.). Initial insecurities were often due to a lack of experience with this specific topic and thus, raised questions about how to realise target-group-specific support with little or no official recommendations or guidance. Further challenges were often of a practical nature, such as finding a sufficient number of competent German-language-teachers (UNESCO, 2018) or access to infrastructural resources, such as rooms. Another issue was the lack of information about the efficacy of such study preparation programmes. There is no overall information available on how many refugees successfully apply to German HEOs – apart from in the organisation of specific support structures, German HEOs do not collect data on their students' residence status (Streitwieser & Brück, 2018). Moreover, HEO-members in direct contact with refugees often emphasised that refugees face challenges that cannot directly be addressed by the HEOs themselves, such as poor accommodation or constraints on their movement. The interviewees also expressed concern about excluding refugees from other student groups by establishing exclusive offers of support:

Because they could not afford to buy tickets. [...] We found no solution. [...] So, they get welfare money, sure. But the money would not be enough for such things. (FH3T1E1)

The tendency was, we wanted to make it possible for them to get out of this label, as I were. So that at some point they could build a life as regular international students instead. (FH1T1E1)

Thirdly, interviews conducted in 2018 showed the adaption and stabilisation of offers for refugees (Berg, in press) – depending on their experiences and feedback, many HEOs adapted their offers of support. Changes included, for example, revising the times at which support was available, in reaction to the absence of participants due to overlapping asylum-related appointments, family obligations or religious traditions, such as Ramadan. Generally, the established offers were understood to function well. They principally included language and academic courses, counselling and mentoring, as well as HEO-specific individual support, such as business networks to support internships. Voluntary projects supplemented the formalised support structures, but often for a limited period of time. Generally, student engagement appeared to

decrease. Some HEOs tried to maintain engagement by creating paid positions or the opportunity to collect study credits for intercultural engagement:

And so we did not develop a general strategy, but watched a little. And, during the last two years, it became more and more clear: what are the actual needs? Where are the needs and related to this, we developed structures. (FH1T1E1)

And we arranged it so that students who wanted to become involved could also attend an accompanying seminar, in order to be a little more trained for this whole situation. And they have the opportunity to collect credit points with it. And this has been very well received; we just had a semester with over 100 students and refugees. (FH1T1E1)

In individual cases, support offers were reduced due to low demand. The principal insecurities were around whether the necessary funding could be secured to maintain support offers for refugees after 2019. Moreover, personnel changes at some HEOs increased insecurities about the future of the programmes and diverted attention to re-organisation, instead of further developing support for refugees:

And we ask ourselves internally whether we will have enough participants, even for the language classes. Before, the situation was always 'oh God! We cannot find a slot for all of them! We have to turn so many away. Where are they going to find something?' And this was the situation until just half a year ago. And now, suddenly, it's 'oh! Will we even manage to fill those two classes?' (FH1T1E2)

We had a project with sport sciences, which was over after half a year because the person was gone again. It is always person-dependent. (U2T2E1)

Finally, the follow-up interviews in late 2019 and early 2020 were conducted after or during the last stages of these programmes, in the sense that funding periods were about to end or, in one case, had just ended. Those HEOs that had applied for further funding had mostly included changes to their programmes in their applications for follow-up projects. The interviews, therefore, show a phase of structural changes and the diversification of further developments of offers for refugee students – different HEOs experienced very different levels of demand. While at some locations the numbers of requests and

applications were either “slightly increasing” (U3T2E1) or remained “relatively stable” (U2T2E1), at some others they “very distinctly” (U4T2E1) decreased. This reduced demand was one cause for reduced offer of support. All interview partners describe how support programmes for refugees had path-dependently been further adapted. Examples include the increasing use of social media at a university that already had a strong focus on information and contact with the target-group, and an increased tendency to include support for refugee students as offered to all international students. A number of factors provided the orientation and inspiration to adjust the programmes. Exchanges and networks prove to be important opportunities for reflection, including experiences with and feedback from refugee students, from internal network partners, such as teachers or study counsellors, as well as from external network partners, such as exchanges with and reports of the experiences of other HEOS. Funding requirements are another crucial factor: federal and state-level calls for funding applications are said to have shifted their focus from study preparation to study accompaniment and preparations for entering the German labour market. Furthermore, support offers for refugee students were to be opened up to, or integrated with, offers for all international students, which was mostly welcomed by the first contacts because it reflected their previous thoughts.

Two general developments emerged. The majority of HEOS in the sample had applied for funding for further programmes. Plans for the continuation of refugee support were always dependent on the outcomes of those applications. In most cases, the focus of these follow-up projects was supposed to shift: study preparation should continue but, additionally, support should be developed and added in finding internships; training for the labour market and job applications; and subject-specific language classes. Mostly, the support offers for refugee students and other international students were to be integrated. The main insecurities were the imminent termination of project funding and uncertainty about open funding applications. In addition, personnel changes brought difficulties in transferring experience and knowledge. Frequently, a new first contact would start after the previous one had already left, causing them to duplicate previous work, collecting information and establishing routines. Moreover, impressions of the success of programmes for refugee students were principally based on direct contact with the target-group, with a continued absence of any evidence-based overview, due to a lack of data collection. The majority of first contacts did not see this evidence as crucial for their work, but the question of how to measure the success of programmes remained, particularly if those programmes were not intended solely as

HEO-specific study preparation, but also as general support for refugees' social integration:

And a new thing is labour market orientation. That was really important to the DAAD in the new call for applications, that additional measures are taken to help refugees prepare for the German labour market. (U4T2E1)

Mainly based on exchange. So, there are conferences where such topics [possible programme adaptations] are centrally discussed. But there are also smaller rounds. Here in [state] there are regular meetings with other contacts for refugees from other universities and universities of applied sciences and we frequently talk about such topics. But, also, in contact with student counselling for example. They can also give feedback on such things, that certain tasks create difficulties, and then we naturally include this in such applications. (U2T2E1)

We have our own notion of what one needs to study, and, of course, there is feedback from refugees: what is missing, what they need, what could be done. So, it is a combination of what we believe is good and what we can somehow offer, of our capacities and what needs are announced by the refugees. And, of course, from professors. (U4T2E1)

The second general development to emerge is typified by one HEO, which had not applied for further funding, primarily due to a marked decrease in requests and course-participants. At the time of the follow-up interview, no first contact position was officially in place. The previous first contact had principally been responsible for documenting the project. All support offers for international and domestic students remained open to refugee students, but no specific courses, counselling or project-management were now offered. This also affected communication structures: external networks would not be followed-up and no internal position now existed to bring together all the relevant information and experience for this target group. This demonstrates the importance of a first contact position for maintaining target-group specific knowledge and networks.

6 Support for Refugee Students as Part of the Third Mission

The analysis of the introduction, formalisation and further development of support for refugee students in German higher education indicated three

crucial points for understanding social engagement as part of an HEO's third mission. Firstly, the term is vague. Although HEOs generally acknowledge their social responsibilities and refer to social engagement in their self-descriptions and mission statements, the practical meaning remains unclear. There needs to be an event or prompt to initiate specific projects or activities. In this case, public expectations, pioneer activities and available funding brought about the introduction of projects for refugees. There are no self-evident topics or actions in social responsibility, but expectations have to be communicated and prioritised. Secondly, personnel are crucial in identifying important areas and inspiring and initiating practical engagement. However, in order to be maintained, those impulses have to be formalised, which usually requires the acceptance or support of the HEO's management. Thirdly, HEOs need incentives and resources which emphasise the importance and support the realisation of social engagement. Then, the third mission could become the first mission, influencing and improving research and teaching (Schneidewind, 2016).

The study participants most commonly discussed support for refugee students in the context of internationalisation, diversification and the third mission, or social responsibility. At some HEOs, the contact between international offices and diversity management increased significantly as a result of their common engagement with refugees. This could offer an opportunity to link these topics more closely and increase cooperation between the respective offices. If the internationalisation of higher education is understood as

the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015, pp. 29, 281)

Refugees and asylum seekers offer the chance to widen the scope of this process. This could lead to increased diversity within HEOs and society, and give the opportunity to establish support structures that could be used for a variety of marginalised or non-traditional groups of (prospective) students. Since the presence of international students does not automatically mean internationalisation (Knight, 2011), it seems important to focus sustainable programmes on supporting both their social and academic integration. Furthermore, the experiences with refugee students offer possibilities to apply lessons learned from these programmes to other groups. This knowledge should, therefore, be seen as an organisational resource and be reprocessed accordingly.

7 Quo Vadis? Implications for Supporting HEOS' Engagement with Refugee Students

Based on rising interest in study preparation, the engagement of pioneers and the funding made available by federal and local programmes, German HEOS initiated a variety of support structures for prospective students with the experience of forced migration. The majority of HEOS in the sample started such support programmes in 2015 or 2016, based on existing offers for international students, plus additional, more or less improvised, measures. During the different stages of introducing and developing a support offer for refugee students, HEO members faced a variety of challenges from initial insecurities about how to support this specific target group with little available guidance, to adjustments of the programmes based on experience. They gained confidence in how to support refugee students, but the future of the programmes and their funding remain uncertain.

It can be expected that the landscape of refugee support will grow increasingly diverse, addressing combined questions of social integration, diversification, study preparation and internationalisation. This may present an opportunity to rethink internationalisation strategies, and to combine strategies of internationalisation and diversification, in order to meet the third mission of social responsibility, thus resulting in cross-department engagement. The development of offers for refugees has shown the potential and importance of individual personnel in identifying and initially addressing important topics. In order to formalise and establish support for refugees, and other marginalised groups, HEOS and their staff members could be supported on several levels. The following measures could help to establish ongoing, target-group-specific support structures at HEOS:

- Personnel: A position formally in charge of counselling, networking and the administration of offers for refugees was repeatedly emphasised as crucial to programmes for refugees. This position concentrates personal and organisational knowledge in one place. In order to be able to offer more diverse projects, more than one position was understood to be ideal. In this context, additional funding should allow time for handovers and training new personnel, in the event of personnel changes.

In addition, paid student positions may increase student engagement and potentially lead to more peer-contact for refugee students.

In order to realise support offers for refugees, qualified personnel, such as German-language-teachers, are crucial. Relevant training and professional development should be offered.

- External networks: Many issues cannot be addressed by HEOS, including the majority of issues relating to the living and learning conditions of refugees or the requirements of the asylum regime and welfare state (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018), and the question of whether refugees are informed of the possibility of higher education. Therefore, it seems elementary to keep crucial official and voluntary figures informed about the possibility of higher education, to find policy solutions to minimise legal insecurities (Schammann & Younso, 2016) and to offer practical solutions to the remaining challenges, such as the recognition of foreign degrees.
- Orientation and information: Although initial insecurities were overcome and support offers for refugee students were stabilised, it seems essential to document the experiences with refugee students and successful support programmes and share this information with all HEOS, inspiring adjustments of individual programmes and benefiting further programmes or other target-groups.
- Funding: The majority of the elements listed above depend on funding. Project-specific funding should include personnel, relevant courses and activities, such as public relations, as well as funding for time-limited additional measures. HEOS should be thoroughly informed about funding possibilities. While the project-specific time limit of funding schemes can allow regular adjustments, project deadlines also cause insecurities. HEOS' applications for further or new funding should be answered promptly and well before the ending of previous funding periods.
- Incentives: In order to emphasise the importance of social engagement, it should become a factor in university rankings.

Notes

- 1 My analysis was based on a systems theoretical framework. In order to investigate decision making and the initiation, formalisation and further development of support structures for refugees, I looked into universities as organisations rather than institutions.
- 2 All quotes translated from German by the author.

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