

Refugees in International Education: Language as a Barrier for Higher Education

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Setting

Higher education is a dynamic and multi-layered process. In times of increased uncertainty, it becomes more necessary for higher education institutions to update policies and take action. Access to higher education is a human right enshrined in various international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this context, refugee participation in higher education best exemplifies this uncertainty. Yet, the participation of refugees in higher education can facilitate and strengthen social integration.

The experiences of refugees, persons under international protection, and persons under temporary protection in higher education are different from the experiences of international students. Those in the first group face many problems in participating in higher education. Access and integration to higher education can be realized by removing the existing difficulties and barriers. Some of these barriers include documentation, finances, and language. Despite policy changes and the support of international organizations, the language barrier remains the most important obstacle to access to higher education.

In this context, the situation is no different for Turkey, which has been exposed to a large influx of refugees. As a stakeholder of the European Higher Education Framework, Turkish Higher Education has taken important decisions to facilitate the processes of refugees, those under international protection and those under temporary protection status. Despite this, the barriers still prevent many refugee students from completing their studies.

Case

Ali is a refugee student who started his secondary education in Syria and had to complete it in Turkey. He is not a refugee under Turkish law and is instead under Temporary Protection Status. Immediately after the start of the Syrian Civil War, he was forced to migrate to Turkey, the closest country to his region. Ali is the eldest child in a family of 6 children and is responsible for taking care of his family. After his migration to Turkey, Ali was hesitant to persevere in his education owing to financial distress. Due to his father's health issues, Ali had to look after his family after the Syrian Civil War. With the support of his family, Ali graduated from high school and then decided to study Civil Engineering, as the field would be in demand after the war. The problems for Ali began to occur after his decision.

Ali had to work and pursue his high school education at the same time. Therefore, he was late in following the advertisements and announcements during the university application process. The main reason for running behind was that all information channels were provided in Turkish. Ali also had insufficient information about the university and department he desired to study at, as well as the required documents for application and registration. In Turkey, universities have information and counseling offices during the application process. Ali went to these offices in the limited time he had after work. Nevertheless, the staff at these offices could not communicate in Arabic or English and were unable to assist not only Ali but also numerous other students in the same situation. Ali's language-based problems with the admissions and student affairs offices made him indecisive about going on to higher education.

The unforeseen influx of refugees has left Turkish universities uncertain about their policies. The intense student demand faced by universities has put the staff working in the registration and student affairs offices in a hard situation. Their attitudes towards prospective students hardened during the process as well.

Ali encountered the obstacle of not being able to communicate with the relevant offices to get assistance. This brought Ali to the point of rethinking his registration. Yet, Ali concluded his enrollment in the Civil Engineering department out of concern for his future. Ali's language-based problems persisted with the start of school. The lack of an orientation week and how to operate the university's course selection system were among the first crises Ali encountered. His friends studying in the same department also struggled to communicate with Ali owing to language barriers, which caused this problem to continue. The language barrier Ali faced during his admission, enrollment and study process caused him to decide to drop out of university several times. However, the attention of Ali's academic advisors and the approach of some university staff in solving the

problems helped Ali to overcome his decisions. With this support and with perseverance, Ali continued his studies, including completing an internship in Civil Engineering in the last year of his undergraduate studies.

Ali's personal experience with the language barrier reflects the problems of many refugees. The elimination of Ali's difficulties and Ali's continuation of his education were realized through the personal determination of individuals. However, this solution is not sustainable and many students with similar problems dropped out of their education. In this context, it is a necessity to create sustainable institutional policies. Many non-governmental organizations from abroad are providing aid to refugees. However, the aid provided and the strategy pursued are often insufficient to prioritize the participation of refugees in higher education. Monthly scholarships are usually very small and policies and practices that will eliminate the language barrier for students are inadequate. In these difficulties, they cannot find the time and financial means to attend language courses. Refugee students face multi-faceted obstacles while trying to continue their higher education, including financial and language barriers. Higher education policy and practice must be updated to safeguard these students' human rights.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How would you assess Ali's experience in higher education as a refugee student? What factors might be common for refugees? What factors might depend on individual circumstances?
- In what ways are the challenges that refugee students face different from other international students?
- How can refugees' participation in higher education be addressed within the framework of internationalization of higher education?
- How can the language barrier be overcome in the internationalization of higher education?
- What kind of training and support should be offered to personnel working in the admissions, registration, and student affairs offices? How would you address the language barrier?
- How can national policies and practices be updated to support refugees in higher education?