

Competing Motivations in Germany's Higher Education Response to the "Refugee Crisis"

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Abstract

In 2015–16 Germany was confronted with over 1 million new refugees, which challenged public and private institutions alike and increasingly divided public sentiments. This article investigates the cultural, political, and economic dynamics as they were in Germany in 2015–16 and in particular how its higher education sector responded. The discussion covers a comprehensive review of media debates, public and private institutional research, new German- and English-language scholarship, and case studies the authors collected of fifteen universities. The article ends with recommendations as German universities prepare for 30,000–50,000 refugees eligible for study in the coming years.

Résumé

En 2015-2016, l'Allemagne a fait face à plus de 1 million de nouveaux réfugiés, ce qui a remis en question les institutions publiques et privées et généré des sentiments de plus en plus divisés de la part du public. Cet article explore les dynamiques économiques, politiques et culturelles telles qu'elles se présentaient en Allemagne ces années-là, et en particulier la réaction de son enseignement supérieur. La discussion porte sur un examen exhaustif des débats médiatiques, de la

recherche institutionnelle publique et privée, des nouvelles bourses d'études pour apprendre l'allemand ou l'anglais, et d'études de cas colligées par les auteurs dans 15 universités. L'article se termine sur des recommandations, alors que les universités allemandes se préparent à accueillir de 30 000 à 50 000 réfugiés admissibles aux études dans les années à venir.

Introduction

The ongoing Syrian civil war has been a tragedy of historic proportions. Over 250,000 Syrians died during its first five years, 6 million became internally displaced, and over 4 million were rendered stateless throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), or sought safe havens in Europe, the United States, but mostly in neighbouring countries (e.g., Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon). Much of the rest of the Arab world remains in turmoil, with tribal warfare and terror groups in countries where dictatorships were overthrown during the Arab Spring and simmering or boiling conflicts persist.¹

This upheaval has intensified the migration of refugees and asylum seekers in many directions, including toward Europe.²

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This article shares a study of the cultural, political, and economic dynamics that played out in Germany in 2015–16 in response to the influx of refugees that came into the country in only a matter of months. In particular, we focus on how the German higher education sector responded. We begin with a comprehensive review of media debates, public and private institutional research, and new German- and English-language scholarship that was just emerging at the time, and triangulate that with case studies we conducted of fifteen diverse universities throughout the country as well as findings from other studies emerging at the same time. The article concludes with recommendations for German universities preparing for 30,000–50,000 refugees expected to become eligible to enter universities between 2016–2020, according to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

In 2015 the refugee influx reached a peak in Germany, setting off what the German and global media soon began referring to a “refugee crisis”³ when as many as 890,000 refugees in 2015 and another 280,000 in 2016 sought asylum in the country, known for its generous social system and liberal immigration policies.⁴

The influx of the large numbers of refugees arriving in Germany at the time carried with it a sense of urgency that verged on panic.⁵ This was fuelled mostly by an overwhelmed bureaucratic system that was struggling to process and house the large numbers of people arriving at the borders daily.⁶ Even after the initial influx was stemmed and German bureaucracy re-stabilized, however, the 2015–16 period continues to have ramifications on current policy and a new right-wing party in parliament, even if factually the country had weathered greater disruptions in its postwar history, including previously larger refugee streams. This contextual reality laid the groundwork for our study of Germany’s response to the “refugee crisis,” and in particular how its higher education sector responded.

Of the new refugees coming into the country in 2015–16, 76.2 per cent were males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five.⁷ At first Germany could only cope with processing and sheltering new arrivals, but over time it also began to direct them into retraining and educational and professional pathways. Between 30,000 and 50,000 refugees were projected at the time to become eligible to begin or resume their interrupted university studies in Germany within the next one or two years when their credentialing and qualification hurdles would be resolved.⁸ Applying as an organizing principle Robertson and Dale’s⁹ Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education, this article analyzes how the social, political, and economic realities of education affected Germany’s universities and the ways they responded in the first years of this newest refugee challenge for Germany, how they

began to adapt their programming on the basis of their experience with the first refugee cohorts, and what challenges they foresaw for integrating refugees into higher education.

An Ambivalent Land of Migration

Since World War II Germany has gradually transitioned into being regarded as a so-called land of migration, although with contested public support.¹⁰ This transition began immediately after the Second World War, when Germany absorbed between 12 and 14 million expelled ethnic Germans who were being driven out of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union.¹¹ In subsequent years, large numbers of foreigners arrived through so-called guest worker programs of the 1960s.¹² When as the result of accelerating economic recovery in the late 1940s through the 1950s and 1960s and attendant labour shortages, roughly 14 million guest workers arrived through bilateral recruitment agreements established with Turkey as well as several European and North African countries. Of these, roughly 3 million eventually stayed in the country.¹³ More recently in the 1990s, increasing migration streams followed, particularly in the mid-1990s during the Balkan War, when 1.504 million applied for asylum status in Germany.¹⁴ Gradually, the federal republic became a major target for migration flows among industrialized countries.¹⁵ Despite the inflow, there had been no laws in Germany that dealt with the issue of immigration, and the public was slow to accept Germany’s new status as a country of migration.¹⁶ The first national Law on Immigration and Migrant Integration (*Zuwanderungsgesetz*) came into effect only in 2005, which was late when compared with other migration countries.¹⁷ Thus, while 2015 saw heavier records of asylum applications than in years past, the events that unfolded in 2015–16 were not an unprecedented migration rush, and previous periods witnessed even larger refugee streams.¹⁸

What marked the 2015–16 “crisis” as different from previous mass migration events into Germany was the initial welcome refugees received. Vivid images in the media hearkened back to another recent moment in modern German history, when West Germans welcomed East Germans after the Berlin Wall opened in 1989. But this did not last long. While the generous reception refugees received in 2015 and early 2016 was characterized by a supportive media heralding the *Willkommenskultur*, when their numbers continued to increase, the media’s language turned to “compassion fatigue”¹⁹ and not long thereafter a “refugee tsunami.”²⁰ With a rate in 2015 of granting 49.8 per cent constitutional asylum, refugee status, or another type of protective status—and 90 per cent if economic migrants from the Balkan states were discounted—the debate around the integration of refugees took on particular urgency.²¹

Background on the German Higher Education Context

Responses to Massification: Standardization vs. Addressing Individual Needs

Germany has a well-established, tuition-free higher education system with 429 institutions, from research universities to universities of applied sciences. Education decisions lie at the state level within the federal system, giving them substantial autonomy. This status has allowed for the development of a diverse higher education system, although, as in any system, geographic and other contextual factors have also led to significant differentiation among university profiles.

Along with being a magnet for refugees, Germany in 2015–16 was also the fifth most popular destination for international students and indisputably a key player in the competitive international education marketplace.²² In 2016, 357,835 international students (12.76 per cent of the student body) were enrolled at German universities,²³ attracted by its generally high quality and well-resourced, tuition-free system. The combination of international students coupled with the persistent growth in domestic students led to a 44.5 per cent increase of the total student body since 2007–8.²⁴ Universities reacted to this increase by limiting students' choice within study programs, which is consistent with reforms introduced throughout the European Higher Education Area via the broader Bologna Process. This policy resulted in greater numbers of students crowding into seminars and lectures and greater student-professor ratios (from 1:59 in 2004 to 1:66 in 2014), as well as fewer contact hours, more online lectures, and fewer student services, among other cost- and personnel-reduction measures.²⁵

While the 30,000–50,000 refugees estimated to seek access to higher education within the following years would amount to an increase of only 1–2 per cent among the total university student body of 2,803,916 at the time,²⁶ refugee students would also need new and additional support and services to succeed. That difference marked a stark contrast to the coping strategies universities had applied over the previous years to deal with the more incremental growth in student enrolments. Services needed by refugees were extensive, from verification of higher education entrance requirements to language preparatory classes, from buddy and mentoring programs to additional guidance and individual consultations. All of these also required additional staff and financial and material resources.²⁷ These needs continue to place significant new demands on the capacities of universities to adequately serve their students.

Access to Higher Education

Despite a reputation for bureaucracy, German university entrance requirements for refugees are no more onerous than quality control mechanisms imposed by most other higher education systems in Europe or North America. German employers and institutions rigorously review diplomas, transcripts, and certificates of authenticity of any applicants for education or employment. While early cohorts of refugees were still able to flee with their documents in hand or had uploaded them onto online storage clouds, some later cohorts who fled more quickly under rapidly deteriorating conditions arrived without documentation. To meet these challenges, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) eased their burden in December 2015 by implementing through statute the following three entrance stages for refugees unable to provide proof of credentials from their home countries.²⁸

1. Hochschulzugangsberechtigung, HZB (university entrance qualification)

The HZB is a valid university entrance qualification that can be verified against the Anabin database (Recognition and assessment of foreign qualifications) and then processed by universities with the help of a credential service provider. The Anabin database can compare school leaving certificates, training certificates, individual achievement reports, and other documents to a vast collection of original documents from 180 countries and 25,000 higher education institutions. For example, a Syrian student who earned a 70 per cent or above on his or her high school leaving examination in Syria would be granted direct access to higher education in Germany if the Anabin database proves the veracity of those credentials.

2. Verification of scholastic aptitude with TestAS

TestAS is a standardized scholastic aptitude test to measure students' intellectual abilities. While the test can be taken in either German or English and is free of charge for the first sitting, in our research we learned that some universities, such as the University of Cologne and the Goethe University Frankfurt, also provided the test in Arabic.²⁹ Although TestAS is neither a language competency exam nor a test of subject-specific knowledge, it is an important measure of an applicant's general intellectual competencies to study at a German university or technical institution. Subject-level testing must still be conducted by an individual department once a university has determined an applicant is sufficiently qualified, however.³⁰

3. Verification of required language proficiency

While C1 German-language proficiency is required to study for a BA or MA taught in German, by 2015–16 approximately 150 BA and MA programs were on offer throughout Germany in English, according to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).³¹ However, even for fully English-taught programs, certain universities in our study, such as the University of Duisburg-Essen, require at least a B2 German-language proficiency. Even so, while the dominant language of instruction at German universities remains German, there has also been a clear trend over the past decade toward more English-language programs. As an example of this trend, which at its core is meant to assertively attract international students, both the Technische Universität Darmstadt and the Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf in our sample offered five English MA programs, including Physics and European Studies.

Financing Education Studies

As of 2015–16, public universities in Germany were all free of charge, apart from an administrative fee of €150–€350 customarily charged per term, which also includes a regional travel card. A monthly grant-loan combination (BaföG) provides a living allowance, which depends on a student's personal assets, earnings, and parental income but cannot exceed €735. There has been no change in the funding mechanisms for all students, including refugee applicants. The policy continues to be that half the sum is granted as an interest-free loan for which repayment begins after the fifth year following graduation; the rate is based on monthly salary income and can be forgiven if a set salary threshold is not met.³² Additional loans with interest rates below 1 per cent are available to students from the government-owned development bank, KfW. Refugees have the same access to these generous German educational support mechanisms as do all domestic students, are neither given special favours nor disadvantaged in this regard.³³

Theoretical Framework

In looking at the German higher education response to the current refugee influx as a macrosocial challenge, we apply Connie Gersick's Punctuated Equilibrium Paradigm³⁴ and Susan Robertson and Roger Dale's Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education (CCPEE) framework.³⁵ We see both as helpful organizing principles.

We utilize the Robertson and Dale framework to organize our discussion, as their use of cultural, political, and economic lenses provides a helpful gestalt on which to structure our own discussion. We see the German higher education (HE) response to the 2015–16 “refugee crisis” as embodying larger globalizing processes and structures. Robertson and

Dale's CCPEE framework insightfully helps to analyze the broader context that influences and conditions German HE policy and institutional responses to refugee integration and access to higher education. Their framework emphasizes the critical interrogation of what they call the “education ensemble” as it interacts with and emerges from the cultural, political, and economic processes that are embedded within globalization. The use of the concept of “education ensemble” does not simply reduce education to being an agent of socialization or allow it to be merely measured through learning outcomes; it acknowledges that education is deeply embedded in often highly contested, multiple societal relationships through the very actors, institutions, and structures that operate within it.³⁶ It is in this context that we analyze the way emerging and existing juxtapositions between cultural, political, and economic forces shaped the response, both broadly in Germany and also through the actions taken by its universities, as they prepared to accommodate this new group of incoming students.

In looking at the university sector and how cultural, political, and economic forces challenged the refugee integration programming they were beginning to organize at the time, we also find particular resonance in Gersick's Punctuated Equilibrium Paradigm.³⁷ This paradigm describes organizations as characterized by “relatively long periods of stability (equilibrium), punctuated by compact periods of qualitative, metamorphic change (revolution).”³⁸ This model provides an appropriate lens to look at the German university landscape in its assumption that, along with continuous adaptation efforts, major changes also suddenly occur at times. Ideally universities are responsive, but it may be in how they react that sheds the brightest light on their openness to reform and adaptation. This puncturing of otherwise general equilibrium in the German higher education system is what makes the case of the refugee influx into the country and its university sector so intriguing. Even though German universities had been reforming incrementally during previous decades in response to the Bologna Declaration,³⁹ the unexpected influx of refugees in 2015–16 presented them with a new opportunity to more urgently consider targeted reforms.

The Study

The rush to cope with the regulatory demands of processing so many new arrivals allowed relatively little time to reflect on the effectiveness and impact of the process. Early on, accounts of the sudden influx of refugees and limited analysis came primarily from the media, German education and migration ministries, and a handful of policy and philanthropic organizations that were conducting primarily demographic studies. Mostly missing were more careful and deeper academic analyses on specific aspects of a critical

period in Germany's recent history as it was unfolding in the early days of the influx in 2015–16.

Only more recently have publications in German-language academic journals⁴⁰ and research reports by German ministries (e.g., Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung⁴¹) and university research groups (e.g., Kleist⁴²) begun to examine the legal and practical boundaries that have faced refugees trying to access German higher education. International journals only more recently have begun to publish research on the German case, and theses and doctoral studies have also begun to emerge (e.g., Ragab et al.⁴³). Given the fact that the education sector is a critical player in refugee resettlement in offering a primary conduit back into society and acting as a powerful antidote to the trauma of forced migration,⁴⁴ documenting this process is important, and understanding what happened early on in the German case is critical for historical and policy studies that are still to be written.

This article contributes to this important area of scholarship by detailing the situation in Germany and how various sectors and key players reacted in 2015–16. The German higher education system provides an ideal setting to study the refugee response and to look initially at the early success and failures of its universities to integrate this potentially significant new workforce. How the process played out early on, and will continue to evolve, will have significant short- and long-term ramifications in a country in which the immigrant influx has been discussed as a possible solution to the demographic challenges facing the country after decades of a declining birth rate and an aging population.⁴⁵

The goal of this study was to investigate how German universities sought to help newly arrived refugees primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, but also in lesser numbers from Africa (e.g., Eritrea), Central and Eastern Europe, and other countries and regions, integrate into the German higher education system by creating academic programming and support services. We did this by looking primarily at how the migration dynamic in Germany played out in cultural, political, and economic terms as reported in the daily and weekly newspapers and magazines spanning the political spectrum, through grey literature published by higher federal authorities at the time, independently commissioned research projects that had just been published, and individual academic researchers publishing in English and in German at the time. Since then much more research has begun to emerge, but our focus is on the earliest studies that came out in the initial crisis period.

In addition to the literature review, we also sent out an email survey in the autumn and winter of 2016 to a selection of seventeen universities⁴⁶ throughout Germany (receiving fifteen responses) to query them about their current and

planned activities in the coming years. Our sample covered institutions in the former East and West and also those in larger metropolitan centres like Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich, and smaller cities like Dortmund and Darmstadt. The sample included responses from a range of administrators at each university, from directors of international offices, to those leading smaller teams of personnel who were working directly with refugee students. Our email included an explanation of our interest in analyzing in detail how German universities were dealing with the “refugee crisis,” and also understanding how Germany was managing the latest migration challenge at a time when the political moods in both Europe and the United States appeared to be increasingly isolationist and anti-migrant. Our questions asked respondents to explain the current number of refugees, requirements for enrolment, services and programs provided, and anticipated enrolments in coming years.

In seeking to triangulate our comprehensive literature review and survey of institutions, we also looked at smaller recent studies. For example, our research was inspired in particular by a smaller, previous study conducted by Hannes Schammann and Christin Younso,⁴⁷ who had looked at the activities of seven universities in the winter semester between October 2015 and April 2016. We selected our universities on the following criteria: (1) geographic location representing diverse parts of the country, particularly the former East and West, (2) likelihood of having a large concentration of refugees, which encompasses both major metropolitan centres and smaller affected cities, and (3) level of engagement with refugees.

Our analysis of the fifteen universities was not intended as our sole data source but rather to further shed light on the “refugee crisis” as reported by the wide range of sources noted above. Finally, we also sought email feedback from the German Academic Exchange Service, which was facilitating educational integration of refugees in Germany's sixteen federal states. We believe the DAAD's response, along with the responses from our fifteen participating universities, helps to demonstrate the passion and dedication shown by the higher education sector at the time to addressing refugee integration challenges. Although the profiled universities represented only a small slice of Germany's more than 400 institutions of higher education, these data, in combination with the DAAD information and our literature review, provide a robust summary of the diverse range of universities and other key players who initiated services in 2015–16 to begin helping Germany's newest arrivals.

Findings

From the research we found emerging fault lines in society as a reflection, or catalyst, of the “refugee crisis.” In the

following section we use the CCPEE framework as an organizational tool to structure our findings in the three overarching categories (cultural, political, economic) with the corresponding subcategories (for example, for the category “cultural,” we discuss universities as a civil society player addressing the “refugee crisis”). We look at these fault lines within the cultural, political, and economic factors and how education has influenced these three fields at play, by looking specifically at higher education institutions and how they have interacted within the three dimensions.

Emerging Fault Lines

In 2015–16 Germany’s response to the entry of a large number of refugees into the Federal Republic of Germany was increasingly complicated and influenced by the struggle between two extreme poles: the perception of the nation celebrating a *Willkommenskultur* and a bitter backlash developing against refugees.⁴⁸ As the German newspaper *Die Zeit* expressed in a 2015 editorial, “Two bitterly inimical mind sets are now working against each other here in Germany and in Europe: We are opening our arms because people are coming (Merkel) vs. Because we are opening our arms, people are coming.”⁴⁹ The social debate was being fought between two plainly irreconcilable positions: rejection, which might become violent, on the one hand, and a welcoming culture, which was based on active civil engagement, on the other. These opposing positions were also evident in Angela Merkel’s statement, “*Wir schaffen das*” (We will manage it) on the one hand,⁵⁰ and the extra-parliamentary opposition’s characterization of refugee supporters as *Ideologisch verblendete Gutmenschen* (ideologically blinded do-gooders) on the other hand.⁵¹

Juxtapositions Challenging Germany

The mass stream of refugees entering Germany in 2015 created a context influenced by juxtapositions of cultural, political, and economic factors. Without intending to artificially separate these dimensions, we discuss each separately for the sake of clarity in the sections that follow. The discussion is built around our broad review of the literature at the time and supported with examples from our fifteen case study universities. In doing so, we analyze how the higher education sector in particular has been affected by sharp conflicts between, on the one hand, an active civil society that was committed to providing crucial refugee support, and, on the other hand, the heightened nativist fears of a Germany overrun with refugees that began to gain strength.

While policy and governance activities traditionally have occurred in spheres separate from the everyday working lives of ordinary citizens, the “refugee crisis” brought out an extraordinarily engaged civil society. This civic engagement

played itself out in positive ways through volunteerism and the donation of material goods to help refugees, and in negative ways through public protests and new political movements that agitated against refugees. The “refugee crisis” catalyzed actions by different pockets of society and mobilized people of diverse backgrounds and persuasions who previously had not been as publicly willing to voice their sentiments. In the following section we address the components of what we saw as emerging fault lines that Germany will need to deal with in the coming years as the refugee integration question continues to evolve.

Cultural Factors

The Positive Face of Civil Society

Images broadcast around the world of cheering crowds welcoming refugees at Munich’s central station in the summer of 2015 “seemed to shake off [Germany’s] image as a cold-hearted nation.”⁵² According to a 2016 study by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), in Germany there was outspoken support from the elites—comprising media, industry representatives, and trade associations, among others—for immigration prior to 2016, compared with more negative views in other European countries such as Spain, Italy, or the United Kingdom.⁵³ While basic supplies and housing were provided by the authorities, many workaday Germans also generously provided a broad range of additional services, from toys and clothing to ad hoc language classes and helping refugees navigate Germany’s dense bureaucracy.⁵⁴ This public outpouring of support—much heralded by the media at the time—helped to quickly mobilize civic engagement and contribute to supporting the bureaucratic system. For example, 120,000 volunteers from the German Protestant Church and 100,000 volunteers from the German Catholic Church, along with other faiths and secular organizations, and a wide range of organically formed smaller, ad hoc support groups quickly sprang into action to offer language classes, reading literacy courses, and assistance with government agencies and doctor’s visits. These support services were likened to being tantamount to a “life insurance of the [German] state.”⁵⁵ But this kind of volunteerism, while ramped up in response to the moment, was not entirely unprecedented. According to a study by the Berlin Institute for Empirical Research on Integration and Migration (BIM), the number of volunteers engaging in refugee work had already increased by 70 per cent over the past several years.⁵⁶ This level of civil society engagement became a critical bridge between overstretched authorities and refugees.⁵⁷ Even so, a study conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation at the time also revealed that over the last two years the feeling of Germans that their state’s generosity was being stretched to the limit also grew from 40 per cent in 2015 to 54 per cent two years later.⁵⁸

Public Backlash

In order to make sense of the outpouring of student interest in helping refugees, it is important to make clear what was happening outside the proverbial gates of the university and in the streets, where refugee presence may have felt more overwhelming to the greater population of Germans. Thus, as refugee numbers steadily increased throughout 2015, the initial welcome culture also began to be tempered by more stark reality. With the spike of refugees entering in the autumn of that year—280,000 in September alone—the media coverage became more nuanced and also began to include reporting on the strain that refugees were starting to place on overburdened administrative agencies. By this time, however, the media's initial euphoric coverage had caused it to lose credibility among certain segments of the population, who went so far as to revive even the Nazi-era term “lying press” or *Lügenpresse*.⁵⁹ On top of that, some segments of the population who had not previously engaged in public protest began to express their distress at the influx of refugees and joined large protests pressuring Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democratic Union party (CDU) to abandon its open-border position.

The most unsavoury face of this pressure came through demonstrations by the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West, or Pegida, movement,⁶⁰ a group most active in Eastern Germany and whose ranks seemed to wax and wane in tandem with events involving refugees.⁶¹ Attacks on refugee accommodations also quintupled from 199 in 2014 to 1,005 in 2015. Perhaps most worrisome, two-thirds of the attackers had never been criminally active before or involved with crimes linked to right-wing tendencies.⁶² At regional elections, some Pegida supporters transitioned their protest voice to the voting booth in support of the newly emerged populist-nationalist party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), which made gains in state parliamentary elections and in the national elections by September of 2017, making it the third-largest party in the German parliament.⁶³ The requisitioning of gymnasiums and other public facilities as temporary refugee shelters further complicated public attitudes toward refugees, although they have all now been returned to their usual use. The event that most badly damaged the welcome culture occurred in Cologne during New Year's Eve 2016 when “mobs of ‘North African and Middle Eastern men’ sexually assaulted hundreds of women in the fireworks chaos.”⁶⁴ Even though a subsequent investigation found only three of the fifty-eight men to be recent asylum seekers, the damage to the refugee narrative had already been done.

Universities as Civil Society Players: “Third Mission”

Universities throughout the country had the autonomy to respond as they chose to and were generally compelled by factors related to their proximity to refugee streams, available

funding, and pressure from students and concerned citizens. As a sector they became engaged through strengthening existing services or creating new ones, much in tandem with the civil society movement outside their walls. As of 2016, 170 universities were receiving DAAD “Integra” (Integrating Refugees in Degree Programs) funding to develop their own programming to advance the integration of more than 6,800 refugee students into higher education.⁶⁵ Much of this programming was driven by an active show of solidarity by faculty, staff, and students interested in helping refugees, acting as a beacon of hope to combat increasing demonstrations against refugees. They did so by going beyond the traditional functions of research and teaching, and allowing refugees to audit courses, take language classes (sometimes even student-led for refugees indifferent to their scholastic aptitude), receive counseling, and participate in sports and social events. This level of service is generally referred to as a university's “third mission,” a term used by many university websites and the Federal Ministry for Education and Research's materials.⁶⁶

However, although well-meaning and beneficial, some of these university support services—for example, permitting the auditing of courses—also created two potential scenarios that set up unrealistic expectations for some refugee students: on the one hand, it gave the erroneous impression that they were already officially enrolled, and on the other it gave students who would be unable to meet enrolment requirements false hope that they would eventually be accepted into the university as regularly enrolled students. To their credit, as early as winter semester 2015–16, many universities appeared to realize this and began transitioning support services from embracing all refugees as a homogenous group with equal chances, to instead focusing primarily on helping those who were likely to have the necessary credentials to eventually succeed in enrolling.⁶⁷

Political Factors

The Merkel administration's efforts to address the refugee situation have been characterized by a “we will manage it” ethos in public messaging, and behind-the-scenes machinations to devise new regulations to control the tide of incoming refugees. As refugee numbers increased throughout 2015 and local governments began to work in crisis mode to provide services and accommodations before winter, Merkel faced growing criticism that she had invited the refugees in without sufficient forethought about what to do once they arrived.⁶⁸

In early 2016, as the AfD party gained support and five state elections loomed between March and September,⁶⁹ Merkel not only needed to tighten asylum laws but also to devise a solution to the “refugee crisis” without having to concede to political failure. After the Balkan countries closed their borders, ending the main refugee route to Northern Europe, the

chancellor's strategy changed to officially still welcoming the perceived "deserving or real refugees"⁷⁰ but also making it nearly impossible for them to reach Europe in the first place. While still seen by Syrian refugees as the "compassionate mother,"⁷¹ Merkel was also working out a deal with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan,⁷² effective by March 2016, that restrained refugees from continuing their flight into Europe.⁷³ In this way, Merkel was able to maintain the illusion of welcoming refugees while simultaneously making deals to restrain them from reaching European shores.⁷⁴

Both the European Union and Germany have attempted to limit further numbers of refugees from entering the EU. At the same time, state-led integration initiatives have provided support to help integrate refugees who are already in the country into society and the workforce. The education sector has been a critical player in this effort. The following sections examine the higher education sector's programming to meet that goal.

Language and Entrance to the University

Integration classes (Integrationskurse) aim to provide immigrants with knowledge of German history, culture, and social norms.⁷⁵ A new law stipulates that refugees who wish to seek any kind of residency status must take this course, or their social benefits can be reduced. Yet, according to figures from the Federal Ministry of the Interior, as of January to August 2016, only half—171,000 out of 366,000—who were issued with a voucher by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees were able to access an integration and language class. They also seek to bring all immigrants up to B1 language competency level, which the EU defines as the ability to engage with a language on an everyday basis on familiar topics regularly encountered in school, work, and leisure, and understand and formulate simply connected texts.⁷⁶ However, integration classes end at the B1 level, which is not sufficient for study at university level. Therefore, C1 level German-language proficiency is required for university study, and all students must cross that hurdle before they can regularly matriculate as enrolled students within the German university system.

During the 2015–16 "refugee crisis," universities stepped in to help bridge that language gap, picking up refugees once they mastered the B1 language exam and helping them to progress to C1 proficiency. Between 2015 and 2019 the DAAD provided universities with €100 million in competitive grants to develop support programming over the next several years. In 2016 alone the DAAD made €27 million available to German universities through its "Integra" program to apply for grants funding to support the development of programming for refugees.⁷⁷

With DAAD support and additional state and private foundation funding,⁷⁸ most German universities by 2016 were providing language preparatory courses. The distribution of

refugees across the academic sector and the means of supporting them, however, varied greatly. For example, according to our study of fifteen universities, the number of refugee students taking language courses ranged between 675 at the University of Hamburg, roughly 200 at the Technical University of Darmstadt, to just 20 at the University of Stuttgart, similar in size to TU Darmstadt.

These language and preparatory classes for refugees, however, are not equivalent to those subject-matter classes taken by matriculated students, and rather served merely as a stepping-stone to full enrolment once credentialing was verified and a department recognized a candidate's subject-specific competency. While the vast majority of universities required a minimum of B1 language proficiency to allow refugees into their language and preparatory classes, there were exceptions in both directions. For example, the Goethe University of Frankfurt required only an A2 level language proficiency—defined as the ability to "understand sentences and frequently use expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance"⁷⁹—while the Heinrich Heine University (HHU) of Düsseldorf required a B2 level. The HHU provided *Deutsch-Intensivkurse* for twenty students to prepare them within one year to fully access German higher education. While most universities offered the language preparatory classes on campus, some universities, including the Technical University of Dortmund, used an off-campus service partner. The University of Duisburg-Essen collaborated with a private external language school but started to provide its own language preparatory classes in 2017.

Along with language courses, most of the universities in our study also provided special integration programs customized to the specific needs and requirements of refugees. However, the size of the general student body at these institutions was not a reliable indicator of the number of places available to refugees or the depth of programming that was being created for them. For example, in the 2015–16 winter semester, the Heinrich Heine University of Düsseldorf enrolled 33,000 students, but only 20 refugees, while the University of Hamburg enrolled 42,000 students but had 539 refugees. Yet each of these large universities offered substantial programming. In that regard, size did not appear to be an accurate indicator of the depth of programming.

In most cases the services for refugees offered by universities included some degree of the following: the opportunity for refugees who are not yet fully enrolled to participate in teaching events and lectures, but not for academic credit; regular informational events and campus and library tours to inform refugees about facilities and academic information; crash courses on subjects such as mathematics or additional online language courses to help prepare refugees to take entry examinations; buddy programs in which a domestic student

helps a refugee with events, activities, and lectures and even language issues (many universities give students credit points for voluntarily working with refugee students); regular gatherings where students, particularly women, can discuss traumatic experiences in confidence; and intercultural workshops with external coaches to discuss social issues of mutual understanding, acculturation, and society. In one particularly exciting program, refugee students were working on an app to make museums accessible for non-German speakers.

Data and Forecast

While the DAAD in 2016 predicted that 30,000–50,000 refugee students would become eligible to enrol in Germany's universities within the next two years, most of our case study universities were unable to estimate at the time how many students they expected. That assessment was borne out of a wider chronic problem: while universities register the students' country of origin, Germany's strict data privacy laws (*Datenschutz*) prohibit them from gathering additional data.

Therefore most universities had little knowledge of their actual numbers of fully matriculated refugee students because these figures are not recorded as part of general student demographics. Self-reported data can therefore be noted but are only anecdotal, locally available, and not fed into a national databank. Among our case study universities, self-disclosed data showed the following: At the University of Hamburg, seventy-two refugees applied for full enrolment but only nineteen were accepted; at the Humboldt University in Berlin, which created a special MA track for refugees, only eleven were enrolled by 2016; at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, fifteen refugee students passed the preparatory courses and became regularly matriculated students; at the Technical University of Munich, eight students who formerly audited courses became enrolled; and at the Free University of Berlin, the International Office admitted twenty-one refugees for full enrolment, and sixteen of them matriculated. However, passing the preparatory course exams did not (nor does it now) bypass the regular application procedure, which requires refugee students, along with all international students, to compete as international applicants. Still, because official data tracking is prohibited, it is unknown how many refugee students were simply not being recorded once they became mainstreamed as regular enrollees. For understandable reasons, once refugee students are fully matriculated, they may also be reluctant to continue to be tracked and identified as refugees in order to distance themselves from a label that could stigmatize them.⁸⁰

Economic Factors

Early in 2015 Germany's top thirty DAX-listed corporations were celebrated for their public statements welcoming

refugees. In November 2015 these companies pledged, in an expensive print advertising campaign, to hire refugees and provide structured apprenticeship programs, even for those lacking the necessary qualifications. However, as of the middle of 2016, few of these grand promises had led to refugee employment. Although these companies referred to 500,000 vacancies they wanted to fill, as of the summer of 2016, only fifty-four refugees had received open-ended contracts from any of Germany's top thirty corporations, and fifty of those contracts were all with the postal service, the Deutsche Post. Companies cited a lack of German-language skills as the reason but then failed to offer an internal pathway for any on-the-job training.⁸¹

Essentially, most of the top thirty DAX-listed companies refused to put their money where their mouth was. While the leadership of the Deutsche Bank claimed in November 2015 that the influx of refugees was "the best that could happen to Germany,"⁸² by July 2016 still not a single major bank or insurance company had created any jobs, vocational training spots, or internships for refugees.⁸³ While the federal minister of labour and social affairs, Andrea Nahles, had initially referred to refugees as a "labour force of tomorrow," she later referred to them as one for "the day after tomorrow."⁸⁴

While available spots in Germany's top companies were few and far between for refugees because of a lack of immediately qualified applicants, Germany's *Mittelstand* of smaller, often family-run companies—historically touted as the backbone of Germany's economic success—appeared to be more receptive. In a study by the Bertelsmann Foundation, self-reported data from 600 *Mittelstand* companies employing more than 250 employees indicated that 62 per cent provided internships for asylum seekers, 48 per cent provided vocational training spots for young refugees, and 47 per cent provided regular workplaces for migrants.⁸⁵ It is notable that in 2016 Germany's well-established vocational training system appeared to be providing the most realistic pathway to employment for refugees.

According to a November 2016 report from the Federal Employment Agency,⁸⁶ there were 546,900 available vocational training spots in 2015–16, offering more options for refugees than universities, which have more rigorous entrance criteria. Refugees, therefore, needed to be made aware that their choices go beyond an academic education, particularly because 2016 was the ninth year running in which there were more open vocational training spots than applicants available to fill them.

Many refugees might have been making the erroneous assumption that only a university education would be respected, as may have been the case in their homelands, and not fully realized that in Germany vocational training has long been a very effective model for professional success and

an attractive alternative to a university education. While candidates need some German-language competency as well as nine to ten years of schooling to be eligible for a training spot, the requirements are not as rigorous as they are for a university degree. While vocational education in Germany includes classroom training at a vocational college and hands-on training at a workplace, the classroom training is not equivalent to university work. Even so, despite its promise, the vocational education track is also not an automatic solution for all refugees who are unable to enter or remain at the university. In 2016, of the 10,300 refugees who applied for a vocational training spot, a mere 3,600 were selected,⁸⁷ and in 2015, up to 70 per cent of refugees ended up aborting their training, according to the Chamber of Crafts and Trades of Bavaria.⁸⁸

Our queries of fifteen universities in Germany indicated that the counselling and services offered to refugees were focused on informing them about different tracks within higher education, and assuming that aspiring students already knew about the other options available to them. Instead of merely rejecting refugees who lack the necessary credentials, universities must help productively redirect refugees into other viable pathways, such as vocational training.

Policy Recommendations for Universities

Collaborative Counselling with Other Sectors

If universities seek to fulfill their third mission as credible civil society actors, they will need to provide counselling to help successfully divert those who are not eligible for full university entrance to find an occupation that matches their competencies. To that end, we suggest that universities team up with relevant partners in the region such as the Jobcentre, the Chamber of Commerce, and the private sector. The Jobcentre helps refugees map out an alternative pathway within Germany's well-established dual system of vocational education and training.

Make Sure Policies Work

As a result of Germany's aforementioned strict data privacy laws, reliable data on how many refugees are fully enrolled in universities are not available, although such data could easily be collected. Our study found that because of these *Datenschutz* privacy protection barriers, universities were not tracking the pathways of asylum seekers once they became regularly enrolled. To investigate the implications, we contacted the DAAD directly to ask why, on a national level, refugees were not being tracked once they became officially enrolled, even though the DAAD and BMBF had pledged to invest €100 million through its Integra program in higher education for refugees over the next several years. The agency responded that it has a comprehensive monitoring system in place and is remedying the lack of data by

collaborating with an unnamed research institute to trace the future impact of their policies. In our view it seems imprudent, in light of the urgency of the "refugee crisis," to delay transparent data tracking through this arrangement when a quicker resolution would likely help refugees avoid the chronically high dropout rates that have plagued earlier groups of at-risk students.⁸⁹

Conduct More Comprehensive Analysis

We argue that universities should register the "flight" status of refugee students in a national or state-level database so they can empirically monitor the impact and success of their programming for refugees and thereby justify the considerable effort and significant costs related to refugee integration. Budget flows should be clearly measured, and program impacts need to be systematically analyzed. As of 2017, this information still appeared to be mostly anecdotal or at best internally available in certain universities, such as the Free University of Berlin, only when they agreed to share it with researchers. However, such data are not centrally available for research purposes. This type of transparency is particularly important for assessing refugees' chances of success in German higher education in light of DAAD figures, which at the time of our study showed that 59 per cent of Latin American and 41 per cent of African students were discontinuing their BA studies in German universities, compared with only 28 twenty-eight of German students.⁹⁰ This alarmingly high attrition rate suggests that universities may not be sufficiently addressing problems associated with entrance criteria and support services for at-risk students. It seems counterproductive to lose track of refugees and the critical data necessary to adapt and customize policies, programs, and support measures to help them succeed.

Appropriate Services to Stem the Tide of Dropouts

The enrolments of refugees in higher education expected in the coming years present an opportunity for positive change that will also help domestic and foreign students. As noted previously, universities have reacted to mass enrolments by mainstreaming, standardizing, lowering student-professor ratios, and reducing contact hours. This has not been a positive development for students. If current data protection laws were loosened to allow for more robust collection of the data needed to assess attrition or success rates, universities would be able to immediately implement programs, such as academic writing or guidance for self-structured learning that could reduce refugee student dropout rates.

Conclusion

As Clark and Grandi⁹¹ have rightfully argued, the time has come to "discard the clichéd image of refugees as passive

recipients of aid, sitting idly with outstretched hands.” Elements of the German example show that, with proper support, refugees can enrich Germany’s culture and economy,³⁰ but only if they become successfully integrated. The university sector, just as primary and secondary schooling and vocational training, is a key player in the integration process and could eventually reap the fruits of its success.

Our research looked at how universities, within a tense national environment of forces agitating for and also against refugees, worked to accommodate refugees and help them transition to full participation in German society. To make this transition, refugees will first need access to the knowledge, skills, and opportunities that education can provide. Our study of fifteen universities, couched within a broader look at the media and research discussion that was taking place in 2015–16, showed some of their programming and examined the broader German context of civil society efforts to address the “refugee crisis” and what the impact of cultural, political, and economic forces was on the higher education sector in particular.

Both our case study data and our review of the broader context showed that German universities were trying to respond positively to the “refugee crisis” through a variety of innovative programming and individualized support services, and doing so within a national atmosphere that was rife with tensions. As the period of the “refugee crisis” fades and the broader German effort to integrate new refugees takes shape, German universities stand to continue serving as positive role models of successful refugee integration, if they succeed. Returning to Gersick’s paradigm, the refugee influx is indeed a chance for qualitative, metamorphic change in Germany’s universities, but only if they seize the moment successfully in this renewed period of disequilibrium. That challenge is mighty, and Germany must carefully balance its heavy history with forward-looking policies that have the potential to maximize the great promise we believe its newest arrivals can bring.

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