

# Higher education and Syrian refugees' navigation of economic, social and political constraints in exile



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## Abstract

Using primary and secondary data, this paper critically examines whether higher education (HE) is living up to its potential in terms of helping refugees to cope with the challenges they face within displacement settings. In particular, the paper explores the extent to which HE opportunities currently on offer for Syrian refugees in the MENA region are helping them to navigate the economic, social and political constraints they experience in exile.

## Key Words

Higher education  
Syria  
Refugees  
MENA

## Introduction

Currently, more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees are registered with UNHCR (the majority of whom are above the age of secondary education) (UNHCR, 2020). However, access to higher education (HE) is severely limited for refugees, and globally, only one percent attend university (Ferede, 2018). In response, international organisations have been working with local partners in the MENA region to try and meet the enormous demand for quality HE amongst refugees. While HE opportunities have increased in quantitative terms, these opportunities have not always expanded refugees' functionings (ability to be or do what they value) and capabilities (freedoms and opportunities to achieve the effectively possible), nor always enabled them to effectively navigate the constraints experienced in exile (Sen 1999). Where HE is available, it is not always accessible, nor is it always acceptable to refugees or adapted to their specific needs (Tomasevski, 2006; Fincham, 2020). From a capabilities perspective (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2003; Vaughn, 2007), HE opportunities available for refugees do not always increase their 'functionings', nor do they always enable an expansion of refugees' 'capabilities'.

Combining empirical qualitative research with Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (with focus groups as the primary research method) (Fincham, 2020) with secondary research, this paper critically examines whether HE is living up to its potential in terms of helping refugees to cope with the challenges they face within displacement settings. The first section outlines the ways in which the Capability Approach can be a helpful framework for thinking about HE in relation to refugees.

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The subsequent sections explore the extent to which HE opportunities currently on offer for Syrian refugees in the MENA region are helping them to navigate the particular economic, social and political constraints they experience in exile.

## Capabilities approach

Moving beyond simplistic resource-based welfare approaches to education, the Capability Approach recognises that different people have different motivations for undertaking HE, as well as different educational needs within it.

The capability approach is based on the precepts that a) freedom to achieve wellbeing is of primary importance, and b) this freedom needs to be understood in terms of people's capabilities – their actual opportunities to be and do what they value. Its main premise is that education should provide people with the freedoms they need to achieve their desired functionings and capabilities (e.g. enable refugees to live lives that they value) (Sen, 1999). Functionings are realised and future achievements (e.g. being a graduate), whereas capabilities are the effectively possible (e.g. the opportunity for a refugee to complete HE) (Sen, 1999). Education itself can be a functioning or act as a conversion factor to enable other functionings (e.g. social mobility) (Vaughan, 2007).

The capability approach acknowledges the structural, social and cultural factors which may impede someone from converting a resource (e.g. HE) into a capability. Differences related to gender, class, ethnicity etc., enable or constrain individuals in their ability to convert resources into functionings and capability sets. For example, a female refugee's freedom to use her university degree to undertake employment will depend on her legal right to work in the host country, as well as a social and cultural context in which she can claim this right (Vaughan, 2007). In this way, the capability approach recognises that having equal access to resources is not the same as having equal opportunities to benefit from them.

The capability approach looks beyond collective outcomes for refugees and recognises individual difference and individual capabilities (Vaughan, 2007). As communities are not homogenous, and

individuals wish to live different kinds of lives, it cannot be assumed that, provided with the same opportunities, all people will wish to achieve the same functionings (Robeyns, 2003).

Similarly, the capability approach is sensitive to refugees' non-financial functionings and capabilities (e.g. being part of a community, being respected by others, etc.). For example, it recognises that gender equality and gender empowerment may mean different things for different groups in different contexts (DeJaeghere and Wiger, 2013). In some refugee contexts (e.g. Syria), women may voluntarily adhere to traditional cultural and/or religious codes (e.g. performing scripts of marriage and motherhood) to prioritise the enhanced social status they achieve through them (Dunne *et al.*, 2017). This has direct implications for female refugees' interest in and engagement with HE.

Despite its challenges, (discussed in detail in Vaughan (2007), the capability approach is helpful in thinking about HE's potential to expand an individual refugee's overall capability set.

The sections below use a Capabilities lens to examine the extent to which HE opportunities currently available for Syrian refugees in the MENA region are helping them to navigate the particular economic, social and political constraints they encounter in exile.

## Economic constraints

Within the Syrian context, refugees face many economic constraints, such as depletion of personal savings, financial insecurity, lack of access to formal labour markets, job quotas and employment restrictions in high-status and high-paying white collar professions (e.g. engineering, law and medicine) (Tiltnes, Zhang and Pederson, 2019; Sheehy, 2014). Host governments have often been reluctant to offer work permits fearing that refugees will take jobs from locals, push down wages and be encouraged to settle permanently. As a result, many young Syrian refugees have been restricted to employment as undocumented workers in food service, construction and retail, at risk of workplace exploitation with no legal recourse in case of abuse by employers. (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel, 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014a; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014b; Knell, 2016).

Male refugees who are unsuccessful in securing employment in host countries often become vulnerable to human trafficking and recruitment into armed groups (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel, 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014a), whereas female refugees become vulnerable to early marriage (Chatty, 2016).

### **Economic constraints and HE**

For refugees, HE is often strongly linked to employment outcomes (or the perception of these outcomes) (this is problematised in Brennan and Shah, 2003). Indeed, quality HE can provide individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve better livelihood prospects, higher earnings and economic mobility. It can also help them to achieve economic self-reliance and facilitate their integration into local economies (Sheehy, 2014). However, for Syrian refugees, HE itself can be a major source of financial strain.

As most refugees cannot afford the direct, indirect and opportunity costs of HE, they are heavily reliant on scholarships provided by (primarily Western) donors. However, the number of scholarships available for refugees is inadequate and does not meet demand (Abdulssattar Ibrahim and Nassar, 2019; Sheehy, 2014). Moreover, within the context of global hegemonic power relations, Syrian refugees, regardless of country of asylum, are directly impacted by (Western) neoliberal HE agendas (Dale, 2000; Rizvi and Lindgard, 2000) which conceptualise HE in relation to employment outcomes, often to the exclusion of refugees' other needs (e.g. the intrinsic and the social). This means that refugees perceived as less likely to be economically productive are often overlooked in terms of scholarship provision. For example, scholarships for refugees over the age of 30 (so-called 'overage learners') are scarce, as are scholarships for refugees with disabilities (Fincham, 2020).

Scholarships that are available for refugees are often limited to certain subject areas believed by donors and policymakers to be critical for post-conflict reconstruction (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel, 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014a; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014b; Fincham, 2020). Refugees who are interested in continuing their education often feel compelled to study subjects for which they may have little interest

or aptitude and/or are unrelated to their earlier academic studies. In line with donor 'efficiency' agendas focused on value for money (discussed in more detail, below), scholarships are largely limited to undergraduate study (understood to provide a greater return on investment), effectively excluding refugees from career paths which require postgraduate education, such as academic positions involving research and teaching in HE. In studies examining Syrian youths' perceptions of HE experiences (Buckner, 2013), young people questioned how useful their HE would be if it did not enable them to live lives and envision futures that they valued. In particular, refugees felt that scholarship providers were simply repeating mistakes made by the Syrian government, which had tracked students into particular economic fields (regardless of interest), while not providing them with guarantees of employment (Buckner, 2013; Fincham, 2020). These are examples of how refugees' functionings and capability sets have been limited by the scholarships made available to them within displacement settings.

In exile, refugees are similarly limited by the types of HE on offer, which are often conceptualised with reference to the overarching objectives of 'effectiveness' (educate refugees to achieve specific goals – i.e. improve employment outcomes, produce a skilled workforce, drive post-conflict reconstruction) and 'efficiency' (educate the largest number of refugees at minimal cost).

In order to achieve 'effectiveness', education strategies for refugees have largely focused on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and employment-based non-formal education. This focus acknowledges the significant financial constraints encountered in exile but ignores refugees' other desired functionings, resulting in limited capability sets (discussed in more detail below). Many refugees have questioned why they are being tracked into technical education when they are not legally entitled to work in exile, and their technical qualifications may not be internationally recognised should they return to Syria or resettle in Europe (Fincham, 2020). Female refugees have noted how nonformal programmes available to them often promote employment paths based on gendered stereotypes, such as 'Childcare' courses.

Although this complies with local cultural sensibilities, it provides female refugees with few options beyond complying with traditional gender norms (Fincham, 2020). With few transition mechanisms between TVET and academic programmes, there is little flexibility to change career paths should refugees later wish to do so. Thus, decisions made by donors and policymakers are likely to have lifelong consequences for Syrian youth in terms of the capability sets they are able to develop and the lives they are able to lead.

Online learning is seen as a viable way to achieve efficiency, as (assuming there is sufficient technological capacity), it has the potential to expand access to marginalised groups, such as the housebound, women with small children, people with disabilities and those in fulltime work. It also enables females to comply with the 'honour and shame' cultural paradigm (discussed later in the paper). However, within refugee contexts, online learning is often framed through a 'banking model' of education (Freire, 1970), whereby learners passively receive knowledge from 'experts' via the internet (Sancho-Gil *et al.*, 2019) (some positive examples of collaborative learning within online programmes for refugees are discussed in Pherali, Abu Moghli and Chase, 2020; Kennedy and Laurillard, 2019). Moreover, subjects leading to high status, financially lucrative careers are not available through online learning (e.g. medicine, engineering), restricting refugees' goals, limiting their capability sets and failing to address their complex social reasons for wanting to undertake HE (Fincham, 2020).

## Social constraints

Syrian refugees face many social constraints in exile, such as being separated from important kinship and social networks and being physically and socially isolated in camps or refugee enclaves in host countries (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel, 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014a). Female refugees are particularly vulnerable to social isolation, as they often have limited freedom of movement within the public sphere and limited engagement in paid work (Ahmed, 2012; Dunne *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, refugees with disabilities are often restricted to social interaction within their immediate families. Refugees who are unable to interact with host country nationals often live at the margins of society (Fincham, 2020).

## Social constraints and HE

HE can provide a number of social benefits for refugees, such as interaction with host country nationals, expansion of active social networks and development of the social and cultural capital needed for socio-economic integration (if not inclusion) into the host society (Sheehy, 2014; Wright and Plasterer, 2012; Bourdieu, 1986). HE can also help refugees to develop confidence and rebuild their lives with dignity (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2019).

For Syrian refugees, however, HE does not always help in navigating the social constraints encountered in exile. Rather, donor and policymaker agendas focused on economic outcomes can undermine refugees' social motivations and needs through education, including meeting family expectations, belonging to a local community, developing friendships, fostering a social network, achieving an advanced social position and gaining respect from their community (Antonio, 2004; Mullen, 2009; Al-Fattal and Ayoubi, 2013). In this way, HE often falls short of enabling refugees to develop the full set of functionings and capabilities that they value.

In many cases, education programmes for refugees (particularly nonformal programmes) are bespoke, meaning that refugees become physically and socially isolated from host communities. Moreover, online learning is often implemented in ways which exacerbate refugees' social isolation (i.e. framed as sitting alone in front of a computer screen). This can be intensified for females who are often culturally restricted to home-based activities when not in education (Dunne *et al.*, 2017). In a study exploring Syrian youths' perceptions of HE opportunities on offer within the MENA region (Fincham 2020), female Syrian refugees in Jordan indicated that they had little motivation to study online, as they would not be able to physically interact with classmates, make friends or have personal contact with their professors. Female camp residents, in particular, had concerns about online learning, explaining how physically attending a university or college gave them reprieve from the psychological imprisonment of camp life. As many of their

desired functionings and capability sets were social, female refugees, in particular, felt that online learning (as it has often been framed and/or experienced within refugee contexts) did not meet their needs (Fincham, 2020).

Within the Syrian context, social motivations for wanting to undertake HE are highly gendered. As Syrian males have been culturally constructed as family breadwinners, they are more likely to want to pursue employment outcomes to enable them to marry and provide for their families (Buckner, 2013; Fincham, 2020). However, the proliferation of nonformal education programmes on offer for refugees (many of which are unaccredited) offer limited career pathways other than manual and technical work within the service, construction and retail sectors. Not only is this work low status and insecure, it offers limited earning potential, career progression and socio-economic mobility. In this way, HE provided for refugees is actually having a profound impact on men's ability to perform appropriate Syrian masculinities, delaying their ability to marry and limiting their marriage prospects (Fincham, 2020). It is also having a profound social influence on Syrian women. The MENA region has the world's lowest rate of female labour force participation, and cultural norms discourage all but professional employment for women (Buckner, 2013; Ahmed, 2012; Kabbani, 2009). As a result, Syrian females have to achieve a high level of education (university) in order to work (Buckner, 2013; Ahmed, 2012; Kabbani, 2009). Consequently, the proliferation of nonformal education opportunities for refugees, discussed above, is unlikely to improve women's economic participation or elevate their social status. In other words, it is unlikely to help female refugees to develop many of the functionings and capability sets that they value.

Within traditional Syrian culture, women are expected to comply with the 'honour and shame' paradigm, bearing responsibility for the 'honour' of their family and community through the regulation of their bodies and behaviour (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Dunne *et al.*, 2017). However, HE on offer for refugees does not always enable women to perform traditional Syrian femininities. For example,

education programmes scheduled in the evening or scholarships only redeemable at particular universities can require females to commute long distances after dark. Commuting on local public transportation may jeopardise women's 'honour' if it forces them to mix with (nonrelated) males and/or exposes them to public sexual harassment. Not only can insensitivity to local cultural norms by education policymakers and providers limit refugees' desired capability sets (e.g. the development of social and cultural capital, being respected by the community) (Bourdieu, 1986), it can have devastating social consequences for females, such as increasing their vulnerability to social exclusion, (involuntary) spinsterhood and domestic violence (Fincham, 2020).

## Political constraints

Syrian refugees also face many political constraints within the context of exile. For example, refugees' legal rights within host countries are often severely limited (Sheehy, 2014), and while most can choose to register with UNHCR, particular groups may find themselves outside of standard refugee protection due to complex identity configurations (e.g. Syrian Christians and Alawites who fear retribution from the Syrian authorities if they seek refugee status) (Hersh, 2013; Kreidie, 2018). Depending on refugees' political and sectarian positioning within the war in Syria, they may be differently positioned in relation to the host government. Refugees (or groups of refugees) who are perceived to be opponents of the government may have more restrictions placed on their mobility and experience particular socio-economic exclusion.

## Political constraints and HE

HE has the potential to nurture refugees' sense of belonging and facilitate their integration into the host society. For example, studying alongside host country populations in local institutions can construct a culture of cosmopolitanism<sup>1</sup>, promoting respect for diversity, tolerance and interconnectedness (Stevenson, 2003). Moreover, through an exchange of ideas and culture, universities can help refugees and host communities to become less susceptible to wider narratives of social exclusion and violence towards 'the other' (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004).

<sup>1</sup>Cosmopolitanism is defined here as 'an inclusive cultural democracy and citizenship' (Stevenson 2003: 5)



However, despite its potential benefits, HE does not always help refugees to successfully navigate the political constraints they encounter in exile. On the contrary, it can even exacerbate them. For example, within host countries, HE policies are often conceptualised with reference to a 'citizen subject', which presupposes certain rights and privileges, such as access to a valid passport and/or residence permit, access to academic diplomas and transcripts. However, as non-citizen 'others', refugees often lack these rights and freedoms. As most refugees left Syria abruptly due to the war, they were unable to bring with them the identity documentation and proof of former study required to apply for a scholarship or gain admission to university (Janmyr, 2016; Sheehy, 2014). This has resulted in many refugees becoming ineligible to enrol in HE in host countries, even though they may have legal access to it. Documentation is an example of how policies of 'equal opportunity' (treating refugees and host country nationals the same) have obscured the particular structural barriers disadvantaging refugees as 'non-citizens'.

Syrian refugees' political positioning can also have implications for the type of documentation they hold. While most hold a school-leaving Baccalaureate certificate issued by the Syrian government, some hailing from opposition-controlled areas hold the Interim Syrian Government-issued 'opposition certificate' (al i'tilaf). In Jordan and Lebanon, this is often not recognised nor accepted for enrolment in accredited HE programmes (Fincham, 2020). In this way, institutional rigidity coupled with 'one size fits all' admissions policies have become major obstacles for some refugees. These examples illustrate how structural and political factors often constrain refugees in their access to HE, as well as their ability to convert it into functionings and capability sets.

Syrian refugees construct their identities with reference to external and internal 'others' at the intersections of nation, religion and ethnicity. These complex allegiances of affiliation and difference profoundly impact their lives, as well as their

access to and experiences within HE. Donors and policymakers insensitive to the political and sectarian dimensions of the war in Syria, and the particular experiences of young Syrians, have sometimes offered university places to refugees in geographical locations dominated by a political or religious 'other' (e.g. pro-Syrian regime Shi'a dominated communities in Lebanon). This is an example of how HE opportunities may be made available for refugees, yet they are not necessarily acceptable to them (Tomasevski, 2006; Fincham, 2020).

Donors and policymakers have also been insensitive to the needs of refugees with complex identities, such as Palestinians from Syria, who do not conveniently fit within predetermined notions of authentic 'Syrian-ness', leaving them in legal, social and economic limbo with regard to rights and entitlements. As a consequence, these groups of refugees have often been overlooked in relation to HE scholarships and opportunities (Fincham, 2020). Treating refugees as a homogenous group without regard for individual difference has resulted in educational exclusion, unmet needs and broken dreams.

Some HE institutions in host countries have (often unintentionally) promoted a culture of exclusion, restricting refugees' psychological access to learning spaces, as well as negatively influencing their experiences within them. Syrian refugees have reported that they often experience implicit or explicit discrimination in HE institutions related to their status, ethnicity or religion/sect (King, 2014; Fincham, 2020). Not only do these experiences of discrimination compound the psychological trauma refugees experience in exile, they also impact their desires to remain in HE and influence their long-term goals for resettlement (Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014a; Fincham, 2020). This is an example of how a simplistic focus only on access to HE can obscure harmful factors within education which constrain refugees from living their best lives (Tomasevski, 2006).

## Conclusion

HE has the potential to help refugees successfully navigate the economic, social and political constraints they encounter in exile. However, in practice, it has often failed to live up to its potential, sometimes even exacerbating the challenges faced within displacement settings. While HE opportunities for Syrian refugees have increased, they have often been conceptualised by donors and policymakers through a neoliberal lens with a focus on 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness', limiting refugees' opportunities to develop the full set of functionings and capabilities that they value. Moreover, policies of 'equal opportunity' have often been paradoxically discriminatory, as they have treated all groups of refugees the same and refugees the same as host country nationals. This has obscured the structural inequalities that exist between citizens and refugees and between different groups of refugees. Finally, donor and policy agendas supportive of particular education strategies (e.g. employment-focused nonformal programmes, TVET, online learning) and collective outcomes (e.g. education for employability) have undermined refugees' agency to make individual choices between different functionings and capability sets. While access to HE for Syrian refugees has steadily increased in quantitative terms, without a corresponding expansion of their freedoms, education as an unquestioned force for good is put into question.

## Author Bio

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