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Refugees on Their Way to German Higher Education: A Capabilities and Engagements Perspective on Aspirations, Challenges and Support

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Abstract

In recent years, the number of new asylum applications in Germany has risen with a peak in 2015. Many refugees arrive with high levels of prior education and corresponding educational aspirations. Hence, German universities and preparatory colleges (so-called 'Studienkollegs') have created additional preparatory courses and supporting services for refugees. Heretofore, little is known about the specific challenges for prospective refugee students seeking access to higher education in the German context. We focus on key individual, social, and institutional conditions for integrating refugees into the German higher education system. How do prospective refugee students value higher education? What are the key challenges and supporting factors on their way to higher education in Germany? Our analysis is based on 17 exploratory interviews with prospective refugee students, staff of higher education institutions and counselling services. We combine educational sociology and refugee studies and rely on the capability approach and its close relation to the conception of agency to theorize our empirical findings. Reconstructing the challenges and coping strategies along with the key concepts of the capability approach reveals the different strategies of prospective refugee students to achieve their aspirations as well as the frustrating institutional limits of agency. Finally, we will discuss implications for higher education policy in Germany.

Keywords

Access to Higher Education, Agency, Capabilities, Engagements, Prospective Refugee Students

Introduction

From 2014 to 2016, significantly more asylum seekers arrived in Germany than in previous years and therefore, many higher education institutions (HEI) had to cope with a growing

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number of advisory requests (Steinhardt & Eckhardt, 2016; Streitwieser et al., 2017). Many of the recently arrived refugees[1] held high school diplomas or had even graduated from foreign universities (Brücker, Rother, & Schupp, 2016) and expressed corresponding educational aspirations. The German federal government responded by implementing a funding program to help to prepare prospective refugee students[2]. Thus, German universities and preparatory colleges ('Studienkollegs') created additional preparatory courses and supporting services for refugees (Fourier et al., 2017). Nevertheless, little is known not only about the specific challenges faced by refugee students (Lenette, 2016) but especially for refugees seeking access to higher education. The research project "WeGe" is the first to investigate the pathways of refugees to German higher education and elaborate on key conditions for successful study preparation.[3] In the case of study preparation for refugees, we assume that access to higher education depends on individual and structural factors, as well as on characteristics of the learning environment. While relevant research in Germany is still in early stages and mostly concerned with organizational conditions and measures of HEIs, our project focusses on the situation and perspective of refugees participating in preparatory courses.

The following analysis aims at a qualitative reconstruction of challenging barriers and enabling capabilities of refugees' pathways to German higher education. First, we provide a brief literature review. Then we illustrate the situation in Germany, relying on a characterization of asylum seekers' and refugees' regulation, and the field of study preparation. Based on 17 exploratory interviews with prospective refugee students, staff of HEIs and counselling services, we investigate key challenges and capabilities for integrating refugees into the German higher education system from an individual, social and institutional perspective. Therefore, we combine educational sociology and refugee studies and rely on the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999) and its close relation to the conception of agency (Sen, 1985) to theorize our empirical findings. We grasp the "reasons to value" (Sen, 1999) higher education and the challenges prospective refugee students are faced with by the concepts of capabilities and personal, social and institutional conversion factors. Furthermore, we highlight agency by reconstructing lines of action, as well as frustrating social and institutional boundaries that cross these lines of action. Finally, we point out further opportunities for higher education policy to improve study preparation for refugees in Germany and discuss limitations of our analysis. Further research should focus on international comparative and longitudinal approaches to deepen understanding and to improve explanations of successful pathways to higher education for refugees.

Literature Review

Access to higher education for refugees is a rather new research topic, especially in the case of Germany. So far, the few published studies conducted in Germany mostly describe the organizational level of HEIs (Iwers-Stelljes, Bosse, & Heudorfer, 2016; Schammann & Younso, 2016; Unangst & Streitwieser 2018) and are concerned with refugees who are already in higher education. Study preparation for refugees in Germany has not yet been investigated. The major part of the relevant international literature is conducted in Canada, Australia, the United States of America or the United Kingdom and is based on qualitative research or case studies (for an overview see Mangan & Winter, 2017; Berg, Grüttner, & Schröder, 2018). Research often focusses on the challenges refugees face on their way to or during higher education (Gateley, 2015; Hirano, 2014, 2015; Kanno & Varghese, 2010); some studies also introduce case studies of specific support structures as examples (Baker et al., 2017; Zeus, 2011).

Generally, empirical studies find high educational aspirations among refugees (Brücker, Rother, & Schupp, 2016; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Key drivers are the hope for better employment prospects and higher income

to overcome poverty and to support families in the host country and in the countries of origin (Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Higher education is described as the foundation of building a new life in the host country (Hannah, 1999). Some studies emphasize that HEIs give refugees the possibility to address and overcome discrimination and marginalization and to gain respect (Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Morrice, 2013).

Pursuing their high aspirations, asylum seekers and refugees face several challenges. For example, many studies emphasize financial difficulties as a central issue. Often, families have to cope with economic losses due to migration, hence many (prospective) refugee students cannot rely on financial support from their families, and are rather likely to have to support their families themselves (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). For some refugees, financial pressure might result in the decision to look for a job and earn money immediately instead of studying (Morrice, 2013; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Other structural constraints arising from the everyday living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers are peripheral accommodation and labour market discrimination, likely to inhibit their financial autonomy. Among other aspects, commutation and long working hours can conflict with the time needed for studying (Naidoo, 2015).

Some studies mention anticipated discrimination and the fear of stigmatization or social isolation as reasons for refugees not applying for higher education, not to making use of existing support, or not to participating in classes as actively as they could, especially when they are not given credit for knowledge and skills that they could previously rely on (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Morrice, 2013). Some (prospective) students also have to take care of their families, which is discussed as a challenge especially for women- along with a potential conflict between traditional gender roles and higher education (Harris, Spark, & Ngum Chi Watts, 2015; Plasterer, 2010).

While generally several integration and language courses are offered, some studies mention contradictory bureaucratic requirements when different institutions are involved (Schammann & Younso, 2016). These factors can be seen in the context of an organized disintegration as described by Täubig (2009). Compared to international students with no experience of forced migration, the everyday living conditions of refugees likely lead to group specific challenges faced by prospective refugee students (Berg, 2018).

Regarding the organizational context of HEI, some studies highlight that refugees and asylum seekers cannot resume their studies directly. Instead, they have to go through a lengthy process of trying to document previous accomplishments and degrees (Morrice, 2013; Schammann & Younso, 2016; Shakya et al., 2010), to receive recognition of certificates and to prepare for studying in a new country, for example, by taking language classes. Learning the language is considered to be crucial, since many asylum seekers need intense preparation to adapt academic reading and writing skills (Kanno & Varghese 2010). What is more, in the case of Germany they usually have to demonstrate a high level of language competence as a requirement to apply for HEIs (Schammann & Younso, 2016).

Another central hindrance discussed by several studies is the lack of appropriate information on how to apply and enrol, as well as available supportive measures (Earnest et al., 2010; Morrice, 2013; Shakya et al., 2010). Moreover, available information is often wrong or contradictory (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Since most refugees and asylum seekers are the first in their families or even communities to study in the host country, they often lack a network that would simplify access to important information about the higher education system (Naidoo, 2015).

Based on the challenges, many studies identify implications for higher education policy and institutions. They argue for the acknowledgement of the cultural capital that refugees and asylum seekers bring with them

(Marar, 2011; Morrice, 2013) and for the implementation of special support programs (Schammann & Younso, 2016; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). In this context, the need for extensive information and support throughout the application process and studies is repeatedly highlighted (Gateley, 2015; Hannah, 1999; Schammann & Younso, 2016).

The Institutional Framework in Germany

Organized Disintegration of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Germany

In 2017, Turkey hosted by far the largest number of refugees (3.5 million refugees), followed by Pakistan (1.4 million refugees) and Uganda (1.4 million refugees). In international comparison, Germany hosted the sixth largest number of refugees in 2017 (970,400 refugees) (UNHCR, 2018). Germany was the only European country among the ten countries with the largest refugee populations, and it was the only one categorized as country of high income. Many other countries hosting large refugee populations "are already dealing with substantial barriers to sustainable development, making it particularly challenging for them to mobilize sufficient resources to respond to large refugee influxes" (UNHCR, 2018, p. 15-17). Germany is a welfare state that signed the Geneva Convention and has a regulated asylum policy which is embedded in the Common European Asylum System. It can therefore be assumed, that minimum standards of living and security for refugees are met. Nonetheless, refugees and especially asylum seekers face structural obstacles in Germany that can inhibit their inclusion in the host country and also impact their possibilities to gain access to higher education.

From housing to social welfare, the everyday living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers are heavily regulated in Germany. They are determined by bureaucratic regulations and requirements that are partly inconsistent and/ or contradictory and usually linked to repressive penalties in case they are not met. It is, however, not easy to comprehend these regulations, due to a) their complexity, b) plenty of room for interpretation and manoeuvre from individual actors on a local or regional level, as well as c) frequent changes in asylum law and policy (Sare, 2017; Schammann, 2015).

In an overview of studies on asylum in Germany, Johansson describes the state of being a refugee as being a constant exception and therefore never really included in the host society (Johansson, 2015). This constantly provisional and insecure state prevents the normalization of an everyday life and complicates social participation in the host society (Scherschel, 2010). Among the factors that inhibit the social inclusion of refugees are labor market discrimination, structural barriers to access education and social welfare, and a lack of support for cultural activities among other mechanisms of social exclusion (Johansson, 2015; Scherschel, 2010).

Thus, from the perspective of organized disintegration, it is assumed that the regulations and conditions of asylum seekers in Germany are designed to inhibit a quick integration rather than to support it (Täubig 2009). Their living conditions seemed to be designed to give refugees as little agency as possible.

On the one hand asylum seekers and refugees are expected to adapt and integrate quickly, but on the other hand their civil rights are constraint and they face structural obstructions, excluding them from central parts of society (Scherschel, 2010). This includes the loss of abilities to fulfil social roles and to act autonomously, and thus the interruption of one's life circle with rarely any opportunities to do anything that would make sense in connection to past or future civil roles. This can lead to the strong feeling of senselessness and wasted time (Täubig, 2009). Establishing social contacts and aiming at fulfilling or productive activities are important measures against structural disintegration. As we shall see, the situation of asylum seekers contrasts with the agency needed to progress on the way to higher education.

Access to Higher Education and Support for Refugees Seeking Access to Higher Education in Germany

Refugee students face various challenges when they decide to apply to HEIs in Germany. One of the major challenges is the need to satisfy admission criteria according to the legal framework of access routes into the German higher education system.

There is no legal restriction for HEIs to admit asylum seekers who have not yet received a protected status (Wissenschaftsrat, 2016). However, access to higher education "is rigorous, and refugee students must meet the same entrance requirements as all other international and domestic students. These include requirements for language proficiency and records of academic credentials," as Streitwieser et al. (2017, p. 8) pointed out.

Refugees take part in a separate admission process for applicants who graduated from school in a foreign state outside the European Union. In this admission process it is determined whether their school degrees are equivalent to an accredited higher education entrance qualification in Germany. The Central Office for Foreign Education[4] is responsible to review the equivalence of the applicants' certificates. The purpose of the *statements of comparability* is to evaluate the degrees in an equitable way, as the chances to study are supposed to be neither higher nor lower than they would have been in the country of origin. Certificates that fulfil the criteria to participate in an admission process for a desired field of study in the country of origin are usually stated as comparable to application documents requested at the German HEI in which refugees wish to enrol.

About 180 HEIs are assigned to a service agent, uni-assist e.V., to provide preliminary checks for international student applications. Through a special funding of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, refugees can apply free of charge for up to three HEIs per semester to uni-assist (Fourier et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the HEIs decide independently if applicants fulfil the required admission criteria and if they can be enrolled in the desired course of study.

In addition, for example, when certificates of Syrian refugees are reviewed, the statement of comparability depends on the overall grade. While Syrian refugees with an average grade above 70% get a direct entrance qualification for a specific field of study, those applicants with an average grade between 60% and 69% are requested to prepare for HEIs first, and to prove their suitability for the study program to which they wish to enrol.

Special academic preparation colleges (*Studienkollegs*) offer preparatory courses in order to improve the subject-specific and language competencies of applicants with foreign entrance qualifications. They are usually established by federal states and/or HEIs, but private colleges do as well. If a prospective student proves appropriate preparation by passing the assessment test (*Feststellungsprüfung*), the HEI will re-approve the application. To check the level of proficiency in German, and usually mathematics as well, the preparatory colleges are presupposing defined competencies and are also conducting entrance examinations.

Another requirement that has to be met is a high level of language proficiency. Usually, German HEIs require students to prove a level of C1 according to the *Common European Framework of reference for languages* (GER). This high, *almost-mother tongue* level encompasses the following dimensions of German language proficiency: "Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express himself/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices."[5]

Recently, German HEIs and *Studienkollegs* reacted to the demand and created various language- and subject-specific

propaedeutic courses. In addition, they developed supportive measures for the academic and social integration of refugees, extended the programs for international students and tried to adapt them to the special needs of refugees (Blumenthal et al., 2017; Frank & Sickendiek, 2016; Schammann & Younso, 2016). In many cases, this engagement was possible because of the "Integra"-program ('Integrating Refugees in Degree Programs'), which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and implemented by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). "Integra" supports academically qualified refugees to prepare for studies in Germany. Special programs are offered at German HEIs and preparatory colleges to get refugee students into the higher education system as soon as possible.

Within the Integra program, funded HEIs and preparatory colleges are obligated to collect data about their participants, for example country of origin, age, sex, language level or educational background. The data show 6,806 participants in Integra-preparatory or language courses of in 2016 (Fourier, et al., 2017). Of this total, eighty-four percent prepared for studying in Germany at a HEI. The remaining sixteen percent attended a course at a preparatory college. The prospective refugee students in the preparatory and language courses come from 61 different countries. Seventy-five percent of the participants come from Syria. Prospective refugee students from Afghanistan and Iran account for six percent each in Integra courses, and three percent come from Iraq. About half of the participants have previously studied. Twenty-eight percent started studying in their home country and an additional twenty-three percent hold a first university degree. Thirty-seven percent graduated from school, which permits them to take part in preparatory courses. The fact that the majority of the prospective refugee students are highly educated is also reflected in the data of uni-assist collected in the course of the application process: more than sixty percent of the refugees who used the free application process via uni-assist have a direct or indirect university entrance qualification (Fourier et al., 2017). Another nineteen percent of the applicants hold a first university degree so that they can enrol in a Master's program in Germany.

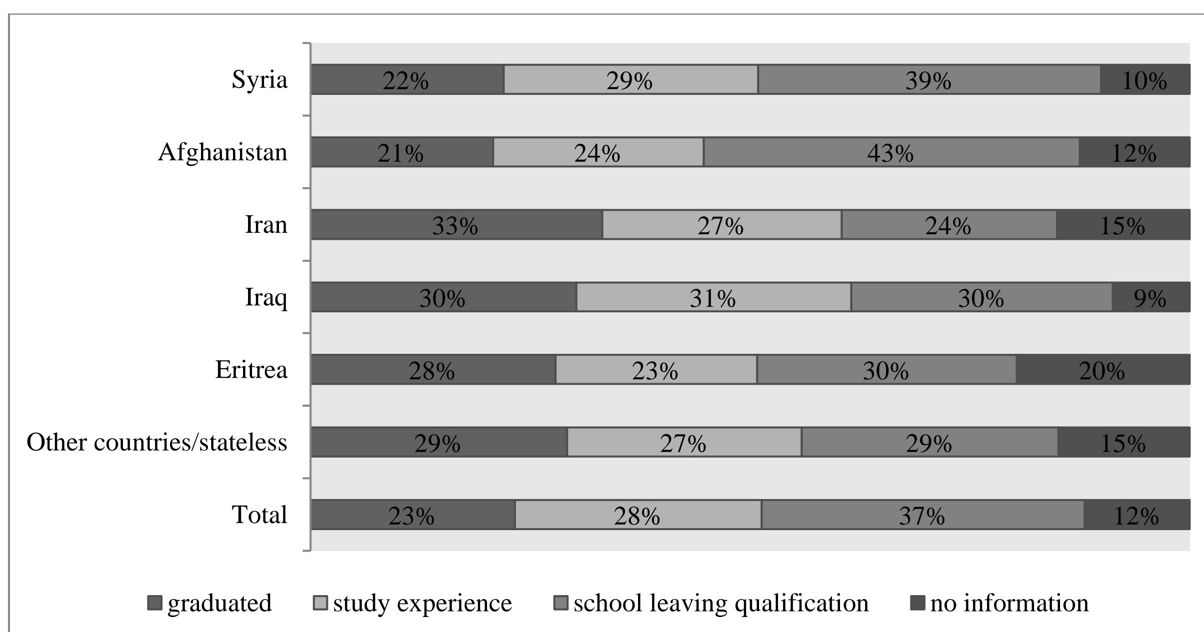

Figure 1. Participants of the Integra Program by Country of Origin and Educational Background in 2016 (Deviations from 100% are due to rounding)
Source: Fourier et al. 2017, p. 18 © DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service).

A Theoretical Framework: Capabilities and Engagements

In this section we aim to clarify three interrelated questions: Why making use of a perspective on capabilities and engagements? What are the central concepts of these approaches? How to relate these concepts to our research question?

When theorizing about challenges for prospective refugee students it is crucial how the phenomena labelled as challenges are conceptualized. We employed a pragmatic sociological approach combining theoretical concepts of Sen (1985, 1999) as well as Thévenot (2001, 2015), that are used in sociology of education and migration studies to avoid a one-sided perspective; either thinking about prospective refugee students as passive victims of structural dependencies who are in need of help, or as self-responsible actors voluntary handling the opportunities of their educational careers. Despite these respective reductions or reifications, Sens' capabilities approach "asks us to help create the conditions under which people's aspirations and abilities allow them to secure their objectives" (Landau & Duponchel, 2011, pp. 2-3). Therefore, we can ask if the support and preparation measures of HEIs can provide such enabling environments, and what are the factors and phenomena that prevent prospective refugee students from making educational decisions and achieving their educational goals.

The concept of *agency* is essential for the capability approach of Sen (1985), as the substantive freedom to live the kind of life that a person has reason to value is at the core of this perspective. Emirbayer and Misches' (1998) inquiry into the nature of agency bears one central element of this phenomenon besides the selective reactivation of past patterns of action and the imaginative generation of possible future trajectories of action: the evaluative capacities of actors. As Sen (1985, p. 206) pointed out, "the agency aspect is important in assessing what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good,"

Therefore, the plurality of values or goods that are at stake comes into play. In order to prevent our analysis from culturalism we separate the notion of value from its close relation to that of culture and group membership (Dumouchel & Gotoh, 2015) by elaborating on the concept of a *plurality of engagements with the world* (Thévenot, 2001, 2015). In this context, engagements mean that peoples' actions are committed to goods (common or private), and thereby involved in (and dependent on) certain environments. Thévenot (2001) distinguished between engagement in a plan, towards a common good, and familiar engagement. *Engagement in a plan* is often grasped as a standard form of action within a person defines goals and sees the entities of the world as means to ends (e.g., higher education to get eligibility). *Engagement towards a common good* is oriented on principles of justification and generalization (e.g., higher education to adhere to the family tradition or to contribute to the economy of the host country). *Familiar Engagement* is bound on the personalized good of feeling at ease and comfortable within familiar surroundings (e.g., higher education to follow a personal inclination or passion). As we will see below, refugees value higher education with regard to a variety of different and intersecting engagements.

Capabilities have much in common with sets of resources, but go beyond these concepts by pointing to "the real opportunities to achieve valuable states of being and doing" (Robeyns, 2006, p. 78), whereas *functionings* are the actual achievements like being healthy, being well educated, doing the right job, and so on. Following Diaz-Andrade and Doolin (2016), this perspective leads to an understanding of social inclusion of refugees as "the substantive freedoms—the capabilities—to choose a life one

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has reason to value" (Sen, 1999, p. 74). From a capability perspective, "all those [refugees: the authors] capable and aspiring to it should have the right to Higher Education" (Zeus, 2011, p. 269). It could therefore be stressed "that while resources are important, the opportunities each person has to convert their bundle of resources into valued doings and beings are what matters in the end" (Zeus, 2011, p. 270).

Distinguishing analytically between capabilities and achieved functionings or rather functionings that are to achieve in a given situation, brings the fact to the fore that "different people need different amounts and different kinds of goods to reach the same levels of well-being or advantage" (Robeyns, 2005, p. 97) because of "factors that influence the conversions of commodities into functionings " (Robeyns, 2005, p. 108) and thereby reinforce agency and serve as constituent of the capability set of a person. Sen (1999) called them *conversion factors* and related this point to questions of justice by insisting that unequal delivery of measures and support structures – e.g. educational measures – can be justified regarding to divergences in initial resources and conversion factors (see Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016 for inclusive education as an example). As Diaz-Andrade and Doolin (2016, p. 407) pointed out, "capabilities presupposes the availability of resources". Nonetheless it "depends on personal, social, and environmental factors" whether people are able to realize valued functionings.

The implemented measures and support structures for prospective refugee students can be conceptualized as part of the institutional conversion factors which encompass institutional arrangements, collective provisions, laws and their implementation by local public institutions. Social conversion factors consist of social relations, social capital, or characteristics of a social climate (e.g., discrimination, stigmatization, competitiveness) as well as symbolic patterns and discourses in society. These are distinguished from personal conversion factors like literacy, cultural capital, attitudes or personality traits (for a comparable analytical distinction see Otto & Ziegler, 2006, p. 279).

Since agency and (social) structure are interrelated (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; for a specific notion of this interrelatedness Thévenot, 2001), it is crucial to look at how prospective refugee students develop strategies for achieving their valued functionings (Alkire, 2005; Hirano, 2014) and how different forms of engagement are recognized by the institutional and learning environments of prospective refugee students. For instance, asylum seekers and refugees have left many familiar attachments and (common) knowledge that are no longer recognized in the host country and its educational institutions (Thévenot, 2015).[6] This approach can bear constellations of oppression or reification in the sense that some engagements are recognized within social and institutional environments and others are left disregarded or people are reified to one form of engagement or common principle and thus bonded to a specific form of social relation (e.g., as victims in need for help within a domestic relationship, see Zeus, 2011). This notion corresponds with Simmels' forms of complex concurrence of inclusion and exclusion (2009, pp. 409–442). In case of the ways of refugees to higher education we can ask how they could be "more hospitable to the whole range of engagements that compose [their: the authors] life together" (Thévenot, 2015, p. 102).

Thus we can conceptualize challenges as issues of conversion factors that are critical for prospective refugee students to realize the valued functioning of being a university student in Germany; these challenges are closely related to a plurality of engagements of those refugees more or less recognized by institutions of higher education. This leads to a better understanding of the specific factors that are necessary to cope with these challenges as well as the frustrating limits of agency.

As Robeyns (2005, p. 94) stated, the capability approach is not a theory that explains

empirical observed circumstances but equips us with a heuristic for the conceptualization and evaluation of empirical phenomena in a qualitative manner. A process that is suitable for our qualitative exploratory study. Thus, we use the theoretical elements presented above as sensitizing concepts as well as for further theorizing on our empirical materials (Swedberg, 2017).

Methods

This article is based on 11 episodic interviews (Flick, 2009, pp. 185-190) with refugees (STU_01 –_11) and six qualitative expert interviews (Flick, 2009, pp. 165-168) with members of HEIs and counselling agencies (EXP_1; 3; 4; 6; 7; 11). They were conducted in the context of an explorative qualitative case study in a region of Germany with a university, a university of applied sciences and a preparatory college.

Refugees and asylum seekers were recruited in preparatory courses of a university and a preparatory college located in the same city in Germany. Their teachers and the college manager informed them about our project and our intent to conduct face-to-face interviews with refugees. We defined sampling criteria for the episodic interviews as follows: Self-description of “being a refugee,” various countries of origin, different fields of study and gender.

In reflection of power structures within the interview situation and to avoid re-traumatization (Thielen, 2009), we emphasized preparing for interviews with refugees and developing a trusting interview situation. Our strategy included offering preliminary talks, focusing on education and study preparation to avoid similarities to interviews conducted as part of the asylum application process, and the interviewers awareness for certain topics. All interviews were followed by a report, discussion and reflection within the research team. In order to gain admission to German study preparation, applicants had to have advanced German language proficiency. In order to recognize their high level of German (Sheridan & Storch, 2009, p. 5), we decided to conduct the interviews in German. This also allowed us to conduct the interviews in the language that structures most of the parts of their lives that we talked about: Study preparation and access to higher education in Germany. Although English would have been possible as interview language, all interviewees emphasized that they would prefer German as the interview language. We aim to complement the perspectives of the refugees with those of counselling and service experts. Therefore, we selected six interviews with experts, whose professional activities were located in these areas: student advisory service (EXP_04; EXP_11), social counselling of the Association for Student Affairs (EXP_03), an educational guidance network (also offering scholarships for language courses) (EXP_06), admission service (EXP_07), and coordination of university-wide programs for refugees (EXP_01).

In this article we triangulate refugees‘ and experts‘ perspectives to identify substantial challenges in study preparation (Flick, 2004). We coded the episodic and the expert interviews on the basis of a preliminary system of categories with a special focus on aspirations, support, challenges and barriers of refugees in preparation courses, all part of the interview guidelines. Applying the sensitizing concepts of agency, capabilities, and engagements described above, the codes were thematically systemized and coherently integrated in revised categories and, if required, sub-categories.

Aspirations, Challenges and Support

Aspirations and Reasons to Value Higher Education

Our empirical work reveals a wide *variety of decision phases*. While some refugees appear to “do not have the idea what they want to study at all, thus study counselling just makes sense” (EXP_01)[7] in the eyes of our experts, others

seem to be very clear (EXP_06; 07) or began to plan their studies in Germany even before getting there (EXP_04; 11). Mostly, their educational career was interrupted and they had to find ways to reassume it. Several experts report their experience of being impressed "by the very high educational motivation that I perceive in many of the refugees" (EXP_03).

The following aspects are of value for prospective refugee students as they are *engaged in a plan* such as to achieve high labor market outcomes, to reach prestigious social positions or eligibility. When reflecting upon the decision between academic or vocational track refugees refer to the *intersection of transmigration and labor market prospects* (STU_01; 02): "it is better to study than to do vocational training. Maybe you have to, no idea how, do not stay in Germany anymore, can be, and studying then is a little better" (STU_02). They are aware of the world-wide recognition of German higher education certificates and they consider their previous studies when deciding whether to study in Germany or not (STU_03). Some interviewees also came up with labor market considerations with regard to their aspired field of studies, indifferent to whether it concerns their capabilities in Germany or their country of origin. If aspirations are clear, refugees often opted for high *prestige* subjects like medicine, dentistry or law (EXP_06; 07). These refugees often have to cope with the frustrating insight of additional admission criteria which often are much harder than those of their home country.[8] Counsellors then try to help refugees choose alternative fields of studies that do not require such criteria, e.g. informatics and engineering (EXP_06). One interviewee was anxious to receive an extension of his *residence status* based on being a university student (STU_11). The individual plans sometimes seem to be conflated with social pressure to perform certain goals as well as insufficient information (EXP_01).

Sometimes aspirations emerged when refugees became *familiar* with using the German language in everyday interaction and, thus, when having achieved this foundational functioning: "I could, well, communicate, and that motivated me" (STU_03). Higher education in Germany offers them the opportunity to continue their familiar studies or to establish new academic pathways of personal and professional affinities (STU_03; 06; 09). They feel that they now have the capability to *follow their passion or calling* to a certain subject or profession (STU_06), which would otherwise be oppressed by social or institutional influences in the country of origin. As argued above, refugees are deprived of many familiar attachments – both to their former and to their current environments – thus higher education and preparation measures can help *overcame feelings of deprivation and reinforce (self-) confidence and the creation of new attachments*. As one interviewee stated: "the advantages at the university or in the course are much more than disadvantages. Just a little lonely. Being a bit self-reliant is a bit difficult. Where I dwell it is difficult. But I'm learning new language. I meet new people and I am studying in Germany. And that's great, I think" (STU_06).

This is why higher education and the preparation process can function as psycho-social interventions empowering and fostering well-being as *refugees begin to identify their self as students*. Sometimes the valuations of studying are to such an extent of a general manner so that it seems as an end in itself (STU_03; 04; 11). The *classic idea of the university* was represented as a familiar and likewise common knowledge grounded in their experiences in the region of origin: "You have to learn everything we have discovered as humans. For example in electrical engineering one should [...] learn everything that belongs to electrical engineering. Everything. [...] detailed general knowledge [...] I know that already. I was at the university. [...] So Uni means you should learn everything" (STU_04). Higher education thus is valued because of its connection to familiar

elements of past experience as well as its capacity to initialize the formation of new familiarities.

If prospective refugee students give *justifiable reasons* for studying, on the one hand, they refer to their willingness to contribute to the German economy and show a *feeling that they owe something* to their host country (STU_01; 09). They qualify their aspiration for a good and well paid job in such a manner. On the other hand, interviewees indicated that they would willingly work to *rebuild their country of origin* if life would be safe there (STU_01). Most i refugees interviewed grew up in families with an academic background. Their parents hold academic degrees and they often mention siblings that already study or have graduated as well. For those refugees, studying at a university is rather an obligation than a possibility. Some of them are committed to *continue a family tradition* and sometimes choose harsh words to express: “It is taken hostile, if you do not want to study in our family. My father is supposed to be very angry” (STU_03). Moreover, interviewees came up with indications that these familiar traditions as well as the social prestige of certain academic professions are of great value in their former cultural environments (STU_09) and they qualify their decision to study by relating it to relationships of *mutual dependency*.

Personal, Social and Institutional Conversion Factors

We start with *personal conversion factors* like the more or less *interrupted educational careers* in the course of (civil) war, persecution or flight. This is well illustrated by the fact that prospective refugee students are, on average, much older than freshmen in general. As one interviewee stated, “there are also students at our college, Syrians too, and there are Iranians too. Some are 28 years old, 32. And suddenly they have to repeat their high school diploma. That's really difficult! Right?” (STU_01). Some of our interviewees reported interruptions of several years since they last visited an educational institution. This long period without any contact with school or study content has left its mark: “physics, mathematics, chemistry, I forgot everything and I have to learn again from the beginning, is a bit exhausting for me” (STU_02). One participant noted the impact of such disruption on current learning achievements: “For those who finished high school fresh, that's no problem. [...] I need double the time” (STU_01). Refugees sometimes had to quarrel with the feeling of being “impaired by the war” (STU_01) in the long term and disadvantaged in competition with other students. This leads them to the rejection of judgments about special (financial) support for prospective refugee students as unjust (see below). The problem of interruption is amplified in the host country when refugees have to wait for admission for preparatory courses because of still insufficient capacity and thus long waiting lists or heavy admission tests (STU_03; 06; EXP_04).

The development of *language mastery and the currently achieved fluency* is a crucial factor that fosters not only the motivation to go further on one’s educational pathway. But the level of language mastery also influences to what degree other everyday tasks become demanding and it thereby co-determines the learning capacity of prospective refugee students (STU_11). Interviewees reported, a lack of communication and demanding everyday interactions can lead to psychological burden (STU_03; 11). *Mental health problems,* regardless of whether induced by forced migration experiences or by frustrating situations in the host country, are frequently present in the narrations of our interviewees (STU_06). Some prospective students oppose to that by their *willingness to give effort* and their *openness towards others* (STU_01; 06; 09), but these narrations could reflect both personal habits and societal discourses on the need for willingness to integrate.

There is a bundle of *social conversion factors* involved when refugees try to get access to higher education and to cope with the challenge to meet the admission criteria of HEIs in Germany. First of all and especially in face of the jungle of institutional regulations mentioned above, the realization of aspirations seems to be highly dependent on *early intensive counselling* with regard to admission criteria and language courses as well as financial questions (EXP_03; 06). This includes well informed and experienced *voluntary companions* as well (EXP_04). Tactful advocacy by educational counsellors within the communication between their clients and authorities or HEIs can also serve as ice breaking and lead to *case-related equitable solutions* (see also Gateley, 2015). Educational counsellors also provide quality assurance of the language courses that are administered outside of HEIs (EXP_06). A very similar influence comes from professors who advocate for individuals (STU_03; 09). Likewise, friends and family members who already study at or have graduated from a German university can help to inform the newly arrived refugees and guide them on their way to higher education (STU_01; 06). Thus, weak as well as strong ties of *social networks* largely influence if the challenge of getting access to higher education can be met in reasonable time.

Especially soon after arriving in Germany refugees have to cope with *social isolation*. This feeling is closely related to the *deprivation from being able to communicate* with others in everyday life – an interrelation of the language barrier, dwelling conditions and sometimes experiences of refusal (STU_06; 11). Therefore, *finding new friends* and being in a social climate that really offers this opportunity is crucial. Although there are many tutor and buddy programs at the institutional level of universities in Germany, these programs have to be filled with life at the social level. One expert stated that she would experience "an unbelievable openness among the refugees interested [...] in getting to know German people. A match from the other with the same interests cannot be found so quickly" (EXP_11). As refugees get admitted to preparatory courses, they do not necessarily overcome the problem of social isolation, if *intercultural connections and study groups* could not be established (STU_02; 09). Dependent on the course composition, processes of social *homophily* can hamper this effort. In addition, subtle *faultlines* between prospective international students with and without refugee background are reported (STU_01; 02; 08). It can be assumed that their manifestation depends on how lecturers and course coordinators can foster a *collaborative climate*. Our interviewees frequently present such a positive climate of intercultural collaboration (STU_01; 04), but also *feelings of being suspiciously judged* as receiving unjust support and advantage by HEIs. These feelings can undermine belonging to and familiarity with the environment of HEIs and culminate together with *experienced discrimination and xenophobic topoi* in increased stigma consciousness (Pinel, Warner, & Chua, 2005). In addition, such experiences disregard the justifiable engagements of prospective refugee students. As one interviewee stated when arguing not to know where to work after graduation yet, despite of the declared willingness to participate in the German economy: "There are people, Germans. I feel like they want me to work abroad after graduation, because they have the idea that the other people, the foreigners, are taking away the jobs of the Germans. Do you understand what I mean?" (STU_01).

Of course the *teachers* play a key role in narrations about the learning arrangements in the preparatory courses. Most interviewed refugees underline their teachers' professionality and most of them express *confidence in their assessments*: "And they tell us, what we have to improve, what are our weaknesses and our strengths, what we have to work on." (STU_06). They are sensitive for teachers' motivation and fairness and react emotional if something is

unjustifiable in teachers' behaviors (STU_01; 03; 08).

Because of their age, prospective refugee students – especially women – have to organize family obligations with the demands of preparatory courses (STU_02). Many of our interviewees have to cope with *worries about the situation of relatives and friends*. This leads to reported learning problems because of a lack of concentration on course content.

Our interviews highlight some *institutional conversion factors* not only with regard to the study preparation courses, but even more concerning the *basic language and integration courses* that many prospective students had to pass previously because of their refugee status. On the one hand, due to asylum regulations, asylum seekers are often not allowed to participate in basic language or integration courses immediately. On the other hand, participants as well as experts indicate quantitative and qualitative problems of these courses, such as insufficient places, lack of qualification of language teachers and inappropriateness with regard to the specific demands of highly qualified refugees (EXP_06; STU_04; 09). Therefore, they have to learn the language almost auto didactically too and it might take a long time until refugees achieve the language GER level B2 as usually required for study preparation courses. Thus, the plan to study as soon as possible is thwarted. Furthermore, those who can only discover a few gaps in their knowledge do not understand why they have to prepare for the *Feststellungsprüfung* for one year (STU_03; STU_04). They want to apply their competences directly during their studies.

Furthermore, a lot of experts complain about the *regulation jungle* that is the *admission process in the German higher education system* (EXP_03; 06; 07). Even counselling staff professionally involved with the admission of international and refugee students are likely to lose the plot because of the variety of criteria between the different universities, fields of study or levels of programs (e.g. bachelor, master, doctorate): "For example, if I have a counselling appointment with someone who would like to apply for medicine, that is hard work. We are sitting here for three hours and try to pass through various application procedures" (EXP_06). Few applicants have the opportunity to begin provisional studies, allowing them to achieve the required language level until a defined deadline of usually one year.

Moreover, as implicitly mentioned here, prospective refugee students struggle with heavy financial restrictions while they have to pass the German system of integration and basic language courses. Those *financial problems* are not necessarily solved when refugees are finally admitted to participate in preparation courses. As the experts point out too, if financial benefits should be allocated either to the federal system of study grants and loans ('BAföG') or to extend the financial benefits for asylum seekers supported by the employment agencies is an unsolved question that is solved inconsistent on local levels (EXP_03; 06). Through the eyes of the prospective students, the employment agencies can act as gatekeepers with their own agenda, "that is to offer jobs" and "educating people, so they can work" (STU_11). Applying for a student grant might not be the best choice, depending on eligibility requirements such as recognition of study periods or completed degrees in the country of origin, duration of stay in Germany, age limit or, as a respective example, the definition and regulation of cases of hardship. The experts remark the need for early counselling and guidance regarding questions of financial support. Even if refugee students are granted financial support by 'BAföG', they will frequently have to work while enrolled in the preparation course (STU_06) and sometimes experience labor market discrimination.

Institutionally induced financial and residence restrictions are amplified by difficult *housing market situations* and are likely to further limit financial resources of refugee

students. Many preparation courses of HEIs and *Studienkollegs* are located in the bigger cities, thus an intense competition for low rent flats is arising between the different groups with small income. It can be said that this is affecting the learning situation remarkably (STU_02; 03; 06; 08): "Next month I have to move and I couldn't find a place until now. Well, I cannot concentrate on German language while concentrating on housing." (STU_08).

Another crucial factor is the *limited supply of places in preparation courses* in relation to a rising demand since 2015. *Studienkollegs* have to raise performance standards for entrance examinations with regard to the ratio of applicants to places. Thus, many refugees are likely to fail, especially those struggling with learning a second language anyway (EXP_04). What is more, after overcoming the various challenges during study preparation, prospective students will frequently have to handle a further competitive situation: Their application is to be reapproved by the HEI within the conclusive decision on their registration for a particular course of study. Some interviewees are deeply worried, whether they can enrol at all in their desired study program: "In university every semester there are not many places for refugees, and that I am afraid of. And one of my friends is finished in Studienkolleg and wants to study informatics, but is not getting a place since one year, unfortunately" (STU_02).

Lines of Action and Their Limits

The key concept of agency refers to the capability to make ones' own decisions and pursue ones' own line of action as well as to the structural conditions that enable such an active position. Thus, the concept can be used to reconstruct and specify the conditions under which students are struggling for successful academic integration. However, by using the agency concept we try to avoid reducing prospective refugee students to victims within a social and institutional structured new environment. Instead of suggesting that we found one kind of coherent line of action in our empirical material, we rather try to illustrate different but common *lines of action* of refugees facing challenges in various respects (Hirano 2014; 2015 for a quiet similar argument with regard to the reconstruction of coping strategies).

While being engaged in their plan to become a university student, almost all prospective student interviewees show a remarkable *concurrency of both persistent commitment in pursuing their goal and distancing themselves from it*. Even if they are not distracted from their paths into higher education, the long and exhausting period of time to achieve a residence status or a university place leaves marks with which they have to cope with: "Takes very long. […] From the beginning I know my fate here. […] First I want to know how I can make my situation. I said to myself, I don't want to be bounced back by this, just carry on. Until now I have learned a lot of German for my goal. Next week I will apply for university, too" (STU_10). Reflecting on the precariousness of asylum seeking as well as the realization of their educational aspirations they tend to distance themselves from their goal (STU_01) or even pluralize goals: "Yes, you should plan your future and you should not. […] But if I plan future, or three, four futures, one of them will happen, okay, that is very good" (STU_11).

Creating supportive social networks and not hesitating to make use of them is a line of action that is illustrated by several narrations of prospective refugee students (STU_09). They try to knot a reliable net between them. Consistent with that is the avoidance of negative feedback from employment agencies and instead talked to (German) friends about their higher education aspirations (STU_11; STU_09). They combine their engagement with familiarized things and places to their educational plans by linking learning groups and friendships for purpose: "we are almost always talking to one another in German. That is an advantage for us, too. And

we are- well, we are friends. [...] Sometimes we go to the cinema together. Go for a walk, around the lake, to the canteen. When we have exams, we are learning together. Also, we are a really good team." (STU_01). This is in line with the *will to trust in their own ability* and the improvement of their competencies: "But I realize, or I notice that I am stepping forward. In the first semester I was bad, now I improved. I think it's getting better all the time" (STU_01).

Frequently, our interviewees described *sophisticated learning strategies*. Usually they expand their daily learning times, depending on the beginning of their course, learning before and after the end of the course. Often they decide to learn in a group or alone depending on subjects or difficulty (STU_01; 04). Also, they increase their efforts, notably before tests, generally using their small amount of free time. Some seem to take every chance to practice German for example by talking to neighbours or friends, or even make use of multilingualism by speaking German with fellow students of the same mother tongue. They even relate aspects of social isolation to their learning goals and reshape them in such a way that they can give meaning to it: "I'm the only Arabic person in the course. That was hard for me from the very beginning. But later I realized that I can improve my German that way. If I had a friend speaking Arabian, I had spoken Arabian all the time. That wouldn't improve my German" (STU_01).

Although prospective refugee students invest a lot (time, learning efforts, cultural capital, money) to achieve their goals, they are likely to face obstacles going beyond their control. These *Limits of agency* are primarily induced by institutional factors.

As we observe in our interviews, some prospective refugee students experience strong feelings of frustration in face of organized disintegration and multiple challenges (STU_02; 03; 06), begin to weigh the pros and cons of their efforts in preparing for study and almost give up: "I want to say, no matter if you are a genius, [...] no matter if you are learning every day, if you have to deal with other problems in your life, they are bouncing you back. You cannot concentrate on anything, you cannot" (STU_03). Achieving a sustainable and predictable residency status seems to be one of the most severe problems, especially if it is impossible to return into the country of origin without facing arrest or cruel pressure (STU_07). Some of them describe particularly frustrating moments, when integration efforts do not result in a secure residence status: "I have taken my home with a German family, so that I can understand German culture and master integration. And finally, they decided just subsidiary protection status temporarily for one year. In that situation I broke down, I couldn't focus anymore" (STU_11).

If refugees are allowed to enrol without a certificate of language competency and are obliged to hand it in later, HEIs go along with their plan to start their studies as quick as possible. But this can also lead them to a dead-end. If language courses are not well suited for their individual living, working and study conditions, they must fail: "Sometimes you have to attend in the morning, sometimes in the evening. And when you pay for a course, it is much money. [...] And you cannot attend regularly. And then you achieve nothing. [...] I couldn't participate in any course." (STU_06). This situation has led to frustration and psychological pressure because of the feeling of being left alone with institutional constrains like that.

Frequently, prospective refugee students mention obstacles they face when they have to manage housing suitable to their needs caused by residence, working, and financial restrictions. Due to that, many of the students try to earn additional money, if they are allowed to by the asylum authorities. But it is also hard for them to find a job during study preparation: "But I can't work. When, even if I could find a job. There is almost no time and in the evenings there are no busses where I live" (STU_06). The limits of agency derive from culminations and

interactions of problems located in institutional and social contexts far beyond their control.

Implications and Discussion

We have provided an introduction to higher education access for prospective refugee students in Germany. While there is mostly international research on refugees within HEIs (Berg, Grüttner & Schröder 2018; Mangan & Winter 2017) our paper contributes in particular to the existing research gap on challenges within study preparation and on refugees' access to higher education in Germany. Similar to international studies on refugee students, we rely on an explorative approach and qualitative methods, but utilize a more theoretically informed systematization of our empirical findings.

Our research has shown diverse "reasons to value" (Sen, 1999) that are shaping higher education aspirations of refugees. These valuations are grounded on several "engagements with the world" (Thévenot, 2015) as familiarity, plan or justifiability. Committed to these valuations, prospective refugee students have to cope with several challenges, especially the mastery of the German language and associated admission criteria. Institutional and social barriers as well as disinformation and tensions between policies crosscut students' efforts. Feelings of being treated unjustly come to the fore if engagements are disregarded, thus oppressing agency and inducing frustration, likely to lead to depressive conditions.

Even if the situation in Germany is far more positive than in many other host countries, policy makers should move quickly to focus on strengthening early and sustainable professional counselling addressing questions of educational aspirations, possible pathways and study funding or loans, and quality assurance of language courses to address the specific needs of refugees with higher education aspirations. Moreover, such institutionalized counselling structures could be of general value in a modern migration society like Germany.

In Germany, undertaking an apprenticeship could result in suspension of deportation or even getting an extended residence permit. It would be of relief and recognition if this would apply in case of university studies or even participation in preparatory courses, too, allowing prospective refugee students to concentrate on their studies rather than thinking about their precarious residence permit. Expanding the capacity of preparatory colleges and universities would reduce competition for places in preparatory courses.

Some of the challenging factors are due to social and institutional contexts outside of the learning environments of HEIs, likely leading to long lasting consequences. Thus, their influence on these factors is limited. Universities are overburdened if they have to compensate for deprivation previously caused by other institutional contexts (collective accommodation, residence obligation, inadequate integration courses, short residence permits, and xenophobic social climate) in order to support social and academic inclusion.

Finally, we would like to point out three limitations of our findings presented here: 1) the sample is restricted to one region of Germany. Therefore, only theoretical generalizations are possible. Further research should try to elaborate on data of a more general scope or look closer into regional differences and embeddedness of HEIs as well as study preparation measures to compare various contexts. 2) To qualify crucial influence factors like national asylum systems and socio-political constellations (Goastellec, 2018; Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018), international comparing research should be expanded. 3) Also, further research should focus on longitudinal mixed methods to deepen understanding and improve explanation of successful integration of refugees into higher education.

Notes

1. Asylum seekers are understood as people who have crossed international borders and then applied for asylum in a new country. Refugees hold a legal status based on the Geneva Convention. We use forced migrant as a comprehensive term for both, while generally it also includes everybody that was forced to migrate internally and internationally (Turton 2003). Asylum seekers and refugees can both apply for higher education and take part in study preparations in Germany. We will generally use the term refugee student in order to refer to (prospective) students that either applied for asylum or have already a refugee status in Germany.
2. We define a prospective refugee student (PRS) as a person who has applied for asylum in Germany and is participating in measures of study preparation regardless of the actual residence status.
3. The research-project „Wege von Geflüchteten an deutsche Hochschulen - WeGe“ is funded by the German federal ministry of education and research (BMBF).
4. The ZAB is supported by the German Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs. The ZAB is, in short, the central institution for the assessment of foreign school, vocational and higher education qualifications. The statement of comparability issued by the ZAB is frequently requested to facilitate access to the German labour market or Higher Education, as in our example.
5. Translation by Council of Europe: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, p. 24.
6. Thévenot refers on empirical research of Blic & Lafaye 2011 to make his argument clear.
7. As noted above, the interviews were conducted in German. All quotes used in this paper were translated by the authors. “EXP” refers to an expert interview; “STU” refers to an episodic interview with a participant of preparatory courses.
8. For instance when HEIs mix up the grades from the country of origin with the grades from the assessment test (‘Feststellungsprüfung’) to decide on applications.

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