



## Challenges and Innovations: Germany's Effort to Integrate Refugees into Higher Education<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Over the last year, the mood toward immigrants and refugees has considerably darkened in some of the countries that are best resourced to help them. In the United States, for example, a new administration has changed the tenor of America's historic openness to migrants and refugees; in the UK, the 'Brexit' vote has signaled a desire to leave the European Union, largely to stave off migration; and in other countries in continental Europe, for example in France, Holland, Hungary, and Germany, far right parties have made some electoral gains, although voters have stopped short of giving them significant political power.

In such a climate of increased nationalist tendencies and antipathy toward globalism and the international elements that come with it, be they migrants, refugees, or even international students, the importance of embracing global diversity and its value to society has become particularly urgent. According to the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, since 2015 when the influx of refugees seeking to enter Europe grew, Germany has taken in 890,000 new migrants, a figure reduced from 1.1 million originally estimated. While the majority (nearly 40%) of refugees have come from Syria, other asylum seekers fleeing civil war, social unrest, and extreme poverty have included Albanians, Kosovars, Afghans, Iraqis, Serbians, Eritreans, Macedonians and Pakistanis, among only the top ten recorded countries.

In this study, we focused on Germany and how its higher education system has been responding to the increased refugee flow since 2015, and in particular how its universities have rolled out new and innovative programming to accommodate the 30,000-50,000 eligible students who will be seeking entry into German universities in the coming years. Germany has been faced with both the challenge of processing, and the opportunity of integrating, these students through education into its education system and workforce. But this aspiration has also bumped up against fears among some constituencies that doing so will ultimately fail or adversely strain Germany's generous social system.

### The Syrian Conflict and Displacement

It is difficult to argue that the ongoing Syrian Civil War has been nothing short of a modern-day tragedy of historic proportions. The carnage continues at the time of writing. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), since 2011 when the Syrian Civil War began during the Arab Spring protests, 6.3 million Syrians have become internally displaced; over five million have become stateless refugees primarily in other parts of the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) but also in smaller numbers in Europe and safer havens

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on the globe. By most estimates nearly five million Syrians have died in the civil war. Despite this horror, although the Syrians are the most visibly affected and covered in the global media, other citizens in much of the Arab world have also suffered gravely. To varying degrees, tribal warfare and the ascendance of terror groups have replaced overthrown dictatorships, economies have been drained, and once dependable social structures have been upended. The short promise of the Arab Spring in many cases has given way to devastating internal conflict and instability; Iraq remains devastated by over fifteen years of sectarian warfare since the U.S. bombardment following the 9/11 attack; Afghanistan, Libya, Eritrea, Egypt and other nations appear to be in perpetual states of simmering or boiling conflict that indicate no clear end in sight.

According to UNHCR, refugees fleeing from Syria have increased dramatically in short order: in 2011 there were 8,000 refugees, by 2013 there were 2,301,668, and by 2015 the figure had more than doubled to 4,595,198. By 2017 it now stands at 4,961,300 (UNHCR, 2017). In the spring of 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel briefly permitted a significant stream of new refugees,<sup>2</sup> the majority from Syria, to enter the country in large numbers. While the open door quickly closed again with tighter borders enforced in European transit countries, a deal with Turkey closing borders, and political pressures in Germany also constricting loser migration, a vast majority of new refugees had made it into the country (Streitwieser, Miller-Idriss & deWit, 2017).

By the end of 2015, with close to 900,000 recorded new refugees in Germany and possibly more not yet registered, the massive undertaking of processing their rights, benefits, and legal status, and placing them into appropriate housing, schooling, training and employment throughout the country had begun. According to data from a Pew Research Center report, in 2015 Germany processed 33% of the total share of asylum applications in Europe, over 20% more than the next leading European Union country (Connor, 2016). In 2015, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) reported that roughly 50% of asylum decisions rendered were positive, meaning the country recognized their refugee status (BAMF, 2015). Since then, however, the window has tightened significantly and the designation permitting entry and permission to remain in the country under protected legal status has become much more difficult.

Despite the impressive numbers cited above, which has been touted by much of the world's media as a German "refugee crisis," three facts stand out as important to note. First, the media sensation was somewhat overblown in light of previous migration streams in recent Germany; the country in fact witnessed mass migration following the Second World War and again significant migration during the Balkan crisis of the early 1990s. Second, the impact of refugee entry on German higher education has been relatively minor when considering the country's overall student numbers; this 'crisis' will not substantially test the system's capacity over time. The academic criteria to enter German universities is robust and refugee students have to compete against all other students and will only make up a small fraction of the general student population. Third, the response by the German government, its 16 federal states, relevant ministries and agencies, and many universities to develop and maintain pathways for migrants

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<sup>2</sup> The following terms defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are used: "Refugees" have fled their country because of armed conflict and persecution; "Asylum-seekers" have submitted applications for refugee status and sanctuary in a host country; "migrants" have left their country primarily for economic reasons but not the threat of persecution (UNHCR, 2016).

has been impressive in its scope and creativity compared to other European countries (Schammann & Younso, 2016; Unangst, 2017).

### **Germany's Role**

Although there had been episodic spikes in migration into Germany's since the end of the Second World War, in 2015 the speed of the mass refugee influx was not expected (Rietig and Mueller, 2016). The stream of new arrivals into Germany required the federal government, state-level governments, public and private organizations, and educational institutions at all levels to respond quickly. While other European countries also accepted refugees, such as Sweden, the majority sought entry into Germany (Streitwieser, Miller-Idriss & deWit, 2017).

The motivations behind German Chancellor Angela Merkel's adoption of a seemingly open door policy to accept Syrian refugees will be debated for decades to come. Arguably, she initially seemed motivated by recognizing a global human rights catastrophe (Dempsey, 2016). Perhaps less publicly Merkel also recognized the opportunity for Germany to lead Europe by example and so continue rehabilitating its post-War image (Clibbon, 2015). Economic advantages surely were also important as a 12 billion Euro surplus in 2015 gave the country financial advantages not shared by other European countries (Thomas, 2016). The declining birth rate since the early 1990s coupled with the country's aging population were additional reasons to attract skilled migration. Given that more than half of asylum seekers in Europe in 2015 were between the ages of 18-34 and roughly another quarter under the age of 18, the new refugee influx also gave the chance that Germany might significantly expand its aging workforce (Desilver, 2015).

According to early polling data reported in March 2016 by the Migration, Integration and Asylum Research Centre of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, among the top ten asylum seeker groups, Syrians came with more experience in higher education and stronger levels of English language competency than most (Rich, 2016). Syrians, along with Iraqis and Kurds, seemed more prepared than other asylum groups to possibly enter the higher education system sooner (deWit & Altbach, 2015) and have a quicker positive impact on the labor market. In early 2016, over two thirds of Syrian arrivals in Germany were male (78.8%), and three quarters had previously been employed in a variety of manual, service, wholesale and other jobs. Among males, 27.8%, and, among females, 23.8% already had university level training before leaving Syria (Rich, 2016; Goodman, 2016).

### **Germany's Process for Higher Education Integration**

According to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), figures for 2016 projected that the number of new refugees that would possibly become eligible to enter higher education institutions (HEIs) over the next few years lay somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 (Rüland, 2016). The biggest challenging and most time consuming for would-be students was getting their German proficiency level up to the standards required for university caliber study and subsequent employment. At the point asylum-seekers are granted legal refugee status, they become eligible to enroll in degree-seeking higher educational programs. Refugees can get information on German higher education options (universities and universities of applied sciences or Fachhochschulen) from the DAAD and the German Rectors' Conference (HRK). As part of this process, refugees may also be advised to consider entering the vocational track, which is well established and highly respected in Germany.

Germany is committed to the goal of educating refugees. Some organizations have used the popular slogan, “Integration through Education” (also used in many other contexts besides the current refugee situation) as a means to support overall integration. Education plays an important role in refugee resettlement, not just offering a way back into society but also counteracting some of the traumas caused from experiencing forced migration and violence (Crea, 2016). In this light, many German universities early in the influx began to prepare for an increased enrollment. Examples follow.

### **A Note on the Data Collection**

The data presented below were collected during an eleven-day faculty-led study tour in Summer 2016 to Berlin and Bonn on the theme of “internationalization of European higher education: case study Germany.” The faculty member and 12 participating students visited 15 different education ministries, foundations, associations and universities to meet with experts involved with Germany’s internationalization efforts. The situation of newly arrived refugees primarily from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan became a large focus during most of our meetings. Much of the information about refugee integration into higher education was learned from discussions with administrators and faculty at three universities in Berlin: the Humboldt University of Berlin (HUB), a large public institution with 33,000 students in former East Berlin and the city’s oldest university; the Free University of Berlin (FUB) with 35,000 students in the Western part of the city and established after the Second World War; and the Berlin School of Economics and Law (BSEL) with 10,000 students and a relatively newer and smaller institution with two city campuses.

In the rush to cope with the regulatory demands of processing so many new arrivals, there has so far been relatively little time to reflect on whether this was done effectively and what its impact has been. To date, an account of the crisis and limited analysis has come primarily from the media, certain ministries charged with education and migration, and a handful of policy and philanthropic organizations that have conducted studies. Only gradually have more detailed academic studies with deeper analysis and more reliable figures begun to emerge that focus on specific aspects of the crisis.

On average, it costs roughly 11 billion Euros, or .35% of total German GDP, for a year of refugee programming (Dettmer & Reiermann, 2016; IMF, 2016). To aid in comprehensive refugee integration, Germany allocated 1.3 billion Euros to this cause in February 2016 at the Syrian Donors Conference (“Germany”, n.d.). Additionally, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the DAAD set aside roughly 100 million Euros for the coming years to assist in refugee programming at universities through the Integra Program; about 30% of this 100 million Euros (or 27 million Euros) was allocated for refugee programming in 2016 (“Migrants at universities”, n.d.).

### **Main Challenges: Language and Credentialing**

#### *Language*

The Integration through Education initiative will prove to be a challenge due to Germany’s rigorous requirements for education. However, the main gateway to pass through is learning

German. The main pathway into the German labor market and society is also to gain German language competency.

However, even if refugees or migrants do not seek to enroll in a study program, they have the obligation to learn German if they are seeking refugee status and hope to remain in the country. The longer it takes an aspiring student to learn the German language, the longer it will be until they are qualified to enroll in a German university. However, this language challenge has not been overlooked by the German government, which in 2016 allocated 5.7 billion Euros toward refugee language training alone (Martin, 2016). For those with English language abilities, as of the 2016-17 academic year there were 882 BA and MA programs offered in English (DAAD, n.d) and, according to the 2016 “SoKo” database produced by the Migration, Integration and Asylum Research Centre of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 42% of Syrians who migrated to Germany in 2015 had a foundation of English language skills. After The Netherlands, Germany offered the second most English language MA programs in Europe, and a much smaller number of BA programs in English, although these have also been increasing (Brenn-White and Faethe, 2013) as the benefit of Germany’s tuition free system becomes increasingly attractive to those in higher tuition charging education markets. Even so, the vast majority of Syrian and other refugees are taking German language courses.

### *Credentialing*

For refugees to become eligible to study at a German university, numerous further steps are necessary (Streitwieser & Taylor, 2016). To become eligible for asylum and eventual citizenship in Germany it is necessary to first participate in an Integration Class (*Integrationskurs*). These classes geared toward citizenship eligibility include teaching general facts about German history, culture, and social norms as well as basic German to the B1 proficiency level. B1 level implies competency to engage on familiar topics in an educational and professional setting and to understand and write simple texts (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24). To meet the university entrance qualification a prospective student, however, must achieve C1 proficiency, which is a significantly higher language ability level to understand more complex theoretical texts and to write in the style of specific disciplines.

Many migrants who came at the height of the refugee influx were not in possession of the proper paperwork or documentation to prove they were eligible for higher education. Germany responded by creating structures and procedures to verify the credentials of this migrant population. One way Germany seeks to verify foreign credentials is through ANABIN. ANABIN is the acronym for “*Anerkennung und Bewertung ausländischer Bildungsnachweise*,” a publicly available German database used to check credentials for eligibility to study at the bachelor’s, master’s, and vocational levels within the German higher education system. The system was developed over a 10-year period and encompasses comprehensive information that covers 180 countries, more than 25,000 higher education institutions, 22,000 types of school leaving certificates, 25,000 individualized achievement reports, and 5,800 vocational training certificates. The system is administered by the German *Kultusministerkonferenz*, or the assembly of ministers of education comprising all 16 German federal states.

When verifying credentials is not possible, German higher education institutions can then choose to utilize the [TestAS system](#) to assess a student’s competency for higher education study. TestAS

is a test that is administered to assess general intellectual competency to study at university level. According to the TestAS website, it is “a central standardised aptitude test for foreign students [that] gives prospective students information about their individual ranking compared to other applicants.” TestAS is not subject specific and can be administered in multiple languages. Once other entrance requirements are satisfied for the university entrance qualification, or *Hochschulzugangsberechtigung* (HZB), including most importantly language competency for discipline-specific study, subject-specific testing then becomes the responsibility of the specific university and academic department.

## **Systems and Services**

### *Systems/Services on Campuses*

By Summer of 2016, there were 400 registered migrant students at the FUB, mostly Syrian males, seeking to continue or obtain higher education credentials through their “Welcome to Freie Universität Berlin” initiative. These students could enroll in intensive German language and preparatory courses, attend certain open lectures, receive academic advising, attend psychological counseling, and volunteer with fellow students in the community. These opportunities were made primarily as a result of DAAD funding and German and international students who campaigned the university to welcome refugees and make opportunities available (“Freie University Berlin Makes it Easier for Refugees to gain Access to Study Programs” 2015). FU teachers also quickly stepped in, with 40 enrolling in German as a Foreign Language courses to help mitigate language barriers for the larger number of refugees, primarily from Syria, new to the campus.

### *Mentoring: Peer & Academic*

Syrian migrants enrolled at the three universities we visited on our tour are eligible to participate in peer mentoring. This practice has been historically successful through the implementation of partnering students and migrants in ‘Buddy Programs’ aimed to help migrants acculturate socially. Peer mentors can be useful resources for learning how to navigate life in Berlin, understand the German educational system, or simply learn how to get around on campus (“Buddy Program”, n.d.). At the FUB, weekly, multilingual academic advising sessions are also held on topics such as program options, organization and structure of academic programs, application guidelines, and general campus life (“Advising migrants”, n.d.). It is important that Syrian migrants understand their employment and education options, as Germany has a tremendously high dropout rate. In 2014, 28% of undergraduate students did not continue their academic programs (Heublein, 2014), and a staggering average of 41% of international bachelor-level students drop their courses each year (Burkhart & Kercher, 2014).

### *Psychological Support*

According to some estimates (Gregoire, 2015), over half a million Syrian migrants in Germany alone were in need of mental health services due to suffering from various forms of post-traumatic stress disorder. At the FUB, special counseling for migrants is available and at the time of data collection was projected to also be offered in Arabic and Farsi in the near future.

### *Academic Support & Preparation*

The Berlin School of Economics and Law (BSEL) has implemented the JUST program, which is a semester-long specialized program that is funded partly by the DAAD. In the summer of 2016,

26 refugee students were enrolled but numbers were expected to increase in the near future. The refugee student population at the BSEL was made up primarily of Syrians, Afghans, and Egyptians with diverse educational backgrounds. The JUST program offered them basic, preparatory courses, some of which were compulsory and others elective, intended to help get Syrian migrants to the academic level at which they would be able to earn regular university admission as fully enrolled students.

In the summer of 2016, BSEL also debuted its summer refugee program, “Students4migrants” with courses designed and taught by BSEL students and free of charge. This program, which was unique for any Berlin higher education institution at the time, included German language instruction and also lectures led by students on German history, methods and manners of intercultural communication, and issues around politics (“Students4migrants”, n.d.; “Students4migrants - Summer School at the BSEL Berlin”, 2016).

## **Continuing Challenges**

### *Economic Constraints*

As universities admit more migrants and their student populations rises in tandem—even if the effects may be minor in terms of overall student numbers—there will be a parallel demand for more faculty and staff to help manage the specialized needs of this new student population. While the issue of quotas is difficult and touches on legal restrictions, migrants in some cases may be allotted a certain quota of admission for universities. The FUB, for example, keeps their international student population, which includes incoming refugee students, to 8% of all students (Admission Limits, 2016) and at the BSEL, migrants are allotted 2.5% of the entire school admission spots.

## **Openness and Future Prospects**

Our interviews with personnel at German universities, ministries, foundations, and universities brought up a passionately articulated and recurrent theme: interest in internationalization comes above all from its citizens’ desire for peace and the core belief that openness to knowing others is the only way to reduce mistrust, hatred, and ultimately war. This belief seemed clearly to underlie the efforts that German universities were making to put educational initiatives into practice. Elements of the few institutions our tour gave us time to visit suggested that with proper support migrants and refugees are likely to succeed in finding their place within the university as a step into German society and over time come to be seen as an enrichment to the country’s culture and economy. But this hinges on the success of the integration efforts that were quickly developed in 2015 and 2016 but in time need to settle in, be evaluated and reworked, and become sustainable.

The university sector, just as primary and secondary schooling and vocational training, has an opportunity to be a key player in the integration process and, eventually, to reap the fruits of its success. Obviously, for refugees to gain the knowledge and skills they will need to transition to full membership in German society, access to the opportunities that education can provide must be available. German universities are responding positively to the refugee crisis with a variety of innovative programs and individualized support services, at a time when tensions around European identity and the willingness and capacity to accommodate refugees and migrants are

being tested. Ideally, German universities will thrive serving as a positive role model of successful refugee integration.

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