

# Asylum Seekers in Higher Education in the United States: Emerging Challenges and Potential Solutions

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## Abstract

Asylum seekers are generally excluded from welfare provisions, social support, and higher education (HE) in their host countries. The depth and impact of these exclusions is barely known, as this population remains invisible and underserved. This article aims to deepen understanding of the challenges asylum seekers face in accessing HE in Western countries and present potential solutions. Existing literature highlights (1) socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, unrecognition of qualifications, low language proficiency, and mental health issues; (2) institutional barriers; and (3) good practices such as policy advocacy, scholarships, alternative admission paths, staff and faculty training, community collaboration, and asylum seeker involvement in policy and decision-making. We pose critical questions on the role of higher education institutions in addressing migration challenges and facilitating integration through access to education. An ongoing student-run initiative at a private U.S. university serves as a case example to offer further directions for research and practice.

*Keywords: asylum seekers, higher education, refugees, access to higher education, community collaboration*



**I**t was still cold outside, winter weather lingering in New York City, when we met with this group of students brought together by a desire to promote justice through innovation. The name of the group: Resettled Refugee Students Practicum. Their goal: to increase the visibility of current challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in higher education institutions and engage different university groups in an honest analysis of what universities are versus what they should be. Based on shared experiences of exclusion and invisibility, this group started with the thesis that higher education institutions were hard to get in and hard to stay in for students with lived experiences of seeking asylum. These institutions were not providing safe spaces for these students. Particularly in the United States. Particularly at that time: It was February 2019, a time when the political administration, and particularly the U.S. government,

was doing anything in its power to restrict immigration policies and keep migrants out.

A few questions emerged very quickly during that first meeting: How to protect people who would be willing to share their stories? How do we even know who they are and what their challenges are? How to collect and use students' stories of struggle, trauma, and resilience in a higher education institution (HEI) context to make universities a place of refuge and safety, where learning is the primary goal, and where supporting students to engage in learning is the primary function? How to engage universities in consistent, coherent, and successful advocacy efforts to challenge current immigration policies? More importantly, how to claim access to education as *a right*? And, finally, how to build an argument when research on the topic is limited at best and invisibility becomes a protective mechanism?

Later on, one student shared with us how after she revealed to her professor that she missed a class because of an important meeting with her attorney about her asylum case, the professor started using the student's status to constantly single her out during classes, with the best of intentions, and have her "teach" about the challenges of forced migration, when all the student wanted was to participate in learning and feel safe in the process. All she wanted was to be a student. After that meeting, we decided we need to do more to raise these critical questions and create opportunities to identify challenges faced by students from asylum-seeking backgrounds in HEIs in the United States. This reflective essay critically discusses findings from the existing literature in response to some of the questions raised by the students and invites scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to reconfigure the role of HEIs in innovatively and effectively addressing complex issues such as forced migration.

### **Overview: Asylum Seekers in an International and U.S. Context**

Asylum seekers are a neglected and unrecognized population at individual and institutional levels in the United States. Often subsumed under the umbrella of "immigrants" or "refugees," asylum seekers face specific challenges that are obscured by the temporality and precariousness of unrecognized refugee status. For instance, asylum seekers are not considered a specific and separate group of forced migrants in local or federal welfare policies in the United States, and the population is hard to reach by service providers and researchers due to their lack of attachment to public or private agencies (Károly & Perez-Arce, 2016).

Although the U.S. Refugee Act (1980) and the previous temporary acts to admit certain groups of refugees included provisions for direct support in the form of temporary housing and living expense subsidies, as well as supplemental social services such as language training, health, school, and small business programs, asylum seekers were excluded from any federal government-funded social support provisions (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015). The limited benefits available to asylum seekers are uneven and very restricted. Specifically, nondetained asylum seekers in the United States with active asylum claims may access the labor market 180 days after lodging an

asylum application, urgent care and other health care insurance programs (e.g., Medicaid, depending on their U.S. state of residence), English classes, some limited social services not specific to asylum seekers, and limited legal support provided by local nonprofit organizations funded primarily by local governments and private donors (Meissner et al., 2018).

Many asylum seekers cannot receive their employment authorization even after the required 180 days due to delays in their cases related to lost documents, requests to reschedule appointments, and other causes. Thus, asylum seekers cannot support themselves by working for at least 6 months or, in fact, much longer, and they do not qualify for any essential welfare services and government assistance. One of the most pressing needs is legal counsel, which is not guaranteed to asylum seekers, making them scramble for scattered and very limited free and pro bono services.

As a result, asylum seekers are generally disconnected from service providers (e.g., social workers, counselors, health practitioners) and educators, or the institutions responsible for serving this population, specifically in Europe and the United States, due to complex barriers at the macro, meso, and micro levels. The punitive and deterrent asylum regimes in Western countries, the neoliberal logic of welfare provision manifested in the structure and settings of social services, and the issues of temporality and mobility ingrained in the tenuous status of an asylum seeker, all prevent encounters and meaningful engagement between asylum seekers and practitioners and educators, leaving asylum seekers with little recourse for claiming their rights (Bocagni & Righard, 2020; Robinson & Masocha, 2017).

One of the places asylum seekers are excluded from are HEIs. HEIs play various roles in society, from production of knowledge to educating professionals and producing nongovernmental societal actors (Jungblut et al., 2020; Toker, 2020) to facilitating an effective and full integration of immigrants in their host countries (Batalova & Fix, 2019). More recently, as core key members of the civil society, HEIs have responded to the recent increase in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in the world, especially in Europe and the United States, through research (producing and reviewing migration data) and advocacy

(engaging with other members of the civil society on policy practice efforts at local, national, and global levels). Most of these initiatives focus on “refugees,” sometimes subsuming asylum seekers under the term. A recent call between a group of universities in Europe and the United States, following a conference on refugees’ access to higher education (HE), outlined concrete steps HEIs could take to assist refugees directly, including providing scholarships and tuition waivers, creating connected programs, and offering alternative paths to admission to accommodate lack of formal education documentation (UNHCR, 2019b). Wider policy initiatives clearly have framed the role of HEIs in fostering integration, with Germany establishing a government collaboration with university partners and funding universities to develop new programs or open current ones to refugees (Kracht, 2017).

In the United States, initiatives such as the University Alliance for Refugees and At-Risk Migrants (UARRM), launched in 2018 to unite researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, and the Columbia University Scholarship for Displaced Students (CUSDS), launched in 2019, are examples of organized efforts (Columbia University, 2019; UARRM, 2018) to advocate for and support refugees’ and asylum seekers’ access to higher education and the integration of asylum seekers and refugees through HE. The new initiatives will eventually produce evidence of what works well for refugees and asylum seekers, including research on the tailored approaches for each of these groups. Gathering this evidence, however, will take time. Although a growing body of academic research is focused on access to HE for resettled refugees, including refugee students (see, for example, Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018; Streitwieser, Duffy-Jaeger, & Roche, 2020; Streitwieser, Loo, et al., 2018), much less is known about how asylum seekers’ access HE and the barriers they are encountering in HE systems, especially in the United States.

To address the lack of a comprehensive policy response from the U.S. government to the challenges of asylum seekers in the context of the current enormous displacement of people, colleges and universities could provide vital support to forced migrants, especially asylum seekers. This essay presents major themes synthesized from the existing literature on the access of asylum seekers to HE in Western coun-

tries. It identifies significant challenges and barriers and good practices and recommendations that focus on needed wraparound service provision and political advocacy. The essay concludes with a call for a more active role for educators, practitioners, and researchers to analyze and adapt existing good practices in the U.S. context of education and to engage in practice and research that promote recognition and inclusion of asylum seekers, starting with their own HEIs.

The rationale for this reflection and call for more engagement stems from the current ongoing work of the coauthors: The first two authors have been building a community–university group to explore the issues of access and success of asylum seekers in HEIs since 2018, and the second author has also been providing education counseling, including navigating HEIs and finding private and alternative funding for asylum seekers.

The critical questions posed by this essay are relevant to educators and researchers, but also to practitioners who regularly interact with immigrants and refugees in their work. For example, social workers and counselors are often on the front lines of service provision to immigrants while also present in counseling offices on campus. However, there is little to no communication on issues affecting asylum seekers *outside* the university campuses despite the significant impact of such issues on their ability to start and complete their HE. Practitioners, researchers, and educators need to engage in a concerted effort to understand the challenges asylum seekers face, specifically in accessing and completing HE in Western countries, and intentionally include them in reviewing potential solutions that can increase access to HEIs and relevant support services. By promoting the right to education for all, HEIs can actively contribute to increasing safety at local and international levels, ensuring a full and effective integration of asylum seekers in their host countries, thus improving democracy.

### **Terminology: Who is an "Asylum Seeker"?**

The U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 (codified in the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, which is in line with the 1951 U.N. Convention on the Status of Refugees, i.e., the Geneva Convention), defines a refugee as

any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. (Sec. 201(a))

An "asylum seeker" in a modern and narrow legal sense is a potential refugee whose claim for protection ("asylum") is not yet decided and who is inside the country where that asylum seeker is claiming international protection (UNHCR, 2014). Every Western government has a process in place for reviewing the merit of asylum claims, called refugee status determination (RSD). RSD follows national refugee laws, which are often based on the Geneva Convention (if a signatory), the U.N. Convention Against Torture, and other refugee policies specific to each country's legal documents (Hamlin, 2014; Schoenholtz et al., 2014).

The U.S. international protection procedures include the asylum procedures, with a marked distinction between "affirmative" and "defensive" asylum applicants. *Affirmative asylum* procedure applies to those who entered the United States on a valid visa and filed for asylum within one year, and who are interviewed by a U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officer in a nonadversarial manner; it also applies to those who claimed asylum at a U.S. port of entry (i.e., at the border) who are interviewed to determine "credible fear" and either sent back or sent to appear before an immigration judge (i.e., in the Department of Justice's immigration court system; specifically, the Executive Office for Immigration Review [EOIR]). The asylum seekers who are referred to a judge can be either released until the hearing or sent to a detention center to wait for a hearing. Those who are in deportation (removal) proceedings because they overstayed their visas or entered the United States without inspection and were apprehended by the U.S. immigration authorities can file *defensive asylum* applications and request a hearing

before an immigration judge (Human Rights First, 2014; Mossaad, 2019).

### Status Recognition: Core Challenges for Asylum Seekers

In general, the United States is doing significantly less to support asylum seekers, with only about 39,000 people having been granted asylum in 2018, while there are 4.2 million asylum seekers worldwide (Mossaad, 2019; UNHCR, 2020). The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that between 2010 and 2019, the number of asylum seekers has been increasing due to the conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as the deteriorating situation in Venezuela, with 880,200 Venezuelans having applied for asylum (UNHCR, 2019a).

These complex migration issues can be addressed effectively only through a multistakeholder approach; thus, the government's role is crucial to developing such an approach (Bruch et al., 2018). However, the current responses to forced migration in the United States are mainly characterized by increasingly restrictive governmental policies aimed at reducing the number of refugees admitted and drastically limiting access to asylum (Green, 2019).

In the United States, unlike in the European Union, Canada, and Australia, asylum seekers do not have access to any federal welfare services or minimum benefits such as housing, food, or clothing. However, some states provide basic healthcare insurance. Asylum seekers in the United States may apply for a temporary work authorization 6 months after lodging an asylum claim (Human Rights First, 2019). Asylum seekers are mostly left to fend for themselves and often exist and operate outside any formal systems of support. Many asylum seekers have experiences of detention and homelessness, among other systemic challenges in the societies where immigrants and asylum seekers are racialized and excluded (Green, 2019; Greer, 2013; Pascual, 2020). In general, precarity and uncertainty of an asylum seeker's temporary status and minimal social support services (if any) are standard across Western countries, allowing for comparisons (ECRE, 2020; Rymer, 2018).

Asylum seekers and service providers face deteriorating welfare efforts in industrialized countries coupled with the worsening political climate for immigrants in the

United States and in the West due to racist ultrapopulism, the post-9/11 environment, and the 2007 economic crisis (Dominelli & Ioakimidis, 2016; Green, 2019). Restrictions placed on movements of people caused by the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly will worsen the already problematic protection systems for asylum seekers.

Seeking protection is an unnecessarily lengthy process. Many asylum seekers wait for years for a decision on their asylum applications. In the United States, both the affirmative (USCIS) and defensive (EOIR) asylum systems have extensive backlogs, with about 400,000 affirmative cases pending in 2020 and almost 500,000 defensive cases pending (Office of the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman, 2020). Furthermore, RSD is still an “asylum lottery” in the sense that people’s chances of getting a type of protection and status vary dramatically across the United States and European countries (see ECRE, 2020; or, for the U.S., Ramji-Nogales et al., 2011). The extensive oppressive policies that shape asylum seekers’ trajectories, especially regarding entry and RDS, are highly legalized and subject to judges’ discretion and attitudes (de Boer & Zieck, 2020).

### **Access to Higher Education: Exclusion and Unrecognition of Asylum Seekers**

Based on 2016–2018 data, the affirmative asylees (USCIS provides detailed information on this category only) tended to be young, with over 60% of all asylees between 18 and 44 years of age; another third of this population were children below 18 years of age. The population had a 50–50 gender distribution (Mossaad, 2019). Thus, education, including higher education, is a salient human right that this population can claim.

Historically, civil society has stepped in to provide limited social services to this population, which was excluded from the central and local governments’ welfare provisions. As part of the civil society, HEIs took an increasingly active role in, at the least, signaling the challenges faced by this population and indicating ways in which migrants in general, and asylum seekers in particular, can more effectively integrate into host countries. Motivations of HEIs in enabling access of asylum seekers to HE include moral and ethical obligations to the society, research and documentation mission, and

visibility as experts in the field, as well as the role of HEIs in preventing marginalization of students and promoting integration while combating downward mobility and deskilling of this population (Jungblut et al., 2020; Lenette, 2016; Nayton et al., 2019; Toker, 2020; Vaarala et al., 2017).

Recognition and inclusion of asylum seekers in HEIs critically depend on their access to HEIs, which is the focus of our analysis. Once inside the HEI, students with asylum-seeking backgrounds face challenges that are mostly similar to those of other language minorities, including academic language acquisition, acculturation, and academic success and retention, with a lot of research and knowledge existing in these areas (see, for example, Hos, 2020; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). Of course, migration-related trauma continues to affect students’ ability to continue their studies and graduate, particularly in the absence of proper access to mental health care and other support services, and the ambiguity of rights as constrained by immigration status/status recognition creates added challenges for this population. Two critical issues linked to status recognition as a necessary step in accessing HE include unrecognized status (with many asylum seekers, although being *de facto* refugees and in the U.S.—fulfilling the criteria for asylum—actually not having their status recognized) and misrecognized status (due to administrative regulations, placing asylum seekers in the category of international students, which precludes them from accessing specific resources).

Our review of the literature indicated that research on the inclusion of asylum seekers in HE is naturally more extensive in the discipline of education, with Europe and Australia leading in their special attention to asylum seekers. Australian researchers have sounded alarms about the treatment of asylum seekers there, including unrecognition and lack of support and access to HE (in contrast to some European countries), with a sizable body of knowledge coming from this country (see, for example, Baker, 2019; Baker, Irwin, & Freeman, 2020; Baker, Ramsay, et al., 2018; Dunwoodie et al., 2020; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Sheikh et al., 2019; White, 2017).

With more progressive policies in Germany and the United Kingdom’s Scotland, European countries have been engaged in bottom-up approaches to include asylum

seekers in HE. In these countries, for example, universities and local governments, rather than central governments, have been developing targeted initiatives to recognize asylum seekers and offer specific academic language programs, college preparatory courses on campus and online, and alternative admission policies with testing competencies in the absence of prior education documentation. They also have developed close partnerships with nonprofit organizations to provide comprehensive supports and services as part of the package to promote access and success of asylum seekers in HE (for specific initiatives and lessons, see Bacher et al., 2020; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Jungblut et al., 2020; Unangst, 2019).

There is scant research from the United States on the access of asylum seekers to HE. A recent analysis by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, the Institute of International Education, and UARRM of emerging initiatives in the United States that reach out and include refugees in HE pointed at many gaps in HEI policies and overall efforts. This analysis noted that the nascent organized outreach efforts targeted mostly resettled refugees and other refugees with more stable immigration statuses while excluding or not mentioning asylum seekers and their unique challenges (see, for example, interconnected research and reports, AACRAO, 2019; Institute of International Education, 2016; Streitwieser, Duffy-Jaeger, & Roche, 2020; Streitwieser, Loo, et al., 2018; Streitwieser, Roche, et al., 2018).

### **Asylum Seekers Accessing HE in Western Countries: Common Challenges and Good Practices**

Issues of recognition and inclusion of asylum seekers in HE have been recently discussed and researched in the fields of education, higher education, and educational psychology, mainly in Europe and Australia. The European Union and some local governments have, with academics' help, produced reports on existing policies and issues. Most of the existing literature on the topic is thus limited to reports and white papers, pointing to the responsibility of HEIs in producing more scholarship in this field. Our review of the existing literature uncovered several major themes that summarized (1) socioeconomic challenges and barriers re-

lated to specific and unique circumstances asylum seekers face in accessing HE, such as poverty, issues with previous education and documentation, language barriers, and mental health challenges; (2) institutional and structural barriers related to government policies and stances and HEI policies; and (3) lessons learned from good practices and recommendations to tackle these challenges. In most of the literature, asylum seekers were noted as a distinct subgroup of refugees, though several studies focused exclusively on asylum seekers.

### **Socioeconomic Challenges**

Poverty is a significant challenge for asylum seekers in general. For asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, poverty is compounded due to lower employment rates because of lack of work authorization for many, ineligibility for most welfare benefits, and low language proficiency (McKenzie et al., 2019; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). In Australia, asylum seekers often live in private housing and have to address housing issues without assistance from agencies, or are housed in poor quality housing and often risk homelessness (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2020). Food insecurity, child care expenses, and transportation costs were other issues closely tied to poverty in Australia and Switzerland (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Hartley et al., 2018; Sontag, 2018).

In Europe, refugees and asylum seekers are often unable to access their prior education records and documents from their home countries. Also, it was challenging to obtain the educational credentials required for university admission purposes, often due to interrupted education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Jungblut, 2017; McKenzie et al., 2019; Sontag, 2018; Stevenson & Baker, 2018; Toker, 2020). The same high school diploma is treated differently in France, Germany, and Switzerland. Although the all-European Lisbon Recognition Convention recognizes refugees and asylum seekers' prior education, the provision has not yet been ratified or reflected in the national policies of 24 European countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Sontag, 2018). Furthermore, low proficiency in the host country's language prevented many asylum seekers from continuing their education in host countries, also leading to challenges with employment as well as poverty and overall isolation and marginal-

ization (Jungblut, 2017; Hartley et al., 2018; McKenzie et al., 2019; Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

The arduous and dangerous transits across the world and experiences of previous trauma and ongoing chronic stress related to the journey itself, individual and collective loss, and the liminality of the asylum procedure profoundly affect the physical and mental health of asylum seekers (Cohen et al., 2019; Eisold, 2019; Taylor et al., 2020). Asylum seekers accrued acute and often prolonged traumatic experiences before arrival, such as torture, violence, persecution, migration-related abusive incidents, and loss of family or community. These traumas were compounded by traumatic shocks on arrival, including family separation, detention, repeated traumatic interrogations, and the threat of denial of protection and deportation. All of these experiences created layers of traumatic impact and added to the challenges presented by poverty, in turn affecting asylum seekers' overall mental health and ability to function in society, with distinct implications for their learning abilities (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Hartley et al., 2018; McKenzie et al., 2019; Nayton et al., 2019; Sontag, 2018; Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

Structural and individual constraints also place drastic limits on access to mental health care. Both in Europe and the United States, asylum seekers have access only to basic healthcare, with mental health treatment beyond reach for most. The protracted trauma and complex emotional and psychological stress affect asylum seekers' ability to make use of even the minimal social and cultural capital available to them. This lack of access further impedes their proper use of information on HEI admission policies and existing financial support, as well as the capitalization of their prior education as an asset when seeking admission into a HEI (Sontag, 2018).

### **Institutional and Structural Challenges and Barriers**

Within the current global context, governmental policies are rarely perceived as welcoming of asylum seekers and refugees. Studies reviewed identified a shared government hostility toward asylum seekers, with minor variations between countries. In Australia, government policies exclude asylum seekers from entitlements to free English classes and social benefits, fur-

ther preventing them from accessing HE. Asylum seekers in detention and those with bridging visas were not allowed to access HE (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Dunwoodie et al., 2020; Hartley et al., 2018). Changing rules and volatile immigration policies add to stress and confusion; simultaneously, overall government policies further contribute to dehumanizing asylum seekers. Examples include selective provisions that demand disclosing personal financial status or other personal information and subjecting asylum seekers to detention, deportation, and lengthy procedures that serve to punish and deter (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Bosworth & Vannier, 2020; Hartley et al., 2018; Sontag, 2018).

In many European countries and Australia, asylum seekers have different and significantly reduced rights to HE compared to citizens, except in a few countries that include asylum seekers as a special minority group (most notably in Germany and Scotland). First, in most countries, policies do not mention asylum seekers or intentionally exclude them from HE through outright bans or restricted mobility and residency rights (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Jungblut, 2017; Sontag, 2018; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Streitwieser, Duffy Jaeger, & Roche, 2020), creating a general barrier to access, making educational systems in Europe and Australia unresponsive to the needs of asylum seekers. A majority of countries in the European Union lack specific policies despite the large influx of asylum seekers in the region over the last decade (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Jungblut, 2017; Vaarala et al., 2017). Second, a general lack of flexibility in admissions policies, schedules, and curricula to accommodate asylum seekers' unique needs was reported in Australia and some European countries (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Toker, 2020; Vaarala et al., 2017).

Third, the reluctance of prospective students to disclose their temporary asylum-seeking status, and the lack of knowledge about this status, including unrecognition or misrecognition of asylum seekers in HEI policies, makes it difficult to meet asylum seekers' needs (Hartley et al., 2018; Sheikh et al., 2019; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Vaarala et al., 2017). Fourth, the complex paths to HE and the specific delivery of admission services, from online applications and degree and course choices to registra-

tion and separation of financial assistance service from admissions and fee payments, present a barrier for asylum seekers with lower host country language proficiency. They are new to these systems and are not provided guidance usually available to other students through families, secondary schools, and counselors (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Jungblut, 2017; Hartley et al., 2018; Stevenson & Willott, 2009; Vaarala et al., 2017). Rarely do HEIs coordinate services with local social service providers or governments, as these systems have different goals (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Hartley et al., 2018; Sontag, 2018; Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

Fifth, and the most significant barrier, is the absence of funding for HE for asylum seekers. In Europe and Australia (and in the U.S., though data is lacking) asylum seekers often have to pay higher international student tuition rates due to their temporary status and the lack of specific policies at institutions (Hartley et al., 2018; McKenzie et al., 2019; Nayton et al., 2019; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Streitwieser, Loo, et al., 2018). Many asylum seekers cannot afford the high cost of academic language preparation or standardized test fees such as English tests (IELTS and TOEFL; Jungblut, 2017; McKenzie et al., 2019; Nayton et al., 2019; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Streitwieser, Loo, et al., 2018).

Because of the specific types of visas asylum seekers hold in Europe and Australia, student loans are generally not accessible (Nayton et al., 2019; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). In some countries, asylum seekers are severely limited in their work options and rights to welfare income supports, with these benefits not supporting HE aspirations and affecting their already dire financial situations and access to education (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Hartley et al., 2018; Jungblut, 2017; Sontag, 2018).

### Good Practices and Recommendations

The targeted initiatives developed by local governments and HEIs to address asylum seekers' needs in accessing HE offer a few lessons and promising practices for what worked, informing the following recommendations. One overarching refrain in many studies was the need for a comprehensive approach to circumstantial and structural institutional barriers and the challenges that asylum seekers face. Specifically, to make HEIs more responsive

to the needs of asylum seekers, the literature suggested a comprehensive program approach that includes adopting an institutional policy framework; recognizing the diversity and specific barriers for asylum seekers; building links between universities, community organizations, and asylum seekers; advocating for asylum policy changes by forming broader coalitions; ensuring universal access to culturally appropriate health and mental health counseling and treatment; and hiring dedicated staff at universities to ensure admission, retention, and employment outcomes for asylum seekers (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Sontag, 2018; Unangst, 2019). One study found that it was necessary to develop greater collaboration between university departments for language, financial, and preparation provisions for asylum seekers (McKenzie et al., 2019).

Due to the overall context of (mostly) hostile, increasingly restrictive government policies toward asylum seekers, it was suggested that asylum seekers' rights and protections be expanded through university-based macrolevel policies. These policies include expanding research to highlight violations, advocating through coalitions across universities, and engaging community organizations and refugees for policy change (e.g., for granting permanent visas to asylum seekers, addressing the backlog of asylum applications, and ensuring access to social supports available to all citizens; Jungblut, 2017; Hartley et al., 2018; McKenzie et al., 2019; Vaarala et al., 2017).

In addition to universities and community organizations, direct engagement of people with lived experience to influence policy and practice was seen as paramount (Fleay et al., 2019; Hartley et al., 2018). It was recommended that questions about financial situation and immigration status be avoided to respect students' confidentiality and humanity. Finally, staff need training on the challenges faced by asylum seekers, and cotraining of both refugees and educators is required to collaborate on streamlining college applications and offering alternative entryways and tailored and wraparound support services (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Hartley et al., 2018).

Six E.U. countries explicitly monitor asylum seekers' and refugees' integration into HE. For example, in a bottom-up approach, universities and asylum seekers organized to facilitate policy reforms in Germany,



where a point agency (DAAD) now monitors the implementation of asylum seeker integration into HE (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Fleay et al., 2019). Furthermore, researchers in Europe and Australia worked with their governments and local social service providers to collect data, develop reports, and eventually advance policies that specifically address the lack of information and guidance on HE for asylum seekers. These policies included recognition, recognition of qualifications and prior education, more access to higher level language preparation, and financing through special scholarships and bursaries for asylum seekers (Hartley et al., 2018; Jungblut, 2017; Vaarala et al., 2017).

Due to the precarious financial situations of asylum seekers, it was acknowledged as essential to fund scholarships that covered both study and living expenses through a diversified mix of philanthropic funds, alumni and other donations, staff donation schemes, universities' match funds, repurposed other scholarships funds, and central university and faculty funds (Hartley et al., 2018; Jungblut, 2017). Several universities already provided full scholarships for asylum seekers with or without a stipend for living expenses in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008; Hartley et al., 2018; McKenzie et al., 2019; Streitwieser, Loo, et al., 2018).

### **Case Application: The Resettled Students Practicum**

In 2017, with the support of the Social Innovation Initiative at a major private U.S. university in a large metropolitan city, a group of undergraduate students from the departments of anthropology, political science, and business were selected to participate in a year-long practicum initiative to find innovative ways to tackle challenges of students with forced migration backgrounds. Several resettled students and their allies formed the group that met biweekly during the academic year. They formulated the goals of their practicum as follows: to raise awareness of the current challenges affecting students with forced migration backgrounds among university students, faculty, and administration; to establish a platform to engage their HEI in developing innovative solutions to identified gaps; and to provide the data needed to inform policy changes and support best practices.

During the second semester of the initiative, researchers and practitioners, including the authors of this essay (a professor and two doctoral students), as well as an MSW student, joined the practicum. As the discussion expanded beyond the HEI to asylum seekers in the city, the nascent network emerging from this initiative expanded to include representatives from community-based groups of Venezuelans and LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

Over the next 2 years, this group identified specific system loops and associated challenges, as well as existing resources; further, it expanded its membership to include more students and community partners, thus ensuring the continuity of this initiative. The Resettled Students Practicum made two notable achievements: (1) the storytelling project that engaged Theater students and students with an asylum-seeking or refugee background in developing three collective narratives focusing on challenges faced by students with lived experiences of forced migration in HEIs and (2) the successful advocacy efforts on expanding health insurance for international students, to cover students with a forced migration background: Using one of the stories developed, students met with several high-level administrators, making them aware of the lack of health coverage for migrant students through existing options. In response to their diligent advocacy, the university expanded current options to provide coverage for all international students—including asylum seekers and refugees.

The group engaged with student clubs across the university to organize events to distribute information and raise awareness. Several members also conducted a literature review on challenges for asylum seekers in accessing and navigating HE, collected data through a pilot survey on asylum seekers' access to HE, and shared resources among students and communities (information, access to educational events, etc.). Currently, the practicum functions as an interdisciplinary and community-grounded advisory group. A series of interviews and focus groups with students and administration is planned to identify needs and gaps in information and services as well as any successes and good practices inside the university.

The online pilot survey was translated into three additional languages and distributed among university students and commu-

nities, targeting asylum seekers who are current students and those who planned to enroll in HEI soon. There were 126 eligible responses. The survey results could be categorized under two core domains. The first focused on the importance of HE for asylum seekers (half of the 126 respondents expressed a desire to go to college or university in order to become self-sufficient or improve their financial situation, to be “useful” to society, to get back to their profession or get a profession, to further their education and improve their English skills). The second domain identified obstacles and challenges with accessing HE, such as lack of financial support, unstable employment to finance education, limited access to information about HE and educational opportunities, low English proficiency, time constraints, and lack of other resources such as childcare. The findings of the pilot survey align with the findings of the literature reviewed earlier in this essay regarding current challenges for student asylum seekers in accessing HE while adding a new component on barriers in considering HE by asylum seekers in a metropolitan city in the United States.

While on pause due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2021, the information events and campaigns will be continued through student clubs and other university events to raise awareness of the challenges identified in the literature and gathered from advisory group members, including students from asylum-seeking backgrounds and asylum seekers in the community.

Eventually, by seeking and developing innovative solutions to the complex problems identified, the group hopes to change the discourse on asylum seekers in private universities, shifting from otherization, unrecognition, and exclusion, and transforming HEIs into safe and brave spaces that are conducive to inclusion and recognition. Survey data and additional qualitative findings will be used to support inclusive and innovative platforms for teaching and advocacy for asylum seekers across disciplines, starting with our university.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This review aimed to scope the existing literature, identify challenges asylum seekers face in accessing HE in their Western host countries, summarize good practices and recommendations that can be adapted in

the U.S. context, and describe an initiative at a large private university that started to tackle these issues. It is the ongoing work generated by people with lived experiences of forced migration, currently enrolled in HEIs in the United States, that drove the analysis we presented here, aiming to engage scholars, students, and practitioners, as well as legal, health care, and higher education administration in the United States in a critical conversation on the right to education as a human right for all. The scarcity of research on this topic speaks to the need and responsibility of scholars and practitioners to reframe their research agendas and include the voices of asylum seekers in HEIs in the United States to develop evidence-based policies and programs that address the identified challenges. One starting point we recommend is a concerted effort engaging all relevant stakeholders listed above toward the recognition and inclusion of asylum seekers as a distinct and growing population of displaced persons in the United States in research design, discussions, and policy documents. As we learned from the Resettled Students Practicum initiative, when students are engaged in documenting their challenges and participate in research to provide evidence on current obstacles and best practices, the collective results of such work are successful and can improve access and participation of students with a forced migration background in all activities at the university level. Furthermore, this work could better inform curriculum development for specific fields of study (such as legal studies, social work, education, and entrepreneurship) to equip frontline professionals to work toward developing programs and policies that promote the rights of asylum seekers, particularly the right to education as an important factor in ensuring effective and full integration of this population in their host countries. As one of the students in the Resettled Students Practicum initiative shared with us, there is an acute need for a better understanding of forced migration and of the responsibilities of higher education institutions, particularly in relation to the complexities of asylum processes and the type of support needed. In her own recollection, although universities are eager to provide mental health support to student asylum seekers or refugees (such services often being the only ones offered to them), they rarely address the complex causation of trauma, leaving students to deal with

legal, financial, and social challenges on their own. Using participatory approaches and working across disciplines to develop training for university employees—from admission to financial services to counseling and mental health—that is anchored in the actual experiences of students who are asylum seekers, could effectively address the institutional barriers that are presented in the literature and identified by the students in the case example provided.

The following recommendations shared across studies can guide U.S. research to improve higher education and social work research and interdisciplinary policies and practice: Ensure that asylum seekers are recognized as a unique group in society and HEIs, provide information and guidance on HE, and provide targeted scholarships and fee waivers; work closely with specialist refugee support organizations and asylum seekers' community groups to build capacity among admissions and other staff at HEIs; provide alternative admission routes to formal HE entry qualifications; engage people with lived experience of seeking asylum to inform related policy and practice in HE; appoint a dedicated staff member to assist students from asylum-seeking backgrounds; train all frontline staff on issues relevant to asylum seekers; and provide specific mental health and counseling services in communities and HEIs. Social work and other frontline professional education should prepare students to seek and work

with this particular population and provide interdisciplinary learning opportunities, significantly increasing legal and educational systems' knowledge and skills.

As evidenced by this article, although research on asylum seekers worldwide is limited and inconsistent, data are even more scarce on this topic in the United States. Better research is needed to understand the unique needs and challenges of potential students with asylum-seeking backgrounds in accessing HE, especially in the United States. As HEIs play a central role in integration strategies at the global level, with the ongoing implementation of the two global compacts on migration and refugees (United Nations General Assembly, 2018; UNHCR, 2018), and at the regional level (the E.U. and U.S. emerging best practices and solutions mentioned in this essay), it is imperative that we rethink HEI roles in addressing forced migration and contributing to the integration of refugees, applying evidence-informed lenses to reframe these roles. Emerging networks, partnerships, and collaborations between asylum seekers, university admissions counselors, student financial services, and mental health counselors, as well as faculty, the larger student population, and activist groups in HEIs, are an important vehicle for transforming HEIs into inclusive, safe, and brave spaces, engaged with the challenges of forced migration, and actively participating in developing solutions to these challenges.



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