
How socially inclusive are our universities to refugees? Policies and practices of two universities in Norway

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Introduction

- Host countries have stressed the importance of effective integration of refugees, with main focus on participation in the labour market.
- Refugee higher education is on the other hand marginalised (Abamosa et al. 2020).
- Higher education institutions can play positive roles in mainstreaming refugee higher education (Lenette, 2016). Against this backdrop, I want to address two questions:
 - What concrete measures do universities take, or lack thereof, to facilitate social inclusion of refugees into higher education in Norway?
 - - How can these measures be interpreted through social inclusion theory?

Refugees in Norway

- granted protection after applying for asylum
 - granted residence permit on other grounds after applying for asylum
 - quota refugees: resettled from other areas in cooperation with UNHCR
 - family members of all of these
- www.udi.no

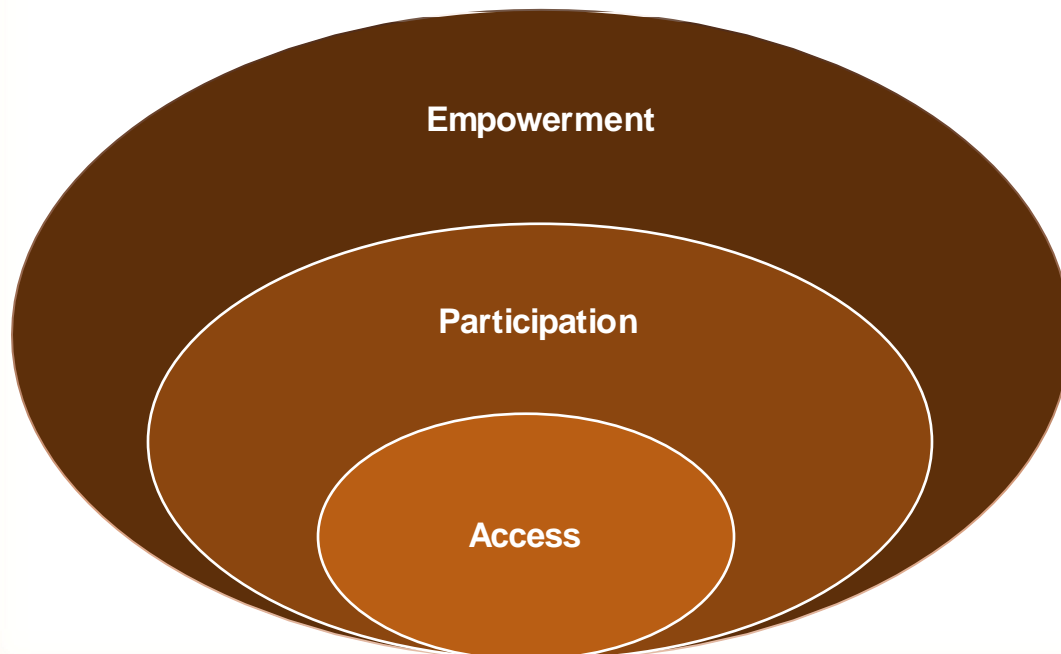
Previous studies on the roles of HEIs

- The existing literature on this topic is scant albeit emerging particularly post the 2015 refugee crisis. Some examples of the roles include
 - assisting refugees on the admission process
 - developing adapted admission processes
 - providing information on study programmes
 - recognition of prior learning
 - providing language courses
 - waiving of tuition fees
 - preparatory academic programmes and bridging courses
 - peer and academic mentoring
 - psychological support to refugees...

- Germany (Streitwieser & Brück, 2018), France (Goastellec, 2018), Belgium (Jungblut et al., 2020), Austria (Kontowski & Leitsbeger, 2018)

Theoretical framework: Social inclusion theory

- Virtually all of the initiatives discussed above are related to the **access** dimension of *social inclusion* theory. [..."break down barriers that prevent full participation"...(Caidi and Allard (2005, p. 312)]
- Social inclusion may be understood through three dimensions: access, participation, and empowerment (Gidley et al., 2010)



Dimensions of social inclusion (Gidley et al. 2010)

Access – neoliberal principles with focus on human capital for economic competition.

Participation – social justice with the aim of equity and fairness for all.

Empowerment – human potential principles with the goal of empowering people to realise their potential by addressing issues of power and dominant cultural issues.

Methodology

- Qualitative exploratory research design
- Two public universities were selected purposively
- Semi-structured face- to- face interview with two experts at the universities (average length 109 minutes) + document analysis.
- Thematic analysis of the data set following the procedures developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).



Documents considered

UiO

- Action plan for equality, gender balance, and diversity 2018-2020
- Strategy 2020
- Annual plan 2020-2021
- Equality report for 2017

UiB

- Action plan for internationalisation 2016-2022
- Diversity and inclusion action plan 2017-2020
- Action plan for equality 2012-2015
- Strategy 2019-2022

Findings

Facilitators

- Norwegian language courses for refugees (well established practice at UiB)
- Academic Dugnad (UiO's initiative but gradually encompassed many HEIs)
- Cooperation with other organizations [though not strategic in most cases]

Constraints

- Dearth of refugee social inclusion policy in strategic plans at institutional level
- Lack of bridging programmes for refugees
- Refugees as invisible group of students
- Lack of English language courses for refugees

Discussion

- Most of the efforts are mostly ad hoc in the sense that they remain marginal activities of the universities or have been discontinued since.
- The absence of refugee social inclusion policy at institutional level can be an indication of how non-systemic social inclusion of refugees into higher education is.
- The universities do not have a complete approach even to the narrowest dimension of social inclusion, the *access* dimension [E.g. absence of the bridging/preparatory programmes].
- Few good experiences at the universities may constitute social inclusion to some extent (access). [E.g. offering the Norwegian language courses to refugees is a good example]; an
- Similarly, peer mentoring programme and cooperation of universities with other organisations can also be indications of the presence of flavour of participation dimension of social inclusion.

Conclusion



- Norwegian language course, Academic Dugnad, and cooperation with different organisations are the main measures the universities have taken in relation to refugees in general (and that of higher education in particular).
- With the exception of provision of the Norwegian language training which falls under the access dimension of social inclusion, other measures the universities have taken in relation to refugees have phased out or are not strategic in nature. This indicates that the universities could have done much more in realising the social inclusion of refugees by focusing on access, participation, and empowerment principles in a comprehensive way.

Recommendations

Universities

- Refugee social inclusion policy at institutional level
- Opening dedicated centers with durable initiatives
- Activities such as bridging programmes incorporating language courses, participatory decision making on issues concerning refugees, refugees' cultural days, acculturation programmes...

The government/ state

- Include social inclusion discourse in integration and higher education policies at national level
- Fund the universities to realise the access, participation, and empowerment of refugees in sustainable ways.



Thank you for your attention!



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