

This file has been downloaded from Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences' Open Research Archive, <http://brage.bibsys.no/inn/>

The article has been peer-reviewed, but does not include the publisher's layout, page numbers and proof-corrections

Citation for the published paper:

[Abamosa, Juhar Yasin. (2023). Social inclusion of refugees is more than granting access to a university: a brief message to academic leaders in host countries. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*. 27(3), 114-119]

[DOI: 10.1080/13603108.2023.2167017]

The social inclusion of refugees is more than granting access to a university: A brief message to academic leaders in host countries.

Juhar Yasin Abamosa
juhar.abamosa@inn.no

Abstract

The unprecedented number of displaced people in the world has led to many challenges for refugees, including the interruption of their academic careers. This, coupled with anti-refugee rhetoric and strict immigration and integration policies in host countries, has exacerbated the exclusion of refugees from academia. Higher education institutions have special responsibilities to realise the social inclusion of minorities, including refugees. While the entire academic community can play a role, the onus is primarily on academic leaders such as chancellors, rectors, deans, and heads of departments, and their deputies to create a genuinely inclusive academic environment. These key figures should at least realise that granting access is only one step in realising the social inclusion of refugees into higher education. In this commentary, I highlight some actions academic leaders can take to facilitate the social inclusion of refugees into academia.

Keywords: academic leaders, higher education, refugees, social inclusion

Introduction

Higher education has an important role to play in helping a society overcome a history of discrimination and exclusion with regard to particular group [such as refugees] (Alger 2018, 65).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there were over 82 million forcibly displaced people in the world by the end of 2020 (United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2021). Although most of these displaced people live in areas near their countries of origin, the number and political influence of refugees and immigrants arriving in Western countries is not insignificant (Jetten and Esses 2018). While a few countries have opened their borders to accommodate refugees, others—spearheaded by right-wing political parties—remain sceptical about taking in ‘the Others’ with distinct socio-cultural backgrounds (Ratković 2017). Refugees who are already present in host nations are also facing stricter immigration and integration policies in the form of lengthy procedures and complex language and social studies tests to qualify for permanent residence or citizenship (Hodson 2020).

While higher education institutions are not immune to wider immigration and integration policies or other forces that create and sustain inequalities in host countries (Mohamed and Beagan 2019), they can circumvent restrictive and anti-refugee policies to devise programmes and initiatives aimed at the social inclusion of refugees into higher education (Stevenson and Baker 2018). For instance, although there are no accurate statistics on the number of refugees

attending higher education in the UK because many universities do not collect data on refugee status, it is estimated that universities in England alone enrolled around 3,200 refugees in 5 years from 2013/2014 to 2017/2018 (Lambrechts 2020). In Germany, it is estimated that more than 30,000 refugees enrolled in higher education between 2016 and 2020 (Fourier 2020; Unangst 2019). While these figures are commendable, access alone is not enough. Moreover, it is not always easy to genuinely include refugees into higher education for various reasons, including the existence of prejudiced and racist academics and other powerful actors who may thwart policies and decisions aimed at the social inclusion of refugees into academia (Bhopal 2022). Against this background, in this brief commentary, I focus on the role academic leaders can play in realising the social inclusion of refugees as both students and faculty in academia by addressing a question: how can academic leaders facilitate the social inclusion of refugees into higher education? In this context, academic leadership may refer to ‘the act of empowering members of the faculty and staff by working with them collegially to achieve common goals, build a community of scholars, and sustain a high level of morale’ (Gmelch and Buller 2015, 43). Chancellors, rectors, vice-chancellors, faculty deans, vice deans, and department heads are among the key figures who assume academic leadership in higher education institutions.

Where to begin?

It may prove difficult to realise the social inclusion of refugees into higher education without having a clear picture of what social inclusion entails. Done and Andrews (2020) report that the rhetoric of inclusion has become ‘a routine incontestable feature of social and education policy discourse such that inclusion may end up meaning everything and nothing at the same time’ (454). In this commentary, social inclusion refers to the process of breaking down the barriers that prevent refugees’ access to, participation, and empowerment in higher education (Caidi and Allard 2005; Dobson, Agrusti, and Pinto 2021; Gidley et al. 2010). Social inclusion is thus more than access to higher education; hence, any policy or practice aimed at the social inclusion of refugees should encompass the participation and empowerment aspects of social inclusion.

The access aspect relates to increasing the enrolment rate in higher education primarily to meet the human capital demand in the labour market (Gidley et al. 2010; Basit 2014). It is grounded in the neoliberal ideology of competition and fails to account for the role that power imbalances play in creating and sustaining social inequalities (Kilpatrick and Johns 2014; Raaper and Olssen 2016). The participation dimension is ‘a more inclusive interpretation of social inclusion’ based on social justice principles (Gidley et al. 2010, 133). In this sense, social inclusion is about human and democratic rights, dignity, equal opportunity, and fairness for all.

Economic interests are not irrelevant, but the primary aim is to enable refugees to participate fully in higher education (Gidley et al. 2010). Finally, the empowerment aspect of social inclusion is about increasing the personal, interpersonal, and political power of refugees so that they can make or influence decisions to improve their situations and achieve self-realisation (Gidley et al. 2010; Licsandru and Cui 2018). Empowerment enhances the capabilities of refugees ‘to function, and to engage, influence, and/or hold accountable the institutions that affect them’ (World Bank 2003, 2). Once a common understanding of social inclusion is established, the next step is to devise ways to implement it.

Not everyone supports the social inclusion of refugees into higher education

Although the majority of those in academia, including higher education students, have a positive attitude—or at least ‘do not show negative attitudes’—towards the social inclusion of refugees into higher education (Soriano and Cala 2019, 9), a few dissidents within and outside of academia can be expected. Some stakeholders may ask such questions as: ‘Why should we bother with the inclusion of “the immigrant others” at all?’, ‘Why not take care of “our own people” first?’ (Woolley 2016). These stakeholders may further argue that ‘national resources should be allocated to the citizens of a country, rather than to foreign refugees’ (Stan 2018, 799). Moreover, in countries where right-wing and anti-immigrant political parties are in government, refugees are discouraged from integrating into local societies through well-defined restrictive policies (Verwiebe et al. 2019). People with all types of political viewpoints work in higher education institutions, including members or sympathisers of anti-immigration political parties. Hence, in daily campus life, it is possible to encounter a conservative anti-refugee rector, dean, head of department, professor, programme coordinator, PhD candidate, or student on campus. This is not problematic in itself. In fact, a diversity of ideas, including political ones, should not be considered a threat but an opportunity for debate and for changing the status quo.

What is infuriating however is the possibility that gatekeepers and other decision makers may bring their political views into their workplaces and influence the decisions, which can have dire consequences for refugees (Webb, Dunwoodie, and Wilkinson 2019). For instance, a head of department affiliated with an anti-immigrant political party could influence all decision-making processes to ensure that no applicant with a refugee background assumes a faculty position or advances in their academic career (see, e.g., Mohamed and Beagan [2019]; Henry and Tator [2012] on how minorities may be deterred from advancing their careers in academia). This could be achieved in many ways, including nominating like-minded people to serve on

committees involved in application review and selections and interview processes. Moreover, such individuals may ignore complaints from refugee applicants (Henry and Tator 2012).

Ways of achieving social inclusion

There are several ways of devising and implementing measures aimed at facilitating the social inclusion of refugees into higher education. Here, however, I focus specifically on four interrelated actions that academic leaders can take to create and nurture a genuinely inclusive academic environment where refugees can feel welcome and thrive.

Action 1: Devising an explicit institutional social inclusion policy

Academic leaders, particularly chancellors or rectors and their deputies, should assess the availability and functionality of inclusion policies at different levels within their institutions and make necessary amendments to accommodate refugees in such policies. Social inclusion can be implemented at various levels and is not necessarily limited to institutional level plans of universities. However, social inclusion activities may be less sustainable if they are not adequately supported at ‘the highest level of university, by articulation in strategic or other high-level university plans’ (Kilpatrick and Johns 2014, 42). Social inclusion policies should address refugees’ access to (recruitment), participation, and empowerment in higher education. As Alger (2018) states, ‘true inclusion goes beyond granting admissions. A truly inclusive institution seeks to create a climate in which [staff] of all backgrounds can participate actively and thrive’ (63). More specifically, social inclusion policies—in addition to highlighting concrete initiatives—should mention refugees as a distinct and legitimate equity group that should be included at all institutional levels. Refugees face unique challenges in both pre-and postflight situations. Thus, it is not fair to treat all people equally, irrespective of their backgrounds, as this can amount to discrimination (Hannah 1999).

Action 2: Talking the walk and walking the talk

Many higher education institutions call for equity and social justice while reinforcing the exclusion of refugees from their premises, thereby contributing to the reproduction of inequalities in society (Abamosa 2021). For example, it is customary to see on vacancy announcements or job portal pages of universities encouraging statements indicating policies of non-discrimination based on age, disability, race, religion or belief, sex, etc. However, racism and discrimination against minorities are well documented in the very same institutions that declare such inclusivity (see, e.g., Bhopal [2022]; Mohamed and Beagan [2019]; Unangst and Alemán [2021]). Therefore, academic leaders should ensure that inclusive policies are genuinely implemented because inclusive practices are what ultimately matter. Refugees are

generally subject to discrimination and racism in different phases of their lives in host countries (Harvey and Mallman 2019). In most cases, these negative practices are subtle, indirect, not overtly violent, but nevertheless destructive in nature (Khawaja et al., 2008). For example, an equally more qualified refugee may be excluded through hidden prejudice. His or her application may be mishandled and his or her complaints may be ignored at the department level (Unangst and Alemán 2021; Rivas-Garrido and Koning 2019). Gatekeepers—where the policies are implemented—play significant role in excluding refugees and other minorities (Mirza 2018; Shizha et al. 2020). Hence, academic leaders should open their doors to hear the voices and complaints of refugees. Moreover, people who misuse their power to discriminate against refugees should be sanctioned to eliminate or reduce such negative practices.

Action 3: Knowing that the opposite of inclusion is not exclusion but indifference

In many higher education institutions, the established organisational culture is tolerant of, or may even reinforce, the exclusion of ‘the Other’. Unangst and Alemán (2021) state,

[some] higher education institutions [are] social institutions [...] in which the discourse of racial and ethnic superiority (racism) and its discursive expression through curricula and meritocracy circulate to limit educational access and opportunity for disenfranchised racial and ethnic minorities including [...] migrant groups (143).

Disrupting such negative norms and practices requires courageous and bold decisions from academic leaders. As mentioned above, much of the racism experienced by refugees is difficult to address through institutional policies (Rollock 2012). Moreover, it may be challenging to micro-manage the actions and decisions of faculty members (Maassen 2003). Therefore, it is important for academic leaders to establish a transparent and functional system aimed at informing and training the academic community on issues related to racism, diversity, and inclusion. However, this is only the first step. What matters most is the practice, which can take the form of siding with and defending the victims of racism and discrimination. Academic leaders should not be indifferent to or deny racism and should not side with the oppressors and blame the victims (Museus et al. 2015). Some academic leaders may have good intentions regarding the social inclusion of refugees in academia. However, intentions alone will not make much difference; leaders must recognise and acknowledge exclusionary and discriminatory practices at their institutions. For instance, Professor David Richardson, the vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia, acknowledges that UK universities perpetuate institutional racism and encourages all university leaders to acknowledge this fact as ‘a first step towards meaningful change’ (Weale 2020).

Action 4: Cherishing real and tangible diversity

Academic leaders should also ensure that the main goal behind the policies and practices aimed at social inclusion of refugees is to cherish real diversity rather than political consumption by practicing tokenism. According to Kanter (1993), tokenism refers to a situation in which minorities may seem to be included but are subjected to intensified performance pressures, social isolation, and stereotyping because of their numerical rarity. In the same vein, Chance (2022) argues that hiring small numbers of minorities to ‘give the appearance of equality instead of true equality and diversity’ (50) is another form of tokenism. Minorities such as refugees, who do not possess the ‘auxiliary characteristics (especially race, sex and ethnicity) that are expected of persons in that position’, may experience tokenism, regardless of their academic caliber (Datta and Bhardwaj, 2015, 200). Studies from the US (see, e.g., Chance [2022]; Niemann [1999]) have found that faculty of colour and those with immigrant backgrounds who have made it into the academy by overcoming other barriers, such as institutional racism, experience racial tokenism. Similarly, Ghosh and Barber (2021) report that ‘racial minorities holding higher education faculty positions face challenges that stunt career progress due to their token status’ (1066). Minorities who are subject to tokenism ‘are never permitted by “insiders” to become full members and may even be rejected’ (Datta and Bhardwaj 2015, 200, emphasis in original). To counter tokenism, academic leaders should create and support an academic culture in which refugee academics are offered opportunities and enabled to participate in decision-making so that they are empowered and become agents of themselves and other minorities (Kanter 1993; Niemann 2016; Kauppinen et al. 2020).

Conclusion

In this commentary, I have suggested how academic leaders can facilitate the social inclusion of refugees into higher education. I have identified the actions academic leaders can take to create a more inclusive academic environment with a particular focus on refugees. Establishing specific social inclusion policies that define refugees as a legitimate equity group in place may be a good starting point. It is almost impossible to find a university with formal exclusionary and racist policies. Virtually all higher learning institutions call for inclusion and diversity. What is missing is commensurate action. Therefore, academic leaders must walk the talk. Moreover, they must fight the discrimination and racism that refugees face and overcome indifference to the negative experiences of this minority group. Finally, academic leaders should empower refugees to become agents of themselves, advocate for other minorities, and make a difference.

References

- Abamosa, J. Y. 2021. "Social inclusion of refugees into higher education: Policies and practices of universities in Norway." *Educational Review*. Advance online production. doi:10.1080/00131911.2021.2009443.
- Alger, Jonathan. 2018. "Access to success – Making campuses both diverse and inclusive." In *Higher education for diversity, social inclusion and community: A democratic imperative*, edited by Sjur Bergan and Ira Harkavy, 63-74. Strasbourg Cedex: Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 2. Council of Europe Publishing
- Basit, Tehmina. 2014. "'I've never known someone like me go to university': class, ethnicity and access to higher education." In *Social inclusion and higher education*, edited by Tehmina Basit and Sally Tomlinson, 173-192. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Bhopal, K. 2022. "Academics of colour in elite universities in the UK and the USA: the 'unspoken system of exclusion'." *Studies in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/03075079.2021.2020746.
- Caidi, N., and D. Allard. 2005. "Social inclusion of newcomers to Canada: An information problem?" *Library and Information Science Research* 27(3): 302-324. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2005.04.003.
- Chance, N. L. 2022. "Resilient leadership: A phenomenological exploration into how Black women in higher education." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 62(1): 44-78. Doi:10.1177/00221678211003000.
- World Bank. 2003. *Social analysis sourcebook: Incorporating social dimensions into Bank-supported projects*. Washington: World Bank Group.
- Datta, S., and G. Bhardwaj. 2015. "Tokenism at workplace: Numbers and beyond." *International Journal of Current Engineering and Technology* 5(1): 199-205.
- Dobson, S., Agrusti, G., and Pinto, M. (2021). "Supporting the inclusion of refugees: policies, theories and actions." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 25(1):1-6. doi:10.1080/13603116.2019.1678804.
- Done, E. J., and M. J. Andrews. 2020. "How inclusion became exclusion: policy, teachers and inclusive education." *Journal of Education Policy* 35(4): 447-464. Doi:10.1080/02680939.2018.1552763.
- Fourier, K. (2020, January 21). *Integrating refugees into German higher education – a holistic approach*. <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/article/integrating-refugees-german-higher-education-holistic-approach>
- Ghosh, D., and K. Barber. 2021. "The gender of multiculturalism: cultural tokenism and the institutional isolation of immigrant women faculty." *Sociological Perspectives*, 64(6): 1063-1080. Doi:10.1177/0731121420981098
- Gidley, J. M., G. P. Hampson, L. Wheeler, and E. Bereded-Samuel. 2010. "From access to success: An Integrated approach to quality higher education informed by social inclusion theory and practice." *Higher Education Policy* 23 (1): 123-147. doi:10.1057/hep.2009.24.
- Gmelch, W., and J. L. Buller. 2015. *Building academic leadership capacity: A Guide to Best Practices*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass A Wiley Brand.
- Harvey, A., and M. Mallman. 2019. "Beyond cultural capital: Understanding the strengths of new migrants within higher education." *Policy Futures in Education*, 17(5): 657-673. Doi:10.1177/1478210318822180.
- Hannah, J. 1999. "Refugee students at college and university: Improving access and support." *International Review of Education* 45(2): 153-167. doi:10.1023/A:1003640924265

- Henry, F., and C. Tator. 2012. "Interviews with racialized faculty members in Canadian universities." *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 44(2):75-99. doi:10.1353/ces.2012.0003.
- Hodson, M. 2020. "“Modern day Trojan Horse?” Analyzing the nexus between Islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiment in the United States." *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 5(2): 267-282. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/islastudj.5.2.0267>.
- Jetten, J., and V. M. Esses. 2018. "The reception of immigrants and refugees in Western countries: The challenge of our time." *Journal of Social Issues* 74(4): 662-673. doi:10.1111/josi.12292.
- Kanter, R. M. 1993. *Men and women of the corporation*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books.
- Kauppinen, M., J. Kainulaine, P. Hökkä, and K. Vähäsantanen. 2020. "Professional agency and its features in supporting teachers' learning during an in-service education programme." *European Journal of Teacher Education* 43(3): 384-404. doi:10.1080/02619768.2020.1746264.
- Khawaja, N. G., K. M. White, R. Schweitzer, and J. Greenslade. 2008. "Difficulties and coping strategies of Sudanese refugees: A qualitative approach." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 45(3): 489-512. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18799645/>.
- Kilpatrick, S., and S. Johns. 2014. "Institutional responses to social inclusion in Australian higher education: responsible citizenship or political pragmatism?" *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 16(2): 27-45. doi:10.5456/WPLL.16.2.27.
- Lambrechts, A. A. 2020. "The super-disadvantaged in higher education: barriers to access for refugee background students in England." *Higher Education* 80: 803-822. doi:10.1007/s10734-020-00515-4.
- Licsandru, T. C., and C.C. Cui. 2018. "Subjective social inclusion: A conceptual critique for socially inclusive marketing." *Journal of Business Research* 82: 330-339 doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.08.036.
- Maassen, Peter. 2003. "Shifts in governance arrangements: An interpretation of the introduction of new management structures in higher education." In *The Higher Education Management Revolution?*, edited by Alberto Amaral, Vincent Lynn Meek, and Ingvild M. Larsen, 31-53. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Mirza, Heidi Safia. 2018. "Black bodies 'Out of Place' in academic spaces: Gender, race, faith and culture in post-race times." In *Dismantling race in higher education: Racism, Whiteness and decolonizing the academy*, edited by Jason Arday, and Heidi Safia Mirza, 175-194. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mohamed, T., and B. Beagan. 2019. "“Strange faces’ in the academy: experiences of racialized and Indigenous faculty in Canadian universities." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 22(3): 338-354. doi:10.1080/13613324.2018.1511532.
- Museus, S. D., M. C. Ledesma, and T. L. Paker. 2015. "Racism and racial equity in higher education." *ASHE Higher Education Report* 42(1): 1-112.
- Niemann, Y. F. 1999. "The making of a token: A case study of stereotype threat, stigma, racism and tokenism in academe." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 20(1): 111-134.
- Niemann, Y. F. 2016. "The social ecology of tokenism in higher education." *Peace Review*, 28(4): 451-459. doi: 10.1080/10402659.2016.1237098.
- Raaper, R., and M. Olssen 2016. "Mark Olssen on neoliberalisation of higher education and academic lives: An interview." *Policy Future in Education* 14(2): 147-163. doi:10.1177/1478210315610992 .
- Ratković, M. 2017. "Migrant crisis and strengthening of the right wing in the European Union." *Megatrend Review* 14(3): 47-60. doi:10.5937/MegRev1703047R.
- Rivas-Garrido, C., and E. A. Koning. 2019. "“We don't want to hear about discrimination”: Evidence slippage and evidence invention in the politics of foreign credential

- recognition in Canada.” *Canadian Public Administration* 62(3): 413-434. doi:10.1111/capa.12340.
- Rollock, N. 2012. “Unspoken rules of engagement: navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25(5): 517-532. doi:10.1080/09518398.2010.543433.
- Shizha, E., A. A., Abdi, S. Wilson-Forsberg, and O. Masakure. 2020. “African immigrant students and postsecondary education in Canada: Higher school teachers and school career counsellors as gatekeepers.” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 52(3): 67-86.
- Soriano, E., and V. C. Cala. 2019. “What attitudes toward refugees do future European teachers have? A comparative analysis between France and Spain.” *Sustainability* 11(11): 3066. doi:10.3390/su11113066.
- Stan, C. 2018. “A life without a shoreline: Tropes of refugee literature in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Go, Went, Gone*.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 54(6): 795-808. doi: 10.1080/17449855.2018.1551272.
- Stevenson, J., and S. Baker. 2018. *Refugees in higher education. Debate, discourse and practice*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Unangst, L. 2019. “Refugees in the German higher education system: implications and recommendations for policy change.” *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* 3(2): 144-166. doi:10.1080/23322969.2019.1643254.
- Unangst, L., and A. M. M. Alemán. 2021. “Coloniality in the German higher education system: Implications for policy and institutional practice.” *Social Inclusion* 9(3): 142-153. doi:10.17645/si.v9i3.4139.
- United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees. 2021. *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2020*. <https://www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020>
- Verwiebe, R., B. Kittle, F. Dellinger, C. Liebhart, D. Schiestl, R. Haindorfer , and B. Liedl. 2019. “Finding your way into employment against all odds? Successful job search of refugees in Austria.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(9): 1401-1318. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1552826.
- Weale, S. 2020. “UK universities perpetuate institutional racism, report says.” *The Guardian*, November 24.
- Webb, S., K. Dunwoodie, and J. Wilkinson. 2019. “Unsettling equity frames in Australian universities to embrace people seeking asylum.” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 38(1): 103-120. doi:10.1080/02601370.2018.1559891.
- Woolley, E. 2016. “How will refugees impact homelessness?” *Canadian Observatory on Homelessness/Homeless Hub*, March 04.