

## Chapter 2

# Navigating Hostile Environments: Refugees' Experiences in Higher Education Institutions in Western Countries

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### ABSTRACT

*Many refugees are motivated to pursue higher education in host countries. However, they face a myriad of challenges in their trajectories in higher education systems. Some of these challenges include absence of alternative pathways, lack of academic language, complex admission procedures, difficulty of getting their qualifications recognised, financial barriers, discrimination, lack of information, and traumatic experiences. Moreover, many Western host countries have become increasingly hostile to refugees; and as a result, some of these countries have introduced restrictive policies to make the host countries as unfavorable as possible to refugees. Higher education institutions are operating in these environments with all the impacts the socio-political contexts might have on them. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to explore experiences of refugees in navigating higher education systems in these hostile environments. Refugees employ various forms of capital such as aspirational, social, and navigational capital to overcome challenges they encounter in higher education institutions.*

### INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of forcibly displaced people reached more than 100 million in 2022 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022a). Even though the vast majority of these people (around 83%) live in so-called Global South countries (UNHCR, 2022b), the arrival of non-European asylum-seekers and refugees<sup>1</sup> in Western countries has put issues related to immigration and refugees high on political agendas in many host countries (Hernes, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, the term refugee may refer to three types of people. First, those who are outside of their countries of nationality and have either been granted protection upon application for asylum on the ground of "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in particular social group or political opinion" (UNHCR, 2010, p. 14). Second, people who have been resettled in third countries from different camps across the world in cooperation with the UNHCR, and finally, people who have been resettled through private sponsorship in various countries such as "Australia, Canada and the United States" (Cerna, 2019, p. 9). Needless to mention, the accompanying family members of all the above groups may be understood as refugees.

The politicisation of refugee issues begins even before the refugees' arrival in Western countries<sup>2</sup>. For example, FitzGerald (2019), in his book titled *Refuge beyond reach. How rich democracies repel asylum seekers*, argues that Western countries pay the countries in the Global South to keep asylum seekers and refugees away from the North. The border wall across the US-Mexico border and the spillover effects of Trump's immigration policies in the US, Australia's migrant boats interception and detention of asylum seekers and refugees, and the toxic politics of migration in many European countries are epitomes of the unwelcoming environments awaiting asylum seekers and refugees (Crawley, 2021; FitzGerald, 2019). In some countries, "refugees and asylum seekers have become political pawns [...] used to chase votes and sell newspapers" (Stevenson & Baker, 2018, p. 23), and even seen as "unwanted" immigrants (Boyd & Ly, 2021, p. 96). Several countries have also tightened their immigration policies some of which have resulted in restrictions on refugees' access to social rights (Hagelund, 2020; Pinson & Arnot, 2010) in a bid to make the host countries "less attractive" to refugees (Parveen, 2020, p. 401).

These situations cannot be decoupled from the wider political contexts in several Western countries. Krastev (2017) argues that the immigration and refugee situations in recent times have led to at least three major events in many European countries. First, the demand for immigration control has led to Britain's referendum on Europe. Second, the "refugee crisis" has brought back "the east-west divide in the EU", and finally, the popularity of right-wing political parties has gain momentum (Krastev, 2017, p. 292). Right-wing political parties in many countries have capitalised on the so-called refugee crisis by proposing anti-refugee sentiments (Davis & Deole, 2017; Gessler & Hunger, 2022). The politicisations of issues related to refugee have impeded refugee resettlement programmes in many Western countries over the last decades (Solf & Rehberg, 2021). According to the UNHCR (2022c), even though the global resettlement needs reached 1.4 million in 2022, only 39,600 refugees were admitted to the destination countries, against 55,680 in 2018. On a country basis, in the US alone, the number of resettled refugees dropped to an all-time low in 2020-2021 with only 15,000 admissions compared with almost 85,000 in 2016 (Spiegel & Mhlanga, 2021). Nonetheless, the number of refugees in Western host countries should not be considered insignificant. For example, between 2015 and 2021, the United States (US), Canada, and the United Kingdom (UK) resettled 209,600, 65,200, and 26,500 refugees respectively (Solf & Rehberg, 2021). In addition to this, millions of asylum seekers arrive in many Western countries to apply for protection. Germany stands out from the European Union countries, if not from Western countries, by hosting more than 1.5 million asylum seekers and refugees since 2014 in absolute terms (Will et al., 2021). Irrespective of their arrival mode – be it

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<sup>2</sup> Western countries are defined as EU member states, Iceland, Norway, Great Britain, Switzerland, Andorra, Liechtenstein, the Vatican State, Monaco, Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand. Non-Western countries are defined as all other countries (Jakobsen, 2023, p. 7).

through resettlement programmes or as asylum seekers – or their numbers, refugees in the Global North countries may encounter a new set of challenges including in higher education systems (Lambrechts, 2020). It is noteworthy that higher education is an integral part of basic human right (Gilchrist, 2018; Crea & McFarland, 2015). Hence, refugees – regardless of their social, political, cultural, and economic background – “deserve to be treated with dignity and respect” and to be given the opportunity to realise their potential through higher education (Morrice, 2022, p. 254; see also Lenette, 2016).

Higher education institutions are, alas, not immune to these restrictive policies and practices (Goastellec, 2020). Unangst & Alemán (2021) argue that higher education institutions can play hindering roles by limiting educational access and opportunity for marginalised racial and ethnic minorities such as refugees in various ways including racism and Eurocentric curricula (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). Universities, as educational institutions, are, after all, in Barber’s (2021) terms, “miniature replicas of society” (p. 976); hence, the political atmosphere and attitudes towards refugees in the society are expected on campuses because political ideas can be pervasive (Madziva & Thondhlana, 2017). In other words, universities can also become threatening or hostile environments to refugees (Murray & Gray, 2023; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Murray, 2022; Sheridan, 2021; Unangst & Alemán, 2021).

The growing, albeit meagre, literature on refugee higher education has highlighted the major challenges refugees face to access higher education. Some of these challenges include the absence of alternative pathways to higher education, insufficient language training, complex admission procedures, difficulty of getting their qualifications recognised, financial barriers, discrimination and demotivation, misinformation and lack of information, and traumatic experiences (Lambrechts, 2020; Crea, 2016; Kondakci et al., 2023; Morrice, 2009, 2013; Hannah, 1999). However, little is known regarding the experiences of refugees within higher education institutions in Western host countries (Unangst & Crea, 2020; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Morrice, 2013). By extension, there is a lacuna in literature on how refugees navigate various systems they may face in higher education institutions (see Mangan & Winter, 2017 for more general experience of refugees in higher education). In particular, the perspectives of refugees directly experiencing intolerance or aggression due to intersection of characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, skin colour, religious beliefs, gender, and migration status have not been researched widely (Murray & Gray, 2023). The purpose of this chapter is to fill this gap in the literature by addressing a question: How do refugees navigate higher education systems in Western countries characterised by hostile environments?

## **BACKGROUND**

...other countries have erected fences and walls, and employ detention centers and armed ships to keep refugees, asylum seekers...from entering their space (Arar et al., 2019, p. xxi).

Refugees in Western countries are defined not as individuals, but collectively “by the fact that they are ‘not one of us,’ and are, therefore, a threat to ‘our way of life’” (Kundnani, 2001, p. 52). More than a decade ago, some years before the so-called “refugee crisis”, Blight et al. (2009) observed that Western host countries were becoming increasingly hostile to refugees, with a variety of restrictive policies, putting (resettled) refugees at high risk of social exclusion. This situation has not improved. In fact, anti-refugee policies and practices, which have long been positions of right-wing political parties (Gale, 2004), have become hallmarks of many mainstream political parties, which previously held a milder positive attitude towards refugees, as mentioned in the introduction (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). To worsen the situation, the mainstream media fuels the hostility towards refugees (Aldamen, 2023; Cooper et al., 2021; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). One of the spillover effects of such unwelcoming environments is social resistance and confrontation in the community in which, among others, the educational system is embedded. In other words, universities are operating in a social context that is “not always supportive of welcoming” refugees (Essomba, 2017, p. 217) or in a hostile environment (Smith et al., 2020). The concept of a hostile environment has its root in the UK’s deliberate policy and attempt to make life as unpleasant as possible for certain groups of immigrants – often referred to as irregular migrants, illegal workers, and bogus asylum seekers – in the country (Murray & Gray, 2023; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019; Webber, 2019; see Gawlewicz & Yiftachel, 2022 for more versions of hostile environments).

Forced migrant students in higher education institutions have been negatively affected by the pervasiveness and accumulation of hostile environment policies. For instance, several universities in the UK have introduced highly restrictive eligibility criteria and avoided provision and promotion of the sanctuary scholarships aimed at refugees and asylum seekers for fear of negative reactions from the authorities who actively promoted hostile environment policies (Murray & Gray, 2023). This is corroborated by another report (Swain, 2018), which, based on the experiences of an expert, states that “many UK universities have been more complicit in the hostile environment than necessary” by, for example, not pushing back the pervasive anti-immigrant and anti-refugee policies and practices (Swain, 2018, para. 18). A study from the US (Bonet, 2018) also indicates that a toxic political environment coupled with an educational system characterised by neoliberal principles of commodification of education has robbed the refugees of the ““bright futures” they hoped to attain in the USA” by excluding them from (higher) education (Bonet, 2018, p. 64).

Another key concept closely related to the hostile environment concept which needs closer attention in the context of refugee higher education is the concept of a threatening environment. A threatening environment is any setting where people from minority background or targets of stereotypes come to “suspect that they could be devalued, stigmatized, or discriminated against” because of a particular or intersection of social identity (Inzlicht et al., 2009, p. 19). Any indication, direct or subtle, that signals that a

distinct group of people are not valued socially, prejudiced, or marginalised on campuses can create a threatening environment in higher education institutions (Inzlicht et al., 2009). The existence of both hostile and threatening environments compound challenges refugees encounter in their academic trajectories, because they must also adjust to new sociocultural environment in their new countries, which can be a stressful process in itself (Santiago et al., 2021).

At the practical level, both hostile and threatening environments can be manifested in the form of everyday discrimination, racism, and microaggressions – the subtle and covert acts and behaviors that might appear insignificant or harmless. However, these can harm the mental well-being of refugees and result in their exclusion from participation in activities that matter most such as group work, class activities, and further studies (Wong et al., 2014). In some cases, as a study from Austria and Germany (Heinemann, 2017) indicates, refugees are trained to be submissive and docile in host countries rather than pursuing their own goals. In Norway, the integration practices (and policies) favour placement of refugees in the labour market, mostly positions which are not wanted by people from non-refugee backgrounds, rather than their transition into higher education (Abamosa, 2023). Similarly, Koyama (2015) indicates that refugees in the US are subject to marginalisation in the form of holding low-wage positions due to the government policies, which discourage refugees' participation in adequate language training and formal education. In other words, refugees are encouraged to transition into the labour market, often marginal employment, as soon as possible after their arrival. This makes the policy itself a barrier to educational participation of many refugees (Perry & Mallozzi, 2017; see also Koehler & Schneider, 2019 for another context). Stewart and Mulvey (2024) argue that refugees who experience all these forms of racism, ignorance, marginalisation, inequality, and prejudice at both institutional and personal levels feel powerless and tend to accept offers provided to them, often, in the absence of alternative opportunities. However, other scholars (e.g., McDiarmid et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2020; McBrien, 2005) contend that refugees have the power and strategies to challenge oppressive systems and even use their negative experiences as motivation to achieve their goals. This chapter deals precisely with this issue in more detail through the lens of the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005).

## **THEMATIC SYNTHESIS**

This chapter is based on reviews of previous studies using a thematic synthesis, which is a specific approach to synthesis of findings of qualitative research (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Caskurlu et al. (2021) – who used thematic synthesis to explore the experiences of students' online learning experiences by considering 35 studies – note that thematic synthesis is different from narrative reviews because the former explicitly treats reported qualitative findings as data for analysis. Thomas and Harden (2008) propose three stages – which can

overlap – in conducting thematic synthesis: i) developing line-by-line coding of the findings of primary studies; ii) developing descriptive themes based on the primary codes, and iii) developing of 'analytical' themes based on the descriptive themes.

In this chapter, 31 studies<sup>3</sup> (29 primary studies and 2 articles referred in primary studies) were selected from the total of 269 studies and included for analysis based on the relevance of their findings for the research question the chapters aims to address. The remaining literature was excluded based on three main exclusion criteria: thematic area, geographical coverage (only Western countries), and language (only English). The studies were searched using key phrases such as “refugee education”, “refugee higher education”, “refugee education in Western countries”, “challenges refugees face in higher education”, “refugee higher education opportunities”, “inclusion/ integration of refugees in higher education”, “refugees’ resources”, “refugees and social capital” and “experiences of refugees in higher education”. Google scholar, IDUNN, ERIC, DOAJ, and JSTOR were the main databases used as a source of the studies. Moreover, reference lists in published articles, books, and a special annotated bibliography (Baker, 2022) were searched to access relevant literature.

Even though the findings of the studies were the main focus area, the included studies were read to understand the context and purposes of the studies. The findings of each of the included literature were extracted and openly coded based on their main message (Cohen et al., 2018). Hence, the findings of the studies were counted as *data* in this chapter (Thomas & Harden, 2008). These primary codes were then categorised into descriptive themes. At this stage, the already developed codes were reduced and condensed to create description of a broad theme. (8 main themes emerged here). Finally, these broad themes were further regrouped to create three main analytical themes: *personal motivation and aspiration as key driving forces to study*, *access to higher education as a beginning of an ordeal for refugees*, and *moving forward no matter what*. Verbatim quotations from the included studies were used under each analytical theme because doing so would be useful to amplify “particular experiences” of the refugees (Thorne, 2020, p. 6).

## COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH FRAMEWORK: AN ESCAPE ROUTE FOR REFUGEES?

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<sup>3</sup> Abamosa (2020); Bajwa et al. (2017); Birtwell et al. (2020); Dryden-Peterson et al. (2017); Dunwoodie et al. (2020); Hannah (1999 cited in Mangan & Winter, 2017); Harris & Marlowe (2011); Hirsch and Maylea (2016); Honneth (1995 cited in Dunwoodie et al., 2020); Kendall & Day (2017); Kochhar-Bryant (2019); Koyama (2015); Lenette (2016); Loo (2021); Major et al. (2013); Mangan & Winter (2017); Miller et al. (2021); Molla (2021); Morrice (2013); Naylor et al. (2021); Perry & Mallozzi (2017); Schneider (2018); Sidhu & Naidoo (2018); Sleijpen et al. (2017); Sontag (2019); Stevenson and Willott (2007); Stevenson and Baker (2018); Streitwieser et al. (2018); Unangst & Crea (2020); Webb et al. (2021); Wilkinson (2018).

Community cultural wealth refers to a combination of various forms of capital<sup>4</sup> used by members of the underrepresented groups to challenge or resist oppressive systems to realise their potentials despite all the challenges they face (Yosso, 2005). Cross and Atinde (2015) argue that people confront and adapt to new situations by using various strategies such as perseverance and experiences of mastering difficult circumstances. These qualities are in turn based on a conscious knowledge that refugees accumulate from the first-hand negative experiences they face due to, for example, racism and discrimination in different majority settings (Sue, 2010). Schools and, by extension, higher education institutions are one of the areas where refugees can, despite or even by virtue of facing difficulties, develop various forms of capital (Barnes et al., 2021). In fact, to survive in hostile environments in which those in power do not care whether the powerless do well or not, it is a necessity for refugees and other disempowered groups to actively engage in understanding the underlying assumptions and practices of the powerful (Sue, 2010). In other words, refugees should not take the protection they receive from their new countries as an end goal because they may be subject to post-settlement overt and covert oppressions in different contexts such as labour market and education (Stewart & Mulvey, 2014). The importance of a combination of forms of capital for refugees is thus unquestionable.

According to Yosso (2005) six forms of capital, which are not mutually exclusive, comprise community cultural wealth. These are: aspirational (the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers), linguistic (the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style), familial capital (cultural knowledge nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition), social capital (networks of people and community resources), navigational capital (skills of maneuvering through social institutions), and resistant capital (knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behaviour that challenges inequality). Boit et al. (2021) argue that community cultural wealth offers insight into multiple forms of capital refugees can have and accumulate in the process of adjusting to their new country.

### **PERSONAL MOTIVATION AND ASPIRATION AS KEY DRIVING FORCES TO STUDY**

In most cases, contrary to the common assumption that blames refugees for failing to access higher education (Koyama, 2015), aspiring refugees are characterised by resilience and ambitions when given opportunities to study (Webb et al., 2021). Indeed, refugees have individual agency – i.e., determination and motivation – to achieve what is valuable to each

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<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, capital may be defined broadly as “accumulated labour [...] which when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or group of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor.” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). According to Bourdieu (1986) capital can take different forms depending on the field or context in which it functions.

of them, including pursuing higher education. For instance, a refugee in Switzerland narrates, "I'm 21 years old, I have many dreams, I want to study and I don't want to lose this energy" (Sontag, 2019, p. 75). Some refugees are motivated to pursue higher education to (re)construct a non-refugee identity and to overcome limitations associated with their refugee situations. Ali, a refugee in Germany, explains "I want to be part of something that is not just for Flüchtlinge (refugees). Everything else is because I am a refugee. The place where I live is a place where Flüchtlinge live. Going to Uni would make me a student again. Not only a Flüchtling" (Schneider, 2018, p. 470). Similarly, another refugee in Germany has to say "It was my dream to do my masters, and I always wanted to do it at a good university in Europe or the US. Of course, I did not want to come here as a refugee. I would have liked to come on a student visa" (Schneider, 2018, p. 471). Hirsch and Maylea (2016) have also shown that some refugees in Australia are determined to persist in education despite the multitude of challenges they encounter with the aim of succeeding in society both as fully engaged citizens and positive contributors to the host country.

#### **ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION AS A BEGINNING OF AN ORDEAL FOR REFUGEES**

Needless to say, accessing higher education is not an end goal in itself for refugees because the challenges they face do not cease to exist in the post-access academic phases. For instance, refugees have to overcome information barriers to gain academic guidance and support to navigate educational pathways (Webb et al., 2021). Similarly, Stevenson and Baker (2018) indicate that once refugees gain entry into higher education in Western countries, they face difficulty of access to information, unfamiliar pedagogical practices, academic language, alienating academic culture, and an absence of "targeted support and staff awareness of the needs of refugees students" (p. 56). Racism and discrimination can also make universities less hospitable for admitted refugees, particularly those from non-European countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia (Kochhar-Bryant, 2019; Mangan & Winter, 2017). Students from refugee backgrounds have reported that they are treated as "inferior to other students in HE institutions, suggesting an underlying racism" (Mangan & Winter, 2017, p. 495).

In many instances, higher education institutions themselves may not have relevant and targeted policies or practices in place to respond in manners that can assist students from refugee backgrounds on campuses (Loo, 2021). In some other cases, programmes ostensibly established to empower or help refugees lack precision and unable to respond to explicit requests of refugee students (Unangst & Crea, 2020). For example, a refugee attending an Australian university narrates,

Last year was absolutely horrendous. It really did ruin me, mentally [...] when I struggled a lot I just felt alone, and no one could help me. When I did try and ask people for help [...] I didn't get any, which I'm very disappointed about and I really



wish that XXXX University wouldn't have done that to me because [...], I was sick [...], struggling so much last year. (Webb et al., 2021, pp. 883-884)

Moreover, once admitted to a university, refugees may experience invalidation and misrecognition of their intelligence, life stories or identities, and current life struggles by different individuals within higher education systems, including classroom mates and teachers. The most common invalidation techniques involve "dismissal, not understanding or recognising, or negative judgement" (Mangan & Winter, 2017, p. 494). In practice, this means for example, educators not taking into consideration refugees' backgrounds, such as academic language level, in the teaching, learning and evaluation processes. Some refugees reported educators speaking too fast, refusing to clarify questions in the classroom, and denying refugees the chance to speak in class. One student from a refugee background states,

[the educator] never gave me space to speak in the class – English is not my first language and I sometimes need a little bit of time to think about what I want to say. If I started to speak, then paused, they would immediately ask somebody else's opinion. (Hannah, 1999, cited in Mangan & Winter, 2017, p. 495)

Research supervisors can also create unwelcoming environments for students from refugee backgrounds by using a deficit-approach, i.e., focusing on what refugees cannot do rather than acknowledging what refugees have managed. A refugee narrates,

My supervisor wielded such power that if they told me to sit on the floor in the stooped position as in the wars, I would have. One time they yelled, 'Your English is terrible, is it your first language? You do not have the intellect or stamina to do research'. I just responded by saying 'No'. Upon reflection, I wish I had the strength to respond [...]. However, I could not say any of this to my supervisor because I learned you never argue with a soldier unless you want to be shot. (Kendall & Day, 2017, p. 593)

This indicates the vulnerability refugees may be exposed to due to the asymmetrical power relations in academia. All these difficulties generally impede refugees' ability to successfully complete higher education (Lenette, 2016).

### **MOVING FORWARD, NO MATTER WHAT!**

Refugees use various techniques to move forward in their studies despite facing the above-mentioned and other difficulties. The desire to move on and live a purposeful and meaningful life in host countries often keeps refugees active in life in general and in education in particular (Sleijpen et al., 2017). Moreover, refugees have high aspirations for themselves and desire to use higher education as a way out of poverty and exclusion and as a means of establishing a better and more secure future (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). A refugee narrates,

The decision to go to university is critical—for us, and for our parents—it feels like all of our futures depend on it! We're very motivated! We've already

overcome masses of obstacles to get to the point of making this decision in our lives. And, with help in the right places, we can do it! (Stevenson & Willott, 2007, p. 681).

Some refugees see pursuing higher education or entry into university as a post-flight or post-war turning point in their life. They see it as the beginning of a meaningful life and a way of making sense of suffering they have endured (Kendall & Day, 2017). A student from a refugee background has this to say: "For me, life truly began at the age of 18 when I started university. I was enrolled on a 3-year degree programme at University A, which had an optional placement before the final year. I felt really lucky..." (Kendall & Day, 2017, p. 589).

Refugees employ various strategies and techniques in their trajectories to and in higher education. For example, refugees use available networks to their advantage to overcome stressful academic situations. These networks can be diverse and obtained through different means such as familial support, casual friendship they build on campuses with other students, formal teacher or tutor-student relationships, and informal relationship they have formed at other places such as religious gatherings (Abamosa, 2020; Birtwell et al., 2020; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021; Major et al., 2013). Near family members are among of the great sources of support for students from refugee background. One refugee narrates,

My husband motivates me all the way through to learn the language and to apply to a higher education. He helps me with some materials which means a lot to me. He assists me also in looking after our children. He always wants to see me in a better position...There were a lot of highs and lows in the process of going to higher education and sometimes I felt like giving up because of difficult situations. I sometimes stuck but sometimes I get energy and motivation from my family and rise again. (Abamosa, 2020, p. 83)

Similarly, another refugee underscores how her mother implanted in her the importance of education for human development. "My mother was strong that she used to help us with our education [...] I always want to go to a university because I am thinking for future of my children. I want to be a strong mother" (Abamosa, 2020, p. 83). In some cases, refugees use available opportunities to create useful relationships with their teachers that benefit their educational outcomes (Major et al., 2013).

A refugee explains how groupwork with other students has been useful, "At first I felt totally hopeless, I could spend hours on a task and still got it wrong [...] Now, I feel better because we worked in groups and I learned that it's tough for us all" (Streitwieser et al., 2018, p. 143). Refugees even recommend formation of a student association based on ethnic or cultural background on campus to help new refugees coming to universities. Regarding the importance of forming an African students' association, one refugee states, "it is good if there is some community group [...] if there was a group that when new people came you just show

them the way and stuff . . . that's one thing [that would help]" (Harris & Marlowe, 2011, p. 191). Indeed, refugees can benefit immensely from peer mentorship, through which senior refugees can share similar experiences and information about possible challenges the newcomers may face (Bajwa et al., 2017).

Another refugee narrates, "When I was [then] coming to a university, it was totally a different world [...] I don't know what it's like. I struggle a lot because there's so much work you have to do every week [...]". To overcome these challenges, he has used several connections to garner support. These include other students who have been studying the same courses and mentors with whom he has been introduced at local church attendances. He describes one of the mentors as key to his recovery from challenges. He says, "I've spoken to him and he then told me that if you have any problem with anyone at the University, just take me with you and we will go and talk to that person" (Wilkinson, 2018, p. 95). This kind of help may be priceless for refugees who mostly do not have a well-established network or familiarity with the academic system in their new countries. Moreover, it can to some extent fill the gap created by the family separation many refugees experience, with its impact on their psychological health and well-being. In some cases, refugees do not get any help from anyone even when they are in need of learning about their community and education (Perry & Mallozzi, 2017).

Moreover, such networks may improve the knowledge of refugees about how universities work and what is expected of them as students in higher education context (Dunwoodie et al., 2020). Unfortunately, it is not always easy to establish and maintain interactions with others who can understand and recognise refugees as survivors with much to offer both academically and in other aspects of life. In other words, refugees may face difficulty of finding "love-based recognition" (Honneth, 1995 cited in Dunwoodie et al., 2020, p. 257), i.e., a type of recognition that first and foremost sees refugees as individuals with agency rather than categorising them as people with endless demands. While there are many factors which may hinder the formation of such vital interaction, the reluctance of some refugees to share about their backgrounds is a significant factor, as one refugee states "Sometimes I think refugee students, maybe they feel isolated, like maybe they feel separated from other students" (Dunwoodie et al., 2020, p. 257). One explaining factor for this is that education systems in various host countries judge and discriminate against refugees based on the information the refugees provide about themselves (Mangan & Winter, 2017). Indeed, student from refugee background are depicted as "problems' who need 'help'" (Molla, 2021, p. 21).

In a striking twist, refugees use racial prejudices and low expectations that people in the host community have of refugees as motivation to navigate the higher education system and move forward. A refugee from Africa settled in the UK states,

When you go into workplaces because not only are you African, but you are also Black, people don't expect you to have any kind of education. So you are always out to prove yourself ... so the only way was to be in education yourself to be professional and then people don't question you. (Morrice, 2013, p. 657)

Similarly, another refugee underscores that he goes to a university to prove many stereotypes from a range of people wrong, and he says "...we feel as though there's a lot of us to prove. We have to prove a lot of stereotypes wrong. We have to prove our parents [...] I have to prove people wrong and I'm going to prove them wrong" (Harris & Marlowe, 2011, p. 192). Refugees see higher education as an important factor in fostering a strong sense of resilience in them to make a transition into the host society as a valuable individual (Naylor et al., 2021). This indicates that refugees try to prove the misconceptions about them wrong by taking higher education. Even so, refugees are still excluded from elite institutions and overrepresented in enabling and non-award courses<sup>5</sup> in some countries (Naylor et al., 2021). In other words, motivations, aspiration, and determination on the side of the refugees alone do not advance equity in access and participation in higher education because refugees are "stymied by long-standing educational and material disadvantages" (Sidhu & Naidoo, 2018, p. 178).

It is noteworthy and important to acknowledge however that there are educators and other professionals who are keen on facilitating the inclusion of refugees in higher education. Dunwoodie et al. (2020) find that refugees benefit from care and support they get from staff members at universities. A refugee narrates the following on her experience with the positive atmosphere at her university "I love [YYY] University, I go there every day—like even during holiday I went into the university and I asked them lots of questions. They helped me a lot". Another refugee says,

This university [...] were really welcoming [...] every time that I had any questions or any inquiry, anything that I really needed help, they were really there and if I emailed them within maximum of two hours they responded back to me, they were really helpful [...] when I needed them they were by my side. (Dunwoodie et al., 2020, p. 258)

These stories indicate that refugees are conscious about and grateful for the help they receive. Moreover, the stories support Mangan & Winter's (2017) suggestion that refugees will benefit in many ways when their situations are better recognised and understood by higher education institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> Non-award study does not lead to a qualification. A student may earn credit but would not be awarded a qualification on completion of the program (<https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/awardnon-award-study/56129>)

## **REFUGEES ARE PEOPLE WITH VARIOUS FORMS OF CAPITAL**

Higher education institutions are not neutral places for refugees because refugees can be subject to negative experiences from both students and faculty members. However, the situations on campuses cannot be decoupled from the wider socio-political contexts in which the institutions operate. Hence, the more hostile the socio-political environment becomes, the more difficult it becomes for refugees to successfully access and succeed in higher education in host countries. To counter this, refugees must possess necessary capital to overcome overt and covert barriers that can deter their progress in higher education. Non-refugee students, irrespective of their age, employ various forms of capital to pursue higher education (see for example, O'Shea, 2016). In the same vein, as it can be seen from the above findings, refugees use a range of forms of capital – some of which they bring with from pre-flight experiences while others built after their arrival in host countries – to navigate education systems embedded not only in new but also hostile environments. The most important and, perhaps durable, capital refugees utilise is aspirational or motivational capital. In principle, therefore, it is difficult to argue that lack of motivation to pursue higher education is the reason for the underrepresentation of refugees in higher education. Other studies indicate that many refugees are generally motivated to pursue higher education irrespective of challenges they encounter in host nations (Crea & McFarland 2015; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). This is priceless capital because wherever they are, refugee can take it with them and use it whenever necessary to overcome difficult situations.

Another form of capital refugees use to navigate higher education systems is social capital. The help refugees get from their close family members such as mother and husband, religious institutions, and close friends is a typical example of bonding social capital, a type of social capital which is vital in providing vital psychological and social related support to newly arrived members (Putnam, 2000; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). Refugees are also resourceful in building and benefiting from linking social capital in the form of good relationship with faculty members. While some refugees dare not speak up in cases of oppression, for example, when supervisors mistreat them, other refugees become more determined to resist the stereotypical assumptions about refugees in host countries. Moreover, other negative experiences such as misrecognition and stigmatisation can prompt resistance capital among refugees (Korkiamäki & Gilligan, 2020). In this sense, it is valid to argue that some refugees utilise resistant capital in their trajectories in higher education. It must be underscored here that the very fact that refugees are able to learn the host country's language, access and remain in higher education institutions, and succeed therein indicate that they have navigational capital. Overall, refugees employ a good deal of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth to overcome all sorts of challenges they must endure in increasingly hostile environments.

## CONCLUSION

The question this chapter addresses is: How do refugees navigate higher education systems in Western countries characterised by hostile environments? Experiences of refugees regarding higher education in Western countries vary. However, it is possible to conclude that refugees encounter negative situations not only in the pre-access phase but also after they have accessed higher education. Hence, it is naïve to think that access to higher education is challenge-free and the end of difficulties refugees must endure. Indeed, some of the worst experiences refugees encounter in host countries happen on campuses. Therefore, higher education institutions in Western countries must serve as oases for refugees in the inhospitable desert where refugees are navigating systems embedded in “impoverishment, insecurity, unemployment, inadequate housing and levels of societal and political intolerance seeking to ‘keep them out’ or ‘make them leave’” (Stevenson & Baker, 2018, p. 117). Grüttner (2019) argues that higher education institutions can offset some of the negative impacts of hostile environments on refugees by creating welcoming atmosphere that facilitates social and academic belonging of refugees.

All stakeholders and concerned bodies must acknowledge that universities are operating in environments hostile to refugees, which are characterised by stricter immigration and integration policies and strong anti-immigrant political parties and other organisations, whose members may be found among the faculty, students, and administrative staff. When these systems and people encounter refugees, it is highly likely that refugees are subject to racism, discrimination, and other negative treatments due to stereotyping and discrimination (Murray & Gray, 2023). These may deter refugees’ progress in achieving success in higher education. In fact, refugees utilise various forms of capital to overcome some of these challenges, where motivational, social as well as familial, navigational, and resistant capital are among the major ones. With the help of genuine inclusive policies, practices and people who are keen on listening to refugees’ voices and including refugees in higher education, refugees can succeed on par with non-refugee students. In the absence of these supports, it is difficult to attain the real social inclusion of refugees into higher education. Notwithstanding the reality of individual agencies of refugees, it is difficult, if not impossible, for refugees to fight and eliminate some of the chronic challenges such as systemic racial and ethnic discrimination in Western host countries on their own. Hence, formal and tailored policies and commensurate practices aimed at the empowerment of refugees through higher education are necessary to facilitate their transition to better future.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Discrimination:** treating people differently or *equally* in ways that lead to unfair and undesirable outcomes for disadvantaged individuals or groups, such as refugees.

**Ignoring:** intentional downplaying of refugees' concerns in order to achieve a specific objective, for example exclusion from boundaries of opportunities.

**Navigational Capital:** (refugees') skills of maneuvering through social institutions.

**Resistant Capital:** (refugees') knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behaviour that challenges inequality.

**Social Capital:** the resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by refugees in their higher education trajectories.