


Our Voice

KUTAIBA AL HUSSEIN AND AKILEO MANGENI



There is no doubt that education is an important element in human development and it should be accessible for everyone, and Europe is a place that on the surface offers equal access to higher education for students who are eligible and seeking to enhance their skills. However, there is a common practice among universities that tends to ignore the fact that refugees face different life challenges, such as coming from different educational backgrounds without any preparation to study abroad, cultural differences, emotional and psychological challenges and different languages of prior instruction, among others. This impacts the lives of refugees and how they integrate academically. Taking note of all these systemic disadvantages, universities should be considerate when addressing displaced students, and they should provide a safe space for refugees for their academic advancement.

Another important note when thinking of higher education is that the institutions of higher learning should take into consideration that some students cannot make contact with their former schools regarding their educational certificates, something that is greatly challenging for them when building their case during application processes. Therefore, higher education institutions should specifically consider refugee programme courses as well as creating or providing opportunities for eligible refugees willing to go back to school to enhance their careers and personal development.

This chapter will highlight the different life challenges and experiences that a number of refugees face in accessing higher education based on the authors' experiences in Hungary as refugees and former students of the Open Learning Initiative (OLive), and further as students within Master's degrees in Public Administration and International Business Law at the Central European University (CEU). It will further shed light on the possible steps that could be taken to promote

refugee access to higher education, such as understanding refugees' needs for higher education, financial obstacles and the role of universities as part of society in easing the social inclusion of refugees. However, we further believe that the challenges and issues included in this chapter are not exclusive to Hungary, but might apply to any other European country as well as Australia (see Wilson et al., this volume).

Why Focus on Higher Education and How Difficult Is It to Be Part of the Process?

Arriving in Europe (Hungary in this context) after enduring a horrific past and all the immigration procedures, our basic first step was to find a job and to make a living, just like anyone else. However, to find a decent job or a job that could pay enough to cover our living expenses was very hard, as we arrived in Budapest as persons with refugee status, with all the negative stereotypes associated with the migration crisis of 2015. Similarly, to be able to compete in the job market, we needed either appropriate skills and outstanding work experience or an educational equivalency to justify our eligibility. In so many cases, it has been very difficult for refugees to gain employment using college certificates acquired from their home countries, for reasons such as issues around credibility and document verification.

Faced with the tremendous sets of skills required in the labour market, in all honesty we were unable to adjust and fill in the gaps in our applications as refugees with no work experience in Europe, especially with the high demand for professional qualifications and high level of competition from other applicants. Going back to school was our only option to attain at least a certificate to increase our chances in the labour market. Studying at CEU gave us the opportunity to learn about recent events and gain basic information that helped us to enhance our knowledge and to draw a general picture of the system in Hungary and how it works. So, based on our own personal experiences, we believe that providing opportunities to access higher education is a core element in helping refugees to integrate into a new society and to give them the confidence and ability to compete in the labour market.

Being a refugee and 'uneducated' at the same time is quite challenging, as most receiving societies are more or less closed and unwilling to accept refugees in higher education systems. Even if a refugee has qualifications from their home country, these qualifications are not considered in most cases in the host countries due to reasons such as language of instruction, the grading system, duration of study pro-

grammes and so on. This makes it difficult for refugees to rely on their previous qualifications to continue their education trajectory.

Nevertheless, we made the decision to continue our studies. In the beginning, it was very difficult to know how to start searching for universities. Even non-governmental organisations could not help us, stating that it was impossible to find a scholarship in Hungary. We tried contacting some universities with questions as to whether there could be scholarship programmes available for refugees, but we received no responses other than application links, with no further information or comments.

Eventually, the Open Learning Initiative Program (OLive-WP)¹ was introduced at Central European University, Budapest in 2016, offering weekend courses in academic subjects, English, advocacy and other training to refugees. After successful progress with the weekend programme in 2017, a more comprehensive and intensive University Preparatory Program (OLive UP)² was launched, a programme basically tailored to prepare students with refugee status for MA programmes. Through OLive-UP, we finally got scholarships and studied for our Master's degrees at the CEU.

Despite this, we had a tough experience with the administration process when applying to CEU. The application is tailored in a way that tries to be fair to all applicants. However, there was a lack of consideration for the needs of applicants like us who have refugee status and who, in most cases, are not financially or academically prepared for the application, and may not have their certificates at hand due to numerous circumstances back home. The application process was complicated, and the requirements were suited to applicants with a 'normal situation'; it was apparently not for us.

For instance, the application process can include requirements such as letters of recommendation from previous universities and proof of previous qualifications, but for safety reasons it is often impossible for refugees to communicate with their previous university. Similarly, many refugees fled their countries of origin without completing university programmes or without copies of their academic papers, and because of the uncertain communication with their previous professors and universities, obtaining copies of diplomas can be extremely difficult. The fees involved and the financial vulnerability of refugee students is another factor: there is often a lack of financial support to cover expenses such as the language exam, the application fee and translation expenses.

Our situation was made worse by the Hungarian government's decision to exclude refugees from applying for a Stipendium Hungari-

cum Scholarship,³ a scholarship programme for foreign students that is funded by the Hungarian government and is considered to be the main platform for non-Hungarians to obtain scholarships at Hungarian universities.

We believe that Helen Keller (1903/2003: 10) perfectly described our situation at that time:

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without a compass or sounding-line, and no way of knowing how near the harbor was. 'Light! Give me light!' was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.

The OLive programme arrived at the right time in a desperate situation.

Key Takeaway

The first time we applied to the OLive-WP, we did not have high expectations of the programme. It was new, and we never thought we would qualify for a chance at a scholarship. When the OLive-UP introduced us to CEU, however, we felt we finally had a foot in the door to obtain a scholarship and complete our Master's at CEU, which we then successfully accomplished.

The OLive programmes did not merely involve sitting in lecture rooms, reading articles or making notes, but provided us with a safe space in which to share ideas, comfort and confidence, other learning experiences and the ability to establish meaningful relationships with colleagues. From our perspective, we can tell you without doubt that higher education, besides its functions in information sharing, builds sustainable relationships within and outside the academic community and, more importantly, helps students to create better opportunities for their future and facilitates career building. It helped us start our new lives and become more accepted by the host society.

As well as the opportunity to step into a classroom again, the programmes offered us life-changing opportunities to build our professional careers and networks by interacting with many different professions and disciplines. From our personal point of view, the opportunities we gained from CEU changed our lives for the better in many different ways. For example, it opened opportunities to network through differ-

ent career services offered by the university. Most people see refugees as a threat to them, their families and relatives, but with the CEU community we were like family. In some European societies where refugee candidates have the ability to go to school, such people are looked at differently. This notion that refugees are a threat to society generates undue emotional challenges which have negatively impacted our lives in Hungary. These challenges sometimes result from excessive pressure to integrate in order to prove that we pose no threat.

Apart from the positive aspects, the OLIVE programmes also came with a number of problems. One issue was that the intensity of the workload during the OLIVE-UP preparatory programme was not comprehensive enough to prepare us for the MA programmes. Upon entering our MA programmes, we faced workload-related challenges that made us feel completely unprepared, such as the large amount of reading we had to do, academic writing-related challenges and numerous assignments for which we never felt prepared.

It is also worth mentioning that the OLIVE programmes' selection criteria and limited opportunities, coupled with limited financial support, have also been a key obstacle for refugees who are interested in entering the university. Similarly, it is also important to acknowledge that the scholarship programme was not part of the university application system, but a result of an informal arrangement between the OLIVE programme and the provost. Nevertheless, we interacted with several students with refugee status who had different ambitions and career paths, who couldn't make it to the university due to limited scholarships or lack of availability of courses/programmes that interested them.

Many host countries lack education programmes for refugees provided by receiving governments as part of the integration process. Even student loans, which are managed in Hungary by Diákhitel,⁴ were not an option for us because of the complicated process, high interest fee and the uncertainty that we would be able to pay back the loan. This excludes many refugees from education-related opportunities that could change their lives or even catalyse the integration process. In this case, institutions of higher learning should acknowledge the need for education if they wish to take action that can add meaning to someone's future. Similarly, despite the set standards for entry requirements, many refugees have faced difficulties that have limited their ability to complete BA programmes and some have lost their certificates before arriving in their host countries. Case-by-case assessments could allow many refugees to change their lives by joining universities.

Our Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to raise our voice and say that universities should take the opportunity to do more than ‘integrate’ refugees into societies, regardless of government policies. We believe that our experience is a good example and real proof that universities can change the life trajectory of a significant number of refugees, who are in a similar situation to us but have not had the same chances. Although our path was bitter, we are now tasting the sweetness of its fruit, even in a country like Hungary, which is largely anti-refugee. We can now introduce ourselves as refugees with no hesitation, as we have decent jobs and adequate skills and knowledge that forces others to respect us. Thus, we have the courage to step forward and integrate into society in a comfortable way.

What we want to say here is that, first of all, higher education institutions must consider the establishment of a programme similar to OLive-UP in order to assess and prepare potential students before entering universities. And also to facilitate the administration process for both students and universities, as this may mitigate the gaps between them and give potential students a chance to be considered in the context of their special situation.

Universities should also pay attention to the fact that they can play a significant role in helping refugees to integrate into society. On the other hand, acceptance of refugee students can also enhance the diversity of university environments by including students with distinct experiences, backgrounds and cultures. In regard to integration, universities can help challenge perceptions about refugees by treating people not merely as represented by their legal status, but rather as students who want to learn. Challenging such negative perceptions could, thus, help students build their confidence and develop various skills through various disciplines in order to address life challenges within different societies.

Kutaiba Al Hussein is a legal and business advisor at an international law firm and a volunteer at Central European University’s Open Learning initiative (OLive-WP) in Budapest. He earned his Master’s degree in Legal Studies from Central European University through OLive University Preparatory Programme (OLive-UP) as a refugee from Syria.

Akileo Mangeni has been part of the OLive community since 2016. In 2019 he finished an MA in Public Administration at the School of Public Policy at Central European University, Budapest. Currently, he works as a finance consultant for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. He is passionate about human rights and inclusion programmes for minority groups.

Notes

1. ‘OLive Weekend Program (OLive-WP) | Central European University’, <https://www.ceu.edu/project/olive-weekend-program-olive-wp> (accessed 30 June 2020). Also see <https://www.refugeeeducationinitiatives.org/>.
2. OLive University Preparatory Program, Refugee Education Initiatives, <https://www.refugeeeducationinitiatives.org/olive-up> (accessed 9 May 2020).
3. https://stipendiumhungaricum.hu/uploads/2020/11/BA_MA_OTM_Call_for_Applications_2021_2022.pdf & <https://stipendiumhungaricum.hu/apply/> (accessed 1 October 2021).
4. Diákhitel – Főoldal, <https://www.diakhitel.hu/en> (accessed 9 May 2020).

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