



**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES – CRITICAL FUTURES**

Working Paper 39:

## **Refugees' Access to Higher Education**

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Reform

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## ***Working Papers on University Reform***

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This working papers series is published by the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. The series brings together work in progress in Denmark and among an international network of scholars involved in research on universities and higher education. The current paper results from the project, 'European Universities – Critical Futures', funded by the Danish Research Council. The project addressed the question: What are the future roles of universities in creating social and regional integration in Europe, in a shifting global context? <https://projects.au.dk/european-universities-critical-futures/>

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**European Universities – Critical Futures.  
Refugees' Access to Higher Education**

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## **Introduction**

This paper draws on the work carried out by the Refugees' Access to Higher Education Working Group that met over the 2020-2021 academic year as part of the European Universities - Critical Futures project led by the University of Aarhus, Denmark. The word 'refugee' was used initially for our Working Group as a short way to refer to the whole spectrum of situations that students with a forced migration background found themselves in, whatever the status they were granted in the countries where they sought asylum. However, this working paper has used the expression 'students with a forced migration background' to better encompass their diverse profiles and experiences, regardless of their administrative statuses in the host societies.

Forced migrations have grown exponentially in recent years and the number of refugee students who access and complete higher education studies across Europe is still very limited and only slowly increasing. Therefore, the Working Group decided to open up an original conversation space for collecting data and insights from multiple perspectives. Through a series of seven monthly webinars, it brought together refugee students, practitioners who provide access courses and support into and through higher education, and researchers from across Europe. The aim for the participants was to increase understanding of the complex inclusion and exclusion dynamics that students with a forced migration background face as they navigate higher education, both in terms of accessing it and throughout their subsequent academic journeys.

From one webinar to the next, the discussions covered the complex web of administrative hurdles both inside and outside universities. We considered the changing rules regarding migration and eligibility to higher education and students' struggles with both aspirations and trauma. We identified support gaps and disconnections between stakeholders and student-led initiatives for shifting the curricula towards more inclusive classroom practices. The discussions led to broader analyses of the social purpose and role of universities and how higher education intersects with social rights and citizenship frameworks, with specific ideas about who is eligible for entry into higher education evolving over time. Overall, the conversations that took place within this unique space led to re-thinking the borders of the university in terms of the broader struggles and power structures that shape inequalities across society.

The webinars were organised by Marie-Agnès Détourbe (INSA, University of Toulouse), Gaële Goastellec (University of Lausanne), Prem Kumar Rajaram (Central European University, Budapest and Vienna), and Céline Cantat (Sciences Po, Paris). They brought together the results of existing academic research and the carefully considered experiential knowledge of a range of refugees and practitioners (listed in Appendix 1). The contributors to the webinar series were invited through an organic process which aimed at opening a space for different voices, rather than a systematic process selecting representative samples of people. The researchers who contributed came from different disciplinary backgrounds and comprised PhD students, early career and senior researchers from the University of East London, University of Trento (Italy), Universität Basel (Switzerland), Swiss School of Public Administration (Switzerland), University of Twente (Netherlands), Université Paris Descartes (France) and the Central European University (Hungary).

A total of five students with forced migration backgrounds participated in the webinars. They came from countries as diverse as Uganda, Syria, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan. The majority of these students were also actively engaged in various initiatives that support migrants through volunteering, student mentoring, and active participation in student associations. One student, a refugee from Syria, had benefited from the OLive University Preparatory Program (OLive-UP) at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. He had earned his master's degree in legal studies from CEU and was now working as a legal and business advisor at an international law firm and was a volunteer at CEU's Open Learning Initiative-Weekend programme (OLive-WP).<sup>1</sup> Another student from Uganda worked as a Finance consultant at the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation (Shared Services Centre) in Budapest. He too had benefitted from the OLive-UP programme at CEU in Budapest and he had graduated with a bachelor's degree in Social Work and Social Administration, then a master's degree in Public Administration. He now served as a student mentor and volunteer with the Open Learning initiative (OLive-WP). A third student, originally from Afghanistan, was an undergraduate student at the University of Lausanne (UNIL) and had lived in Switzerland since 2016 as a refugee. He was co-president of the UNIL Without Borders Association, and an elected student representative at the University Council. A fourth student from Azerbaijan was studying for a master's degree in Human Rights at the Central European University. He held the position of an International Advocacy

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<sup>1</sup> The Open Learning Initiative-Weekend Program at Central University Budapest, Hungary, was organised to provide refugees and asylum seekers access to education, job-market training and English language skills. Organised jointly with Migszol (Migrant Solidarity Group of Hungary), OLive-WP started its programs in January 2016 enrolling up to 45 students per term.

Officer at Nafas LGBT Azerbaijan Alliance, which focused primarily on the UN's human rights and development mechanisms. His exceptional dedication to global LGBTI rights advocacy was recognized in 2016 when the British Council awarded him the status of global LGBTI rights influencer. A fifth student, having studied Business in Damascus later specialised in European Economic Integration at the College of Europe in Bruges. He joined the Jamiya Project in 2016, which aimed to create Blended Open Online Courses (see section 3.1), and he subsequently consulted for an EU delegation in Syria to design higher education access mechanisms. After gaining experience in tech startups, he worked as a Finance Officer for Out of the Box International which consults on Erasmus+ projects for youth and micro businesses.

The practitioners included representatives of national NGOs concerned with legal, social and psychological support for all kinds of refugees. It also included teachers of access programmes run by universities, notably the OLIVE programme, and researchers specialised in areas such as the recognition of qualifications in the context of European and international regulations.

Methodologically speaking, the webinar series' original way of advancing knowledge took inspiration from Bruno Latour's (2005) approach at the crossroads between anthropology and Actor Network Theory. We developed a type of network research that consisted in carefully "follow[ing] the actors" and minutely recording "the traces they left" (Latour 2005, p. 23). We opened a discussion space between different people through broad, guiding questions under a shared umbrella theme at each webinar, and we provided full, public access to the actual discussions through recordings (see Appendix 2). In this way, we actually strove to follow the actors and give open access to the wealth, depth and *ad hoc* exchanges between the webinar participants. We then 're-assembled' the traces they had left by writing short, publicly available summaries of each webinar (also in Appendix 2). All the webinar material was then re-organised thematically and put into perspective in this working paper, with the support of Anna Mayland Boswell, a research assistant from Aarhus University. We took to heart Latour's statement that "no social scientist can call oneself a *scientist* and abandon the *risk* of writing a *true and complete* report about the topic at hand" (Latour 2005, p. 127-128). We hope this working paper is "a true and complete report" of the webinar series which allows for multiple ways of accessing and understanding the data.

Three main themes emerged from across all the webinar conversations. First, the importance of recognising the diversity of students with forced migration backgrounds, instead of



treating them in broad categories as 'migrants' or 'international students.' Second, we identified the bewildering complexity of agents and actors with which refugee students have to navigate in their journeys into and through higher education. Third, treating students with forced migration backgrounds as a source of knowledge and agency enables universities to become safer spaces for them and expands their role in fostering an inclusive society. In this working paper, we re-assembled data drawn from across all the webinars under these three themes. The aim is to illuminate the experiences of students with a forced migration background in their pursuit of higher education in order to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved, while identifying potential avenues for fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for these resilient individuals.

## **1. Recognising the diversity of students with forced migration backgrounds**

Accessing higher education as a forcibly displaced person is highly complex. The educational backgrounds, characteristics and aspirations of refugees are themselves very diverse and the students are faced with extremely complicated eligibility criteria for accessing university places. They also have to navigate ever-changing immigration rules. When they do gain access to university, the diversity of their perspectives and needs is often overlooked in the education programmes. This section highlights the importance of appreciating the diversity of the forcibly displaced persons seeking to access and complete higher education, and the complexity of being a refugee student.

### ***1.1 Diversity of backgrounds and pathways***

What came over clearly in the webinars was that forcibly displaced students varied enormously in their circumstances and needs. Not only did they differ in terms of age, gender, social background and educational capital, they also differed in their aspirations and the stage at which their education had been disrupted.

During the first webinar, the graduate with a law degree from Syria shared his experience of trying to gain access to university in Budapest. Despite having the relevant paperwork from

his law degree in Syria, he had to meet multiple requirements before being eligible to apply to university institutions, including learning Hungarian. The student expressed that he experienced rejections and lack of consideration of his situation as a refugee and he also found out that his status as refugee did not allow him to apply for a national scholarship. The graduate from Uganda also mentioned difficulties in gaining access to higher education due to the lack relevant information and the requirement of language proficiency. Having spent 17 months in a refugee camp in Hungary, it was difficult for him to seek assistance and support. The third student, having graduated from the top school of economics in Afghanistan, aspired to pursue further studies in economics at the Swiss School of Economics. However, due to his status as a refugee, he could not meet the university's admission criteria for individuals specifically coming from Afghanistan. This was primarily due to the devaluation of his previous education.

## ***1.2 Forcibly displaced students' trauma***

During the fourth webinar, one prominent concern was the lack of attention given to the specific needs of students with a forced migration background once they entered higher education. Valuable insights into the adverse impact of immigration policies and market-driven higher education systems on university access for migrants, and especially refugees and asylum seekers in the UK were provided by Dr. Aura Lounasmaa, a senior lecturer in politics and the director of University of East London's OLIVE course. Among other things, she highlighted the inadequacy of universities in addressing issues of trauma experienced by refugees and forcibly displaced individuals. She underlined that the traumatic aspects of refugee experiences are not solely located in their past but persist throughout their journeys, even after arriving in their host countries. This lack of consideration, particularly regarding their previous and ongoing traumas, exacerbates their challenges, especially in the UK where the asylum system is characterised by suspicion and hostility towards applicants. Lounasmaa added that unfortunately, UK universities have, at times, been complicit in perpetuating an environment that contributes to retraumatisation.

Her concern echoed the story of the student from Uganda: in the first webinar, he shared the significant challenge of rebuilding his life after having spent 17 months in a refugee camp. He explained that, upon his arrival in Budapest, his primary concern was simply surviving. As a consequence, he was not ready or did not know how to navigate the process of higher education and figure out what steps he needed to take to pursue it. The same issue was

emphasised by the student from Syria who had experienced the profound impacts of war in his home country. This student, having lost almost everything, emphasised the urgent need to rebuild his life and secure employment, ideally aligned with his current educational level.

The insights shared by two participants in the fifth webinar provided an equally profound understanding of the traumas experienced by students with a forced migration background. Their accounts clearly showed that they carried a diverse mental load due to their traumatic experiences and journeys. For instance, one of them, who had fled from Damascus, explained that many displaced people grapple with significant mental health issues and trauma. He shared, among other experiences, his own struggle to concentrate in class, as the sound of passing helicopters from a nearby airport triggered his fear of barrel bombs when he was in Damascus. Additionally, they faced financial limitations, making it challenging to pursue higher education. Adapting to national European systems posed a significant hurdle for them, primarily due to the vast amount of syllabus they would need to catch up on and keep up with.

Lounasmaa underscored the urgent need for universities to recognise and address the ongoing traumas faced by these vulnerable populations, urging them to take proactive steps in creating a supportive and healing environment within their institutions. This would require a more empathetic and understanding approach towards refugees and asylum seekers, acknowledging the hardships they have endured and working to mitigate potential triggers of retraumatisation in the academic setting.

### ***1.3 Diversity of aspirations***

Given the multifaceted challenges faced by forced migrants, their aspirations for stability and safety come as a priority, while educational and professional aspirations often take longer to shape. The key, yet often overlooked, issue of forcibly displaced students' aspirations was brought to the fore by Ihssane Otmani, a PhD candidate at the Swiss school of public administration (IDHEAP), University of Lausanne. She presented ongoing research on the aspirations of individuals who have experienced forced migration in Switzerland. Her research findings indicated that relatively few refugees aspired to pursuing higher education. This could be due to the general perception that entering a university in Switzerland is very difficult. A lack of information and mobility restrictions in the country (based on what type of residence permit is granted) play an important role in making access to university appear

insurmountable. Otmani also noted that social workers often encouraged individuals to seek employment and vocational training instead of pursuing higher education. Jobs in elderly care were commonly suggested as viable options for migrants and refugees to aspire to.

The five students' narratives above, complemented by other stories from practitioners involved in various access programmes across Europe, highlighted the complexities of being refugee students, which, as one of them claimed, cannot be reduced to merely "being a refugee" and "being a student." They stressed the necessity of embracing each individual's full complexity, wealth and depth, as well as their specific pathways into and through higher education, depending on their countries of origin, gender, family circumstances, forced migration stories and temporalities, previous education, mastery of languages, personal and professional aspirations, etc. These combined factors underscore the immense barriers that refugee students encounter on their educational journeys, calling for customized solutions which often involve very diverse actor configurations of agencies and actors.

## **2. Diverse configurations of actors: Fostering student agency and collaborative engagement**

The webinars made it very visible that each and every student brings with them a distinct background and life story that deserves recognition. Yet higher education policies tend to overlook those students' individual circumstances. Students with a forced migration background are generally treated as a homogeneous group through general administrative categories which can be linked to their status at the university (e.g. "international students"), or to the asylum seeking or refugee status they are granted in society (with the differential rights associated with them). As a result, the intersection of higher education policies, social policies, and immigration policies can often feel like navigating a jungle for those who have undergone forced migration. This section highlights the complexity of their higher education pathways, then reports on different approaches and initiatives aimed to lift some of these obstacles by fostering collaboration, diversity, and inclusivity within the higher education system.

## **2.1 Complexity of higher education pathways and shared obstacles**

Depending on the context, students with a forced migration background encounter suspicion and hostility not only within higher education systems but also in broader societal contexts. They face the ongoing challenge of navigating constantly changing immigration rules and eligibility criteria to access higher education. The students who participated in the webinars shared diverse experiences and challenges of accessing higher education, emphasising a series of complicated encounters with systems and regulations they had to navigate, such as the application process for scholarships. The student from Uganda elaborated on the complexity of the process in Budapest, sharing his experience of engaging with multiple organisations, but without getting sufficient support. It was through his assigned social worker he coincidentally discovered the OLIVE program in which he subsequently engaged as a student mentor and volunteer. Similarly, the diversity and human rights defender from Azerbaijan emphasized the daunting challenges displaced students encountered when dealing with the hostile and bureaucratic systems in Hungary, making it even more complicated to access higher education institutions. Financial hurdles also appeared as a shared obstacle in the different students' pathways.

Another significant issue is the gap that exists between the educational opportunities that are accessible to refugee students and the recognition of their previous educational capital. Both during the first and the fifth webinar, the students shared their diverse experiences and challenges of accessing higher education, highlighting the challenges of eligibility and meeting specific qualification requirements at a particular higher education institution. In the third webinar, Katrin Sontag, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Basel and a fellow at the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR, a Swiss research network focusing on migration and mobility across various disciplines and universities), focused on the different policy blind spots that had been identified through a comparative research project in France, Switzerland and Germany. One key finding was that most of the policy blind spots related to access to higher education for refugees existed in all three countries, yet at various levels and to various extents. For instance, the recognition gap appeared as particularly deep in Switzerland, where the qualifications of migrants are often not recognized or under-recognized. She highlighted how this issue contributes to the broader difficulties that migrants and people with refugee status face when trying to access higher education. Again, the two main challenges - lack of access to information and, in some cases, limited financial support – were highlighted.

To address the recognition gap, which varies a lot from one country to the next, Sontag suggested that recent alternatives such as the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPR) developed by the Council of Europe<sup>2</sup> be further extended to provide more centralised and faster recognition procedures across Europe. By offering standard criteria and procedures for recognizing prior qualifications, learning and work experience, the EQPR paves the way for a more homogeneous and fair recognition process across Europe. It could take into account the specificity of forced migrants' circumstances, as they come from sometimes little-known national higher education systems in their home countries, as well as having incomplete documentation. Sontag also pointed out the disconnection between highly skilled migrants and forced migrants, with the former experiencing a smoother process for qualifications recognition.

While acknowledging and sharing the multiple and intersecting obstacles that students with a forced migration background faced in their higher education pathways, the webinars also brought to light positive initiatives built up through collaborations between diverse actors, including researchers, academics, students, program practitioners, policy makers, social workers, NGOs, and other stakeholders. The focus of these initiatives is to address existing gaps and enhance the educational experience for displaced students.

## **2.2 Fostering student agency**

In order to help students overcome these multiple hurdles, higher education institutions must embrace the full complexity, wealth and depth of each individual's background and life story, and allow students to be full agents of their own educational pathways. This approach advocates for the active involvement of refugee and migrant students in shaping university policies, programs, and initiatives, recognising the valuable contributions they bring to the academic community.

A recurrent theme in both students' accounts and the subsequent discussions was the transformative role of institutions that go beyond limited administrative categorisations and create the conditions for individuals to engage actively in diverse academic and non-academic communities, and shape their individual educational journeys without experiencing further threats or traumas. Accordingly, Katrin Sontag called for a "reverse integration"

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications>

perspective, whereby the diversity of refugee and migrant students is acknowledged and used as an asset to profoundly transform the university itself.

Ian Cook strengthened this point in the seventh webinar by claiming that refugee students should not be treated as meek, mild and grateful receptacles for Western knowledge or objects of study in the classroom. He called for a de-colonization of the curricula and presented different pedagogical initiatives based on flexible approaches to learning with and through the diversity of student's skills, experience, knowledge and potential (these are developed in Cantat et al. 2022). Based on the practical experience of teachers in the OLIVE programme, he argued for 1) a heightened awareness of the relationships within the classroom; 2) continuously evolving expectations, goals and aims on all sides; and 3) extreme adaptability of the syllabus and teaching styles. This entails a role for the teacher where she draws on her expertise whilst also moderating the knowledge and the experience that is present in class.

Essentially such teaching both seeks and creates openings,

recognising the knowledge that refugee and migrant students bring with them, including those skills they have developed for 'social survival and mobility', rather than treating them as having a 'deficit' that needs to be made up in 'remedial' lessons (Mwenzu Blell et al. in Cantat et al. 2022: 112).

By bringing in the displaced student's voices to re-shape the curricula, Mwenzu Blell explains how she "organised the teaching in such a way that I taught only what the students asked to learn more about and wanted the chance to discuss" (ibid: 115). Such teaching and learning practices approach the curriculum as "an ongoing dialogue" (ibid: 116). This culturally responsive approach created a more inclusive and empowering environment, allowing students to thrive and contribute meaningfully to the academic community and to society at large.

In that respect, the students themselves were repeatedly presented as key actors, their agency playing a central role in successful higher-education pathways. Those who agreed to attend the webinars obviously stood out as successful and deeply engaged students and graduates who had used their agency to re-shape the spaces they had crossed and to influence policy makers. They shared the ways that different configurations of actors had made it possible for them to move forward and develop their agency, highlighting the need for coordinated action between stakeholders, while providing customized support and guidance.

### **2.3 Collaborative engagement**

The stories shared by three students during the first webinar underscored the importance of access programs in bridging gaps within the education system. These programs played a crucial role in supporting the students' educational progress and providing them with necessary information to navigate their new degree programs.

In the second webinar, two distinct programs were presented to address these gaps. The first was implemented by a charity in the UK, while the other was initiated by a higher-education institution in France. Both programs aim to provide necessary support and information to facilitate the successful integration and educational journey of refugee students. During the webinar, Emily Bowerman, the Head of Programmes at the Refugee Support Network (RSN),<sup>3</sup> shared valuable insights regarding the various initiatives that they launched to enhance refugee students' access to and well-being within higher education institutions in the UK. She explained that the particularly hostile political context for migrants in the UK, when combined with very different opportunities for access to higher education depending on the asylum-seeking statuses granted to migrants, led to diverse bottom-up initiatives from charities like RSN or individual higher education institutions. The initiatives involved a comprehensive approach that combined in-person advice and support, guidance, the distribution of factsheets, workshops, training sessions, and research efforts.

The second bridge-building programme was presented by Dr Marie-Annick Mattioli, a senior lecturer and co-head of the FlaViC university diploma program at the University of Paris (Université Paris-Seine, n.d.). It was established in 2018 at a University Institute of Technology (UIT) in Paris, with a group of 15 migrant students from different horizons. It originated from a collaboration between two academics and the institution's social services to answer the needs of incoming migrants. The project is currently linked to various services at the UIT and the University of Paris and is part of the French network MEns (Migrants in Higher Education). Despite institutional and political support, Mattioli shared that the financial sustainability of the programme was still a challenge.

These two practitioners shed light on the various critical issues regarding refugees' access to higher education institutions while proposing positive initiatives to address these challenges.

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<sup>3</sup> The Refugee Support Network, a charity founded by Catherine Gladwell, was later renamed Refugee Education UK (<https://www.reuk.org/>).



One key aspect they underlined was the need for targeted information and guidance not only for students but also for key actors such as university staff who may have limited or no expertise on refugees, and social workers and other people who are supporting refugees but have little knowledge of the education system.

They also highlighted the importance of networks and partnerships with diverse individuals and organisations. These collaborations are very valuable and efficient when it comes to lifting barriers through shared expertise. They emphasised the value of including professionals from workplaces and bridging programs outside higher education to improve knowledge of the labour market and create opportunities for refugees.

Furthermore, both practitioners stressed the importance of sustaining long-term relationships with former students to foster a sense of community. While it may be challenging to keep in touch or set up formal buddy systems, encouraging students to take the initiative and create their own networks can be highly beneficial.

While uncovering the complex and diverse configurations of actors involved in access to higher education, the webinars also underlined the key role played by universities in creating safe spaces that foster inclusivity and empower students throughout their academic journeys.

### **3. Inclusivity, empowerment, and positive social change: Universities as safe spaces**

The whole webinar series was built on the idea that higher education institutions have a broader and more significant role in the public sphere, beyond academic excellence and research. They carry a profound social responsibility to actively shape a shared society and promote inclusivity while tackling complex issues like power structures, social inequalities, and displacement. These institutions are expected to be proactive agents of positive social change, contributing to the betterment of society not only through academic pursuits but also through their actions, policies, and initiatives. That is why refugee access to higher education should not be studied in isolation but should be included in wider reflections on the structures, contents and boundaries of academic institutions from the perspective of the exclusions they generate. The experience of displaced students is a case in point, as it teaches

us a lot about the relation of universities to broader social, economic and political constellations. It shows how some universities have actually set up “everyday bordering practices” (Murray 2022) like financial barriers, restrictions on immigration statuses, and exclusionary practices which narrow down forced migrants’ access to higher education by creating “a higher education border” of its own.

Drawing from the specific topics and themes discussed in the webinars, this section highlights the need for higher education institutions to embrace their responsibility in controlling voice and visibility, creating safe spaces, developing social capital, and fostering openness and inclusivity in often hostile immigration environments. The webinars shed light on the multifaceted nature of this responsibility, leading to rethinking the borders of the university in terms of broader social inequalities and power structures in society.

In this context, the notion of universities as safe places emerged as a pivotal theme during the discussions. The need for often deeply traumatised students to find spaces devoid of violence and hostility, where they can express themselves and engage without undergoing further trauma, was expressed several times. The physical reaction of the student from Damascus to helicopters flying nearby the university illustrated the high level of trauma and sensitivity to threats experienced by some forced migrants. A ‘safe space,’ as conveyed by another student from Azerbaijan, implies a social atmosphere or environment that allows the freedom to express personal thoughts and opinions without the fear of judgment or repercussions. In the context of higher education, providing safe spaces for forced migrants therefore implies creating an environment that ensures their physical and emotional safety, while also providing them with essential support and inclusion for them to develop critical thinking, diversity of thought, and personal growth.

Through the webinars then, it became evident that there was a pressing need to turn higher education institutions into safer spaces, where the specific needs of displaced students and other excluded student populations are recognised and addressed. By doing so, universities can act as transformative spaces, proactively challenging societal norms, and supporting forced migrants in their educational journeys.

### ***3.1 Fostering inclusivity***

In the fourth webinar, Leon Cremonini, a senior policy advisor at the University of Twente’s Strategy and Policy Unit, contributed with valuable knowledge from a pilot project conducted

at Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. The aim of the project was to establish blended learning programs for displaced learners. Focusing on the discrepancy between the educational possibilities available to refugees and their educational aspirations, Cremonini highlighted that refugees often face a devaluation of their social and related capital, as their previous learning experiences become undervalued in unfamiliar environments. For him, the geopolitical context also frames access to higher education, in defining which type of education is accessible to whom, where and at which cost.

Scholarship programs and opportunities designed for refugees are a case in point as they often display a bias towards exceptional “high achievers,” and, as in any group of people, the number of academically exceptional refugees is low. This focus on exceptionality highlights the challenges faced by those who do not fall into this limited category. Cremonini argued that in this way, higher education can play a significant role in shaping societal norms, values, and the inclusion or exclusion of different voices and perspectives determining what sorts of voices are able to be part of a public domain. In this context, refugee voices may be perceived as problematic and subject to control within the public discourse. Consequently, higher education can become exclusionary, perpetuating the restriction of certain voices and their visibility.

In light of these issues, Cremonini posed a critical question: How can inclusive higher education models address this problem and provide wider access to higher education for refugees and increase their visibility in the public domain? Only through such efforts can universities play a transformative role in empowering these individuals, breaking down the barriers they face in accessing higher education and achieving their full potential. Exploring and implementing such inclusive approaches would be essential to foster a more equitable and empowering environment, ensuring that all voices, including those of refugees, are acknowledged, respected, and integrated into the higher education landscape and the broader public discourse.

### ***3.2 Academic inclusivity: displaced scholars***

Since 2015, many universities in Europe have been confronted with an increasing request for assistance from scholars who have been forced to flee their countries due to civil wars and/or persecutions. Forced migration not only poses a threat to scholars' safety but also disrupts their integration into university communities. Relocation is not only about reducing the

“original risk”; it raises critical questions about forming meaningful relationships, engaging in socially meaningful transactions, and adjusting to the norms, values, and traditions of the receiving scientific communities.

In the sixth webinar, Ester Gallo, an associate professor of Anthropology at the University of Trento, drew from the recent experience of her university with two “at risk” scholars from the Middle East and Central Africa. Her discussion revolved around the complexities and challenges of providing protection as a form of scientific inclusion, both in social-science teaching programs and in nutrigenomics-laboratory research. Gallo emphasised that the notion of protection in receiving higher education communities—from students to scholars—inevitably addresses the question of academic freedom as a two-faced concept. Protection involves the *negative dimension of freedom*, and specifically the removal of obstacles that hinder free intellectual pursuits. Yet it also addresses the important dimension of *positive freedom*—the ability to actively participate in a community of scholars and students, to further the ends of scientific inquiry and teachings by establishing a dialogue that, ideally, transforms both ends.

Therefore, ensuring protection and scientific inclusion also calls for renewed pluralism in curricula and research orientations. Displaced scholars bring unique experiences and perspectives that may be unfamiliar and differ from the academic culture and traditions of the university they join, which is inevitably embedded in specific territorial and intellectual traditions.

The subsequent discussion addressed the following question: to what extent are universities willing and able to actively engage with internal changes brought about by displaced scholars? Gallo suggested that focusing only on the negative dimension of freedom risks reproducing a patronising image of receiving institutions as “liberal saviours”. Instead, she proposed the key challenge lies in developing long-term inclusive strategies that valorise scholars’ scientific contributions, ultimately fostering a renewed pluralism within the higher education landscape.

### **3.3 Safe and inclusive learning spaces**

According to Prem Kumar Rajaram, Ian Cook and Céline Cantat in the seventh webinar, universities are often not well placed to deal with specific issues of displaced people as

students: the impact of trauma on learning is not well recognised, different voices and perspectives do not find space in the curriculum, thereby exacerbating the silences that refugee students often face. Refugee students report feelings of isolation, having to deal with new and ill-understood expectations in the more alienating and formal environment of a degree program in a foreign country. Kumar Rajaram, Cook and Cantat explained that university access and exclusion are experienced across at least three different scales: 1) in the classroom; 2) in programmes and institutions; and 3) at the level of the wider social formation. In order to open up the universities, they called for the implementation of policies and practices that combat discrimination, promote diversity, and ensure the physical and psychological well-being of all students. By fostering an environment where all students feel respected, supported, and valued, instead of furthering the trauma they have already been through, universities can enhance the overall educational experience and promote the success of refugee and migrant students.

One way of addressing these issues, also supported by Aura Lounasmaa in the fourth webinar, is to consider and support moves to decolonise the curriculum so as to amplify the voice of displaced students and provide adequate space for a range of experiences and perspectives. This involves expanding what is taught and also reconsidering how resources are used and distributed in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

In this working paper, we have explored the multifaceted landscape of refugees' access to higher education by bringing together a diversity of voices uncovering the complex web of challenges that shape the educational journeys of individuals with forced migration backgrounds. We have also put forward potential avenues for fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for these resilient individuals. This paper has outlined several key themes that emerged from the conversations which took place over a series of seven webinars, including the diversity of aspirations among forced migrants, the need for holistic, inclusive and collaborative approaches, and the role of higher education institutions in fostering inclusivity, empowerment, and positive social change.

Central to our findings is the importance of recognising and embracing the wealth and depth of students with a forced migration background. In this context, developing adaptable approaches to learning is imperative to ensure forcibly displaced students can flourish within the higher education system, acknowledging their agency and resilience. It requires universities to create safe spaces that empower these students to take control of their own educational pathways and contribute meaningfully to the academic community. This involves fostering a sense of belonging, providing targeted support, and recognising the valuable contributions that displaced students and scholars bring to the table.

Echoing the concept of “the higher education border” suggested by Rebecca Murray (2022), this working paper advocates re-imagining university boundaries: it underscores the pressing need to de-border and re-think university boundaries in the context of forcibly displaced students' access to higher education, so that universities actually play a transformative role in addressing the challenges faced by these students, promoting positive social change, and fostering an environment where all students can succeed.

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## **Appendix 1. List of webinar speakers**

The Working Group organisers are deeply grateful to all the people who have contributed to the webinars, listed below:

- Akileo Mangeni (CEU MA graduate, OLIVE graduate)
- Cavid Nabiyev (CEU MA graduate, OLIVE graduate)
- Kutaiba al Hussein (CEU MA graduate, OLIVE graduate)
- Malaz Safarjalani (Graduate, College of Europe, Bruges)
- Navid Samadi (Undergraduate student, University of Lausanne)
- Aura Lounasmaa (University of East London)
- Emily Bowerman (Refugee Support Network, UK)
- Ester Gallo (University of Trento)
- Ian M Cook (Central European University)
- Isshane Otmani (Swiss School of Public Administration)
- Katrin Sonntag (Universität Basel)
- Leon Cremonini (University of Twente)
- Marie-Annick Mattioli (Université Paris Descartes)
- Prem Kumar Rajaram (Central European University)



## **Appendix 2. Webinar summaries and recordings**

### **Webinar 1, presented by Refugees' Access to Higher Education Working Group, European Universities – Critical Futures, November 13, 2020.**

**Duration: 55:07.**

The aim of this webinar series is to open a space for students, practitioners, and researchers to engage together in issues related to the inclusion of students with a refugee background in higher education (HE) structures. What brings the participants together is their wish to understand further the dynamics at play, not only the obstacles but also the opportunities in widening access, from multiple perspectives. We believe that a diversity of voices should be heard to support the idea that higher education can provide a range of answers and opportunities for people undergoing forced migration in all their diversity and to support further action to improve access to HE. And we decided that the first voices that should be heard are those of the students themselves.

In this first session, Kutaiba Al Hussein, Akileo Mangeni, and Navid Samadi accepted to share their experience of access into higher education in different countries. The questions that guided their talks were the following:

- How did you come to plan your entry into HE?
- Which situations made it difficult for you to access HE?
- Which issues did you face after accessing HE during your university/classroom experience?
- What or who did you feel helped/made a difference?

**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 Program (OLive-UP) as a refugee from Syria.

**Akileo Mangeni** is a Finance consultant at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (Shared Services Centre) in Budapest. He is a student mentor and volunteer with the Open Learning initiative (OLive-WP) at Central European University in Budapest. He graduated with a Master's degree in Public Administration from Central European University, and he holds a Bachelor's degree in Social Work and Social Administration.

**Navid Samadi** is an undergraduate student at the University of Lausanne (UNIL). Originally from Afghanistan, he has lived in Switzerland since 2016 as a refugee. He is co-president of UNIL Without Borders association and an elected student representative at the University Council.

Brought together, the stories of Kutaiba, Akileo, and Navid recall the importance of several dimensions as central for access and success in pursuing HE studies in their respective European countries of residence:

- The existence of previous individual educational capital to aspire to, construct, and obtain access
- The existence of access programs, as vectors of academic socialization. They enable students to do educational catching up through auditor status, and to receive adapted information to engage in a new degree program.

- The importance of sometimes random encounters to identify these programs but also to build adequate social networks
- The importance of administrative categorization of refugees and the rights they open up or close down.

Additionally, difficulties are especially important:

- The temporality of access: constructing access in a new country, in a new language, takes years and also implies economic resources.
- The languages of studies available make it more or less difficult, and being able to study in English can make it easier.

This touches upon the issue of the universities' social responsibility. The next webinars will explore this further.

The link to the recorded webinar (minus the introduction as agreement to record from the participants at the point had not been asked):

[https://zoom.us/rec/share/C99yFAjkWlfdgrdkBGRSiSACnBhpmobFjjM60\\_SsQyM2JY\\_lvu\\_u5wxiqvhN-os.zcXyOG8ka8FuZwk5](https://zoom.us/rec/share/C99yFAjkWlfdgrdkBGRSiSACnBhpmobFjjM60_SsQyM2JY_lvu_u5wxiqvhN-os.zcXyOG8ka8FuZwk5)

Passcode: ?VSUjH47

## **Webinar 2, presented by Refugees' Access to Higher Education Working Group, European Universities – Critical Futures, Dec 15, 2020. Duration: 59:18.**

In this second session, Emily Bowerman, from the Refugee Support Network, and Marie-Annick Mattioli, from Université Paris Descartes, shared their experiences of building access programmes. The questions that guided their talks were the following:

- when and why did you decide to set up such programme?
- who was involved?
- what were the main issues you faced in building access programmes?
- which solutions did you find?
- what are the current issues you are still facing? Can you identify what remains to be understood?

### **Emily Bowerman, Head of Programmes, Refugee Support Network (RSN).**

Through a combination of face-to-face advice and support, guidance, factsheets, workshops, training and research, Refugee Support Network (RSN) seeks to enable young refugees and asylum seekers in the UK to overcome their barriers to Higher Education. In this presentation, RSN's Head of Programmes Emily Bowerman shared key ideas and learning from this access to HE programme.

### **Marie-Annick Mattioli, lecturer, co-head of the FLAVIC program, Université Paris Descartes**

The bridging programme FlaViC started 3 years ago at the University Institute of Technology with a group of 15 migrant students from different horizons. It stemmed from a unique collaboration between 2 academics and the social services of our institution. While

citizenship status is not an issue to access higher education in France, issues related to funding and legitimacy were major obstacles when the programme started. The project is now interconnected to different services at the IUT and the university of Paris, but many hurdles remain to make it sustainable.

What appeared from the two very interesting presentations was that both bridging programmes were set up to fill a gap in the system, one as a charity, the other as an internal programme within a higher-education institution. They target people with a refugee background from a different age ranges, and with slightly different aims in terms of access to higher education, further education or the job market.

Briefly stated, the main issues identified by both practitioners were that of:

- finance, either for students themselves who struggle to access institutional funding or targeted scholarships (especially when fees are high), or for the programme creators who can find it hard to fund their programme in a sustainable way;
- providing the right information early enough for those young people not to face the barriers at a later stage; both making the relevant information available and providing it at the right time are key. For instance, unaccompanied young asylum seekers must be informed in their teen years for them to make the right choices of education afterwards;
- keeping in touch with the students after they have actually accessed HE to help them through the many obstacles that come up once they've entered the system; finding inclusive ways of teaching and learning that allow them to complete their studies successfully
- adjusting to changing contexts in terms of migration rules and eligibility to access HE depending on specific asylum or refugee statuses, with significant variations from one country to the next and from one status to the other

Some solutions and lessons learned were shared too:

- Information and guidance can be targeted not just to the students themselves, but also to key actors that provide them with support: university staff with no expertise on refugees, people supporting refugees with little knowledge of the education system, social workers, etc. Barriers can and should thus be tackled from different angles.
- Networks and partnerships with different types of people and organizations are very valuable and efficient to lift barriers through shared expertise; including people from the workplace, outside HE, in bridging programmes can improve the knowledge of the labour market and create opportunities
- Sustaining long-term relationships with former students so as to create a community, even if it's often hard to keep in touch or set up buddying system; it is often interesting to let the student take initiatives and set up their own networks.

The webinar closed on discussions on how the COVID crisis may have developed digital literacy and opened new online or blended opportunities which may well widen access to both information and higher education training for students with a refugee background.

Link to the recorded webinar is here:

<https://zoom.us/rec/share/NGpVxvczack73dzSmlEA2gWflbggevbnVE1RaICCbMSxVp31AG4KaZ3xUDous3B.9L9GGaGyaI74OPLa>

Passcode: V=s.6r&f

**Webinar 3, presented by Refugees' Access to Higher Education Working Group, European Universities – Critical Futures, Jan 15, 2021. Duration: 1:05:55**

In the third session of our webinar series, Katrin Sontag from the University of Basel and Ihssane Otmani, a PhD student at the Swiss School of Public Administration, shared their research work and reflected on the blind spots of research on refugees' access to HE.

**Katrin Sontag** is a cultural anthropologist at the University of Basel and a fellow at the NCCR – on the move. Her research focuses on migration and mobility in the areas of migration of the highly skilled, forced migration, entrepreneurship, civil society engagement, education, citizenship, and voting rights.

Katrin Sontag's presentation focused on the recognition gap that exists in Switzerland, where the qualifications of migrants are not recognized or are under-recognized. Katrin discussed these issues in the context of broader difficulties that migrants and people with refugee status face in accessing higher education (there is a lack of access to information, and in some cases, a lack of access to finance). When it comes to recognition, Katrin considered whether there is a future in having a faster and centralized approach to qualifications recognition (based on but also expanding the European Qualification Passport for Refugees). There is a disconnection between the worlds of highly skilled migrants and forced migrants, with so-called highly skilled migrants finding qualifications recognition a much smoother process. Katrin argued for a 'reverse integration' perspective, which means considering how the diversity of refugee and migrant students can shape the university.

**Ihssane Otmani** is a PhD candidate at the Swiss School of Public Administration (IDHEAP), University of Lausanne. Her PhD thesis, supervised by Prof. Giuliano Bonoli, focuses on educational and professional aspirations of refugees in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland.

Ihssane Otmani presented her ongoing research on understanding the aspirations of people who have experienced forced migration in Switzerland. Ihssane noted that in her interviews to date, findings indicate that refugees have a low level of aspiration when it comes to assessing higher education. Seeking to explain this, Ihssane noted that there was a sense that entering university in Switzerland was very difficult. A lack of information and mobility restrictions (based on what type of residence permit is granted) played an important part in making access to university appear insurmountable. Ihssane noted that social workers play an important role in shaping aspirations. Social workers reportedly tend to encourage people to get jobs and vocational training, rather than pursue complex projects of getting into higher education. Care jobs - elderly care – are often given as examples of jobs that migrants and refugees could aspire to. Ihssane will explore this research further with a wider pool of interviewees and map their aspirations in the short, medium, and longer term.

The link to the recorded webinar is here:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rt1on8atIHQNxAk1\\_KCLQemwNz9yRxfQ/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rt1on8atIHQNxAk1_KCLQemwNz9yRxfQ/view)

**Webinar 4, presented by Refugees' Access to Higher Education Working Group, European Universities – Critical Futures, Feb 12, 2021. Duration: 58:57.**

In this fourth session of our webinar series, we shared research on issues related to the inclusion of refugees in higher education. Aura Lounasmaa spoke about the entanglements of immigration policies and university neoliberalization and their impact on access to higher education for marginalized groups. Leon Cremonini reflected on blended learning programs deployed in Za'atari Camp in Jordan as part of the Jamiya project and their significance in terms of rights and citizenship for refugee learners.

**Dr. Aura Lounasmaa** is a senior lecturer in politics and the director of the University of East London's OLIve course, which prepares forced migrant students for university entry. She previously worked as part of a team teaching the award-winning Life Stories course at the Calais Jungle.

Aura Lounasmaa highlighted how immigration policies that create a hostile environment for migrants in the UK combine with market-driven higher education systems to negatively impact access to university for migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers. When refugees and asylum seekers do enter higher education, there is a lack of attention to their specific needs, particularly regarding issues of trauma. Aura Lounasmaa emphasized that the traumatic aspects of refugee experiences are not solely located in the past; individuals who have experienced forced displacement may have faced traumatic situations prior to leaving home and throughout their journeys. Unfortunately, UK universities have frequently been complicit in reproducing an environment leading to retraumatization. One way of addressing these issues, according to Aura Lounasmaa, is to consider and support moves to decolonize the curriculum, providing adequate space for a range of experiences and perspectives. This involves expanding what is taught and reconsidering how resources are used and distributed in higher education. This centers on the possibility of 'amplifying voices', allowing refugee voices to resound in curricula and in the ways education is taught and organized.

**Leon Cremonini** is a senior policy advisor at the University of Twente's Strategy and Policy Unit. He has been the Managing Director of the Ethiopian Institute for Higher Education (EIHE) at Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia) and a researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, the Netherlands, between 2006 and 2018. Leon has worked in Europe, the United States, and Africa, focusing on higher education policy reform in several countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. His main areas of interest include excellence policies, internationalization, quality assessment, university and program rankings, and equity and access to higher education, particularly for historically disadvantaged populations and refugees. He contributed to the 2019 UNESCO volume on student affairs in higher education with an introduction on the roles that student affairs play in refugee education. He has worked as a consultant to the European Union's delegation to Syria on the higher education in emergencies project and as a consultant for the development of the national strategy for higher education in Ethiopia.

Leon Cremonini analyzed a pilot project undertaken at Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, which aimed to develop blended learning programs for displaced learners. The talk focused on the gap that exists between educational possibilities and aspirations among refugees. Refugees often face a depreciation of their social and related capital, where their previous learning becomes devalued in new environments. Scholarship programs and opportunities for

refugees also tend to favor exceptional 'high achievers', and Leon Cremonini argued that this focus on exceptionality points to the ways in which those marked as 'different' must struggle harder than those who conform to the 'norm' when seeking access to higher education. In this way, higher education becomes a space for controlling a shared society, determining which voices are able to participate in the public domain. Refugee voices can be problematic and may need to be controlled in the public domain, and if exclusionary, higher education can serve this aim of controlling voice and visibility. Leon Cremonini poses the question of what types of modes of inclusive higher education can address this issue and allow for wider access to higher education and public domain visibility for refugees.

The link to the recorded webinar is here:

[https://zoom.us/rec/share/RLvzxmS2C\\_jRYX7STojLkCLe-xWF-w4jCdqcM0cQqAOsW875VPlvq-JxxPJSj5D.Ax0eeYEWBTehhoWH](https://zoom.us/rec/share/RLvzxmS2C_jRYX7STojLkCLe-xWF-w4jCdqcM0cQqAOsW875VPlvq-JxxPJSj5D.Ax0eeYEWBTehhoWH)

Passcode: Abe+82YD

**Webinar 5, presented by Refugees' Access to Higher Education Working Group, European Universities – Critical Futures, March 12, 2021.  
Duration: 58:55**

In the fifth session of our webinar series, former students with a refugee background, Cavid Nabiyeu and Malaz Safarjalani, were invited to share their experiences and perspectives as students on inclusion and communities.

**Cavid Nabiyeu** (original: Cavid Nəbiyeu) is a diversity rights defender from Azerbaijan. The preferred pronoun is [O]. Since 2012, Cavid has been working towards the improvement of the human rights of LGBTI persons in Azerbaijan. O is an International Advocacy officer at Nafas LGBT Azerbaijan Alliance, focusing mainly on the UN's human rights and development mechanisms. In 2016, O was awarded by the British Council as a global LGBTI rights influencer. Cavid is an OLIVE scholar and is currently studying for a master's degree in Human Rights at the Central European University. Cavid's research topic (for thesis) is "Claiming rights and justice for LGBTIs in the post-pandemic era."

**Malaz Safarjalani** studied Business in Damascus and later European Economic Integration at the College of Europe in Bruges. He subsequently consulted for the EU delegation in Syria on the design of a Higher Education access response mechanism. He joined the Jamiya Project in 2016, which aims to create Blended Open Online Courses. After gaining experience in tech startups, Malaz currently works as a Finance Officer for Out of the Box International, which consults on Erasmus+ projects for youth and micro businesses.

Cavid and Malaz's very insightful contributions can be analyzed through the lens of intersectionality. Their talks showed the complexities of being a refugee student, which cannot be reduced to merely "being a refugee" and "being a student." To help students with a refugee or forced migration background access, navigate, and complete higher education studies successfully, one has to take this complexity into account and go beyond reductive labelling. Both talks pointed to the fact that HE policies intersect at different levels with social policies, preventing students from experiencing smooth higher education pathways.

The geopolitical context also frames access to HE, defining which type of education is accessible to whom, where, and at what cost.

Both presentations and the following discussions pointed to the fact that the people who can and do make a difference in supporting students usually go beyond any limited categorization and embrace the students' full complexity, wealth, and depth as individuals. Also mentioned was the need to create safe spaces that make it possible for individuals to engage fully with diverse academic and non-academic communities and to contribute actively to higher education programs as full agents of their own educational pathways.

Link to the recorded webinar:

<https://zoom.us/rec/share/Mu5N78SEO7r0WaLqoG8iK9LqEu1VmXq63U33YNO9simDhqwALpcwKglThJ5Qpiyq.P-TVW96fxIqVDyBZ> - Passcode: 2Oz\$.zcZ

### **Webinar 6, presented by Refugees' Access to Higher Education Working Group, European Universities – Critical Futures, April 30, 2021. Duration: 1:12:25**

In the sixth session of our webinar series, our two guests were Ester Gallo from Trento University and Ian M. Cook from the Open Learning Initiative in Budapest.

**Ester Gallo** is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Trento, Department of Sociology and Social Research. She works on migration, gender, and religion, and her research extends to colonial history, memory, and class inequality with a focus on South Asia and Southern Europe. Her contribution, entitled "Displaced Scholars: Protection as a Transformative Scientific Inclusion," discusses the challenges and meanings of protecting "at-risk" scholars and how it can contribute to scientific inclusion in social science teaching programs and laboratory research.

**Ian M. Cook** directs the Open Learning Initiative's Weekend Programme in Budapest. He is an anthropologist with research interests in cities, digital media, environmental justice, and alternative academic practices. His presentation, entitled "Openings through Teaching / Teaching through Openings: Relationships, Expectations, and Adaptability within a University Access Programme," reflects on his teaching experiences within a university access program for displaced individuals.

Both presentations explored the complexities of providing protection and academic freedom to scholars and students who have experienced displacement. They highlighted the importance of creating inclusive and adaptable learning environments that not only address the negative dimension of freedom by removing obstacles but also embrace positive freedom by actively engaging with diverse perspectives and experiences. These efforts contribute to a renewed pluralism in higher education and open up opportunities for transformation and collaboration within academic communities.

Link to the recorded webinar:

<https://zoom.us/rec/share/I3tKRSLebQ6aRtSmdXTUUhUhlmIY0AyVs7CRvejO6Rq9Qhv9bzd9FZ7SCR0mj093.Os0NUehHtp9GiDcP> - Passcode: ?%@sZ4gT

**Webinar 7, presented by Refugees' Access to Higher Education Working Group, European Universities – Critical Futures, May 21, 2021. Duration: 57:00**

In this 7th session of our webinar series, our guests were Céline Cantat, Sciences Po, France, Ian Cook, Open Learning Initiative, Budapest, and Prof. Prem Kumar Rajaram, Central European University, Budapest & Vienna.

**Céline Cantat** is a research fellow at CERI, Sciences Po, as part of H2020 MAGYC which looks at crises and the government of mobilities. She previously conducted research into solidarity and activism by and for migrants along the Balkan route as part of Marie Curie fellowship at CEU in Budapest. Céline gained a PhD in Refugee studies from UEL with a thesis looking at mobilisation against borders and in support of migrants in different EU member states.

**Ian M. Cook** directs the Open Learning Initiative's Weekend Programme in Budapest. An anthropologist working primarily on cities, digital media, environmental justice and doing academia differently, he has published work on small cities, housing, vigilantism, land, environmental injustice and podcasting.

**Prem Kumar Rajaram** is Professor of Sociology & Social Anthropology at Central European University in Budapest and Vienna. His research is on the inter-relations of capitalism, race and displacement, and on critical approaches to teaching and learning.

**Opening Up the University: Teaching and Learning with Refugees**

The talk presented some of the ideas from a forthcoming edited volume – *Opening Up the University: Teaching and Learning with Refugees*. People called 'refugees' are particularly marginalised when it comes to access to higher education. Thinking about academic institutions - their structures, contents and boundaries – from the perspective of the exclusions they generate, and the experience of displaced students more specifically, teaches us a lot about the relation of universities to broader social, economic and political constellations. In the presentation, the speakers talked about their book and focused on a few chapters that deal with specific instances of opening up.

Prem Kumar Rajaram opened the webinar by presenting some of the key themes of the book - academic displacements, re-learning teaching and debordering the university. According to him, opening up the university is to call into question:

- how higher education has been institutionalized in ways that serve larger projects of political and economic power and domination
- how this leads to the exclusion or marginalization of certain populations from the university through pedagogic practices and institutional structures that reinforce and solidify historically contingent expressions of the relationship between knowledge production and publics.

Therefore, not studying refugee access to higher education in isolation is crucial.



The university is a site where the historically contingent relationship between knowledge, higher education, and publics materializes, and in its current form in Europe and elsewhere, this relationship has led to a narrowing of the university.

It is narrowed by Eurocentric epistemologies and pedagogies that ignore imperial colonial histories and patriarchal occlusions, by an increasingly marketized understanding of higher education as a 'sector of the economy,' and by its focus on the individualized careers of teachers and students.

University access and exclusion are experienced, challenged, and reworked across at least three different scales: 1) in the classroom; 2) in programs and institutions; and 3) at the level of the wider social formation. It is therefore useful to rethink the borders of the university in terms of the broader struggles and messy social inequalities and power structures and to address the common marginalisations of people called refugees and others who are marginalized in the university.

In particular, observing who gets into universities at any given time and place tells us what types of people and subjectivities are valued and perceptible and which are not. It highlights the narrowing of the purposes of the university: the cultivation of individualized life projects that serve national and capitalist projects.

Actually, the way entry to higher education is governed makes it open and welcoming to some, yet it imposes an obligation to adapt on more than a few, while outrightly excluding others.

These borders apply not only to who is accepted at the university but also to what types of knowledge production and curricula are made canonical, what types are tolerated, and what types are entirely dismissed. We see the effects of bordering practices in how value and meaning (positive and negative) are cast on students, knowledge, and institutional rules.

Ian Cook then presented three proposals for opening up the university.

- **Create education programmes for learners** by rejecting humanitarian frames of 'helping' or 'saving' 'refugees', recognising learner needs, and building relationships of solidarity
- **Allow for disruptive education:** 'Refugee students' should not be seen as meek, mild grateful receptacles of western knowledge or objects of study; we should strive to develop flexible approaches to learning with and through the diversity of student's skills, experience, knowledge and potential (more on this later...), and value teaching.
- **Defund the university management:** University senior managers are paid too much and there are too many of them; at a bare minimum they should justify high wages by defending academic freedom (but they often don't); complex programmes for displaced learners cost money.

He also shared two innovative projects to take up these proposals further:

- **Experts by Experience: The Scope and Limits of Collaborative Pedagogy with Marginalized Asylum Seekers** by Rubina Jasani, Jack López, Yamusu Nyang, Angie Deoparsad, Dudu Mango, Rudo Mwoyoweshumba & Shamim Afhsan
- **'Can We Think about how to Improve the World?'** Designing Curricula with Refugee Students by Mwenza Blell with Josie McLellan, Richard Pettigrew & Tom Sperlinger

Link to the recorded webinar:

[https://zoom.us/rec/share/yHoIxtQIUIMkmjR\\_vm1MpfPr73osOqSU0O5M9PpKKGVBtIdY8FjimsyD0iDmCdRu.sU3Im2uYcWlsWRIK](https://zoom.us/rec/share/yHoIxtQIUIMkmjR_vm1MpfPr73osOqSU0O5M9PpKKGVBtIdY8FjimsyD0iDmCdRu.sU3Im2uYcWlsWRIK)

Passcode: X6C=b%Tm

## Working Papers on University Reform

1. Setting Universities Free? The background to the self-ownership of Danish Universities, Jakob Williams Ørberg, July 2006.
2. Trust in Universities - Parliamentary debates on the 2003 university law, Jakob Williams Ørberg, October 2006.
3. Histories of RUC - Roskilde University Centre, Else Hansen, November 2006.
4. An Insight into the Ideas Surrounding the 2003 University Law - Development contracts and management reforms, Peter Brink Andersen, November 2006.
5. Who Speaks for the University? - Legislative frameworks for Danish university leadership 1970-2003, Jakob Williams Ørberg, May 2007
6. 'After Neoliberalism'? - The reform of New Zealand's university system, Cris Shore, June 2007
7. Women in Academia - Women's career paths in the social sciences in the context of Lund University and Swedish higher education, Susan Wright, October 2007
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