Crisis upon Crisis: Refugees and COVID-19

Hakan Ergin

Without any doubt, the refugee crisis is one of the heaviest challenges that has ever confronted international higher education. Universities around the world are being approached by unexpected guests knocking at their doors and asking for access. Policy makers are being forced to reform their admission procedures for international students and to consider applications from refugees who, more often than not, lack necessary qualifications or the documentation thereof, such as proof of previous academic coursework and proficiency in the host country's language.

Inevitably, this "forced internationalization" requires universities to address serious issues: getting involved in the complex bureaucracy of assessing refugees' (often incomplete) qualifications, providing them with financial aid, helping them overcome their traumatic experiences, while they also have to cope with social tensions due to competition for university admission with local applicants. While universities around the world are struggling with these issues, matters have been worsened by the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drastic measures have been taken to protect international students and help them continue their programs remotely during the pandemic, but this is hardly an alternative for refugees due to obvious disadvantages.

No Sweet Home for Quarantine

Universities around the world seem to be responding to the COVID-19 crisis in the same way. They paused face-to-face classes and instead began teaching online, shut down campuses, and asked students to isolate themselves at home until further notice. Meanwhile, international students were immediately advised to return to their home countries before borders closed. These well-intentioned measures to protect students are without any doubt praiseworthy. However, most refugee students do not have comfortable homes in which to quarantine themselves. Due to health-related, financial, and academic disadvantages, refugee students are more vulnerable to the COVID-19 epidemic than their peers.

First and foremost, in terms of health, refugee students are more at risk than other students. Before the epidemic, most were provided psychological support by their universities' counselling centers. Face-to-face services are now suspended, like other on-campus services. The benefit of online psychological support is a question mark with respect to refugees.

In this turbulent time of the pandemic, refugee students are also financially disadvantaged. The vast majority have to work while studying, but the suspension of university services has resulted in a pause of on-campus employment. Outside of campus, the situation is worse. The economic recession caused by the pandemic and the imposition of curfews are hitting sectors where most refugees work informally, depriving them of their modest incomes. The World Health Organization has been repeatedly stating that during self-quarantine, everyone should ensure good nutrition to strengthen one's immune

Abstract

COVID-19 is an unprecedented test on higher education. What is unchanged, though, is that refugee students remain victims. Their disadvantages are health related, financial, and academic, making them more vulnerable to the pandemic than other students. It is aggravating that this virus has been associated with "otherness." Nationalists and populists point at refugees as scapegoats spreading the disease. This adds to the hardship that they are currently suffering and, post-COVID-19, will linger as a threat.

9

10

system against the coronavirus. Unfortunately, for a refugee student without a regular income, this is an unaffordable luxury.

Finally, academic challenges magnify the hardships faced by refugee students. Universities are asking their international students to stay registered for online classes and complete them successfully in order to maintain their student status. However, efficiently attending online classes requires a good Wi-Fi connection and a computer equipped with a camera and microphone. In order to ensure the attendance of all students to online classes, some universities in various parts of the world started a new type of financial aid for students in need. Boğaziçi University in Turkey decided to pay the internet fee for two months for students who cannot afford it. Similarly, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Australia committed to pay up to A$1,000 to students in need of financial aid, to help them cover the cost of internet connection, software, hardware, subscriptions, and other digital materials.

These inclusive practices are likely to increase refugee students' participation in online classes but are offered by very few universities. Therefore, online course requirements such as attendance check, in-class presentations, assignments, and overall evaluation should be redesigned in consideration of the special circumstances of refugee students. Otherwise, online higher education is not a level playing field.

Post-COVID-19 Discrimination at the Door

The coronavirus has been associated with "otherness."

Refugee students are facing yet another serious challenge. The coronavirus has been associated with "otherness." Countries closed their borders to protect themselves from contamination originating from "other countries." President Donald Trump called the coronavirus the "Chinese virus." In a time when "others" are under suspicion, refugees—the most alien group in society—attract negative attention. Refugee camps with few COVID-19 cases in low-income regions are reported in the media as highly dangerous places—although the numbers of coronavirus cases in big cities of higher-income countries are much higher. Hungary's nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orban, stated that "there is a logical connection between migration and the coronavirus as both spread with movement." Matteo Salvini, the populist opposition leader of Italy, blamed African migrants, arguing that "the presence of the virus was confirmed in Africa," while the number of the cases in Italy itself was considerably higher.

In pre-COVID-19 times, refugee students were already *personae non gratae,* considered to be a financial burden to national budgets and competing with local candidates for admission to university. With the current pandemic crisis, exacerbated by nationalism and populism, refugee students may easily become scapegoats, as they are already tarnished in the media as unhealthy and carriers of the virus. The best way to fight this misconception is to remind people of those refugees willing to risk their lives in their host countries. There are many cases of refugees with healthcare education and experience from their home countries, currently offering their expertise to fight the pandemic, but blocked from doing so because their background is not recognized. (In the United States, undocumented immigrants working in the healthcare system are even being threatened with deportation.)

The pandemic does not create discrimination, people do. Equity must be preserved in international higher education, and individuals, rumors, or ideologies must not be allowed to deprive refugees of the right to education, especially in this time of great stress for our societies.

Hakan Ergin is a lecturer at Istanbul University, Turkey, and a former postdoctoral scholar at the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, US. E-mail: hakan.ergin1@yahoo.com.