

CONCLUSION

The difficulty for LA institutions to collect these data and indicators certainly does not imply that they cannot be part of the U-Multirank or other similar tool, to improve transparency in higher education in the future. To achieve this goal, there should be suitable incentives (increasing potential benefits, lowering transparency costs) for universities to participate. Universities should also provide the right technological, human, and financial resources to produce this information.

Information on the higher education system has the characteristics of a public good: it is nonexclusive and non-rival. If such information is indeed on a public good, then governments have a responsibility to guarantee the provision of this service. It is unlikely that each LA university will on its own initiative produce the necessary quantity and quality of data to satisfy this social demand for higher education statistics. In particular, it is unlikely that they will sustain the effort to regularly collect data on teaching, learning output, and internationalization. To achieve this goal, LA governments must engage in this innovative enterprise and encourage universities, through funding mechanisms and other incentives, to produce information based on performance indicators and to publish them on a regular basis. ■

The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Higher Education

HANS DE WIT AND PHILIP G. ALTBACH

Hans de Wit is professor and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College. E-mail: dewitj@bc.edu. Philip G. Altbach is research professor and founding director of the Center. E-mail: altbach@bc.edu.

The rapidly escalating refugee crisis in Europe has been dominating the international news for several weeks, but surprisingly it is only very recently that the higher education community has become alert to its role and to the considerable dilemmas it will have to face. It is relevant to speculate about the needs and challenges of higher education as a result of this crisis.

The massive exodus of refugees, primarily from Syria, but also from Eritrea, Libya, Afghanistan, the Kurdish territories, and Iraq, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, must be added to already significant numbers trying over the years to move from Africa to Europe. The motivations

for this massive migration are both political and economic: the refugees are escaping terrorism, civil war, and poverty in the countries they come from. Over the past several years the attempts of African refugees to cross the Mediterranean have been mainly perceived as a human tragedy resulting from economic hardship, and have received limited support from receiving countries and their communities and governments. The new influx of refugees from the Middle East, in particular Syria, seem to receive a more positive response, at least in Western Europe, although less so in some Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary.

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THE HUMAN CAPITAL POTENTIAL OF MIDDLE EAST REFUGEES

Why is that the case? In the first place, refugees from Syria escape a country where both the Assad government and Islamic State commit terrible crimes against the local population. They are perceived more as political victims (which fuels sympathy in the receiving countries), than as economic refugees. Refugees from Iraq and the Kurdish territories are seen in similar ways. In addition, and this is where education enters the equation, refugees from Syria, Iraq, and the Kurdish areas are perceived to be better educated and therefore, potentially easier to integrate into society and the labor market in the receiving countries. In the current competition for talent, these refugees are not only seen as victims and a cost factor for the local economy, but in the long run also as welcome new talent for the knowledge economy.

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While struggling with issues of quotas and capacity, Germany is grasping this potential, and other European countries are also beginning to frame their policies in more sophisticated ways. Although the humanitarian factor is understandably dominant in current official statements, the German authorities also make it clear that these refugees can also be an asset for Germany and other European countries in the short and particularly the longer term. German universities are expecting to accept approximately 10,000 of the 800,000 refugees that are now entering the country.

At least for now, there is little discussion about potential “brain drain” problems for Syria and Iraq. The immediate challenges overshadow long-term consequences, and in any case most European and other industrialized countries have shown little moral concern about retaining talent from poorer countries. The literature is filled with discussions of “stay rates” and utilizing foreign talent, without regard for the needs of the countries of origin. While one may hope that well educated Syrians and Iraqis will return home when the situation improves, statistics show that relatively few refugees actually do that.

RESPONSIBILITIES, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

In a few countries, students, academics, universities, and governments are beginning to explore ways to integrate young Syrian and other Middle East academic refugees, students and no doubt also scholars and teachers into the educational system. This can be done by increasing the number of scholarships, speeding up the credential evaluation process, and providing language training and facilities such as dormitories. Organizations like the German Academic Exchange Service-DAAD, EP-Nuffic in the Netherlands, and the Institute of International Education in the United States can play an important role in getting the refugee issue on the higher education agenda—and advocate for scholarships and logistical help.

The universities themselves are of central importance. They can act quickly and independently in many ways. They can cut red tape relating to the admissions process, open study places for refugee students, and provide counselling and other services to traumatized students and their families. Since most students will lack appropriate credentials, universities can, through testing and other means, determine appropriate placement for students. In many cases, language and cultural training will be required.

All of this requires the commitment of human and financial resources. In a time of financial stress, this will not be an easy task. Governments, NGOs, and organizations such as the European Union can, and should, help.

One additional challenge must be mentioned, since it is a major concern of governments in the United States and the United Kingdom, and perhaps elsewhere. It is the need to provide some assurance that refugees admitted to universities are genuinely focused on education and will not turn out to be security risks. For Americans especially, the memories of 9-11 remain strong.

The universities themselves will find that a positive response to this crisis will also yield significant benefits in terms of internationalizing the campus and providing the academic communities with opportunities for social engagement.

There are also plans to create special universities for refugees in the region. There are apparently already three initiatives by Islamic foundations to build such universities in Turkey. The challenges for such plans are to find the right teachers, to guarantee continuity and quality education. Creating a new university is in itself a very difficult—and expensive—process. Doing so for traumatized students will be particularly problematical.

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CONCLUSION

All these initiatives are commendable but the problems are enormous. As Riham Kusa wrote in *Al-Fanar Media* (September 1, 2015), the dilemma for a student is between paying a smuggler or seeking a scholarship. Unfortunately, the possibilities of success of the first option are higher than those of the second. The challenge for academic communities in Europe and elsewhere is to increase access of these refugees to higher education.

The longer the crisis lasts, the more difficult it will be to provide enough study places for refugees in higher education, and the more serious the brain drain impact is likely to be. Experience has shown that refugees who stay away from their home country for a long period and are well integrated in their new communities, are less likely to return. However, this cannot be an argument for the higher education community not to extend support to Syrian refugees, by offering more study places and scholarships for students, visiting scholarship positions to academics, and other measures. This applies to Europe, North America, and other parts of the world, and certainly to neighboring Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, which have remained largely uninvolved and have let Lebanon and Jordan take most of the burden. ■
