MIGRATION
LETTERS

# Highly skilled asylum seekers: Case studies of refugee students at a Swiss university

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## Abstract

The article argues that the applicability and value of "skills" depend to a considerable degree on the way in which a person enters a country. Based on a study on potential university students with refugee backgrounds, it shows how difficult it can be to transfer skills through the migration channel of asylum in Switzerland and how social and cultural capital may be reduced. The space in which asylum seekers live and operate is restricted in such intersecting fields as mobility, time, finances, languages, or access to information. In addition, the educational system has regulations regarding recognition. The article raises questions as to how education systems in the destination countries recognize, integrate and develop skills. It makes the case for re-assessing the very term "highly skilled", along with the notions and associations that surround it, as an empirical object of research, rather than accepting it as a category in its own right.

**Keywords**: Asylum; refugee students; highly skilled; refugees at universities; education.

## Introduction

This article[1] examines the concept of skills with regard to its limits and boundaries, by looking at the context of potential university students with a refugee background. It gives weight to the argument made in the introduction of this special issue that "skills are not valued in and of themselves; they are, rather, weighed in relation to a specific economic, social and political situation." I argue in this article that the migration path or channel through which a person enters the country (Sandoz, 2018) has a strong effect on the applicability of their skills.

There are different channels (Hercog & Sandoz, this issue) through which highly skilled persons from outside the EU enter Switzerland, the most important being work migration and family reunion. However, highly skilled persons also come through the channel of asylum[2]. Despite this, the general understanding is that the predominant channel is work migration and this is the focus of most academic studies on highly skilled migrants. Neither are refugees in the focus of studies on migration of the highly skilled, nor are highly skilled

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[2] Skills are not supposed to be relevant in the process of asylum, either during application or in the event of rejection (Hruschka, 2016, p. 127). The asylum channel is, for good reason, purely humanitarian. Despite this, studies also point to the fact that specific skills and resources such as narrative/language skills may actually influence the outcome of interviews in the asylum process (e.g. Blommaert, 2001).

migrants in the focus of studies on asylum (Mozetič, 2018; for studies on refugee students at universities in Australia see Joyce et al., 2010; Hannah, 1999). This blind spot shows how strongly the public and political notion of "skilled migrants" equates to "economically wanted" migrants, i.e. those who are in demand by companies and enter through the channel of work migration, and how research also builds on this understanding.

On the other hand, the refugee migration of 2015 has led, in the German-speaking countries, to wider public and political debate around the issues surrounding the potential and skills of asylum seekers and refugees (EKM, 2016). Both Austria and Germany have published statistics on the level of education of asylum seekers. In Germany, the numbers for 2015 show that 17,8 % of all adult asylum seekers had been to university (this number [includes] those who completed their university education with a degree as well as those who did not), and 20,4 % had completed high school before migrating (Rich, 2016: 5). Switzerland has taken measures to make use of this potential by providing special courses for vocational training and language competence for a faster integration into the employment market. In public debates, these measures are often linked with savings in welfare expenses (Bundesrat, 2015). Moreover, initiatives have developed in different European countries to ease access to universities for potential refugee students providing language courses, mentoring, buddy systems, or other preparatory courses (for initiatives in Germany see Schammann & Younso, 2016). There are even open online degree programmes at the Kiron University, and projects developing training material (e.g. S.U.C.RE.).

Despite all this – and very much contrary to the general perception that highly skilled migrants enjoy increasing mobility – highly skilled refugees are in fact subject to a number of specific limitations and find themselves dependent on a raft of government policies and agencies. I will exemplify this with qualitative case studies of four refugees who have tried to enter universities in Switzerland after completing high school, a bachelor degree or interrupted academic training abroad in their home country. After presenting the four cases in the following section, I shall argue in the third section that the transition and exchange of cultural and social capital is harder for those who use the asylum channel and explain that the refugee students are part of a space in which various intersecting areas of life are limited and controlled. I will then argue in the concluding part that research should consider the national political character of "skills" and its inter-connection with educational practice.

## Portraits

Spaces of migration and mobility are often conceptualized as transnational social spaces (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). However, the ways in which these spaces are structured vary according to the different migratory situations. The

team of the research project "Bildungsinstitutionen im Spiegel von Flüchtlingsbiographien afrikanischer Jugendlicher[3]" of the DFG/ Germany has used the term *"Raumgestalten"*, to describe transnational spaces in combination with the possibility for individuals' actions that is provided (or limited) by institutional structures (Schroeder, 2003: 380). Referring to Goffman and Foucault, they describe the transnational social space of refugee youths they studied in Hamburg as "total space", a space that is "to a very high degree characterized by the fact that structures determine actions" (Schroeder, 2003: 380, my translation). One could indeed say that the interaction of such institutional structures defines the very category of "refugees" – just as a different set of institutional structures constructs the category "highly skilled professionals" in the channel of work migration.

This concept of a space structured by intersecting institutions and regulations that affect various parts of a person's life makes eminent sense in the case of refugee university students, as exemplified in the following four portraits. Yet, policies and policy makers are, from an anthropological perspective, not understood as unchanging entities. Rather, they are involved in practices of exchange, interpretation, contestation, and transformation. The main focus of this short article, however, is on the perceptions, experience, co-creation, and navigation of the refugee space from the perspective of the potential refugee students.

All four case studies are part of a larger study carried out at three different universities in Germany, France and Switzerland.[4] For this article, I shall refer to the persons interviewed in Switzerland. They all took part in an introductory programme for asylum seekers and refugees at Swiss universities, launched by student volunteers and designed to provide information, first-hand experience of Swiss university life and support to enable them to gain full access to the academic system. The participants on the programme can take German language courses and listen in on regular courses as guest auditors only. The initiative also organizes a "buddy" programme, matching each refugee student with an enrolled student. The programme caters for around 20 participants per semester, of which, on average, two to four find a way to register as regular students per year. The interview partners were selected with the aim of

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[3] "Educational institutions as reflected in refugee biographies of African youths"

[4] The cultural anthropological research employed in this study is based on qualitative interviews, participant observation and document analysis in a Swiss, German, and French university. Altogether 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 3-4 potential refugee students, who were taking part in preparatory programs at the universities, 1-2 student volunteers and 1-2 university representatives in each university, as well as representatives from the cities. The interviews were conducted in 2017. Participant observation was carried out in meetings of volunteer groups and official information events. Documents such as webpages, newsletters and online conversations of the universities and volunteer groups were taken into account. In addition, local and national asylum policies and educational policies were analyzed. The research team consisted of Katrin Sontag and Tim Harder.

describing a range of contrasting situations[5], acknowledging, of course, that the "group" of refugees is extremely heterogeneous and only constructed by their legal status.

### Nuri (Swiss residence permit N: asylum seeking)

At the time of the interview, Nuri has been in Switzerland for one year. He spent 6 months in regulated camps with closure times, three months of which were in a bunker. Nuri is 26 years old. In his home country he had completed a bachelor degree and worked for a few years in his family's company. During his time in the camps, he says, he had no access to the Internet, to a mobile phone, or to any courses. In one of the camps he had books. Meanwhile, he saw people leaving the camps. He says about this experience: "And all of these things are by chance, I think it doesn't have any rules." After six months, he too could move on to shared housing which gave him more freedom. And yet his feeling of being helplessly dependent on an asylum process, which he feels he does not understand, remains, and he reacts by keeping silent. He tries not to raise any issues and avoids any contact with official agencies.

Nuri took part in the introductory programme organized by volunteers at the university and commented extremely positively on this experience. He particularly valued the feeling of being accepted and not being judged or asked about his status. He says: "I saw that some people care about us, and that we are important for some people. That gave me new energy." For Nuri, university is a way of retrieving some of his former life. He says he feels like a child, because he has to learn everything from the beginning and has lost everything he had built up over the last few years.

A few weeks after our interview, Nuri was accepted by the university as a regular student. The next issue was his finances, since it was not clear whether the social allowance provided by the government would be reduced or stopped when he became a student. Also, he needed additional funding to cover the university fees and study material. At the same time, he could not get a work permit or an income to support himself[6]. The situation had to be resolved at very short notice. A number of student volunteers supported him. They talked to government agencies and foundations, and even they did not find it easy to research and navigate the bureaucratic regulations. Finally, they helped him successfully apply for a scholarship.

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[5] The interview partners were selected from the students who were part of preparatory courses and contrasting cases were chosen with regard to gender, age, family situation, prior experience at university, country of departure, and path into the program. The cases presented here have been anonymized.

[6] For further information on financing education, and on the work situation see section 3.

## Omar (Swiss residence permit F: temporarily accepted)

Omar is in his early 30s and has been in Switzerland for four years now. He completed various vocational and academic courses and had his own business before coming to Switzerland. Omar took part in the introductory programme at the Swiss university, but left part way through, because he felt he needed to have his papers and work situation settled before he could think of further education. Omar's residence status is "F", which means that his request for asylum status has been rejected, but that he has been given a temporary right to stay, because he cannot for the time being go back to his home country. This status has to be extended every twelve months[7], resulting in an existence of insecurity and limitations. He left the university programme part way through, also because he was unable to find a quiet place to study in his accommodation and because the level of language was too high. He is allowed to work and he has several jobs, but his income goes directly to the local authorities[8], until he finds a permanent job. Omar has a strong feeling of hindrance, limitation and frustration in terms of his studies, career, finances, and his health. At the beginning, he says, he sometimes thought that it would have been better to have been killed in the war in his home country, but he also says that he feels a bit more relaxed now. Like Nuri, Omar uses the image of being a child again who has to learn all the rules from scratch.

## Samira (Swiss residence permit N: asylum seeking)

Samira came to Switzerland in 2015 in her early 20s. Her application process for asylum is still running. In her hometown, she had completed high school and enrolled at university when war broke out. She describes how difficult it was to even go to university in a situation of war. She came to Europe on her own and joined friends who were already staying in Switzerland.

When she finished high school, Samira wanted to study and she still hopes to be able to study at university in Switzerland. She joined the introductory course and is learning German. However, her high school diploma is not recognized in Switzerland. She would have to pass the ECUS exam in German in Zurich (Examen Complémentaire des Hautes Écoles Suisses), which costs 980 CHF, an amount that is difficult to afford. Moreover, preparatory courses for this exam are only offered in certain cities, and by private schools which must be paid additionally and are very costly. Like other interview partners, Samira also talks about the emotional difficulties, the stress and anxiety that have built up

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[7] Art. 85, Abs. 1 Bundesgesetz über die Ausländerinnen und Ausländer (AuG) vom 16. Dezember 2005, SR 142.20

[8] Social short-term assignments for asylum seekers and temporarily accepted foreigners are limited with regard to time and payment. Of the total wage, the person receives only 4CHF per hour. Exceeding amounts are credited for the social aid, as stated for the Canton Solothurn in SO: Handbuch Asylsozialhilfe 5.3.

over the last few years and how she wishes to do something and use her energy instead of experiencing a long process of searching, waiting, and losing energy.

## Sergej (Swiss residence permit B: recognized refugee)

Sergej has been in Switzerland for five years now. He had to flee when he had just finished his final university diploma and did not get the final certificate, even though he had completed all necessary courses. He is very actively trying to take part in courses at two universities and to find a way of either getting his studies recognized or doing a Swiss diploma. He is also looking at international online programmes at universities, but has not yet found a solution that suits him. As in the other cases, his university studies were not part of the Bologna system.

Sergej had to wait for five years for his asylum decision to be made, during which he was not sure what might happen next. Today he is a recognized refugee in Switzerland. When he thinks of his future, he still feels quite dependent on government agencies and the general political situation. In order to find ways into the job market while his university education remains problematic, he tries to do internships or other professional and volunteer activities to build up networks and gather information. He feels that he does not have similar starting conditions to Swiss people and says: "He [a refugee] does not have to be treated better than a Swiss person, but at least equal to a Swiss person. And be given the same possibilities. It is not about giving refugees more money or anything like that. Money does not help at all. We see so many examples of refugees receiving social aid for 10, 15 years. And that doesn't help. The opportunities must be the same, so that a refugee can study at university, learn the language and so on" (my translation).

## Obstacles in the Asylum Channel

The four examples show how the space that refugees find themselves in is structured and limited and how "structures determine actions" (Schroeder, 2003: 380). In fact, asylum seeking students are exposed to a number of factors that hinder them from investing their skills and accessing the university system. In this study, these factors include recognition of previous studies, mobility, time, finances, languages, the complexity of accessing and connecting information, as well as coming to terms with the past and the future. I shall now discuss these factors in turn.

In all four cases, the diplomas, degrees or completed semesters were not fully recognized by the Swiss system. So far, only in Nuri's case has a transfer of parts of his earlier studies been possible. Degree recognition means validation of the skills involved in the degree. This requires a lot of information, so it often takes time or even proves impossible. Things are even more difficult if diplomas did not get handed out in time or were lost due to the circumstances of the

escape, or if universities closed down or are not fully functioning anymore in areas of war. The process of recognition of foreign diplomas is a fundamental issue that has an effect on the career paths of numerous migrants (Zoeteweij, 2016). Sociologist Ilka Sommer analyzed the laws and practices that govern recognition in Germany and uses Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. The general notion that the value of different degrees is not 1:1, she argues, is a deeply inscribed construction, and not only affects individual careers but also produces and reproduces an unequal global social order (Sommer, 2016). The constructedness is revealed if we compare the regulations in neighboring states, as we did in this project with Germany, France and Switzerland. A Syrian high school diploma, for example, is recognized in Mulhouse (France) as a general university entrance qualification. In Freiburg (Germany), however, high grades are required, and in Basel (Switzerland) it is only recognized in connection with the Swiss ECUS exam. And yet all these countries accept each other's diplomas and credits within the framework of EU/EFTA[9] agreements. What this shows is that diplomas, degrees (and interrupted academic training) – what Bourdieu has called cultural capital – are a sensitive freight to carry. Their transfer is problematic, not least because the question of boundaries in transferring this capital is broader than the mere recognition of diplomas.

As far as mobility is concerned, during the first stages of the asylum process asylum seekers do not know where they will be sent to live and how long they will stay there. Upon initial arrival, asylum applicants are supposed to stay at one of the eight Swiss Reception and Procedure Centres (Empfangs- und Verfahrenszentren: EVZ) for a maximum of 90 days.[10] They are later sent to cantons.[11] While they are still in the asylum process, they are obliged to remain in the canton they have been sent to. Some students thus have to travel to neighboring cities or cantons in order to attend university. Even at this stage, they must sometimes check in at night at their accommodation, but rules differ[12]. Once registered, asylum seekers cannot move to another country. This means that it is impossible, for example, for asylum-seeking Syrian students whose high school diploma does not permit them to study in Switzerland to cross the border and commute to a university in France or Germany, where they would be able to study as other regular Swiss-based students do. On a very practical level, the camps or shared housing situations may not provide the level

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[9] EFTA: European Free Trade Association. Member states are Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, and Liechtenstein.

[10] Art. 21 Abs. 1 Asylgesetz (AsylG) vom 26. Juni 1998, SR 142.31.

[11] Art. 27 AsylG.

[12] The social security office of the Canton Solothurn, for example, recommends that the municipalities adapt a set of house rules in order to ensure proper operation. This recommendation includes presence checks (SO: Handbuch Asylsozialhilfe 4.2). Other cantons also provide the possibility of introducing such rules by the cantonal authority, e.g. Aargau (§ 19a lit 5 Gesetz über die öffentliche Sozialhilfe und die soziale Prävention (SPG) vom 06.03.2001, SR 851.200)

of quiet that students need to study, as Omar and others have mentioned in the field study.

The space is also limited in terms of how students can use their time. This begins with the circumstances of their previous experiences and migration. Some students mentioned that they felt they had already lost years in an area of war and also in the process of fleeing. Time is also an issue in the situation they find themselves in in Switzerland, where they are now stuck in the processes of asylum and diploma recognition and feel frustrated about losing time in this procedure. Among the many other limitations, one of the differences between international students and refugee students is that international students have time for preparation. They have time to learn about the new system, learn how to transfer their credits, learn about the language, and sometimes how to take advantage of a programme such as Erasmus and thereby connect with existing networks. In the refugees' case, this kind of preparation is usually non-existent due to their escape.

In addition, there are the problems of finance. First, the refugees' monthly allowance is tight and it is difficult for potential students to afford commuting, for example, if they live far from a university. Alternatively, they must be aware of how to apply for a special travel allowance with their social worker. Second, social welfare can be terminated when a person becomes a university student. This is due to the fact that it is not the main aim of public welfare to support education.[13] At the same time, depending on decisions of local (cantonal) authorities, some asylum seekers are not allowed to work. Asylum applicants with the status of "N" (still in the process of applying) or "F" (temporarily accepted) are not permitted to work, especially for the first three months.[14] After three months, a potential employer can apply for a work permit, but the employer must prove that there are no other qualified employees available (such as Swiss citizens, individuals with a residence permit, persons from EU or EFTA states.[15] The market situation can also be taken into account as part of this decision. These policies thus make it more difficult for asylum seekers to finance university education than for other students.

Most crucial of all are language skills and the ability to access and analyze regulations. This sometimes proves difficult even for the local university-experienced student volunteers with native language skills. For the students with a refugee background, lacking language skills or lacking information in their own language, or lacking computer skills, it is often an insurmountable hurdle. Understanding regulations and transferring information is particularly

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[13] For example stated for the canton Basel in "Merkblatt zur Unterstützung von Personen in Ausbildung" (Departement für Wirtschaft, Soziales und Umwelt des Kantons Basel Stadt, 2009), and "Sozialhilfegesetz" of Basel SHG § 2.

[14] Art. 43 AsylG.

[15] Art. 18 AuG, Art. 21 AuG.

difficult in Switzerland, as the rules vary between the Swiss cantons. As some cantons do not have a university, some students have to understand two different sets of cantonal law if they commute to a university in the next canton. A further issue is that refugee would-be students are sometimes discouraged when they engage with social services: while the refugees wish to go to university, the social services might try to point them towards starting work and becoming financially independent as fast as possible.

Further common factors that came up in the interviews were experiences such as family separation, which most of the students went through, continuing fear for the lives of family members, experiences on the trip itself, and the arrival in a completely new social and cultural situation. Social capital may already be lost, as social networks cannot be transferred. In addition, many had lost money in war or other circumstances.

The above mentioned factors commonly make the transfer and application of formal qualifications a costly affair and combine to create a situation of long-term uncertainty or discouragement with regard to academic career plans. Cultural capital (the value of the skills) and social capital (the networks that provide information) is reduced as a result of the refugees' journeys and the migration channel of asylum. At the same time, of course, it is important to emphasise that the actual skills do not change in this process. The only change is in how the skills are perceived, whether or not they are formally recognized and the degree to which they can be applied.

## Conclusion and Outlook: The Value of Skills

Unlike the migration process experienced by international students, or "expats", the "refugee space" (Schroeder, 2003: 380) is a situation which affects every area of life. Refugee students find themselves the subjects of a number of regulations and restrictions, which can combine with the circumstances of their migration to complicate or hinder the applicability and recognition of their skills. The four interview partners had all acquired academic skills, yet only one of them has so far managed to take a career step that arises from his skills. This situation raises questions about the degree to which "highly skilled migrants" and students are understood to be not necessarily those with the most education or widest experience, but those who have found the 'right' access points to Switzerland through the 'right' migration channels. "Highly skilled migrants" are deemed to have networks, an understanding of the system and market, and the time and means to prepare their move – possibilities, which refugees often do not have. Cultural and social capital may thus increase or decrease through migration also according to the circumstances of a person's migration and the migration channel used to enter a country, and be compounded by the different legal and educational systems.

In fact, educational systems, like asylum systems are deeply national projects and the current situation, with the increased number of refugee students now applying for a place at university, provides educational institutions with the opportunity to re-assess the ways in which students can engage and how they can give value to the skills brought by the prospective students. A programme at the University of Bielefeld in Germany, for example, has taken an interesting approach in this respect. Their critique was that the aim of programmes for migrants at universities is often to change the students' habitus to make them conform with the norms of the university. The programme in Bielefeld was designed to turn this tacit assumption on its head and also propose changes to the university habitus (Arslan, 2016: 502, my translation). They argued for the need "to recognize the cultural capital of migrants as legitimate knowledge at the university" (Arslan, 2016: 518). They attempted to achieve this by offering a number of new courses, such as language courses in Turkish as an academic language, or academic courses in Turkish. The project was discontinued for lack of general support. "Multilingualism as well as internationalization are important mottos at universities, but they refer primarily to prestigious languages such as English or French", as Emre Arslan, one of the initiators, concludes (Arslan, 2016: 516). There are other interesting projects, such as the Kiron Open Higher Education gGmbH with its vision of higher education that is accessible to people all around the globe by combining online learning with learning at different local universities. Also the above-mentioned DFG project with young refugees (mentioned at the beginning of section 2) envisions that "the space of education manages to emancipate itself from the geographical space" (Schroeder, 2003: 396).

As previously mentioned, many universities already offer very helpful and important special programmes, including introductory and language courses for refugee students, initiated by volunteers or the university itself. A valuable and practical step that became apparent from this study would be to offer better access to and understanding of the possible pathways for refugees, and more consultation with them, in order to keep them better connected and informed. Some universities, cities, or cantons like Basel, are already offering such close individual consultations.

What is apparent from this study for research of "migration of the highly skilled" is that the seemingly clear term of "skills" as used in public migration discourse is not the (objective), analytical category that it appears to be at first sight, but instead a concept that is very much determined by national, economic and political definitions. The value of "skills" can change. Referring to Max Frisch, Hruschka states: "Today, it is still human beings that are coming, not 'asylum seekers', 'refugees', 'third country nationals' or 'highly skilled'" (Hruschka, 2016: 131, my translation). "Migration of the highly skilled" as field of study must therefore be critically questioned time and again if research is not

unwittingly simply to reproduce the political, neoliberal categories for this type of migration, in which "highly skilled" becomes a euphemism for "economically desirable" or "acceptable". Rather, these terms and labels must be scrutinized for the images they evoke and the subtle or direct power relations that constitute the spaces they are framed in. When talking about the mobility and transnational spaces of the highly skilled, it is important to keep in mind that these spaces along with the opportunities they offer vary to a radical extent, depending not only on a person's skills or education, but on the channel through which they enter a country.

## Acknowledgements

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