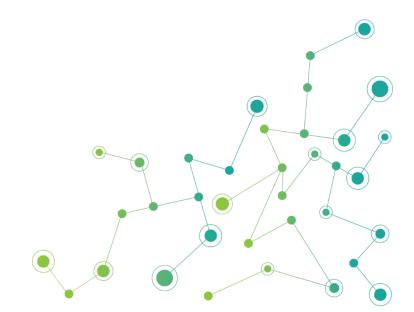


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# **REIS POLICY RESEARCH**



The status of refugees in Higher Education in Austria

This is a REIs Policy Resarch Paper on acecss to higher education for refugees in Austria, produced by REIs partner the University of Vienna.

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Refugee Education Initiatives, 2019.

Refugee Education Initiatives is an Erasmus+ Social Inclusion project with the aims of fostering access to higher education and social inclusion for people of refugee backgrounds. Its members are Central European University, the University of Vienna and the University of East London.

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## Introduction

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights guarantees education at every level as a right for all, including refugees, asylum-seekers and other migrants. Article 22 of the 1951 Refugee education guarantees the right to primary education and states that refugees may not have fewer rights to higher education, including university level, than other foreign citizens living in the country of their stay (UNHCR 2015). Article 18 StGG of the Austrian constitution guarantees everyone the right of profession and education.



#### Asylum statistics

Regarding education and asylum seekers, one important issue that needs to be addressed, is the deporation gap. The deportation gap is the numerical difference between the number of people who have to leave the country according to decisions taken by the relevant authorites and the number of people who actually leave that country (Gibney 2008:150). Decisions for the fate of asylum applications are made by the Bundesministerium fuer Inneres (BMI) the Federal Ministry of Interior in Austria

The Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl (BFA) - Federal Office for foreign and asylumpublishes statistics about refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in Austria. The year 2015 saw the highest number of asylum applications (88.340) since the Yugoslav Wars in



the 1990s. The number dropped in the following years to 42.285 in 2016, to 24.735 in 2017 and to 13.400 in 2018 (BFA 2018). According to UNHCR, a total amount of 5.626.914 Syrian refugees have been registered worldwide, as of beginning of August 2019. In the age group of 18-59 years about 33% are male and just under 20% are female. In the age group children and teenagers the percentage of refugees is very similar regarding sex. Above the age of 60 there are more women but the total amount of refugees above 60 is very low and women have longer life expectancy so that might be the reason for the difference (UNHCR 2019). In the year 2015, 24.547 Syrian refugees applied for asylum in Austria. When hard border controls in 2016 were implemented the number of asylum applications by people of Syrian origin dropped to 8.773, to 7.356 in 2017 and 3.329 in 2018, in



Austria (Statistik Austria 2019.06.13). The drop in these numbers can be partly explained by tough migration policies, which included the closing of the Balkan route.

BFA was able to decide on The 40.427 applications in 2018, granting 14.484 people (asvlum. subsidiary protection, protection residence permits for humanitarian reasons), which equals to 35% of all applications, denying 22.885 applicants protection (Zurückweisung, Abweisung, Duldung), which equals to 57% of applicants and 3.085 other decisions were made (cessation, Gegenstandslosigkeiten,). The top ten nations with the highest application rate were Syria of which 94 percent received a positive decision, Afghanistan (30 percent positive decision), Iran (40 percent positive decision), Russia (32 percent positive decision), Iraq (26 percent positive decision), Nigeria (4 percent



positive decision), Somalia (68 percent positive decision), Georgia (5 percent positive decision), stateless people (76 percent positive decision) and India (one percent positive decision). People with a positive decision are protected by the Austrian State through asylum, subsidiary permission protection residence for or humanitarian reasons. The number of open procedures has dropped significantly from 73.444 at its highest peak in 2015 to 3.501 in June 2019. In the first 6 months of the year 2019, 9.882 asylum decisions were made by the BFA (BFA 2018, BFA 2019).

The number of asylum applications submitted dropped to 13.746 with a little more than 1.000 applications a month in average in 2018 and fell slightly below 1.000 applications a month in average in the year 2019. In the first four months of 2019, 3.827 asylum applications were

submitted. The number of asylum applications submitted in Austria is currently lower than before the refugee 'crisis' in 2015. In the first 6 months of 2019, 6.844 people were brought out of the country. 49 percent of them (3.342) left the country voluntarily and 51 percent (3.502) people were deported forcibly (Statistik Austria 2019.06.13, Statistik Austria 2019.06.18).

## University level education

The number of students at university level in Austria has risen continuously with the expectation of the year 2001 when tuitions fees were introduced. In the winter semester 2017/18, 382.945 students were enrolled, of which 98.663 were international students (Statistik Austria 2019.06.13). This means that more than one fourth of students in Austria are not Austrian citizens. Approximately 90 percent



of those students come from European countries. Austrian students, students from EU-countries and students with same rights as with Austrian students, which is the case for people who are granted asylum, can study for free for the regular duration of a university degree, extended to two additional 'tolerance' semesters. Students at universities of applied sciences usually pay 363.63€ per semester. All students in Austria, including refugees, have to pay the students' union fee including the required accident insurance for the students' union, which is €20,20 in the winter semester 2019/20. Third country students (with a few exceptions) who are not entitled to the same rights as Austrian students have to pay the double amount of the student fee (726,72€) plus the students' union fee (20,20€) each semester.



Migrants in Austria are more likely to have university education than Austrians and depending on the ethnic origins are also more likely to have only lower level education than Austrians. Mid-level education is the typical Austrian education level. Migrants are also more likely to work in a position lower than their academic qualifications. Mostly this means they work below their level of education which means potential is lost, not only for the person but also for the society as a whole (Österreichischer Integrationsfonds 2018, Wiedenhofer-Galik 2016, Stadler/Wiedenhofer-Galik 2011).

#### **Educational training**

Education training other than university level education is additionally a very important step to train the youth and low qualified adults.



Schooling is obligatory for children up to the age of 15. After this age, children may stay in school until the age of 18, take the final examination and graduate (Matura), hence obtaining the qualification which will allow them to enter Higher Education or they may follow other kinds of professional training.

The qualification levels of forced migrants are different for certain regions. Forced migrants from Syria, Iran and Iraq typically have higher levels of education while most forced migrants from Afghanistan have low levels of education. asvlum status People with receive can professional practical training (Lehre) and thus receive highly valuable education for the labor market. Asylum seekers up to the age of 25 may only receive professional practical training 'understuffed' (Lehre) professions. in



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Understuffed professions are published by the Austrian ministry of social affairs and are professions were businesses desperately look for employees. The list includes, for example, the profession of cooks, qualified nurses and welders (Sozialministerium 2019, Wirtschaftskammer 2019). Due to a lack of German language knowledge and sometimes a lack of basic education, in general, refugee students in school face difficulties. This leads to the situation where students are placed at grades for which they are older than the typical Austrian students. Special tuitions in German are provided for those students in school. Basic education programs are offered for those who have never been to school. After completing those programs they may start professional practical training (Lehre).



Initiatives provide basic to (Pflichtschulabschluss) or professional education are highly valuable for the integration of the people receiving it, the labor market and the society as a whole because without those trainings lots of potential would be lost. Information of those initiatives must be further spread among forced migrants. Information of be found those programs can at Asylkoordination Österreichische or JungArbeiterBewegung (ÖJAB), where for example language courses and competency checks are offered (Asylkoordination Österreich, ÖJAB).

#### Institutional support

People with asylum status have a working permission in Austria. Applicants for asylum who wait on their decision have only very limited access to the labor market (e.g. community service, agricultural field work and newspaper delivering) and rigour income limits in Austria.

Recognized refugees in Austria are on equal rights with Austrians and people from the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA). Therefore, they have the same right to apply for scholarships as Austrian students and they are free of charge of tuition fees for the regular study period plus two semesters. However, neither a holder of a residence card for humanitarian reasons and a person which is under subsidiary protection, nor an applicant for asylum without a decision, is entitled to the same rights as Austrians and therefore cannot apply for a scholarship (OeAD 2017, ÖH). For people who wait for long periods for a decision on their asylum application, this time which can even be



years, time is lost without any personal progress either educationally or professionally. The situation of 'limbo' where these people find themselves can be debilitating and frustrating as language provisions or other possibilities for skilling themselves and hence integrate in the labour force are not available to them.

After four months of being a recognized refugee, the rights of the Grundversorgung becomes invalid. Afterwards the refugee may apply for Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung (BMS)/Sozialhilfe (needs-oriented minimum social welfare resources), if s/he does not earn enough. If that person starts to study at university level, s/he loses any amount of Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung/Sozialhilfe but this person has the right to apply for a scholarship as for low income students who lack



financial resources and whose parents cannot sufficiently pay for the student living costs. Asylum-seekers on the other hand do not have the right to apply for a scholarship. The maximum amount of public scholarship for students is €841 per month. (Fonds Soziales Wien, Studienbeihilfenbehörde) In the year 2017 in annual average 59.675 people who were granted asylum in Austria received Mindestsicherung and 9.293 people with subsidiary protection in Austria received Mindestsicherung. Mindesticherung is part of state law (Landesgesetz) and therefore varies in the states of Austria. In Vienna the maximum amount of a single household is €885,47 per month Before one can apply for Mindestsicherung one must use their savings and assets with the exception of their freehold



flat and savings not worth more than €4.427,35. (Statistik Austria 2018.09.06, Arbeiterkammer).

# Most important barriers to university level education for refugees

There are several barriers to refugees who want to study at university level. To be allowed to enroll on third level education one has to fulfill language conditions. Advanced language skills are an absolute requirement for the access to higher education and is a huge barrier for refugees, especially because most degrees offered at the Austrian universities are in German and far fewer degrees are offered in English. According to new changes at the university law, which is effective since summer semester 2019, people who wish to apply for a German language regular study program need to have German language skills of C1, a change from



B2. Moreover, for preparatory courses for university entry applicants need an A2 level or higher, even when they want to make a Vorstudienprogramm, to train for a regular study program. (Universität Wien).

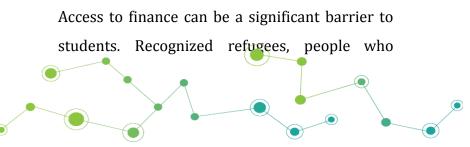
Recognition of previous qualifications is another barrier. Forced migrants who wish to study in Austria need to prove that with the qualifications they have, they are allowed to study the subject of their choice in Austria in their home countries. Proving academic qualifications can be a huge barrier because during the long fleeing documents can be lost or authorities in the home country cannot or do not cooperate.

Academic culture and skills might be different to students who have previously studied in their home country. In programs for refugees at university they can be trained to adjust to the



changes. Forced migrant students can learn new pedagogical approaches and demands in those programs to enhance critical thinking and improve digital literacy skills for those forced migrants who are digital excluded.

Lack of support and information is a barrier for forced migrants. Sometimes information is available only in German and is therefore not accessible for people without knowledge of the German language. Information for refugees should always at least be available in English and German. Due to experiences of trauma (e.g. escaping war, conflict and violence, the asylum process) forced migrants need additional support and information on how to overcome mental ill health that might have arisen.



under subsidiary protection and asylum-seekers with a high likelihood of positive asylum decision have access to public funding for language courses throughout Austria and basic education courses are offered as well. They should receive German language courses at least up to the A2 level (§ 4 Abs. 2 lit. a IntG). In Vienna there are also German courses just for women provided by the Viennese government to address gender issues. The situation is not the same in every state in Austria. The Language courses provision is fragmented and not offered systematically with several temporal gaps in between courses. In some states the intensity of the courses is low and in other states the waiting lists are long. Refugees have access to selected academic courses at certain programs such as MORE and OLIve, if they cannot meet the requirements for a regular study and wish to prepare themselves



further to meet the requirements such as language skills or academic knowledge in certain fields, they want to study/continue to study the subject that they studied in their home country. Students are generally not entitled to receive the Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung BMS/Sozialhilfe (OeAD study information for refugees).

### University level programs for refugees

There are several training courses available in Austria for refugees who want to study in Austria. The Österreichisches Austauschdienst informs as oead4refugees – Higher education for refugees about those training opportunities. Programs like MORE and OLIve offer the possibility to improve language skills and get a 'taste' of Austrian higher education. MORE is an initiative of the Österreichischen Universitätenkonferenz and all public universities of Austria participate in the program.

"The MORE program is aimed at persons who were forced to flee their countries of origin, regardless of whether they are still awaiting their asylum decisions or have already been recognized as refugees. The program offers orientation regarding a possible course of studies and assistance with academic integration. MORE students may be able to later enroll in a degree program or to continue one." (uniko Österreichische Universitätenkonferenz)

Other programs who aim at supporting refugees in the higher education include, but are not limited to the OLIve program at the University of Vienna, the Open Class for Refugees initiative started by Carinthia University of Applied Sciences (CUAS) to provide asylum seekers and recognized refugees with access to education and help them improve their future prospects, the refugee program at the FH Vorarlberg and the refugee program for education at the FH Joanneum.

OLIve at the University of Vienna is a programme designed for individuals with refugee or asylum-seeking status in Austria or another country of the European Economic Area (EEA) who have an interest in pursuing higher education in Europe. It is funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European and executed by the Media Commission Governance and Industries Research Lab at the Department of Communication of the University of Vienna, in cooperation with the CEU – Central European University, Budapest, and the University of East London.

## Feedback by OLIve students

OLIve students value the program because it helps them improve the required language skills in German, helps improving their scientific getting English. helps to know the European/Austrian academic culture, helps preparing for further studies to get to the next level degree (BA to MA and MA to PhD, etc.) or is used a preparation for university entry in additionally it is general and useful а opportunity to meet other people, make contacts and increase the personal network.

Programs like OLIve are therefore a good place to satisfy interests in knowledge and research of refugees or asylum seekers who do not fulfill the university entrance requirements in Austria. Students can expect obtaining economic benefits



as a result of education. The program is a tool for national reconstruction, meeting not only individual needs for the refugees but the development of the human and social capital necessary for the future reconstruction and economic development in countries or regions of origin.

## Recommendations

As forced migration due to armed conflict, severe violations of human rights or environmental catastrophe will continue to be on the policy agenda of governments and as such violent uprooting affects the lives of several generations, it is important for social cohesion and the wellbeing and prosperity of societies that this segment of the population is included as a standard and not exceptional group when



designing social and public policy. Inclusion of refugees in the educational trajectory of a society assists in the aims of social cohesion, personal and social development, progress and innovation, stability of the economic and political systems and enriches the creative and cultural worlds and economies of a host society.

Development of flexible administrative processes for the recognition of prior knowledge and for entry to higher education study is crucial. HE institutions can coordinate the development of assessment tools for the recognition of forced migrants' prior knowledge. This coordination is better achieved when it includes all curricula and combines elements of formative testing as well as summative assessment with a variety of assessment types. The outcome would ideally result in a form of recognized qualification in the



case of incomplete documentation of academic achievement (Matura i.e. school graduation documentation) and qualification for university entry.

Gender sensitive measures to attract female refugee students to Higher Education must be developed at both administrative and curricular levels to counter gender specific impediments to accessing and progressing in HE. Offering childcare facilities to would be an asset for the integration of refugee women into HE. Women and LGBTQIA<sup>1</sup> refugees often have to cope with multiple forms of discrimination, restrictions, harassment and violence. HE institutions and respective authorities should foster awareness on fundamental rights and provide measures against discrimination on any ground such as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> LGBTQIA: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Tossexual, Queer, Intersex,

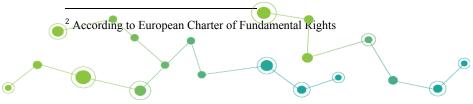


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sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup>

Inclusion of refugees in HE also means to promote fundamental rights, to offer "spaces" for empowerment, resilience and transcultural reflections. The creation of places of encounter and communication could be a valuable instrument to foster social cohesion, the value of diversity and the respective transcultural concepts of society.

The globally large extent of children, minor and youth refugees certainly requires greater responsibility on the part of HE institutions and



authorities. The effects of forced migration, separation from their family and the often traumatic experiences the youth should could be met by special programmes with a gender-sensitive and transcultural approach to build up their resilience and thus improve their capacitation to HE.

Access to information and computers and internet for enrollment for applicants at university must be ensured. Information should be provided in at least German and English. Material additional in languages is recommended. Support regarding language and understanding of formal regulations, different fields of education and career perspectives must be publicly ensured. Specific focus on language courses regarding age, gender and uncertain residence status should be made. Language courses should be offered for all asylum-seekers



to improve the integration process from the beginning. The provision of more language and ICT courses for females only must be enlarged and be offered in every state of Austria.

respective Overall. HE institutions and authorities should maintain constructive collaboration to underscore the commitment to the inclusion of migrants, forced migrants, refugees and asylum seeking individuals at all levels of gender and diversity policies at University at all level (e.g. curricula, staff, students, fields of studies). This can be understood as a principle of 'mainstreaming' through which appropriate risk assessment is taken to explore the concrete costs of lack of inclusion of refugee groups in education at the short and long terms, as well as the opportunity cost of not developing skills and loss of potential.



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