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National Center of Competence in Research –
The Migration-Mobility Nexus

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**What Are the Barriers for Asylum
Seekers and Refugees Who Want to
Enrol at a Swiss University?**

in a nutshell #9, December 2018

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Messages for Decision-Makers

Swiss higher education institutions are not easily accessible to students who are refugees. The most significant barriers are recognition of previous education, coping with the high costs of living while studying, and a lack of affordable language courses to C1 level.

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There are also challenges in the area of finding and understanding all the necessary information and putting it all together, so in many cases there is a need for individual advice and support.

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Access to higher education for migrants who reside and are able to remain in Switzerland is also important from the perspective of the need for highly qualified staff in the Swiss economy.

What is meant by ...

... refugees and provisionally admitted persons?

'Recognized refugees' are those whose asylum application has been approved, and who have been issued a B identity document. Apart from electoral rights, recognized refugees enjoy the same rights as Swiss citizens, including free choice of place of residence and entitlement to social welfare. "Provisionally admitted foreigners" are issued an F identity document for one year (can be extended). Restrictions apply to social welfare benefits, family reunification, work permits, and choice of place of residence.

... asylum seekers?

The term 'asylum seeker' covers all persons who have submitted an application for asylum. They are issued an N identity document, giving them the right to remain in the country until a decision is made on their case. After a stay of three months, they may be issued a work permit subject to cantonal requirements. Asylum seekers are assigned a canton following a period spent at a reception and processing center.

Some of the refugees forced to flee their home country are young people who have just graduated from secondary school, completed one or more semesters at university level, or already hold a first degree. They want to continue their university studies in Europe, but encounter a variety of obstacles standing in their way. They are, however, also supported by Swiss students and universities. What difficulties do they encounter, and what measures are especially helpful in this situation?

In Switzerland, there is currently political debate on what can be done to better integrate refugees into the labor market, and on the problem of their qualifications not being recognized, and therefore not fully accepted by prospective employers. The same problem exists in the educational arena. This problem has been compounded by the arrival of greater numbers of refugees in all age categories in the years since 2015, both Europe-wide and in Switzerland, and is now an urgent issue for which solutions need to be found.

Accordingly, a number of volunteer initiatives have been launched at European universities for the support of refugees who are interested in studying. Most of these initiatives have been created by students, for example at the Universities of **Basel**, **Bern**, **Zurich**, and **ETH Zurich**. Programs have also been developed by university administrations, such as 'horizon académique' in Geneva and the **sample studies in Lucerne** program.

In 2015, a study by Rich looked at the educational level of asylum seekers in Germany, as reported by the respondents themselves: 17.5% of all adult asylum seekers said they had studied at a university (with or without completing a degree), and 20.4% said they had completed secondary education. There has not been any systematic survey of the educational level of asylum seekers in Switzerland. However, the level of participation in the above initiatives clearly shows that there is considerable interest in the possibility of taking up a course of higher education among refugees.

Many of these initiatives are deliberately made available for asylum seekers and not only for those whose refugee status has already been recognized, on the grounds that asylum decision procedures are frequently lengthy, resulting in a difficult waiting period that could be

put to better use. In the interviews that we conducted with refugee students, it was clear that the waiting period (of five years, in one case) was depressing, and that the interviewees were highly motivated to begin or continue their education, and to put their time to good use. However, being an asylum seeker makes the situation even more complex.

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«Learning is my future. I don't want to live without having something to do.»

What Are the Challenges Faced by these Students?

The decision on admission for enrollment at an institution of higher learning is made by the institutions themselves. The situation of asylum seekers and refugees is, however, dependent on a wide range of rules and regulations in many different areas of life, which may make studying impossible in practice. The most significant of these are discussed below. In many cases, there are also difficult personal and emotional situations.

Recognition of prior school-leaving qualifications

Some school-leaving qualifications are recognized only in conjunction with the Swiss ECUS complementary examination of Swiss higher education institutions (Examen Complémentaire des Hautes Écoles Suisses). A prospective student must be enrolled for this examination by a higher learning institution. The required preparatory courses are provided by private institutes, and these – like the examination – require considerable commitment involved in terms of time and cost, which is a major obstacle for the group of refugees.

Prerequisites

Further obstacles include language skills, specialist vocabulary, and computer skills. Advanced language skills (C1–2) are necessary for the successful completion of a degree course, but language courses of this kind are not always readily available. In Basel, for example, the ‘**Offener Hörsaal**’ (Open Auditorium) association provides funding for this purpose.

Funding of university study

Prospective students are often uncertain about the options for funding their studies. As is also the case for Swiss students, social welfare does not generally fund education costs for university-level study. In some cases, too, prospective students do not have a work permit, and are therefore unable to fund their own studies, or if they do have a permit, they may be unable to find a job. Eligibility for scholarships is dependent on a range of factors, including resident status. Another potential source of funding is private foundations.

Assigned places of residence

Asylum seekers are assigned a place of residence in Switzerland, and, accordingly, the nearest university may not be easily accessible, or the commuting costs may be too high. Students can apply for assistance with these costs in some cases, but they must first be aware of how to go about this.

Finding the necessary information

Refugees often experience difficulties in finding the information they need and putting it all together. The situation is often quite complex, involving the asylum process, legal provisions on social welfare benefits, work permits, scholarships, and admission to the relevant university. There are few advisory bodies that are able to provide comprehensive assistance on these issues.

Refugees are often unfamiliar with the dual education system in Switzerland, which involves apprenticeships and studies at a university or university of applied sciences, as national education systems vary considerably. Nursing occupations require a higher education qualification in some countries, for example. So the first step is to check that university-level study is in fact the right path for the prospective student, or if another form of access to the desired occupation would make more sense.

«*Studying is the only chance for me to get back a part of my life. I don't know if they could give me any working permit, but it's important for me to find some way to pay fees and costs.*»
(Interviewee holding a bachelor's degree, now successfully enrolled)

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«The rules and regulations in many different areas of life often mean that asylum seekers and refugees are unable in practice to enroll at a university.»
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Existing Initiatives at Universities

At many Swiss and European universities, there are already programs and projects in place, organized by students on a volunteer basis. These initiatives cover advisory support, language courses, arranging ‘buddies’ (Swiss students who can guide their refugee counterparts through the system), cultural activities, and the opportunity to sit in on courses before being officially enrolled. Unfortunately, the credits obtained in this situation are often not recognized following their subsequent enrollment. A good example of the opposite situation is the ‘**horizon académique**’ initiative in Geneva, where the grades obtained by students sitting in on a course are in fact credited to them following their enrollment at the University of Geneva.

The enrollment process as such is still a major problem in many cases, however. In Basel, for example, where the preparatory programs offered by the ‘**Open Auditorium**’ initiative have been attended by up to 40 people a year since its inception in 2016, only two to four students a year end up actually enrolling at the university, for the reasons mentioned above.

These programs do, however, make a valuable contribution. As well as providing some very important information, they give refugees a space for social interactions and making useful contacts, and they are also an enriching experience for the student volunteers.

The Project

The **research project** was carried out from January 2017 to June 2018. The authors compared the situation of potential students with a refugee background at a Swiss, a German, and a French university. To ensure the inclusion of different perspectives, interviews were conducted in each case with three to four refugees, one to two volunteers, one to two university representatives, and representatives of municipal authorities or social services/integration services. They also attended community information events, held a range of informal discussions, and analyzed relevant laws and regulations.

«*Sure, the Open Auditorium program gives me the chance to attend lectures, but more importantly I am able to get an idea of the way things work at a university in Switzerland, and to get to know people and make contacts.*»
(Interviewee, left home country just before graduating from university, not enrolled at a university in Switzerland)

What Measures Would Be Helpful to Address this Situation?

At the university level, an effective approach, along the lines of what is being done at the University of Geneva, is to establish a specific structure for this purpose and bundle all the relevant information in a funded advisory service. Important information on the topic is now available at perspektiven-studium.ch. Financial support or institutionalization of the volunteer initiatives would be important to ensure the sustainability of programs that have already been established.

At the municipal and regional levels, individual support by cantonal agencies, such as the ones in **Basel (City)** and Graubünden, has been successful. These agencies make it easier for refugees to find a suitable career path or gain access to the education system. At the national level, it would be wise to fund language and preparatory courses at universities. Language courses would need to be offered up to C1 level. In Germany, for example, the **integra** program provides national funding for such courses.

It is especially important to simplify the admission and qualification recognition process, or at least to provide funding for preparing for and taking the ECUS exam.

Fairness in Education – Our Summary of the Situation

Behind the specific challenges and possible measures to address the situation, there are some larger questions, such as:

How and in what way should universities be international institutions? An international profile is important for universities in the areas of research and teaching, but there is potential for making higher education in Switzerland still more international.

How open and flexible should the higher education system be, and how important is this for the labor market? Currently, the Swiss model is to integrate refugees in the labor force as quickly as possible. There are certainly good reasons for doing this, but there are also some risks: competition in the low-wage sector, a shortage of well educated employees, and social segmentation in terms of opportunities for education and building a better life. Switzerland needs highly

qualified employees, and it makes sense to provide training to those who have the potential to be successful and are already living here – many of whom are likely to remain in Switzerland.

Access to education and fairness in education is a social good that must constantly be renegotiated. The difficulties faced by refugees is just one facet of this problem. Other (potential) students are also affected by access barriers. Providing support for refugees along the lines of the initiatives described here would help to create a more level playing field.

“I like learning, because it’s my future. I think it’s everybody’s future. But my wish is to be an important part of Switzerland. I don’t like to live without doing anything in my life.”

(Interviewee, holder of a bachelor’s degree, now successfully enrolled)

Further Reading

Information on higher education access for refugees in Switzerland from the Swiss Student Union:
perspektiven-studium.ch

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The Mobility of the Highly Skilled towards Switzerland

A project of the “nccr – on the move” Walter Leimgruber, University of Basel

Recent encouragement of skilled immigration is mostly explained by the changing needs of the Swiss economy. However, access to the labor market differs not only according to foreigners’ level of skills, but also according to their country of origin, mode of entry and field of specialization. The aim of this project is to reflect on the notion of highly skilled migrants by (1) analyzing its role in Switzerland, (2) observing the strategies of highly educated migrants to access better life prospects and (3) investigating their influence on today’s society.

In a nutshell #9 is based on a subproject which investigated the situation of potential students among asylum seekers and refugees.

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The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies and aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics and law. Managed from the University of Neuchâtel, the network comprises fourteen research projects at ten universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Zurich, ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Northwestern Switzerland.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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