



From the Camps to the Campus: Refugees' Experiences in Higher Education through Their Narratives

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Abstract

This study explores eight refugee students' experiences in higher education, more specifically, in a private American College in Greece. The qualitative methodology was followed by using narratives based on the students' personal stories and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Using a thematic analysis, main themes are identified and discussed in the findings, such as stability and citizenship, financial and language barriers, racism, biases and discrimination, and sense of belonging or exclusion. Thus, this study focuses not only on the difficult route towards a better life and the struggles of their individual unique stories to give another perspective and challenge existing stereotypes that apply to refugees, focusing more on their remarkable resilience to learn and evolve and setting them as an example of strength.

Keywords: Higher education, integration, refugees, resilience, youth experiences

1. Introduction

The huge demographic changes observed in modern societies are largely related to the effects of economic, social, and political globalization. People, in an effort to survive or improve their living standards, choose to move and settle down in countries all over the world (Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2023; Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021).

With regard to the Greek context, Greece is an appealing destination for migrants and refugees -permanently or temporarily- given that the national population census in 2021 shows that immigrant citizens account for 11.34% of the total population with the majority of ethnic groups being mostly Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Pakistanis, Georgians, Ukrainians, Russians, Armenians, Syrians and Afghans (Greece Immigration Statistics, 2022; Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2023). In addition, according to the UNHCR Operational Data Portal, in 2023, approximately 41.266 people arrived in our country who were recognized as refugees, whereas the picture is similar for the year 2024 (Greece-UNHCR Data Portal: See and land arrivals, 2024).

As a response to this reality, the Greek state has taken measures to shield formal education through two routes since education is considered one of the most fundamental rights of all humans, and each level of education is of great value and gradually builds the skills needed for the refugees' smooth integration into the society. To begin with, pre-existing language support structures were reformed, and reception classes and Zones of Educational Priority (ZEPs) began to operate according to Law 2413/1996. The aim of the ZEP sections is to provide immigrant, refugee and Roma students with intensive lessons in the target language, as well as to help them integrate into the Greek school reality. In addition, structures for the welcoming and education of refugees were organized as separate classed housed in school premises (Bachtsiavanou et al., 2023; Karanikola & Pitsou, 2015).

However, according to relative research studies, emphasis is given more to primary and secondary education rather than to higher education (Vasilopoulos & Ioannidis, 2020). The reason for that is that only a small number of refugees are interested in attending university courses, with a lack of linguistic skills as the main drawback (Saiti & Chletsos, 2020). Tertiary education has certain requirements, including a high level of language competency, as well as secondary educational qualifications. As a result, refugees' uncertain circumstances, unstable legal status, lack of motivation, and educational gap hinder most of them from accessing higher education (Tzoraki, 2019). Only 3% of the 25.9 million refugees globally have access to higher education in the host countries (HNNHCR, 2019).

In addition, initiatives for higher education are mainly taken from Greek universities with European or private funding. Apart from the programs designed related to refugees, such as special language programs or additional help accessing higher education, they provide long or short-term seminars for teaching training or training of other professionals working with refugees (Vasilopoulos & Ioannidis, 2020). In the meanwhile, various projects related to intercultural education and the refugee crisis are running from these universities in cooperation with other universities abroad, and some Greek universities take part in a series of projects that help refugee scientists to integrate into European academic institutions, develop their academic career and skills and restart (Tzoraki, 2019).

It is also worth to note that it is rare for young refugees to enter a Greek public university mainly for two significant reasons. They don't have sufficient knowledge of Greek and they lack documents as a proof of their academic qualifications (Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021). In Greece, the majority of the refugees (70, 94%) lack any documentation as a proof of their previous educational qualifications (Saiti & Chletsos, 2020). Facing difficulties passing the entrance exams and accessing the Greek public universities, an alternative option for refugee students seems to be to apply for a scholarship and enroll at a private college. In private educational institutions, the language of instruction is English, and the language obstacle may be overcome faster because it is a language spoken by most people worldwide. Unfortunately, there is a limited number of scholarships given to refugee students, so it could be a good idea for more courses with English as a language of instruction to be created in the public universities as an option.

2. Research Methodology

Narratives are authentic and very powerful life stories showing parts of the refugees' lives that can liberate and uplift them and at the same time inspire the readers or the listeners (Harrel-Bond & Voutina, 2007). Giving refugee students the chance to tell their stories, you give them 'voice' and make them feel that they are not alone in their struggles and that there are people who support, understand and encourage them. In general, narratives for refugees are the best resources they have and we shouldn't underestimate them (Mupenzi, 2018). Through them, different perspectives are brought in the light of research and a more humanistic focus on the individual experience within the process of social change.

Regarding ethics, which is an integral part of this research, an attempt to extend it throughout the entire research process -from literature review, theoretical underpinning, research aim, and methodology to data collection and analysis- was made. Thus, the participants had the right to self-governance, liberty, and freedom, whereas the researcher had the obligation to promote well-being and maximize the benefits for both the students and the society, to minimize risk and avoid any harm, to assure confidentiality and that all individuals should be treated in a fair and equal way, and finally to build trust (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2016; Gay et al., 2012).

The scope of this research is to present refugee university students' experiences in the new country and educational environment and how future goals, their inner strength, and resilience shape the way they evaluate their college education. The main research questions are: (1) Which barriers hinder the refugees' access to higher education? (2) What are the main challenges that refugees face as students in higher education? (3) What role do language and cultural, ethnic, or religious identities play in the acculturation process of the refugee students? (4) In which ways do their higher education studies empower and motivate them towards a better life?

2.1. Participants

The convenience sampling process was followed, as the main criteria for sample collection was the accessible population for the researcher and the participants' characteristics needed for the research (Creswell, 2016). More specifically, the participants in this research are a mixture of male and female refugee students; six men and two women. Most of the participants have lived in Greece for some time, and they are not newly arrived refugees. Additionally, participants' ages range from 23-47, and some of them have already started a university degree in their countries, but they have not managed to finish due to war conflicts and forced migration. They are mature students, a bit older than the average students due to their displacement and disruptive education. Some of them enrolled in a Greek high school, and some had only informal education before accessing higher education. Their countries of origin vary, and they are mainly from Afghanistan or Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Ghana. Seven of them are attending undergraduate courses and one of them has managed to finish his undergraduate studies in the college and continued his studies at a postgraduate level. This student is the one who contacted with most of the participants who took part in the research and the one who works in the college assisting students facing difficulties during their studies.

2.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

A demographic questionnaire has been given to the participants about their age, gender, birth location, studies and any other languages spoken besides English. Then, the participants were interviewed individually in English, and the duration of each semi-structured interview was thirty to ninety minutes. The data was collected through the recorded interviews, and the notes were kept. A reflexive journal is also another useful tool that was used for further self-reflection on any expectations or bias, assumptions, or ideas in general about the research itself and the participants (Auberbach et al., 2007). Follow-up discussions and clarification questions were needed and arranged. The interviews and the collection of the data took approximately two months due to different schedules and lack of free time for the participants, as most of them worked and studied at the same time.

Themes were identified and the data was coded according to these themes using the thematic analysis approach because it was easier to manage the vast amount of information with this way (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Before the interviews, the participants were given a consent form that informed them about the study. The data was developed 'bottom up' from the narratives, systematized and coded, then analyzed in the light of the existing literature with direct quotes to illustrate the most important themes. Limitations and further suggestions for future studies were identified because the interviews were not taken from a wide sample of refugee students from different educational institutions around the country, as in a larger scale research, but from a small number of refugee students studying in a private American college (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Auberbach et al., 2007; Gay et al., 2012).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Barriers and Challenges Accessing to Higher Education

It is noticed that there is a strong commonality throughout the literature review that refers to the experiences of higher education refugee students in different countries, especially concerning the barriers that both prevent refugee students from accessing the above-mentioned measures primarily concern primary education and succeeding once they enter their studies. Even though there is a rich diversity within the group of refugee students, there are many common experiences that connect them (Stevenson & Baker, 2018). In this paper, results of previous studies will be compared with findings in this particular one, summarizing and discussing some of the most important themes presented.

As cited in the literature, this journey towards accessing higher education is one with many obstacles. To begin with, perhaps the most important challenge that refugees face is their legal status, while accessing universities and during their studies. Leave is only guaranteed for a certain period of time and this uncertainty about their status can cause additional psychological stress to those waiting for a renewal. All these systemic arrangements, and these "unfreedoms" associated with legality can put refugees in the limbo (Sen, 2002). Citizenship is essential for the students to better plan their future and have stability in their lives (Dereli, 2022). P₁, a political refugee from Turkey and a participant in the study, stresses that:

"There is so much psychological pressure; to apply for your residence permit, to wait, and to miss so many opportunities in the meanwhile. With the last regulations of the government, it is so hard to renew your ID. It takes long and you have to live under fear and the risk of losing everything, your job and your studies."

Another huge drawback is the language barrier and the inadequate language skills that prevent not only the integration to all aspects of life but also access to higher education (Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021). Naidoo (2015) stresses the importance of language learning and the role of schools in the transition process from secondary to higher education. Earnest et al. (2015) shows that participants, who had either spent a few years in high school or who had done a preparatory course, were more prepared compared to other students who directly entered a higher education institution. With this way, the refugee students had the time to familiarize themselves with the new language and culture, perhaps a different educational system, or different teaching styles and the transition was smoother.

All the participants in this study attended courses in Greek at some point during their stay, but their level of proficiency varies. Most of the participants through self-study and a daily interaction with people try to improve their language skills. Some others' experiences are different because they went to Greek schools and they got a lot of support from their teachers and peers. Despite the difficulties they managed to learn a completely different

language in a different educational environment and system in a relatively short period of time thanks to their self-determination and persistence.

P₂ is the first accompanied child from Moria Camp that went to school and as he says that he: "had to do ten times the work" so as to succeed. P₃ got rejected from three schools in Samos before attending and completing high school with the help of his teacher and peers. Most of participants had been planning to learn Greek in order to study in a Greek public university, such as two female participants P₄ and P₅, before they were given the chance to study in an American institution. Applying in such institution, where all courses are in English, minimized the language barrier for the refugee students who were accepted in the program, as English is an international language spoken from most young people worldwide. Some of the students spent a year studying English, which was easier than learning Greek, in order to be accepted in the college. Also, the fact that they study and work mostly in international environments as interpreters for various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), with English to be the main language of communication with others, made the need of learning the Greek language less stressful for the participants of this study compared to the participants in other studies.

Furthermore, documents and credentials, such as birth certificates, school or college diplomas and examination results, may have been left behind or got lost which can be a significant issue while applying to enter a university or college (Crea, 2016; Arar et al., 2020; Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021). Shakya et al. (2010) highlighted the need for a more sensitive and flexible system for accessing diplomas and degrees from back home. Another persistent issue that is well presented in research with refugee students is that their previous studies are not always recognized, and together with disruption of previous education can restrict or delay their future studies (Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Shakya et al., 2010; Stevenson & Baker, 2018; Karanikola & Palaiologou, 2021). These procedural barriers can discourage refugee students because searching for solutions or alternative ways to get the formal educational certificates and identifications needed can be a time-consuming process and often without adequate help and assistance. At times even the application procedure can be complicating for the newcomers causing confusion and misdirection (Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Shakya, et al., 2010).

In addition, lack of financial means can be stressful in various ways. Accessing and finding information for different programs or scholarships, lack of financial aids combined with high college fees in some countries can hinder access to higher education (Lambrechts, 2020). It should also be mentioned that the number of students that have access to these scholarships is usually small compared to those who apply for one. My participants were selected within hundreds of refugees who applied to get a scholarship from the American Embassy in cooperation with the American colleges in Greece through the program "Education Unities: From Camp to Campus".

3.2 Experiences of Participating in Higher Education

The first step towards higher education requires support in numerous ways such as financial, emotional and social. The literature suggests that after accessing higher education, there is a need for financial means for students to finish their studies, as we have already mentioned previously. Even if they are eligible for a scholarship, this cannot cover all the expenses, so many of the students may not manage to finish their studies or have to take an additional work to make ends meet (Joyce et al., 2009; Crea, 2016; Mupenzi, 2018; Naidoo, 2019). P6 points out that:

"When you help students enter higher education and you give them this unique opportunity, you also need to find ways to support them to finish it."

All of the participants admitted that the most important obstacle is the financial one. Employment is considered more important than education because of their survival needs. Many of them have to even support their families who live in different countries, as P6 who has to send money to his family that fled to India. A different set of constraints are evident in the case of P5, a single mother with two children who works full time. She refers to the lack of support from the Greek State as:

"The Greek state didn't support me financially; I had free accommodation just for a year. I have to pay for everything."

A further oft-mentioned issue that impacts on student's participation and success in higher education is the personal connections and the importance of forming friendships and feel accepted. From the students' perspective, as presented in the literature, connecting with others is not always simple for higher education students because of the 'stigma' of their refugee identity and the discrimination they have encountered (Molla, 2019). P4 describes it vividly:

"It is like a wall because you never know how people will react. Some people act with kindness, some people don't care at all but there are some people who told me that I am a threat to the national security. You get all ends of it. You never know how people will react; sometimes it's scary."

Feelings of non-belonginess are common and that makes many refugee students not to want to mention their refugee background (Shakya et al., 2010; Morrice, 2013; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Dereli, 2022). P7 says that:

"Sometimes I feel like an alien, an outsider and it is hard to get in the social circle."

It is a slow and prolonged process to adjust to a new life and environment and students often find it hard to create a strong bond with their fellow students. Most students cannot fully integrate in university life because of all these financial responsibilities too. Only those who have fewer financial burdens and the support from their families, such as P3, can be more sociable and relaxed which are usually rare cases.

Displacement is also a big challenge that others such as international students have not experienced because they were not forced to leave their countries. For refugees leave in the receiving country is only granted for a certain period of time and this uncertainty over status can cause additional psychological stress to those waiting for a renewal and affect all parts of their lives, including their studies (Dereli, 2022). All these experiences and struggles of the refugee students' daily lives are a source of additional stress and make it difficult to relate with the experiences of the other students. The experiences of living in a refugee reception camp, what they have seen and felt during their journeys are all unbearable to imagine, hard to understand and identify (Joyce et al., 2009; Mangan & Winter, 2017). On the other hand, refugee students are proud to have their student identity which is a new identity for them, because in the refugee camps they used to talk mainly to people with the same problems and that often creates frustration and negative feelings (Dereli, 2022). They try to stick to their student identity instead because with this way they feel safer. Rasoul says that:

"It is not that I walk around, and everyone knows that I am a refugee. Everyone knows me as another student which I am another student."

Additionally, the distance from their families affects refugee students to a great extend because family is a source of power and support and the inability to be with their loved ones is a source of distress that can affect their studies and their relationships with the others (Joyce et al., 2009; Mangan & Winter, 2017). Most of them have to support their families financially and even send money back home which make coping with their college responsibilities even more difficult as we have already mentioned above (Joyce et al., 2009; Shakya et al., 2010; Crea, 2016; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Dereli, 2022). On the other hand, support from the family or from a particular family member is a source of power for some students and can significantly contribute to their academic success. P₃ sees his father as a role model and P₄'s mother was the one who did not let her stop school. P₅ wants to be herself a role model for her children and secure a good job that will allow her to support her family. The experiences of members of the family, parents or siblings, which have been in school and acquired education in higher education encourage and inspire the students to a great extend to do the same and follow their steps.

The literature also reports that when it comes to the connections with their professors, the tutors in most studies seem to be available to open a dialogue, are kind and willing to help and answer questions and most students have much more informal relationships compared to what they were used to having in their countries of origin. Informality, engagement, flexibility, and proximity are common in their daily interactions with their professors. However, they may face difficulties because of the differences in the education systems, but their teachers seem to have a positive impact on their lives and try to help them overcome them as in the case of P₅ (Joyce et al., 2009; Dereli, 2022).

3.3 Self-determination and Resilience

Refugee students are survivors, they do not take anything for granted and they are highly adaptive. The fact that they are given a second chance in life makes them determined to convert their visions into realities (Mupenzi, 2018). They have been through adversity and for that reason they developed strategies to be able to cope with all kinds of challenges. One of their strong characteristics is their strong optimism. P5 always sees the glass half full and "never give up" is her motto. Similarly, P3's kind of mantra, that he keeps saying to his heart every day "All is well," gives him the strength to fight. Education for them is the ultimate goal that they value the most. Nothing comes easy and for that they have strong determination. They also have a strong sense of responsibility. P7 says:

"I want to educate myself enough and go back to help my people and my country. When I see people and children crying, their helplessness, I feel them like they are my own family, I feel myself in their place and I feel their pain, very intense. I am obliged to do something; I have this responsibility on my shoulder. To fill this responsibility gives meaning in my life. Sometimes I feel I have the most difficult past in the world. Sometimes I feel that I am trying for the impossible. Being realistic and seeing all the facts, there is a chance of 99% of failure but I am hopeful for that 1% I have."

Higher education helps refugees to develop a "critical consciousness" by giving students a voice in their own communities and empowering them to create change (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010). When the war in Syria ends, P8 wants to write and direct stories, create films and through them unite people and make them think about their mistakes. P6 wants to raise awareness about human rights of refugee people through the short documentaries he creates and seeks for change that won't come in one day, as he says, but it will come through collective work and solidarity. P4 wants to go back to Middle East and defend women's rights, opening an NGO and starting a movement. They are all strong people with difficult past that shouldn't be marginalized but set as an example.

Access to higher education can help refugee students serve as roles models in their communities and inspire others (Wright & Plasterer, 2010). One way that students such as P5 help others is by providing psychological support to members of the community, particularly those who are more vulnerable, such as the women in the refugee women center where P5 works. P8 does the same helping a younger refugee student in the college where he studies coping with his struggles. P2 adds to this:

"I want to specialize in a profession (in Medical science) that would allow me to offer services to refugee people. These services that I needed during my journey."

More generally, the present research highlights important issues related to the integration and inclusion of all citizens in host societies and their equal access to education, which is a fundamental right of the child and the human being. The principles of multiculturalism and interculturalism can contribute in this direction. An interesting aspect of multiculturalism is its link with citizenship, as it ensures social justice and equality by

establishing and implementing an appropriate legislative framework to tackle discrimination and to create a sense of belonging to the group.

Interculturality is founded on multiculturalism, but it is a later example of political management, where diversity is an important asset and resource, while emphasis is placed on cultivating community cohesion and shaping a common culture that places diversity within rather than outside the community (Karanikola, 2024; Sealy, 2018; Zapata-Barrero, 2017). In this vein, the European and international discourse, taking into account the significant influx of refugees and migrants into the European Union, recognizes the importance of intercultural and multicultural education as a means of achieving the social integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees, with an emphasis on language learning in the host country, the acquisition of the right and appropriate skills and equal access to lifelong education and learning (Abamosa et al., 2019).

4. Conclusion

Research conducted in different countries reveals that higher education for refugees can have short and long-term benefits on both individual and societal level. Besides their personal development and better working opportunities ahead, another benefit is their faster integration in the host countries. For that, this study tried to find out what strengths these students have, areas that need to be improved and the nature of support which is needed in terms of not only funding but of other resources too. In light of this, it is important to identify gaps in the nature and type of education that is being offered from the first levels of education till higher education. Issues related to their legal status that cause them a constant anxiety should also be resolved and make the process easier and less time-consuming. Perhaps another suggestion could be a more effective system, in a national and international level, to help people on move to further their educational qualifications minimizing the structural barriers and giving them the opportunity to realize their dreams. Lastly, counselling services and psychological support are of great importance because these students usually experience stress due to their previous experiences and all these challenges they face in their daily lives. If these suggestions are put in practice, then refugee students with potentials will be given a second chance in life and the opportunity to dream again.

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