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Diana van Dijk is PhD. Researcher and project leader at
the Research Centre Urban Talent and senior lecturer at

the Institute of Social Studies of the Rotterdam University
of Applied Sciences. E-mail: d.a.van.dijk@hr.nl

Anne Kooiman is Ma. Researcher at the Research Centre
Urban Talent and lecturer at the Master Urban Education
of the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. She is
also team coordinator at the Dutch Refugee Council.
E-mail: akooiman@hr.nl

Correspondence to: Diana van Dijk

E-mail: d.a.van.dijk@hr.nl

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YOU HAVE TO FIGHT TO GET
THERE. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY
INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF
REFUGEE-BACKGROUND STUDENTS
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

JE MOET VECHTEN OM ER TE
KOMEN. EEN VERKENNEND
ONDERZOEK NAAR DE ERVARINGEN
VAN STUDENTEN MET EEN
VLUCHTELINGENACHTERGROND IN
HET HOGER ONDERWIJS

DIANA VAN DIJK,
ANNE KOOIMAN

ABSTRACT

Many refugees aspire to continue or start higher education studies in their host country. However, higher education is difficult to access for refugees due to various obstacles such as a lack of (reliable) information and admission criteria. If they manage to access higher education they experience specific problems during their studies, related to their backgrounds. Institutions therefore need to provide refugee-background students with suitable support. Based on an explorative study among fifteen refugee students, we argue that focusing on equity and inclusion is fundamental to successfully support refugee students. We interviewed refugee students twice: in the first and the second year after they started their program. In addition, before the student interviews took place, we interviewed seventeen education professionals who are involved with refugee-background students, to gain good insight in the range of support that was available for the students. According to our study, refugee students are highly motivated but less able to capitalize on higher education for their aspirations because of multiple disadvantages. Besides unfamiliarity with the Dutch education system and a language barrier, they encounter exclusionary mechanisms. They struggle to connect with fellow students and do not always feel safe to ask questions or seek support, while inclusion and a sense of belonging are crucial for study success. Existing organizational resources can be valuable; however, refugee students have difficulties utilizing these for their benefit. Offering support alone is not enough: students must be able to use the support for their goals, which now is often not the case. If we want to strive for inclusive education for these students more diversity in approach, support, and resources is required.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive higher education, refugee-background students, student support

SAMENVATTING

Veel studenten met een vluchtelingenachtergrond ambiëren een studie in het hoger onderwijs of willen hun studie uit het thuisland voortzetten. Hoger onderwijs is echter beperkt toegankelijk voor deze studenten, onder andere door een tekort aan betrouwbare informatie en toegangscriteria. Als het studenten lukt om met hun opleiding te starten, lopen ze opnieuw tegen obstakels aan, gerelateerd aan hun vluchtelingenachtergrond. Hoger onderwijs instellingen moeten studenten met een vluchtelingenachtergrond daarom passende ondersteuning bieden. Op basis van een exploratief onderzoek aan een instituut voor hoger onderwijs in Nederland stellen wij

dat kansengelijkheid en inclusie essentieel zijn om deze studenten succesvol te ondersteunen. We interviewden vijftien vluchteling-studenten twee keer: in het eerste en in het tweede jaar na de start van hun opleiding. Daarnaast hebben we vooraf zeventien onderwijsprofessionals geïnterviewd die betrokken zijn bij studenten met een vluchtelingenachtergrond om een goed beeld te krijgen van het ondersteuningsaanbod. Uit het onderzoek blijkt dat studenten met een vluchtelingenachtergrond sterk gemotiveerd zijn, maar minder in staat zijn hun ambities waar te maken. Naast onbekendheid met het Nederlandse onderwijssysteem en een taalbarrière lopen ze tegen uitsluitingsmechanismen aan. Ze hebben moeite om aansluiting te vinden bij studiegenoten en voelen zich niet altijd veilig om vragen te stellen of hulp te zoeken, terwijl inclusie en het gevoel er bij te horen cruciaal zijn voor studiesucces. Bestaande organisatorische middelen kunnen waardevol zijn; vluchteling-studenten hebben echter moeite deze in hun voordeel te gebruiken. Het bieden van ondersteuning alleen is niet genoeg: studenten moeten de ondersteuning kunnen gebruiken voor hun doelen, wat nu vaak niet het geval is. Als we willen streven naar inclusief onderwijs voor deze studenten is meer diversiteit in aanpak, ondersteuning en middelen nodig.

TREFWOORDEN

Inclusief Hoger Onderwijs, studenten met een vluchtelingenachtergrond, studentenondersteuning

INTRODUCTION

Due to war and political repression the number of refugees in Europe has increased since 2015. Many refugees aim to continue or start a study programme (in higher education) in their host country (Arar, 2021; Schneider, 2018). Refugees' educational careers may have been interrupted by the flight, but even refugees who have already received tertiary education often have the ambition to study in their host country. Higher education for refugees supports upward socioeconomic mobility, promotes more significant participation in the labour market, and supports building networks and connections in host countries (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). However, tertiary education is difficult to access for refugees, particularly higher education (Crea, 2016; Gruijter *et al.*, 2019; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; Onderwijsraad, 2017). Only 3% of refugees have access to higher education worldwide, compared to the 37% global higher education access rate (UNHCR, 2019).

Research in various countries shows that students with a refugee background experience multiple challenges in accessing higher education in the host country: periods of interrupted education (Block *et al.*, 2014); a lack of (reliable) information and advice to make informed choices

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(Bajwa *et al.*, 2017; Gateley, 2014); not being able to bring diplomas (UNHCR, 2019); inadequate support networks or other essential resources (Sleijpen *et al.*, 2016) and admission criteria (Van Dijk & Kooiman, 2019; Van Dijk *et al.*, 2022). The COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent measures have aggravated refugee-background students' challenges (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; UNHCR, 2019). Many lessons have been offered digitally, which has likely influenced refugees' learning outcomes negatively (Mupenzi *et al.*, 2020).

Unequal education opportunities in the Netherlands

More than 200.000 refugees applied for asylum in the Netherlands between 2015 and 2022. In order to rebuild their lives in the Netherlands, many refugees strive to finish their education or pursue further education (Sleijpen *et al.*, 2016). In addition to the obstacles for accessing higher education described above, there are specific obstacles in the Netherlands. After a period in an international transition class, young refugees (minors) regularly move on to practical labour market-oriented programs (EQF 1). The choice for practical programs is often based on language level rather than cognitive ability (Onderwijsraad, 2017). Of young refugees (18–30 years) who are not in compulsory education, approximately 80% do not participate in Dutch education (Dagevos *et al.*, 2021). Only a small proportion of refugees study at higher education institutes. Municipalities and higher education institutes differ in how much they facilitate refugees' education depending on the vision of the municipality concerned and the commitment of educational institutions (Dagevos *et al.*, 2021).

Below the age of 30, students in the Netherlands may be eligible for financial assistance. This is primarily a loan but supports students in paying for study-related costs and living expenses during their studies. Refugees older than 30 years may face financial barriers. When they depend on welfare, they need the permission of the municipality to study. Only a quarter of the municipalities allow refugees to study exempt from applying for a job (Razenberg *et al.*, 2018). In other words, the current Dutch policy does not provide equal opportunities for refugees' education (Dagevos *et al.*, 2021).

Inclusive higher education for refugee students

Creating equal opportunities, or inclusive education, is a fundamental universal goal and aspiration in higher education. Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for inclusive education and equal lifelong learning opportunities by 2030 (United Nations, 2018). It emphasizes inclusion and equity

as the foundations for quality education and learning (Sengupta *et al.*, 2019). Experiences of exclusion have a negative impact on study success (Tavecchio, 2020; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). Initiatives to promote inclusive education are essential because the student population is highly diverse. Although various frameworks, programs, and tools have been developed, inclusion for a diverse student population continues to be challenging (Crea, 2016; Onderwijsraad, 2017). Inclusion of students with refugee backgrounds in higher education proves even more challenging than in other groups (Morrice, 2013; UNHCR, 2019). This is due to multiple complex problems that add to a 'super disadvantage' (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022).

Inclusion, in general, is not a straightforward concept, nor is what is meant by inclusive education (Armstrong *et al.*, 2011). The narrowest interpretation of inclusion in education is that of 'access' (Gidley *et al.*, 2010). Although initial access to higher education is difficult for people from refugee backgrounds, inclusion in education goes beyond the admission process. Students with a refugee background experience specific problems during their studies, such as having to adapt to an unfamiliar educational system, culture and language (Block *et al.*, 2014; Klatter-Folmer & Weltens, 2017). A broader understanding of inclusive education is that education should provide equal opportunities to the diverse student population. Equal opportunity for refugee students means compensating them (through support) for an unequal starting position. International studies in higher education show however, that support is often perceived as unhelpful or inaccurate (Bajwa *et al.*, 2017; Baker *et al.*, 2017; Van Dijk, 2022). Support offered to refugee students is often aimed at addressing the deficits these students have in the perception of higher education institutes (Tavecchio, 2020) and are defined from dominant social perspectives (Cobigo *et al.*, 2016). Views of students are often not included, although student voices are increasingly recognized as important. The personal experience of inclusion from the perspective of those it concerns is likely to lead to the use of other, more subjective indicators in measuring social inclusion, such as the individual's needs (Cobigo *et al.*, 2016).

The present study aims to explore refugee students' perspectives (and thus voices) about studying in higher education and whether and how the researched institution supports them. The insights can be used to create more inclusive education. The research question was: How does support from the researched institute contribute to the study success of students with a refugee background? Subquestions focused on how students gained access to the institute, what students understand by study success, what support students need, which support is provided and utilized, and to what extent support matched the students' support needs.

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We interviewed students on perceived barriers, strategies, behaviour and the use and availability of various resources. The focus was on barriers and resources within the researched institute. Students were asked to what extent they were familiar with and used the resources.

We are aware that the term 'refugee students' or 'students with a refugee background' can be stigmatizing. Some students would rather not be labelled 'refugee' while others find it not an issue (Baker *et al.*, 2017). Although the term does not do justice to these students' enormous diversity of backgrounds and experiences, this group has common problems in accessing and studying in higher education. Therefore, we have chosen to use this term in our research and this article. This article provides insight into refugee-background students' experiences pursuing higher education, their challenges, and the support they need and can access.

METHODOLOGY

The research started in March 2017/2018 at a higher education institute in the Netherlands. The central part of the fieldwork was conducted until March 2019. Five students were followed up during the COVID-19 crisis in May 2020.

Selection of respondents and informed consent

The invitation for the interview was sent from the Refugee Support Centre (RSC) to 136 first year students who had a refugee background according to the database. Students could then decide for themselves whether to respond. To students who responded positively we explained the purpose of the study before asking permission for the interviews (informed consent). Before the interview started, we asked permission to record the interview. Students received a gift voucher for their participation in the research (see: Van Dijk & Kooiman, 2019). Before delivering the final report, we organized a validation session with a delegation of the respondents to validate conclusions and sharpen recommendations. Respondents indicated that they recognized themselves in the results and contributed to the recommendations.

We interviewed fifteen refugee-background students (intake 2017/2018) twice: once in the first year and once in the second year after they started their studies. An invitation was also sent to former students who stopped their studies early. Three students responded positively, and two of them were interviewed. Of the fifteen students interviewed, twelve students are from Syria, two from Iran, and one from Iraq. Their age ranged from 22 to 45 years. In addition, five of them

have been (digitally) interviewed for a third time during the first COVID-19 lockdown (May 2020).

The circumstances of the students vary. The interviewed students do not represent the entire group of refugee-background students studying at the higher education institute. Our study illustrates the diversity of students and the wide range of experiences that underlines the importance of inclusive education. Before we started the student interviews we also interviewed seventeen education professionals who were directly or indirectly involved with refugee-background students. The purpose of those interviews was to get a better picture of available support for students in general and for refugee students in particular. In this article, student experiences are the focus.

Interviews

The 37 interviews with students were semi-structured. The questions and clarity were discussed with peer coaches with a refugee background and the RSC coordinator. The interviews were conducted in Dutch, which all interviewees mastered sufficiently. During the interviews some terms or questions needed to also be explained in English. During the interviews we used visual aids in the form of cards with on literature based obstacles (such as language) and support resources (student counsellors, fellow students, family etc.) and a blank card. Students were asked which obstacles they experienced; if they could make a top five of these and, subsequently, match obstacles with support resources. The blank card could reveal an unrepresented but perceived obstacle or support resource.

The purpose of this ranking was to allow students to think about the challenges they (had) experienced and to relate these to resources. The visualizations were supportive in the interview: they provided structure and facilitated follow-up questions.

Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. Based on our research questions, we first coded the interviews on several main themes: access process, students' definition of study success, study barriers, potential resources, resources used, usefulness of resources and support needs. Both researchers manually coded five of the same interviews using a combination of induction and deduction. In practice, this meant coding fragments on the general main themes and through open coding. The next step was to compare the coding and codes used and arrive at

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revised codes to analyse the rest of the interviews. For this article, we translated quotations into English, for which a “transfer of meaning” was sought (Feldermann & Hiebl, 2019).

FINDINGS

Between September 2015–2017, 526 refugee-background students started studying at the higher education institute where the research took place. Of those students, 60% were male and 40% were female; 38% had an Afghan background; 30% had an Iraqi background; 12% an Iranian background and 11% had a Syrian background. The proportion of students from Syria increased significantly in 2017 and 2018. On average, refugee-background students are older than regular students: one-fifth was 28 years or older when they started their studies, and two-third was 24 years or older.

In the following sections, we will cover various aspects related to the higher education institute's admission process, institutional resources, and the overall atmosphere for refugee students. Initially, we will address the challenges encountered by refugee students when seeking access to higher education. Subsequently, we will explore the utilization of institutional resources and examine students' experiences with them. Lastly, we will explore the collaborative environment, interactions with fellow students, and the level of inclusion experienced by refugee students within the classroom.

Admission process: application and enrolment

The admission process differs between programs, but generally, students apply, receive a study advice and then enrol. Students must have a Dutch language degree at least at B2 level. The interviews revealed that making a study choice, having the proof of required qualifications, and applying for student finance plays an impeding role. Over 60% of the registered students with a refugee background will eventually not enrol. Non-enrolment has various causes, according to the respondents. Interviewed students said to be unfamiliar with the educational system and the programs. Refugee students who apply, sometimes receive contradictory information about required documents:

I had many problems registering. I really didn't like that; you already have so many problems. If something is a bit different, like in my situation, no one knows what to do. It is also difficult for me to understand what the rules are.

During the enrolment process students only sometimes felt taken seriously by staff members. Some felt ridiculed because of the language barrier when they asked for information. Some students stated

that stress and frustration hindered them from speaking Dutch. One of the students referred to the enrolment process as 'a fight to get there'. If enrolment is successful, students have a mandatory interview to check whether the study is suitable (study advice). Standard questionnaires are used for all students. These do not suit this particular group of students and do not reflect their need for support.

Resources at the Institute

Student-counsellors support with personal problems affecting the students ability to study. A Language Centre provides language support. For study related questions, students can turn to study-coaches. Specific support for refugee students is only offered through the Refugee Support Centre (RSC). In the following, the students' experiences with these resources are discussed.

Refugee Support Centre

RSC aims to provide potential refugee students with information and study advice. The RSC consists of a coordinator and peer coaches (senior students with refugee backgrounds). The centre organizes workshops and social activities for refugee students. Starting refugee students who wish to do so can be matched with a peer coach, who can guide them in the first year. However, there are only four peer coaches in total.

Students who participated are positive about RSC and the workshops they offer. They indicate that the social activities meet their need to be recognized as refugees and students. They enjoyed meetings with other refugee students, because they did not feel exceptional. Others mentioned that seeing other refugee students succeed in their studies felt good.

However, the RSC needs to be more well-known. Students only learned about the existence of RSC during their studies. They could have used support earlier with their study choice or enrolment. Students familiar with RSC who did not participate in activities indicated not having time due to study, work or caring responsibilities.

The Language Centre

One of the criteria to register for higher education is language level B2. Students indicate that the Dutch language remains a major challenge despite having the required level. They concluded that the B2-level is not sufficient to understand the content of the lessons and instructions in the first

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year. Another challenge they face is the extra time it takes to study. They have to think twice: once about the content and once about translating it into Dutch.

The Language Centre provides language support to all students through individual support and workshops. Most of our respondents were unaware that there is such a Centre within the higher education institute. The few students who attended the Language Centre did not receive the support they expected.

... There, they thought that because I was a refugee, I didn't speak Dutch. I was advised: you can watch television, read advertising brochures or go to the supermarket to talk to people.

The quoted student aimed to request support in writing a project plan. Not all trainers are aware that refugee students already speak Dutch at B2 level.

Student-counsellors

Student-counsellors are an essential source of support for all students. Students can contact a counsellor for support if personal circumstances (potentially) affect study progress negatively. A counsellor may recommend certain facilities for refugee students, such as using a dictionary during exams. Programs do not have to follow the advice, but often do. Only half of our respondents knew about the possibility of turning to a counsellor. Four interviewed students went to a counsellor.

The counsellor gave me the courage to continue. I've been there and talked about my insecurity and my situation. The counsellor said: that uncertainty is normal; just keep going. If you have more problems, you just come back to me, but luckily that was not necessary.

The students who turned to a counsellor felt sufficiently supported. Counsellors offered practical and emotional support. The students who had not sought help from a counsellor said in the interviews that such support would have been beneficial.

Study-coaches

In every program lecturers also act as study-coaches. According to the institution's policy study-coaches aim to support students in their studies and in their professional development. Students need to seek and ask for help if they need it: some degree of self-reliance is therefore expected.

Refugee students struggle with the principle of self-reliance:

He [the lecturer] says you have to be independent, but we feel very responsible for others, you do a lot for others. But when someone says you have to take care of yourself, that's hard to understand...

Students are not always aware that support is available and even if they do, they may not feel safe or secure enough to ask for help. One of the students said he first needs to know that he needs support, what type of support he needs, and where to ask for it. Students usually put their support questions to their study coach. Because students automatically see their coach several times a year, asking them for support can be perceived as more accessible than asking a counsellor. However, from the interviews with students, it appears that coaches, when asked for help, do not always have the correct information or refer students to counsellors with issues that belong there.

A welcoming environment?

After discussing the admission process, the available support within the Institute and refugees experiences with those, we will further examine the experiences of students concerning their interactions with fellow students and lecturers, as well as the importance of persistence in their academic endeavors.

Connecting with fellow students

A sense of connection to fellow students positively impacts students' study success. However, some students said to be laughed at or ignored by fellow students. Some students do not actively participate in class for fear of being laughed at. They dare not answer or ask questions. This reluctance also inhibits them from connecting with fellow students outside the classroom.

I just want to join my classmates. But I often sit alone and don't want to talk. Some think I have an attitude. But they talk very quickly, they are 17/18 years old. I'm ashamed to say: I don't understand you. That's why I'm alone.

Refugee-background students are often older than regular students and this age difference plays a role in their (sense of) connection and belonging. Students avoid possible negative comments

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about their Dutch. Most of the students interviewed indicated that they lack contact and friendships with students:

I feel a bit lonely, I have no family, no partner and no children. Especially when I'm sick I feel really lonely. The other day I was home, I was ill for five days, but nobody called me to ask: are you okay?

Almost all students specified that they had experienced periods of grief and loss during their studies. Some students refer to these feelings or experiences as depression. The COVID-19 lockdown exacerbated feelings of loneliness, particularly for students who lived alone. One of the students explained that he did not speak to anyone during the lockdown. He expected to be tough after what he had been through (i.e., the war and the flight), but the lockdown affected him deeply. Before the lockdown he was building a social network. Now he was on his own again. The COVID-19 situation evoked memories of war. Four of the five students interviewed in May 2020 related the pandemic threat to their experiences with the war in their home country. Feelings of depression and oppression came back.

Inclusive classroom

Students had to get used to the different educational system. The system in the country of origin is usually geared towards frontal classroom teaching and taking knowledge tests. In general, students are used to dealing with their lecturers more formally.

With us, the lecturer is a kind of god; you are only allowed to listen to him.

In the Netherlands relations are much less hierarchical: it is expected that you will be on a first-name basis with your lecturers and that you ask (critical) questions. However, not all students feel comfortable dealing informally with a lecturer or asking questions.

Here you call the teacher by his first name. With us, you do this only with your family or best friends. In my country it is impolite to address your teacher; it is really not acceptable.

Lecturers play a crucial role in strengthening safety and social bonding in the classroom. Giving compliments and recognizing the strengths of refugee background students improves the sense

of belonging and connection. Entering into a dialogue of expectations for example, may open up feelings of belonging:

... nobody in our country asks: what do you expect from us? That was really new to me. Can I expect something? That gave me a sense of self-worth... That made me feel very good.

Students experience some lecturers to provide attention and compliments. As one respondent said:

The teacher complimented me: I know that Dutch is not your first language, but still you are here. This motivated me, I started practicing, practicing, practicing.

Another student is very good at mathematics, which was seen by the lecturer who appointed him as his assistant. The student gained a position in the class's app group.

I'm in the class's group app, then they ask me questions and I explain. They thank me and I'm happy for them. They also made it to the exams. They called me their hero. I was happy for them and proud.

However, lecturers only sometimes teach inclusively. For example, when one of the respondents asked the lecturer for more explanation, the lecturer only referred the student to the study manual. Another excluding factor is the use of typically Dutch examples: these are neither understandable nor illustrative for refugee students. Some interviewed lecturers are afraid that extra support will reduce the value of higher education certificates. Others claim they want to treat all students equally: They do not distinguish in support between groups of students.

Building new futures: remaining strong and hopeful

Refugee-background students have various dreams and ambitions. They wish to develop themselves professionally, utilize what they have learned in practice, and find a study-home balance. In addition, almost all respondents aspire to achieve high grades and to complete the study within the set time frame.

I've lost enough years. It is now time for me to make my dreams come true. I felt very insecure...I haven't studied for 15 years [...]. I thought my brain was frozen. But then I saw my progress with the Dutch language and I thought: I can do it. I want to get a diploma and a job.

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Interviewed students were highly motivated and driven. Interviewed professionals also mentioned this. The belief in one's abilities and perseverance were mentioned in all interviews with education professionals. Counsellors say refugee students are highly motivated and study very hard. In the interviews several students named this a personal source of resilience. Having the opportunity to build a new life and future can be tremendously motivating and challenging simultaneously. Balancing between dealing with challenges and staying motivated is fragile.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To make higher education more inclusive for refugee students, we argue that inequalities must be recognized. Offering equal (access to) resources to a diverse population of students leads to unfair service provision for students and unequal outcomes. Inclusive education requires more diversity in approach, support, and resources. Secondly we found that students were often not able to use the offered support for their goals. Offering support alone is not enough and therefore it is necessary to take a critical look at the institutional policies, rather than emphasizing on individual responsibility (Javornik *et al.*, 2019).

According to the interviewed students, connecting with fellow students and lecturers and having a sense of belonging is vital. A caring, supportive, and welcoming environment is crucial for a sense of belonging and connection (Salazar *et al.*, 2010). This can be achieved by developing positive relationships between students and faculty and embracing diversity (O'Keeffe, 2013). Feelings of belonging have also been found to be positively associated with academic achievement (Knehta *et al.*, 2020). This involves interacting with fellow students, participating in extracurricular activities, and having good contact with lecturers. It also relates to having a network of fellow students that supports study content or (motivation) problems (Wolff, 2013). A welcoming community is required for refugee students to feel they belong (Salazar *et al.*, 2010).

Conclusion

Finally, how does support from the researched institute contribute to the study success of students with a refugee background? We conclude that existing organizational resources can be valuable, but refugee students struggle to access and use them to their advantage. Refugee students do not necessarily feel they belong, have difficulty connecting with fellow students and/or lecturers, and feel unsafe or not secure enough to ask questions or seek support. Students report feeling insufficiently safe in the classroom, because they experience little understanding from lecturers and

fellow students. Therefore moral support and encouragement are not readily available, since not all refugee students have a support network inside or outside the institute.

A picture that also emerges from our research, is one of highly motivated and hardworking students. Interviewed students were driven, not only to pass the various courses but also to get high grades. They want to rebuild their lives and access the labour market as soon as possible. Professionals, such as student counsellors also refer to this drive. While respondents show enormous perseverance and resilience and their drive is commendable, there is also a risk. Because of multiple disadvantages, refugee students are less able to capitalize on higher education for their aspirations. Refugee-background students spend much more time on their studies and experience loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Therefore they run a high risk of being overburdened. Gaining a social network is crucial for a sense of belonging and is a potential source of socio-emotional support and support with study content. They therefore need more (free) time for extracurricular activities, such as those organized by RSC.

In general students are expected to be self-reliant: one is expected to know whom to ask which questions and what support is available. Just assuming and expecting self-reliance may make refugee students less inclined to seek support. Furthermore the role and responsibility of the higher education institute is absent in this discourse on self-reliance. The role of the institution is however essential for inclusion and study success. This research shows that the institute purposefully developed resources to support students in general and refugee students in particular, but that attention is still necessary to the extent to which this support is accessible and meets the needs of this group of students. Our research suggests that (more) students could do better with the right information, support, and connection. The successful students interviewed have achieved this mainly due to their personal sources of resilience and not thanks to institute's support.

Recommendations for practice

Based on the conclusions of the research, the following recommendations can improve support for students with a refugee background:

- Enhance accessibility of existing resources:
Institutes should ensure that the support resources it offers are accessible to refugee students. The process for accessing them should be simplified by communicating more effectively with refugee students, providing them with clear information about available resources, how to access them, and how to seek support.
- Provide unequal, targeted support for refugee students:

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In doing so, institutes should take into account the unique challenges and experiences of refugee students. The support should include academic and emotional support, such as counselling, mentoring, and tutoring. Equity-minded practitioners are essential for inclusive education for students from diverse backgrounds and needs.

- Establish personal contact with a long-term character:
We recommend that the lecturers introduce the refugee-background student to a student counsellor, whose task is to ensure that all facilities are available to these students based on their professional judgment. The counsellor can also function as a lasting contact. Sustained contact is especially important because these students are at high risk of being overburdened.
- Encourage a sense of belonging and create an inclusive and safe pedagogical climate:
Students should feel safe enough to ask questions or seek support. This means focusing not on the shortcomings of students from refugee backgrounds but recognizing and utilizing strengths and talents.
- Provide preparatory programs for refugee students:
Such a program has several potential benefits. It prepares students to study in higher education, both in academic skills and language skills. It contributes to social bonding with the institution if one gets to know other students, lecturers and counsellors of the desired program.

By implementing these practice recommendations, higher education institutes can better support the study success of students with a refugee background and help them to achieve their aspirations. Higher education institutes need funding to support students with a refugee background. Preparatory programs for higher education institutes can be combined with programs focused on language and social integration and could hence partially be funded from funds allocated for those purposes.

Recommendations for future research

In this study fifteen students were interviewed two (or three) times about their experiences with studying in the researched higher education institute. Although this is only a small group of refugee students, our findings indicate general barriers and support for them. Because we chose to interview the education professionals first in order to get a good picture of existing support, we could not confront these professionals with the student experiences. Their perspective on student experiences could have provided more insights.

Also students who were ultimately not admitted to one of the programs of the higher educational institute were not part of this research. From these experiences much could have been learned

about how to improve the admission process. However, reaching this group is a challenge. The same goes for students who decided to stop early with their program. Eventually we only spoke to two of them.

Students' views on how to promote inclusion are increasingly recognized as necessary. In our qualitative research, therefore, we put student voices and experiences at the centre. More quantitative research, for example through a survey, is useful to obtain a more general view of barriers and support use within this group.

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