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DigIT: Developing Digital Skills and Tools for Better Inclusion of Refugees and Immigrants

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Toolkit to higher education (HE) training for educators

CHAPTER-1

Particular difficulties that refugees/immigrants face in accessing, remaining and progressing in HE (Higher Education)

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Introduction

Access to higher education (HE) is a fundamental right that should be granted to all individuals regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances. However, refugees and immigrants often face numerous barriers that prevent them from fulfilling their desire and motivation to access HE. These barriers can be cultural, social, economic, and legal in nature, and they require a concerted effort from all stakeholders to overcome.

HE professionals play a crucial role in facilitating access to HE for refugees and immigrants, as they are in a unique position to provide tailored support and guidance. However, HE professionals need to be aware of the specific challenges faced by refugees and immigrants and equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to address these challenges.

This digital toolkit is designed to address this need by providing HE professionals, student association members, social workers, teachers/career advisors from schools and colleges, and workers from refugee support organizations with a comprehensive guide on how to facilitate access to HE for refugees and immigrants. The toolkit's objectives are to raise the level of competence and socio-economic awareness among HE professionals, enhance refugees/immigrants' professional and personal growth, and encourage refugees/immigrants to pursue their education and contribute to community development.

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the toolkit, the recommendations provided are based on the latest legal and policy developments affecting access to HE, as well as the best practices identified by experts in the field. This digital toolkit was created to serve as a valuable resource for HE professionals and other stakeholders involved in facilitating access to HE for refugees and immigrants. By equipping HE professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills to address the barriers faced by refugees and immigrants, we can promote social inclusion, diversity, and community development.

Chapter 1-

Particular difficulties that refugees/immigrants face in accessing, remaining and progressing in HE (Higher Education)

Introduction:

The topic covered in this first module of the toolkit is common barriers to fulfilling the desire and motivation of refugees/immigrants to access higher education. This topic is essential as it sets the foundation for understanding the challenges faced by refugees and immigrants when attempting to access HE. The structure of this topic includes a background of the challenge, recommendations to act, step-by-step implementation, good practices, and other sources to consider, followed by a sample case.

Background of the Challenge:

Refugees and immigrants often face significant barriers when trying to access higher education, such as a lack of recognition of their qualifications obtained outside of their home countries, financial barriers, and discrimination. Higher education (HE) professionals can address these challenges by advocating for policies and practices that recognize and validate foreign qualifications, providing financial support, and creating inclusive learning environments. Several academic resources have emphasized the importance of HE professionals in promoting social and economic mobility for refugees and immigrants. In addition to these specific challenges, refugees and immigrants also face broader systemic issues, such as language barriers and financial constraints (British Council, 2016). Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and coordinated response from HE professionals, policy-makers, and other stakeholders.

Barriers and Recommendations to Act

Language barriers: Refugees and immigrants may not have the necessary language skills to complete courses or meet language requirements for higher education.

Financial barriers: Refugees and immigrants may face financial constraints and may not have access to the same financial resources as citizens or permanent residents.

Lack of recognition of prior learning and qualifications: Refugees and immigrants may have acquired knowledge and qualifications in their home countries that are not recognized in the host country, making it difficult to access higher education.

Cultural differences: Refugees and immigrants may face cultural barriers that make it difficult for them to integrate into the host country's education system.

Limited access to information: Refugees and immigrants may not have access to the same information and resources as citizens or permanent residents, making it difficult for them to navigate the education system.

Limited access to support services: Refugees and immigrants may not have access to the same support services as citizens or permanent residents, such as academic and social support, which can make it difficult for them to succeed in higher education.

Immigration status: Refugees and immigrants may face legal barriers that prevent them from accessing higher education, such as restrictions on their immigration status or residency status.

Psychological and emotional challenges: Refugees and immigrants may face psychological and emotional challenges as a result of their displacement and experiences in their home countries, which can make it difficult for them to focus on their studies and pursue higher education.

Recommendations For HE professionals:

- Offer additional training and support for HE professionals to better understand the needs and challenges of refugees and immigrants.
- Encourage peer mentoring and support networks to help refugees and immigrants navigate the challenges of higher education.

Recommendations For HE decision-makers:

- Offer targeted support for language learning and academic writing skills to help refugees and immigrants meet the language requirements for higher education.
- Develop alternative assessment methods that can recognize prior learning and experience obtained outside of the country where the HE institution is located.
- Establish policies that recognize and credit previous qualifications and work experience obtained outside of the country where the HE institution is located.
- Provide financial support and scholarships specifically targeted at refugees and immigrants who face financial barriers to higher education.
- Offer flexible study arrangements, such as part-time or online courses, to accommodate the needs of refugees and immigrants who may have additional responsibilities or commitments.

- Provide dedicated support services, such as counselling, mental health support, and social activities, to help refugees and immigrants integrate into the HE community.
- Increase the diversity of staff and students at HE institutions to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for refugees and immigrants.
- Work with policymakers to advocate for policies that recognize and support the educational and professional aspirations of refugees and immigrants.
- Foster a sense of belonging and community among refugees and immigrants in higher education through social events and networking opportunities.
- Establish a dedicated point of contact at each HE institution to provide tailored support and guidance to refugees and immigrants.

Recommendations For Policymakers:

- Work with policymakers to advocate for policies that recognize and support the educational and professional aspirations of refugees and immigrants.
- Collaborate with national and international organizations to share best practices and resources.
- Develop partnerships and collaborations between HE institutions and refugee support organizations to improve access to information and resources.

Recommendations For Other Stakeholders:

- Ensure that information and communication about higher education opportunities are accessible and provided in multiple languages.
- Promote a culture of respect and understanding towards refugees and immigrants within HE institutions.
- Establish partnerships with employers and industry bodies to create opportunities for work experience and internships for refugees and immigrants.
- Offer support for cultural adjustment and language learning for family members of refugees and immigrants.
- Create peer networks and support groups for refugees and immigrants who have left education early or who have had their education interrupted.
- Encourage and support the involvement of refugees and immigrants in decision-making processes within HE institutions to ensure that their perspectives and needs are represented.

Step-by-step Implementation with the Visible Progress to Achieve:

Below 10 steps concrete steps for implementing a strategy to remove barriers for refugees and immigrants in accessing higher education are given:

1. Conduct a needs assessment and gather data on the specific needs and challenges of refugees and immigrants in accessing higher education.

2. Develop a comprehensive plan for implementing the recommendations, including timelines and resource allocation.

3. Establish partnerships with refugee support organizations, employers, industry bodies, policymakers, and other stakeholders to create a coordinated and collaborative approach.

4. Increase the diversity of staff and students at HE institutions to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for refugees and immigrants.

5. Provide targeted language learning and academic writing support to help refugees and immigrants meet the language requirements for higher education.

6. Offer alternative assessment methods that can recognize prior learning and experience obtained outside of the country where the HE institution is located.

7. Establish policies that recognize and credit previous qualifications and work experience obtained outside of the country where the HE institution is located.

8. Provide financial support and scholarships specifically targeted at refugees and immigrants who face financial barriers to higher education.

9. Offer flexible study arrangements, such as part-time or online courses, to accommodate the needs of refugees and immigrants who may have additional responsibilities or commitments.

10. Monitor and evaluate the progress of the strategy regularly to ensure that it is effective and making a positive impact, and adjust the plan as necessary based on the feedback and results obtained.

Sample Case

Fatima is a Syrian refugee who arrived in Norway with her husband and two young children. She has a degree in civil engineering from a university in Damascus, but she had to leave her job and her home behind when the war broke out in 2011. After spending several years in a refugee camp in Lebanon, she was finally granted asylum in Norway.

Fatima was determined to continue her education and find a job in her field. However, she faced several barriers to accessing higher education:

Step 1: Needs Assessment and Data Gathering

- Fatima faced several cultural and linguistic barriers in understanding the Norwegian higher education system.
- She did not have sufficient information about available study options and scholarship opportunities for refugees.
- She also struggled to find a suitable childcare option for her children while she pursued her studies.

Step 2: Comprehensive Plan and Resource Allocation

- The higher education institution that Fatima applied to developed a comprehensive plan that included offering language support classes and information sessions about the Norwegian higher education system.
- They also allocated resources to provide childcare services on campus and offered additional financial support to refugee students.

Step 3: Partnerships and Collaboration

- The institution collaborated with local refugee support organizations to connect Fatima with additional resources, such as housing and transportation assistance.
- They also partnered with industry bodies and employers to create internship opportunities for refugee students, including Fatima.

Step 4: Diversity and Inclusion

- The institution actively recruited and hired staff from diverse backgrounds to create a more inclusive environment for refugee and immigrant students.
- They also established a peer mentoring program to provide additional support to Fatima and other refugee students.

Step 5: Language Learning and Academic Writing Support

- Fatima was able to attend language support classes and received additional academic writing support to help her meet the language requirements for higher education.

Step 6: Alternative Assessment Methods

- The institution recognized Fatima's previous degree and work experience obtained in Syria and was able to offer her an alternative assessment method to credit her prior learning.

Step 7: Recognition of Previous Qualifications

- The institution had policies in place to recognize and credit previous qualifications and work experience obtained outside of Norway.

Step 8: Financial Support and Scholarships

- Fatima was awarded a scholarship specifically targeted at refugees and immigrants who face financial barriers to higher education.

Step 9: Flexible Study Arrangements

- The institution offered flexible study arrangements, including online courses and evening classes, to accommodate Fatima's additional responsibilities as a parent.

Step 10: Monitoring and Evaluation

- The institution regularly monitored Fatima's progress and provided feedback on her academic performance.
- They also evaluated the effectiveness of their support programs and adjusted them as necessary based on the feedback and results obtained.

Despite the challenges she faced, Fatima was able to overcome many of the barriers to accessing higher education with the help of the institution and its partners. She graduated with a master's degree in civil engineering and is now employed by a local engineering firm.

External Sources

- The UN Refugee Agency - Higher Education Programs for Refugees: https://www.unhcr.org/education/higher-education.html
- The European Commission's Erasmus+ Program for Refugees: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities-for-refugees_en
- The Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford: https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/
- The Journal of Refugee Studies: https://academic.oup.com/jrs
- The Migration Policy Institute: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/
- The International Association of Universities - Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Higher Education: https://www.iau-aiu.net/Refugees-Displaced-Persons-and-Higher-Education
- The World University Service of Canada - Student Refugee Program: https://www.wusc.ca/our-work/student-refugees/
- The Refugee Education Initiative: https://refugeeeducationinitiative.org/
- The Higher Education Support Program by the Open Society Foundations: https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/what-we-do/themes/higher-education-support-program
- The International Refugee Assistance Project: https://refugeerights.org/
- European website on Integration: https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/report-health-refugees-and-migrants-who-european-region_en

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