Higher Education as a Socio-economic Advancement Opportunity for Refugees

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This conceptual paper addresses the relationships between higher education policies for refugees (Avery and Said, 2017) and the wider issues of social justice, transition to sustainability, peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery in the Middle East. The paper draws on an overview of current options for refugees to access higher education, as well as research on long term impacts in post conflict contexts. Perspectives adopted in the paper involve theorizing the ways higher education shapes socio-technical systems in the Middle East, and the effects this can have for economic recovery and autonomy.

Today, the world is facing the greatest refugee and displacement crisis since the Second World War. The immediate causes of the crisis seem to be armed conflicts and radicalisation of societies. At closer inspection, we can see that this crisis reflects a repeated failure of the international economic and political system in addressing certain major challenges, including social justice and adequate education. While international politics has failed to support stability or prevent political conflicts, growing neoliberalism and ineffective development strategies have instead contributed to social injustice and economic instability at national and international levels. Higher education plays a key role in stabilisation, modernization and de-radicalisation of societies, but has to date only received limited attention in development assistance strategies or in the context of humanitarian aid for refugees. Young refugees and displaced academics are therefore insufficiently equipped to work as catalysts for peacebuilding in their own or host countries. Moreover, they are under severe economic and social pressure to earn money for their family’s survival. Given these circumstances, opening up opportunities for higher education for young refugees (O’Keeffe and Pásztor, 2017) not only give them the hope to improve their socioeconomic situation, but will also change their personal status as a “refugee”. Crucially, a well-educated generation is a fundamental condition for successful reconstruction, social recovery and sustainable development in the post conflict future (Emtairah, Avery and Mourad, 2016). Attention must be devoted to the form and content of higher education, however, to address challenges, create capacity needed in recovery efforts, and avoid future dependencies (cf. Dryden-Peterson, 2016).


