CHAPTER SEVEN

Not Quite a Crisis but a Coping Challenge

How Berlin Universities Responded to the 2015–2016 Refugee Influx

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INTRODUCTION

Since the arrival of more than 1.1 million new refugees into Germany in 2015/2016 (BAMF, 2017a), the country has been challenged to respond, from the federal government down to its 16 states, from public and private institutions down to individual citizens. It has been two years since the initial ‘refugee crisis’ period of summer 2015, when globally broadcast images showed ordinary Germans with ‘Refugees Welcome’ signs bringing bags of clothing and cartons of food and drink to major rail stations. Those early days have now passed, with entry points in transit countries closed off again, as quickly crafted political agreements in 2016 ended refugee intake into Europe and Germany. The scramble to devise adequate shelter and organize the administrative mechanisms to process the sudden rise in new asylum requests to Germany, to move refugees into stable housing, get their children into schools and parents into training as well as employment arrangements, are now mostly resolved. Language training and educational assistance for refugees in federal states and cities is formalized and functioning. But with the slim re-election of Chancellor Angela Merkel in September of 2017, the government remains hampered by deep divides over a broad range of issues, including the debate over refugee integration and what its implications will mean for Germany. In the higher education sector—the focus of this paper—the relatively small number of refugees who will become eligible
to enter universities by 2020 is estimated to range from between 30–50,000 (Rueland, 2016; Stifterverband, 2017).

BACKGROUND

Never in UNHCR’s existence have more people been forcibly displaced. While 86 percent of all refugees are hosted in developing countries—one out of four even in the world’s least developed countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2016, p. 4)—with refugees entering Europe in large numbers over the past few years, the topic of (forced) migration has gained greater public attention in the Western world (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015; Juran & Broer, 2017). Early in 2015/2016 in Germany, the outpouring of civic support for arriving refugees “seemed to shake off [the country’s] image as a cold-hearted nation” (The Washington Post, 2016).

This paper presents the perspectives of university administrators in Berlin who are working with refugee students seeking to enroll in full time studies. We nest our research within the broader global discourse on forced migration that has gained traction in the scholarship in recent years (Guterres, 2010; Landau & Duponchel, 2011). The university administrators we studied pointed to numerous challenges but were unified in their belief that the challenge posed by the so-called refugee “crisis”—to use the term predominantly adopted by the German and global media (Bauder, 2016) in 2015/2016—has not been a crisis but rather given them an opportunity to improve services for refugees that could in the long run also improve services for all German and international students. In the following discussion, we detail findings from our interviews conducted with administrators in the summer of 2017 about their work directly with refugee students. We explore how the university administrative estate in Berlin responded to the refugee influx, what programming their institutions created and what they felt were the most important and pressing challenges to be addressed now and in the future.

Research on refugees and education has so far primarily focused on their aspirations for primary and secondary education, the challenges of access in developing and developed contexts as well as education in refugee camps (Anselme & Hands, 2012; Crea, 2016; Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010; Hannah, 1999; Zeus, 2011). Much less research has so far looked at refugees and higher education. In this study, we considered a different scenario: refugees in the well-resourced context of Germany who are aspiring for higher education and the administrators who worked with them. Although existential questions often emerged during our interviews such as “What is integration?” or “How is integration part of internationalization?”, we address these only tangentially as our focus was primarily on
the practical responses of Berlin university administrators and what they have done to directly address the refugee influx.

THE STUDY

The data for this study was collected during an intensive week-long interview phase in early August of 2017. The four researchers—three German and one American—formed earlier in the year as the Berlin Refugee Research Group (BRRG) to formulate the research project and develop the interview protocol. There were 17 items in the semi-structured interview divided into five sections. Questions addressed issues such as “What have been some of the biggest changes in your work since the number of refugees increased in 2015?”, “What do you think are the biggest challenges for refugees who want to study in Germany?” and “Do you think higher education structures and procedures need to be adapted to accommodate refugees, and if so how?”

The interviews were conducted with 14 university administrators at seven public research universities and universities of applied sciences throughout Berlin. All interviews were audio recorded and conducted in German and participants signed a consent form authorized by the lead author’s Institutional Review Board (see Table 7.1 for brief descriptions of the interview partners, their roles and universities).

After each interview, the researchers briefly discussed the main points of the interview. Upon completion of all interviews, the research team compiled its notes and organized the information into a first round of thematic categories that initially came out to 20 distinct themes. They then listened to the 11 audio interviews again and refined the initial 20 themes to 31, along with exemplary direct quotes from the interview recordings. The team then had successive group meetings to comb through the series of themes and narrow them to the distinct categories we describe in the sections below.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While German higher education institutions have been reforming steadily over the past decades since the Bologna Declaration established a European Higher Education Area that revised previous university structures, the unanticipated refugee influx of 2015/2016 presented universities with another externally imposed challenge that allowed them to consider more targeted reforms. A helpful framework useful for looking at institutional change in higher education was proposed by Kondakci and Yildirim in 2004, who noted Gersick’s Punctuated Equilibrium
Paradigm (1991). Gersick's paradigm argues that organizations are characterized by "relatively long periods of stability (equilibrium), punctuated by compact periods of qualitative, metamorphic change (revolution)" (p. 12). Yet, metamorphic change is restricted by what Gersick defines as deep structures that "disassemble[s], reconfigure[s] and force[s] wholesale transformation" (p. 12). The punctuated equilibrium model is appropriate for the German university landscape in its assumption that, in addition to continuous adaptation efforts, major changes may also suddenly happen to which deep structures must respond. This process is what makes the German case of the quick influx of new refugee streams into the country and eventually its universities so intriguing.

**CONTEXT**

Since the Second World War, Germany has increasingly been seen as a "land of migration" and an attractive hub for skilled workers and international students (Rietig & Müller, 2016). Without great public notice, over the years even before the refugee crisis, Germany had consolidated "its position as one of the main immigration countries, second only to the United States" (OECD, 2015, p. 16). Its universities also made it the fifth most popular destination for international students (UNESCO, 2016). In 2015, over 300,000 international students (12.3 percent of the student body) were enrolled at German universities (BAMF, 2015) attracted by its high quality, well-resourced, tuition-free system.

The arrival of refugees became more and more a crisis when the Ministry of the Interior quadrupled its predictions in March 2015 from 250,000 to 800,000 by August (Ulrich & Hildebrandt, 2015). The final tabulations by the Ministry of the Interior for 2015 were that a total of 890,000 refugees had entered Germany that year (Federal Ministry of the Interior [BMI], 2016). Of these, 55,000 had applied for asylum in Berlin (State Office for Refugee Affairs Berlin [LAF-B], 2017). Between 2014–2017, more than 1.6 million refugees made their way into Germany (BAMF, 2017b), with 35 percent having graduated from a secondary school before they arrived and 20 percent having a higher education or vocational qualification (Brücker et al., 2016). Germany's free education system proved particularly appealing with 43 percent of refugees specifically citing the education system as their motivation for choosing Germany over other European countries (Brücker et al., 2016).

With the influx of so many refugees in such a short period of time, Germany's institutions and civic society have been challenged to quickly become part of a wide integration effort driven from the top and trickling down into nearly every sector and all parts of the country. Although by 2017 cities and municipalities no longer were in a state of panic to administratively process the initial number of refugees
who came in and their numbers have declined dramatically (-75 percent compared to the previous year (BAMF, 2017b), the detailed process of integrating new arrivals with adequate support has begun in earnest. Our focus on higher education administrators in only one city context focuses on a small but important part of that much larger puzzle.

In Germany’s higher education sector, official estimates are that the refugee stream may be as high as 50,000 by 2020 once qualification and credentialing hurdles are resolved (Rueland, 2016; Stifterverband, 2017). Although on paper that number may appear fairly modest compared with the total university student population of 2,806,063 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016), equalling merely a 1.07 percent – 1.78 percent increase in the overall university student population, it nevertheless requires new or additional management structures and services that had not been required before. While in recent decades, universities had indeed experienced a 44.5 percent increase in the student body since 2007/08 that implied greater student-professor ratios (from 1/59 in 2004 to 1/66 by 2014), fewer contact hours, more online lectures and fewer student services (Bös, 2016; Roche & Goldmann, 2014; Statista, 2016), these changes emerged only gradually over time and were incrementally dealt with by the measured addition of new university personnel and services. The refugee student influx over a much more condensed period of time, by contrast, necessitated a much more immediate administrative response. Beyond that, arguably, it also required a more fundamental shift in thinking about the role and responsibility of universities and what the best provision of services to students requires.

These additional services are extensive, from verification of higher education entrance requirements to language preparatory classes, from buddy and mentoring programs to additional guidance and individual consultations, all of which must be provided with the hiring of additional staff and the money for additional resources (BAMF, 2016, p. 2). These needs place significantly new demands on the capacities of universities to adequately serve their students. To do so, in 2016, universities became eligible to apply for a combined 100 million Euros in competitive grants aimed at developing support programming between 2015 and 2020 from the German Academic Exchange Service, operating with funds from the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (DAAD, 2016).

While this funding has helped universities provide special courses and programming for refugees, in light of the urgency to cope with the new demands they require, universities have had relatively little time to reflect on whether their new programming has in fact been effective and what its actual impact has been. Thus, more carefully conceived and crafted academic studies that can provide a deeper, targeted analysis of university programing are just now beginning to emerge.
FINDINGS

Language

For administrators, the main hurdle they unanimously agree refugees have had to overcome first in order to study in German higher education has been learning the German language sufficiently for study at that level. The German government has also not overlooked the language hurdle that refugees and any other newcomers to Germany face. Anyone who seeks asylum or citizenship in Germany must pass an Integration course (Integrationskurs), which requires learning about German history, culture, social norms and language (BAMF, 2017a, p. 25). The Integration course prepares participants for sufficient communication ability at everyday, basic level classified as B1 on a scale from A1 to C2, according to the European Council’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001, p. 24). However, B1 level is not sufficient for attending university studies, which require C1 language competency as a minimum. The framework is illustrated in Figure 7.1 below.

![Common European framework of reference for languages](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf)

Learning German was identified by most of our interview partners as the main hurdle all refugees face. Especially for newly arrived refugees, access to higher education was hindered by insufficient or nonexistent language skills. In Berlin all universities require C1 as the minimum language level verified through the uni-assist process (explained in the next section below), whether studying at the bachelor’s or master’s level (DAAD, 2017, p. 20). For that reason, some universities in Berlin set up special counseling hours in Arabic, Farsi, Dari or English for refugees (DAAD, 2017, p. 16): “HTW Berlin offers consulting in Arabic and Farsi for refugees. In the beginning, many applicants needed the special language consulting hours. Meanwhile, Arabic and Farsi are less necessary, because refugees are learning German so fast.” (Hoffmann, HTW). Even if more recent prospective students come to the univer-
sities with a higher level of German, they still face hurdles when trying to articulate themselves on academic subjects at a university level: “For very specific questions, still, their mother tongue is necessary” (Hoffmann, HTW). Sierra Bara from EHB confirms this finding and extends the perspective towards the introductory study phase: “Refugees are somewhat overwhelmed when they sit in their first courses.”

Expectations Management

Once refugees have successfully mastered the language hurdle and become eligible to enroll, competition for highly sought-after study places begins in earnest. Refugees are classified the same way as international students and thus must compete with all non-European international students for a limited number of seats. Universities limit international non-EU citizens access to between five percent (HTW, HWR, Beuth, EHB) and eight percent (TU) of the student population.² Especially in metropolitan areas such as Berlin, there is a surplus demand for limited study places and a refugee from Syria who has barely just learned German may be competing against a student from Denmark who has regularly visited Germany their whole life and is for all intents and purposes a native-level speaker. In these circumstances, administrators in unison agreed on the importance of expectation management: “We make clear that our preparatory classes are only there to qualify them for enrollment, but not to be automatically eligible for a guaranteed slot” (Hess, HWR); “It needs to be explained early on that nothing is guaranteed, even after overcoming all the hurdles, because they still compete with many for very few study places.” (Hirsch-Landau, HWR). And yet, our interview partners reported: “no matter what we say, there is still ‘a certain illusion’ on the refugee part” (Kohstall, FU).

Uni-assist e.V.

In Germany, there is a service agency offering support for all universities in the assessment of educational certificates from around the world. The uni-assist e.V., promises “professional, secure and efficient application processes”³ while reducing the workload for admissions offices at the respective universities. German universities can decide whether they want to externalize the application process of international students and pay for this service or if they prefer to keep that expertise in-house. Except for EHB, all universities in Berlin that took part in our study were using the uni-assist service to handle international applications. In unison our participating administrators were somewhat dissatisfied with the complicated process that internationals face when trying to apply for study programs at Berlin’s higher education institutions.
Hess from HWR Berlin perceived uni-assist as a big hurdle: “It’s not very easy to understand. It’s complicated for anyone who has not applied somewhere before, we hear that from all international students.” Her colleague Hirsch-Landau added as an explanation for the language hurdle: “The uni-assist forms are predominantly in German bureaucratic language.”

The prompt solution to this problem has come from the commitment of employees and student assistants: “The steps are a bit difficult and complicated, true. I have to help many at the computer to go through each step. But then I think to myself: we’re here, they can ask us, I try to explain all, they simply have to learn and understand the process. Most managed this challenge” (Cadete La O, HTW). Other universities have student assistants that support refugees in this process by filling in the online application. However, support in the application process does not mitigate against disappointment at a later stage. In the assessment process itself, which is handled by uni-assist alone, rejection-decisions are perceived as being non-transparent: “No one understands uni-assist! Some decisions are hard to explain. Why do some applicants get permissions and others not? I wonder what happens to too many who don’t come to us for advising. I fear many are left out as a result” (Kube, TU).

Structural Challenges Advising Students and Providing Information

Jeß from HWR Berlin pegged the success or failure of refugees seeking higher education access directly on her shoulders: “In large measure their [refugees'] success depends on the consulting they get along the way.” Many interviewees expressed a similar view, citing a host of structural problems as hindrances to their aspirations. But the challenge rests on both ends: on the one hand, it is hard for university employees to ‘identify’ refugees and their needs, while on the other hand it is hard for refugees to find a suitable contact person. For Hirsch-Landau from HWR Berlin, this tension is in fact the ‘biggest challenge’ he sees. Nevertheless, the administrators in our sample said that most refugees they had dealt with had eventually managed to overcome this hurdle: “Refugees find their own contact person” (Kohstall, FU); “and once they have come to trust you, they always come back to you” (Hoffmann, HTW).

At some German universities, counselors are organized through an association called GIBcT (Association for information, counselling and therapy at universities). Within this body, an exchange about prospective refugee students and the need for action in higher education takes place and “there is an informal exchange between the student advisors” (Jeß, HWR).

However, despite this service, there remains a long way to go: “The refugee integration at EHB requires a lot of informal communication to develop structures for the specific demands” (Sierra Barra, EHB). While most interviewees
now declare themselves as satisfied with the results achieved, it is an apparent ongoing change process that stretches some employees to their limits. Kube from TU Berlin especially sees the need to improve inter-department communication. Our interview partners call for more flexible, non-bureaucratic methods that will help meet refugees’ needs.

This exceptionally complicated “complex orientation jungle” (Morris-Lange, 2017) not only challenges administrators. Previous research also identified similar challenges facing international students and in particular migrant populations who also found maneuvering in Germany’s education space to be difficult.

Bureaucracy

In our study, our interview partners presented German bureaucracy as a double-edged sword: overwhelming, but also necessary. On the one hand, they described it as overwhelming because “bureaucracy does not create quality; it is hampering the individual” (von Kopp, Beuth), as “the system is often not transparent and contradictory; many mistakes refugees make result from that” (Kube, TU). Another administrator lamented that “Some students have been through so much bureaucracy. They are in a way traumatized from where they came from, and also exhausted from the administration process here. There could be less bureaucracy” (Kohstall, FU). Another put it even more starkly, arguing that German bureaucracy is so omnipresent and pervasive as the gateway to getting anywhere ahead in the system that a refugees’ “first words are the bureaucracy words, ‘Termin, Antrag, Ausweis’ [appointment, application, identification paper] (Uenal, TU).

On the other hand, however, some administrators described administration as necessary and “not too bureaucratic. We have our laws and rules and we should not lower any standards” (Karst, Beuth), as this level of quality management is perceived as important to guarantee the kind of education standards the country wishes to stand by. As Hirsch-Landau from HWR Berlin put it, more bluntly, the universities are not “hip start-up companies but public authorities and the larger we are, the more we need rules and processes to live by.” Furthermore, he argued, “if the universities deviate from their regulations for the refugees, what is happening to other applicants like people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, for example, if we give preference to refugees from the upper class? This is worth a discussion.”

In order to find a balance between maintaining a sensible and orderly system but also having each individual student in mind, one of our interview partners explained that, “We work closely with uni-assist; we check credentials, they need to be correctly translated and proper, they need required signatures, but we look at every person on a case by case basis too; we try to go beyond bureaucracy as best we can” (Cadete La O, HTW).
Integration as Part of Internationalization

For our interview sample, the challenge of finding a way to help integrate new refugee students—on top of the 12.3 percent international students already in the system (BAMF, 2015)—raised their awareness about the role of wider forces of globalization at play in their day-to-day work. Rather than throwing up their hands in despair at more administrative work demanded of them, our interviewees saw becoming more aware of students with difficult backgrounds and circumstances pushing them to reform the way they work and be creative in finding ways to more adequately cater to a wider set of particular student needs.

While it remains to be seen whether universities will be able to maintain the responsive programs they initiated with DAAD funding in 2015 once that support ends in 2018 (and may or may not be renewed), their work catering to refugees’ needs can be seen as having served as ignition to create more student-oriented counseling services, which had not previously existed in the same measure. As the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) predicts that the number of first-year domestic students will decrease in the future, universities will need to give these kinds of services particular considerations (DAAD/ DZHW, 2016). In light of the continuing growth of international students in bachelor-level programs coupled with high attrition rates among migrant and international students (59 percent Latin American and 41 percent African compared with 28 percent German students, respectively) (Burkhart & Kercher, 2014), problems associated with entrance criteria and support services for at-risk students are not currently being sufficiently addressed by universities. In this regard, the refugee influx can serve as an important catalyst for positive change that will help the entire student body, foreign and domestic alike, with the provision of additional counseling and preparatory courses that can serve all students.

Pre-enrollment guidance is particularly necessary so that “the choice of study programme [can] be made confidently, with knowledge of one’s own talents and abilities” (Ebert & Heublein, 2017, p. 171). Studies show that migrants’ choice of study subjects is to a greater extent influenced by extrinsic motivation and family expectations for ‘prestigious’ study programmes, which then often cannot be fulfilled (Ibid, p. 155). Yet, researchers also unanimously agree that it should not be concluded from this that special programs targeted just for migrants should be set up, but rather that there is the need to “take greater account of the needs of different immigrant groups when designing their regular programmes” (SVR, 2017, p. 5). That is, mainstreaming refugee programing offers a promising chance for such groups but also for all German university students.

Our interview partners confirm this assumption in the research. For example, Karst from Beuth University outlines that he never treats “a refugee preferentially,
in contrast to other applicants with a foreign university entrance qualification.” Only the German governmental financial support separates programs for both stakeholders, but administrators do not implement them as necessarily separate services.

Was the Refugee Influx a ‘Crisis’ for German Universities?

Reporting in the German and global media frequently referred to the refugee influx as a “refugee crisis” (Haller, 2017). This led to our initial belief that for university administrators the refugee stream must also have been seen as a crisis. However, responses from our administrators on this point fell into a range with no extreme ends and without any feeling of explicit crisis. The general feeling was that for German society the refugee influx posed challenges, but for the higher education sector this was more a challenge couched within an opportunity. As one administrator put it: “It put new demands on us. For society it was an enormous challenge, but universities had the chance to reflect on which kinds of assistance we can offer. The situation has raised questions for Germany, which is good for the country, like ‘what tendencies may emerge like xenophobia,’ but ‘crisis’ is too dramatic a term” (Hirsch-Landau, HWR).

What Has Changed in Everyday Work?

For our respondents, the question of how everyday work life had changed depended in particular on the peculiarities of their institution and their roles within it, particularly if direct student advising was a large part of their day-to-day activity. For example, some administrators attested not to feeling any change in their workload or counselling topics: “I don’t see a major change” (Jeß, HWR) or “administratively nothing has changed for me... our counselling load has not grown much” (Karst, Beuth). But for others the change was noticeable, in one case double what it had been before: “There is definitely extra effort for counselling, easily 50 percent more” (Uenal, TU).

On a structural level, for administrators perceiving more administrative work this was supported simply by a tangible increase in the numbers. As Karst from Beuth University noted, the number of applicants with a foreign university entrance qualification in the winter term 2017/18 was “1200, so double” in comparison with prior semesters. Further compounding challenges brought about with the sheer fact of more students to advise was that some applicants arrived without any documents, which meant that the universities had to find new structures to get them started, such as into a preparatory program (Studienkolleg) before applying for more official enrollment. As Hoffmann from HTW Berlin explained: “To enroll
in Studienkolleg is possible if a refugee has no documents at all”. Some interview partners even noticed changes at the university level: “How the uni has to respond has changed. We now know better who does what kind of work here because we had to be able to point them in different directions, we know our colleagues better now. We improved our communication. This will also help in the future to solve cases from all students” (Uenal, TU).

The Dilemma of Not Being Able to Track Students

Due to data security rules (*Datenschutz*), university administrators and study counsellors are not permitted to officially track who is a refugee student and who is not once they enroll officially. They are just able to see in the general records they maintain where the students come from to know if they are an international or domestic student. The difficulty of keeping track of what happens with refugee students once they complete qualifying training and are normally enrolled is that “the refugees want to be perceived as regular students and not as refugees” (Kostall, FU), so choose not to out themselves. In these cases, advisors may only learn by chance who is a refugee “if they use uni-assist free application process” (Hoffmann, HTW) or if they “need the help of the refugee Welcome program” (von Kopp, Beuth). These hindrances to more open transparency makes the evaluation of refugee programming and its impact at the universities more challenging.

**CONCLUSION**

To situate our study of German administrators working with refugee students in the current political climate, this study looked at lessons learned by university administrators who have developed programming for refugee students. As Gersick’s Punctuated Equilibrium Paradigm (1991) indicated, periods of relative equilibrium at times are inevitably punctuated by sudden environmental changes. Indeed, the refugee influx, while not a crisis in the eyes of the university administrators with whom we spoke, nevertheless disrupted their institution’s operational equilibrium over the last decades. As the German and global media portrayed the influx of refugees into the country as a ‘refugee crisis’ it is important to make a distinction between their coverage of the situation as a whole and how administrators looked particularly at their ability to cope with a comparatively small part group of refugee students who are making their way to the universities. In other words, an important distinction must be made between the media’s coverage of Germany broadly and the explicit perceptions of university administrators on the ground level who dealt with the everyday specifics. Whereas the administrators looked particularly at the
ways their universities coped with a comparatively small segment of the refugee population that came to the universities, for Germany more widely the refugee influx presented system-wide challenges whose effect trickled down to individual institutions and people.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

In this last section, we revisit the themes described above and offer recommendations that came out of our discussions with administrators.

**Simplifying Information and Offering More Targeted Support**

To support students, whether they are refugees or not but in recognition that all find it challenging to make sense of the variety and complexity of the German higher education system, universities need to provide more pre-enrollment guidance and counseling to “help demystify the process of navigating this very complex system” (Hess, HWR). A more structured approach to simplify the bureaucratic process should also be developed as another administrator suggested, and “Right now there are so many steps they have to figure out. The experts could develop a transparent process” (Jeß, HWR). Previous research has found that migrants “are less likely than other students to be well prepared for their studies in terms of the use of communicative skills, e.g. in order to make optimal use of tutorials or counseling services” (Ebert & Heublein, 2017, p. 175). Merely providing services is insufficient and a proactive and inclusive approach also needs to take into account that a person’s ability to study goes beyond merely intellectual capacities but also includes the ability to purposely seek out support when it is needed.

While refugee students undoubtedly require more guidance, advising, faculty contact and services, providing this across the board more readily to all students at the university presents a chance for universities to rethink what all students, not just refugees, and in particular first semester students, need to flourish. As Kube from TU Berlin stated: “My wish: that we widen our focus to all students. What hurdles do we have, which ways are possible to come to university, why is everything so non-transparent? When we continue with these reflections, this is a win-win-situation for all of us!”

To make sure that refugees can identify their ‘perfect contact person’ in the institution, one or more employees have to be clearly designated as responsible for refugee integration. Those assigned this role should be knowledgeable about procedures and structures at the university in order to fully answer legal technicalities. Second, beyond these key advisors, the university staff more broadly should be in-
formed of activities being developed for refugees and who is specifically responsible for this area of its work. Moreover, websites, flyers and first contact centers should be designed for refugees as a specific target group.

Improve the Uni-assist Process at Universities

The service platform that assesses international educational certificates and handles the application process for non-European and international applicants is described by our interviewees as a complex, complicated and non-transparent gate where many refugees fail. Hess from HWR Berlin argued that uni-assist acted as the main key to success for refugee integration. When high-school or university documents from a refugee’s home country are missing because the student had to flee so quickly, applying to university is still possible via uni-assist. However, as admission offices at universities make decisions about who is accepted for study, it is important that they be sensitized to the specific situation of refugees. This requires an open-minded, flexible and communicative process. These offices need the support of student assistants in the application process to help in the uni-assist process, but more so even the administrators we spoke with advocated that staff from uni-assist itself be hired to help at the universities: “One solution would be to provide individual support for all international students to get through the application process of uni-assist. And to centralize the whole process, where the experts sit who can judge whether a document is genuine” (Hess, HRW). To that end, they argued that uni-assist as a key mechanism in the application process for international and refugee students should be evaluated for its transparency and effectiveness.

More Opportunities for Language Learning

The administrators we spoke with noted that refugees but also many other international students still face various problems after being admitted to the university: “We cannot leave the refugees alone just because the study now. We need to make sure to support them also within the next few years” (Uenal, TU). Hoffmann from HTW Berlin specified further: “Subject related language is important for success, so students should continue the learning while studying. Moreover, the contact to German students is important for their integration. They need to have the guts to contact Germans actively. Even if they have C1 level, they still are overwhelmed with the technical language.” For this reason, we recommend various activities wherein language learning can also take place, such as with continuous German classes during their studies, buddy programs that support interaction with German students and lecturers that integrate international students in mixed teams.
Revise the University Welcome Culture

Not only can changes in the structure and style of how information is communicated smooth the way, but so can a revision of the ‘welcoming culture’ at the universities. Interviewees we spoke with, such as Uenal from TU Berlin, called for more flexible solutions, direct-communication and more interdepartmental exchange to support refugees in a non bureaucratic way: “We do not want to put a lot of barriers in their way, but to find out if this is a place right for them. We want to help them right away by being surrounded with their academic peers” (Uenal, TU). This calls for a change of work culture.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVE AND ANTICIPATED CHANGES

Overall, our interviews with Berlin university administrators working with refugee students seeking access into their universities revealed both that the administrators by and large welcome refugees and seek to help them, but also point out numerous clogs in the system that need to be worked on and resolved. The main takeaway from our study is best expressed in the words of one administrator, that the situation presented a “coping crisis” (Kohstall, FU) and across the board was seen as an opportunity for universities to rethink aspects of the higher education system (Streitwieser & Brueck, under review). By now, two years since the peak of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ and the largest arrival of new refugees, administrators have become accustomed to the situation and in their work no longer feel like they are in a trial phase, but rather that the situation has become normalized, with programs up and running and integrated into the university structure. While there were certainly new challenges, these were not overwhelming.

Berlin university administrators felt that it was up to the higher education system to think about how it can help all students, refugees included, and smooth the transition into higher education, whether from school to university or from another system and context into the German university landscape. Overall, our sample felt that while the bureaucracy was not necessarily heavier than in other systems, it was still important to further demystify the process and make it more manageable. While they saw the details within the system as a necessary quality assurance measure, they also saw how it could be overwhelming.

Overall, as a research team we believe that while studies like ours are valuable in gathering detailed information from those in the so-called trenches who are experiencing the refugee integration work on a day-to-day basis, it remains too early to know what the real impact of the programming has been so far. The research community interested in this topic in Germany is growing, as it is through the interest of international researchers who recognize a special case in the Germany
example. But more time and data will be needed before any of us will be able to make more definitive declarations about the success or failure of the efforts that have been launched so far to avail refugees of substantive higher education opportunities, as well as what the implications of doing so are.

The refugee influx presented German higher education institutions with new challenges that the administrators we spoke with interpreted primarily as an opportunity to enact new types of programming, which were inspired and supported by DAAD funding through the INTEGRA and WELCOME programs, among other supports. One possible explanation for administrator perceptions of the challenge as an opportunity for reform, rather than a full-blown crisis, can be explained by the inherent durability of the university bureaucratic administrative structure, or what Gersick calls “underlying order or deep structure” (p. 12).

While bureaucracy is often a source of frustration for many, and perhaps particularly so for refugee students trying to navigate and access a complex system, in the eyes of administrators it may also serve as an anchor of stability for the institution itself. While the perspective of refugees was not the focus of this paper, and it is important that further research lend them a voice as well, this study presented the refugee situation from the perspective of the administrators who have been working with them. To these administrators, the bureaucratic structure lent them stability that allowed parts of their institution to temporarily “disassemble, reconfigure and force wholesale transformation” during the refugee influx. That is the nature of German bureaucracy, as one of our interviewees stated: perhaps it is indeed overwhelming, but it is also necessary and, in the end, is a reassuring “underlying order.”

Table 7.1. Interview partners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Name &amp; Institution</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three large research-focused universities: The Free University of Berlin (Freie Universität Berlin), the Technical University of Berlin (Technische Universität Berlin) and the Humboldt University of Berlin (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Kohstall, FU</td>
<td>Dr. Florian Kohstall, Freie Universität Berlin</td>
<td>International Cooperation Berlin-Kairo</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Kube, TU</td>
<td>Katharina Kube, Technische Universität Berlin</td>
<td>Student counselling</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Uenal, TU</td>
<td>Baris Uenal, Technische Universität Berlin</td>
<td>Student counselling</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Shafiqyar, HU</td>
<td>Moheb Shafiqyar, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin</td>
<td>Volunteer Refugee Law Clinic Berlin e.V.</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Name &amp; Institution</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cadete La O, HTW</td>
<td>Julia Cadete La O, Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft (HTW) Berlin</td>
<td>Student counselling</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoffmann, HTW</td>
<td>Heike Hoffmann, Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft (HTW) Berlin</td>
<td>Study administration</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karst, Beuth</td>
<td>René Karst, Beuth Hochschule für Technik Berlin</td>
<td>Study administration</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Von Kopp, Beuth</td>
<td>Andrea von Kopp, Beuth Hochschule für Technik Berlin</td>
<td>Student counselling</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hess, HWR</td>
<td>Arndis Hess, Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht (HWR) Berlin</td>
<td>Student counselling</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeß, HWR</td>
<td>Susanne Jess, Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht (HWR) Berlin</td>
<td>Student counselling</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirsch-Landau, HWR</td>
<td>Andreas Hirsch-Landau, Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht (HWR) Berlin</td>
<td>Student counselling</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preis-Allesch, EHB</td>
<td>Dagmar Preis-Allesch, Evangelische Hochschule Berlin</td>
<td>International Office</td>
<td>female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sierra-Barra, EHB</td>
<td>Sebastian Sierra Barra, Evangelische Hochschule Berlin</td>
<td>Lecturer for quality management</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schimkat, EHB</td>
<td>Dr. Heike Schimkat, Evangelische Hochschule Berlin</td>
<td>Lecturer for social work</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.
NOTES


2. Note, young refugees who went through the whole upper two to three-year cycle of secondary education in Germany and who obtained a German university entrance diploma are classified as resident aliens with a German diploma; such individuals count as “Bildungsinländer” and are thus not affected by the quotas (Hoffmann, HTW Berlin).

3. http://www.uni-assist.de/universities.html

4. In 2016/2017, about 35 percent of applications from international students were not forwarded to the universities for the final decision of enrollment (DAAD, 2017, p. 27).

REFERENCES


Roche, M., & Goldmann, C. (2014). Was die deutschen Universitäten von den amerikanischen lernen können und was sie vermeiden sollten [What German universities can learn from the US and what they should avoid]: Meiner, F.


