

Refugees' Path to Higher Education in a Host Country: Opportunities and Challenges. (A Qualitative Study from Norway)

Abstract

This study aims at exploring the experiences of refugees with regard to accessing and utilizing resources which are necessary to enroll in higher education institutions in Norway. Some refugees are able to access higher education in Norway while others are not despite their motivation and intention to do so. The question is, therefore, why? Dealing with an under researched topic, the study has a far-reaching significance in contributing to related academic literature and informing the policy makers about refugees' journey into higher education in Norway.

The study is informed by a conceptual framework developed from a combination of a concept and a theory. The concept represents resources which refugees need to access to enroll in higher education institutions; and the theory is the social capital theory used to frame how refugees access the resources. Nan Lin's definition of social capital, the *resources embedded in social networks accessed and used for purposive actions*, is adapted as the main guiding definition. This general theory is operationalized by using three forms of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking social capitals.

Qualitative research method is used in this study. The data were collected from 6 refugees, in Oslo and Akershus, who were selected using a combination of judgmental and snowball sampling methods. The data were gathered between March 11 and March 31, 2015 using narrative interviews and document analysis. The data are analyzed using a combination of thematic and to some extent structural analysis, both of which are forms of a narrative analysis.

The study argues that the availability of resources and even access to them are not enough for refugees to access higher education in Norway. It is equally important, if not more important, to let the refugees *utilize* the *right* resources based on their academic background and their future academic aspirations in Norway. Refugees are fully aware of some of the opportunities in the form of residence permits and free Norwegian language provisions; but they face problems such as poor quality language training, discouragement and discrimination, and being ignored when they raise legitimate requests. Therefore, all stakeholders need to do their best to improve the participation of refugees in higher education in Norway. How to empower the refugees to access and utilize the vital resources can be a starting point for further studies.