

Refugee crisis in Greece: the forthcoming higher education challenge

Demetrios Moris, Evika Karamagioli, Michael Kontos, Antonios Athanasiou, Emmanouil Pikoulis

International Medicine/Health Crisis Management, School of Medicine, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

Correspondence to: Demetrios Moris, MD, PhD. Agiou Thoma 17, 11527, Athens, Greece. Email: dimmoris@yahoo.com.

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As the south-easterly boarder of European Union, Greece has found itself standing for the gateway to the largest mass movement of populations across Europe since the end of World War II (1). Currently, refugees in Greece are estimated around 57,000 with the context of the crisis still evolving (2).

Universities have a duty to hark the social needs. The National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUoA)-the oldest and more prestigious Institution of Higher Education in Greece (3)—is preparing to launched an initiative of various activities to meet the “higher education challenge” that these people will face inevitably (4), acting as a pioneer in an effort to advance a new participatory model of pedagogy that not only treats education as a fundamental human right but also paths the way for policy dialogue, knowledge sharing and capacity building for those in need.

As Allan Goodman recently said, *“the world’s humanitarian response to refugees is focused on food, sanitation, and shelter. There is no doubt these things are vital and in great demand. But we don’t tend to mention educational needs in the same breath”*. The immediate challenges of refugee management can overshadow taking stock of the vast scope of people who are displaced. Among those who have had their education or their career in academia interrupted are the many scholars and scientists whose lives and work serve thousands more. While access to higher education is 32% on average across the world, among refugees it is less than 1%. With refugees spending 17 years on average in exile, this is a gaping social injustice (5).

NKUoA has already launched an initiative to grant several scholarships for young scholars to be able to participate in Modern Greek Academia. Prerequisite for

the success of this integration initiative is the preparation for future studies or a relevant career while undertaking language training and building cultural competencies. Due to the fact that NKUoA is a public university, funded from public budget alongside with per-purpose research funds and minimum private funding in form of scholarships (3), it is highly unlikely that it could sponsor a smattering of scholarships and funded placements to threatened students and scholars. Thus, the need for adequate financial support from international funds as well as reasonable management of the available budget is mandatory. If this pilot initiative succeeds, then it would be able to be spread to other higher education institutions across the country.

To date, it is not clear how the NKUoA will design the gradual integration of refugees in Academia. There are many problems to be efficiently solved to facilitate their participation in higher Greek education. One matter of debate is whether the students and scholars should be offered full- or part-time enrolment in short-cycle higher education courses. This is of paramount importance since this could cause a gap between the efficacy of education and validity of degrees. Since Greece is an EU country, where the academic degrees are of equal validity only after graduation from to fully certified university courses. The latter might cause a future difficulty in these graduates to access other opportunities in their lives, based on the field of their expertise.

Another challenge is the educational heterogeneity among refugees. Some have little schooling; others are medical doctors, nuclear physicists, professors of literature or lawyers. For some, bridging courses may be all they need to continue a career in Greece or even in Europe (4). Others-particularly those who have not finished

their education, or are trained in regulated professions- will require individual counselling to be able to continue on their chosen career path.

Another question is whether the individual financial background could have an effect on the integration process of refugees in Academia. Higher Education in Greece is a Public Good-fully supported by the Greek State (3). Even if financial crisis has crushed the social character of the Greek State (4), no discrimination should take place between wealthy and poor students and scholarships should cover both tuition and living costs. Another solution to this conflict could be the support of the e-learning which by forming the so-called “blended learning” in which students gather as a learning community in one resource center, but learn online, with their studies supported by provision of laptops, a local facilitator and visiting lecturers, as well as academics online.

Unfortunately, in Higher Education-and in Education in general-the effects and results of policies, decisions and actions are not only long-term, but frequently not measurable either. This meaning that the real effects of the integration policies may become visible—though not necessarily measurable—many years in the future (3). The true impact of efforts to improve the lives of refugees and academics in troubled countries may not be realized for decades (5).

This crisis will take at least a decade to recover from. So universities may be able to learn lessons from monitoring and evaluating their efforts now, which will help them develop more effective programs to help refugees further down the track. By taking a critical look at what’s helpful

and what isn’t, and responding flexibly, we may be able to improve the lot of thousands of students and colleagues in higher education whose lives and careers are in danger, through no fault of their own. By thinking outside the box, by building on experiences with national and international cooperation, the challenge of Academic Solidarity will be met.

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Footnote

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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