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**Comparative Case Study on the Situation
of Refugees at Universities in France,
Germany, and Switzerland**

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Discussing migration of the highly skilled usually implies work migration. However, what do skills mean in the case of refugees? This subproject to the project “The Mobility of the Highly Skilled towards Switzerland” looks at the situation of asylum seekers and refugees from an international comparative perspective. It focuses on three university programs for potential students with a refugee background, examining possibilities for and restrictions to participation and asking which role the migration channel of asylum plays regarding the meaning of skills.

The subproject focuses on the situation of highly skilled refugees (here used including asylum seekers, persons with provisional admission, and recognized refugees) who wish to be admitted to universities in Switzerland, Germany and France. It adds to the project “The Mobility of the Highly Skilled towards Switzerland”, which shows how the category of highly skilled migrants is framed by economic, social and political issues. Refugees are in a special situation when it comes to the recognition as highly skilled migrants because they live with specific limitations and in dependency of policies and government agencies. By adopting an international comparative perspective and looking at cases in Germany, France and Switzerland, we compare individual ways of dealing with different policies and practices – national, local, and institutional.

Our project enables us to examine transformation processes on the meso level of institutions and on the micro level of individual actors. The increasing numbers of refugees in Europe during the last three years have led to debates, new demands, initiatives and policies within institutions such as universities. Our research thus focuses on a very concrete, current and pressing space of social transformation through migration. At the same time, this example adds a facet to the narration of generally

increasing mobility, as it encompasses contrary dynamics within the complex of transformation: the increase of student and academic mobility and the immobility of refugees during the asylum application process, whose range of movement, access to institutions, means of living and so on are defined by regional and state law. This does not fit with the idea of generally increasing mobility for highly skilled migrants and is, thus, an important aspect to address in the complexity of the Migration-Mobility Nexus.

Research Questions

The project looks at special university programs, which support refugees, as well as policies and investigates possibilities and limitations. Moreover, it examines the situation from the point of view of different stakeholders involved and asks, if and how institutional change takes place.

In line with the research conducted in the project „The Mobility of the Highly Skilled towards Switzerland“, it looks at the construction of the label „highly skilled“ in the context of asylum. It contributes to further refining our model of migration channels: How can we understand the specifics of the protection-oriented channel in the context of universities in comparative international cases? We

further ask about ways of societal engagement: What does it mean for refugees to take part in academic programs, what are their expectations, how do they engage and what kind of engagement do they feel is expected from them? How are engagement and expectations negotiated in different international resource environments (Levitt et al. 2015)?

Methods

In a qualitative field study, we conduct semi-structured interviews with refugees who are in the process of applying for access or are already studying at one of the three universities. The questions focus on their perception of their educational integration process, their career plans, interests and claims, the effects of intermediaries and university policies and their own engagement. We then interview experts and volunteers at universities and government agencies with a focus on their aims, policy-making and consulting processes, as well as forms of engagement. Last, the policies of the universities and the regional and national asylum policies will be compared and linked to the interview results.

Academic and Non-Academic Contributions

This subproject contributes to the endeavor of developing a comprehensive understanding of “migration of highly skilled people” by adding perspectives of highly skilled migrants who are largely immobile and under strict state control and incorporating them into our model of migration channels. So far, neither are refugees in the focus of studies on migration of the highly skilled, nor are highly skilled migrants in the focus of studies on asylum. Moreover, the project contributes – by way of a comparative case study involving institutions in three different countries – to the body of research on transnationalism (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), regimes of migration and mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), and borders (Hess and Tsianos 2010).

Furthermore, the project adds qualitative insights to the broad discussion on the “potential” of migrants and refugees. It is of direct policy-relevance since it can contribute to a better academic and overall societal inclusion of refugees.

Publications

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