

# Refugee students' inclusion in higher education



*A multi-dimensional analysis of the German-speaking part of Switzerland*

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Master thesis International Development Studies

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## Abstract

With an increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers, the recognition of the importance of inclusion pathways is growing. The role that higher education plays in the resettlement of students with refugee backgrounds is increasingly receiving attention. However, only a small amount of research has been dedicated to the experiences of refugee students in Switzerland. Thus, institutions may be poorly equipped to respond to the distinct needs of refugees. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences and perspectives of refugee students and to explain the interrelation of barriers and facilitators of inclusion in higher education by analyzing the environment through a multi-scalar approach. As such, this thesis investigates to what extent an inclusive environment exists in the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

This research draws on a threefold approach to inclusion, offered by Knappert et al. (2019) and Lee (2020), to conceptualize the experiences of refugees as they make their path to and through university and as they move across social space. The purpose is to examine the interrelation between the micro-individual, meso-institutional/-organizational and macro-national/-cantonal level of inclusion. 10 interviews with higher education institutions and integration service employees as well as secondary data have provided a comprehensive contextual embedding of this research and enhanced the understanding of the meso- and macro-level of inclusion. Further, semi-standardized interviews were conducted with 12 refugee students to understand their experiences on their path to and during studies. Findings of this research confirm the complexity of accessing and participating in higher education as a refugee student. It reveals a ‘top-down’ flow of influence, creating intersectional barriers that need to be overcome by the refugee student. This study argues that comprehending the interplay of barriers and facilitators across levels is fundamental to move towards inclusion. Finally, this research provides suggestions to tackle barriers and leverage facilitators of inclusion and reflects on the broader context of higher education as a sustainable inclusion pathway for refugees.

**Keywords:** inclusion, refugee students, higher education, access, participation

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## List of abbreviations

CH	Switzerland
CHF	Swiss franc
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
EDK	Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education
e.g.	exempli gratia, for example
etc.	et cetera
FSO	Federal Statistical Office
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
IAS	Integration Agenda Switzerland 2018 – 2021
KIP	Cantonal Integration Programs
OHCHR	United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner
RS	Refugee student
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEM	State Secretariat for Migration
SER	State Secretariat for Education and Research
SH	Stakeholder
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
NGO	Non-governmental organization
Yr.	Year



# 1 Research overview

## 1.1 Introduction

In the last 15 years, the number of refugees<sup>1</sup> has doubled and is estimated to be around 26.4 million people (UNHCR, 2020). In 2020, there were around 20.7 million refugees under the UNHCR mandate and 5.7 million Palestine refugees under the UNRWA's mandate. Since 2010, according to the UNHCR (2019a), only around 3.9 million refugees have been able to return to their country of origin as compared to 10 million refugees returning in the previous decade. More people are being displaced than can return, which results in increasing pressure on host countries to provide long-lasting displacement solutions.

As outlined in the UNHCR Engagement with the SDGs Report, the principle of leaving no one behind “requires stakeholders to address and improve the situation of the poorest and most marginalized, enable them to enjoy their rights, and assist them to exercise agency over their development” (UNHCR, 2019b: 3). Whilst the importance of creating an inclusive environment for vulnerable groups, including refugees, is recognized (UNHCR 2017, 2019a, 2019b), the reality is that people with refugee backgrounds face several challenges when arriving in their resettlement country. Some of the challenges are finding employment and appropriate housing, accessing education, and digesting the disruption of their social and family networks (Ziersch et al., 2019). Amongst all the refugees, only 3% attend university globally (UNHCR, 2021). To put this number in perspective, globally there are around 37% of non-refugee students enrolled in tertiary education.<sup>2</sup> According to Eckhardt et al. (2017), despite many years of work, higher education (HE) systems have not been able to establish an environment that is inclusive towards refugees, a population in a unique socio-economic situation, and particularly vulnerable.

As part of the 2030 Agenda, the SDG 4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2016). The SDG 4.3 particularly outlines that by 2030, “equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university” needs to be ensured (UN, 2016). Further, the SDG 16 targets to “provide access to justice for all and build effective,

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<sup>1</sup> According to the UNHCR (1951), “refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.”

<sup>2</sup> According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship” (OHCHR, 1966: 1113).

accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”, thus promoting inclusive and peaceful societies (UN, 2016).

Ensuring access to HE for people with a refugee background is fundamental to both the SDG 4 and SDG 16. Further, the UNHCR has established the strategy “Refugee Education 2030”, aiming for the inclusion of refugee youth in education. Its mission is to create an environment and conditions where all refugees can “access inclusive and equitable quality education that enables them to learn, thrive and develop their potential” (UNHCR, 2019c). Regarding tertiary education, the strategy targets to enroll 15% of university-eligible refugees in education programs or technical and vocational education and training, and further aims to have equitable gender representation.

## 1.2 Academic relevance

In regard to refugee education, a great amount of research has been conducted on refugee children and teenagers in primary and secondary education. However, refugees in tertiary study and their experiences have been relatively missing in academic literature (Harris & Marlowe, 2011). As there has been little attention given to this particular student body, it is argued that there is a need to better comprehend the experiences of refugee students and more attention is required from the international HE research community (Bacher et al., 2020; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Ramsay and Baker (2019) suggest that the complexity of required needs for refugee students is not acknowledged sufficiently by existing institutional structures. A recent study also suggested that the increasing anti-immigrant sentiments across the world, and particularly in Europe, are part of the reason why the experiences of refugees at higher education institutions (HEIs) are both under-researched and under-theorized (Lambrechts, 2020). Multiple scholars mention that the different barriers should be analyzed more in their relation to one another to recognize the intersectional factors that cause the disadvantage and barriers (Lambrechts, 2020; Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

## 1.3 Social relevance

Following the 2030 Agenda, many countries have implemented projects and policies working towards the outlined goals. Concerning the SDG 4, Switzerland has identified the following aspect as one of its most important challenges: “In education, research and innovation, as elsewhere, there should be no discrimination on the basis of physical or mental characteristics, gender, or social, economic or cultural background, or prejudice or stereotype. The action that must be taken to eliminate such discrimination is also seen as helping to support equal

opportunities and mobilize untapped resources and talent” (Swiss Federal Council, 2016: 32). Whilst the potential and qualifications of refugees are not assessed coherently, it is estimated that there are a number of thousand people that would qualify for tertiary study in Switzerland (Arx et al., 2017). It is interesting to note that in 2020, at least 19% of first-generation migrants in Switzerland are estimated to be overqualified for their jobs (FSO, 2020).

In trying to grant tertiary education for all, multiple HEIs and associations in Switzerland have introduced projects that aim to support highly qualified refugees. However, in comparison with other European countries, no large-scale programs that support highly qualified refugees to access and participate in tertiary study can be found in Switzerland (Bacher et al., 2020). In fact, in comparison to its neighboring countries, such as Germany and Austria, Switzerland is lacking research on the experiences of this refugee population, particularly of the qualitative kind (Arx et al., 2017, Stevenson & Baker, 2018). In order to be able to foster the potential of refugee students and therefore create an inclusive environment, more information is required on the educational level and the experiences of refugees (Arx et al., 2017).

#### 1.4 Research objective and questions

Given the context of an increasing number of people seeking refuge, it is continuously important to research how an inclusive environment can be established. The UNHCR recommends that, in order to achieve the goal of enrolling more refugee students in HEIs, governments need to establish policies that are dedicated to “refugee-inclusive national education systems” (2019c: 33). In terms of geographical scope, the Swiss federalist system makes it complicated to incorporate the whole nation into an analysis (Probst et al., 2019). French-speaking Switzerland shows a more inclusive-multiculturalist politics of integration compared to a more restrictive environment in the German-speaking part (Probst et al., 2019). In the HE sector, the University of Geneva pioneered by offering an institutionalized project in cooperation with the cantonal integration services (Université de Genève, n.d.). This project prepares refugees to study and reflects the more inclusive policies in French-speaking Switzerland. Whilst there are projects in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, there is more need to research the relevance of HE both for the individual as well as the broader society (Arx et al., 2017).

As HE can play an important role in fostering an inclusive environment for refugees, this research aims to understand refugee students’ experiences through a multi-scalar analysis. Both the experiences of refugee students before and in tertiary education are explored, combined with an analysis of integration and educational policies and services.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the following research question:

**To what extent does an inclusive environment for refugee students exist in the higher education sector in the German-speaking part of Switzerland?**

To answer the research question, the following subquestions need to be considered.

1. What are refugees' experiences in regard to inclusion, access, and participation to higher education, and how have this been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the challenges from a refugees' perspective, how do they interrelate and what role does the agency of the refugee play in tackling those?
3. What are the institutional/organizational facilitators and barriers for refugees' inclusion in the higher education sector?
4. What are the national/cantonal facilitators and barriers for refugees' inclusion in the higher education sector?
5. How do facilitators and barriers towards inclusion operate across the individual, institutional/organizational and national/cantonal level?

## 2 Theoretical framework: inclusion

Whilst the concept of integration has been widely represented in literature on refugees' resettlement, it has recently also been contested and frequently debated. Critiques of the notion of 'integration' argue that it views society as homogeneous and that migrants are the 'other' and need to adapt to integrate. It has been claimed that integration was formed on the assumptions that immigrants form an alien element who need to adjust and connect to the predefined society. In recent literature on refugee resettlement, it is suggested that more holistic interactive aspects need to be incorporated (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018). Therefore, alternative, or adapted concepts, such as inclusion, are increasingly forming the debate. In its early years, inclusion was defined by the ability of democracies to not only accept all the differences and diversity amongst all people but also to include those in everyday life (Dahl, 1991). In recent literature, inclusion as a concept for equal opportunities and access to rights and participation, has received more attention. Therefore, this research joins other scholars in using 'inclusion' as a theoretical starting point to understand refugee resettlement experiences. In the following chapter, an overview of inclusion will be provided, followed by an elaboration of inclusion through the capital approach, and the presentation of the conceptual framework bringing these theories together. As such, this chapter provides theoretical background on the main research question:

*Research question:* To what extent does an inclusive environment for refugee students exist in the higher education sector in the German-speaking part of Switzerland?

### 2.1 In-/exclusion: an overview

There are many different definitions and interpretations of inclusion, without consensus on the theoretical background as the concept remains relatively new (Shore et al., 2011). Thus, in this overview, various interpretations of inclusion are elaborated on. Additionally, notions of exclusion are explored to understand the dynamics between inclusive and exclusive societies. By exploring an 'inclusive environment', the question is raised of 'inclusion' in what. What type of society do we want to live in, who is meant by 'we' and who gets to decide on who belongs? What is needed to make everyone feel included? What are circumstances that make people feel excluded? These questions are explored in the following section by looking at previous literature.

Abbott et al. (2017) suggest that social inclusion is related to a process that aims to create a ‘society for all’, in which no one is left behind. Inclusion refers to the extent that all individuals are allowed, enabled, and empowered to participate and contribute fully to a society (Gidley et al., 2010; Miller, 1998). A further definition suggests that an inclusive environment exists “when people of all social identity groups have the opportunity to be present, to have their voices heard and appreciated, and to engage in core activities on behalf of the collective” (Wasserman et al., 2008: 176). Fredericks (2010) claims that the feeling of belonging experienced daily creates the foundation on which inclusive (or exclusive) societies are based. Likewise, Lirio et al. (2008: 443) refer to inclusion as “when individuals feel a sense of belonging.”

Faist (2018: 8) suggests that “inclusion can be summarized as consisting of social cohesion and migrants’ incorporation in the various societal areas, such as education, health, employment, housing, and civic and political involvement.” Further scholars suggest that economic, social and political/institutional issues are dimensions of inclusion (Abbott et al., 2017; Narli & Özaşçılar, 2020). Economic security means that people have sufficient means to live in the present and the future and goes beyond not living in poverty. All people must have enough economic capital to participate in daily activities (Fraser, 2008). Hence, key dimensions of social exclusion are poverty, low income and disadvantage (Spicer, 2008; Taylor, 2004). Social issues refer to the ability to establish social networks with family, neighbors, friends, and the local community, which are important for the establishment of a sense of belonging (Abbott et al., 2017). Hence, if social relations are limited, social exclusion experiences might be enhanced (Spicer, 2008). Thirdly, the relationship between the individual and institutions or the state, including participation in decision-making and access to information indicates political/institutional issues. As such, the concept of social exclusion is connected to poor access to housing, health and entitlements to welfare services depending on a person’s asylum-seeking status.

According to Levitas et al (2007: 25), social exclusion is defined as “the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political areas.” Limited access to appropriate housing is also viewed as a characteristic of social exclusion. According to the empirical research done by Correa-Velez et al. (2013), it is crucial to tackle hurdles to economic participation and discrimination, so that social inclusion can be promoted. Therefore, it is highlighted that in order to achieve economic, political, social, and cultural participation, obstacles to participatory parity need to be deconstructed.

To summarize, in an inclusive society, all individuals are viewed as equal members of society, and everyone can participate in decision-making processes to represent one's interests over recognition and distribution (Fraser, 2008). Social inclusion is a process of improving participation in society, especially for the disadvantaged such as refugees, by “enhancing opportunities, access to resources, authentic experiences and wellbeing and voicing respect for human rights” (Dobson et al., 2021: 4). It is pointed out that, in order to foster an inclusive environment, skill development of refugees and supporting belonging and wellbeing are crucial approaches (Dobson et al., 2021; Slee, 2019). An overarching theme in the conceptualization of inclusion is the relevance of access and participation in the economic, social, and cultural space, enabled through legal structures. When access and participation is ensured on all levels, a sense of belonging is created (Dobson et al., 2021). Thus, the concepts that are used to measure authentic experiences of inclusion and the sense of belonging will be elaborated on in the following chapter.

## 2.2 Refugee inclusion as belonging through the capital approach

Inclusion through the sense of belonging is not an easy concept to measure, but it can be conceptualized by using social, economic, natural, and human capital, as well as legal dimensions influencing access and participation. In this section, the role of the social, economic, and cultural capital for refugee inclusion is explored. Following, the importance of legal factors on the politics of belonging on an individual level are elaborated on.

To measure the sense of belonging as an indicator for authentic inclusion, *social capital* is viewed as an important domain. It is argued that belonging is influenced by the emotional attachment to a social group (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In fact, multiple scholars perceive interpersonal relations as fundamental and an existential need for every individual (Mellor et al., 2008; Menzies & Davidson, 2002). Whilst relations are crucial for the creation of a sense of belonging, it is important to note that those relations should be positive, stable, long-lasting, and significant with frequent interactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mellor et al., 2008; Shore et al., 2011). Social networks offer practical support to asylum-seekers and refugees by assisting in accessing health, social welfare services, emotional and financial support, interpretation, and the development of confidence, thus reducing the feelings of social exclusion (Spicer, 2008).

To conceptualize ‘social capital’, it is drawn on Putnam’s (2000) and Ager and Strang’s (2008) formulation of social capital, categorizing social networks into social ‘bonds’, ‘bridges’ and ‘links’. Social bonds refer to relationships with family, co-ethnic, co-religious or co-national groups. It is pointed out that social bonds, particularly the reunion with close family

members, are crucial for the experiences of refugees and influence their quality of life (Strang & Ager, 2010). Social bridges are the relationships between refugees and the host community and relate to the participation of the refugee in the host society. It is suggested that the ‘feeling at home’ is strongly connected to social bridging. Social links describe refugees’ relationship with institutions, services, and agencies (Ager & Strang, 2008).

As a second indicator for the notion of ‘belonging’, the *economic capital* of an individual is of importance. Having economic resources contributes to feeling safe and stable for the individual and his/her family (Antonsich, 2010). A study on refugees in East London found that those who had built a professional life rather than participating in casual labor felt a stronger sense of belonging to British society (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008). Whilst economic stability is not the only indicator, it is a necessary factor in creating a feeling of place-belongingness. Economic capital and embeddedness do not only count for material capabilities but also “in relation to make a person feel that she has a stake in the future of the place where s/he lives” (Antonsich, 2010: 648).

Additional to social and economic factors, *cultural capital* is viewed as important for belonging and inclusion. Usually, language is regarded as the most important element of cultural capital (Antonsich, 2010). Further elements of cultural capital are “aspirations, having the right accent, and being familiar with particular academic resources” (Morrice, 2013: 655). In her research, Morrice (2013) found that lacking cultural capital made the experience at university difficult for a participant as s/he was struggling with new learning styles and the expectations for academic assignments, which then led to the refugee dropping out of university and thus illustrates how cultural capital is a dimension of belonging and inclusion.

It is noted that belonging through the capital approach is not an individual affair only but includes politics of belonging. The foundation for the sense of belonging and security are *legal factors*, such as resident permits and citizenship (Alexander, 2008; Antonsich, 2010). According to Antonsich (2010: 648), “to be or not to be a citizen or a subject entitled with rights (to stay, to work, to obtain social benefits, etc.) clearly matters.” The legal dimension as an element of belonging influences an individual’s level of access and participation, and therefore, is a pre-condition for authentic inclusion. As some scholars have found, insecurities in legal status negatively correlate with an individual’s sense of place-belongingness (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008; Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008).

As the legal factors of belonging have shown, belonging is not only a personal matter but also a political one. Antonsich (2010) suggests that individual belonging is connected to socio-spatial in-/exclusion and to the politics of belonging. The politics of belonging relate to the previously stated question of “what type of society do we want to live in, who is meant by “we”



and who gets to decide? To sum, a pre-condition for inclusion is access and participation, which is often enabled or influenced through the economic, social, cultural, and human capital as well as legal dimensions.

## 2.3 Conceptual framework

The aim of this research is to explore to what extent an inclusive environment for refugee students exists in the HE sector in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The conceptual framework presented in this chapter aims to provide an evaluation guideline of an ‘inclusive environment’. As such, this section provides theoretical background for the main research question and the subquestions.

Some scholars have given definitions of inclusion, referring to its existence if “policies, procedures, and actions of organizational agents are consistent with fair treatment of *all* social groups, with particular attention to groups that have had fewer opportunities historically and that are stigmatized in the societies in which they live” (Shore et al., 2011: 1277). Further literature suggests that there is a micro-, meso-, and macro-level of inclusion. At the micro-level, interpersonal connections through informal networks, such as family, friends and neighbors are fundamental. At the meso-level, Abbott et al. (2017: 825) define inclusion as “civic integration through membership of formal organizations which build trust, shared norms, solidarity and loyalty and permit coordinated action.” At the macro-level, an inclusive environment exists through citizenship rights enabling social, economic and political participation (Abbott et al., 2017). Relating to the concept of three level inclusion, it is suggested that access as an instrument is embedded in a diverse range of structures (Goastellec & Välimaa, 2019).

This research’s conceptualization is based on the previously mentioned definitions of an ‘inclusive environment’, and in particular on the framework of refugee inclusion by Knappert et al (2019). Additionally, the conceptual framework is inspired by Lee et al.’s (2020) multi-disciplinary approach to refugee workforce integration. Both Knappert et al.’s and Lee et al.’s frameworks focus on refugee inclusion at work but are viewed to be applicable for the analysis of refugee inclusion in HE. For the analysis on the individual level, Knappert et al. take into consideration the resources of a person as well as the agency to tackle barriers and challenges at work. On the meso-level, policies and approaches enabling or restricting diversity and inclusion are looked at. Concerning the national level, Knappert et al. explore the institutional structures and national cultures surrounding the legislative framework about equal opportunity, as well as society’s beliefs and values. They note that the interrelation between these three levels has not received much attention yet and that a cross-level approach is necessary to understand

refugee inclusion (Knappert et al., 2019). Therefore, the aim of this research is to understand the dynamics between these different levels, how they interrelate, and how they affect refugee students' inclusion.

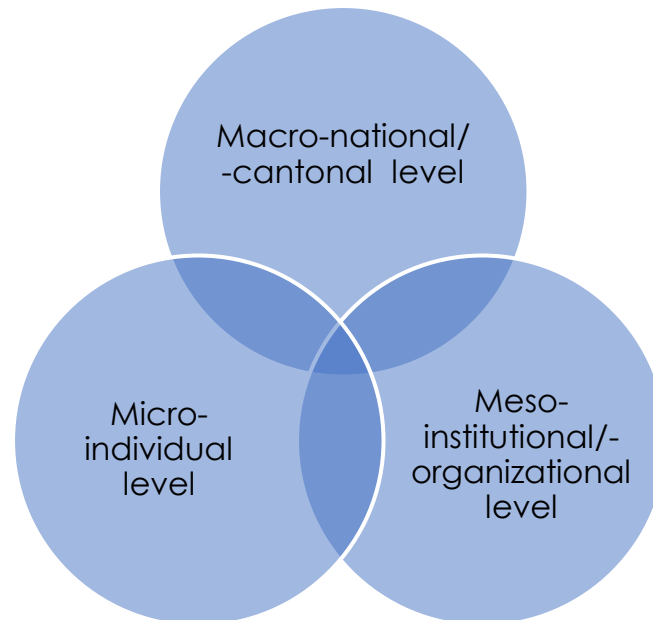


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for inclusion; inspired by Knappert et al. (2019)

### 2.3.1 Individual level

In this research, the individual level represents the refugee student and the subjective experience in the HE field. Some of the indicators included in the micro-individual level are motivation, agency, the background as well as the resources of the refugee. The resources of the refugee can be conceptualized by looking at the human, social, cultural, and economic capital. Human capital is measured by the refugees' work experience, language skills and previous schooling. Social capital is measured by analyzing the social links, bonds, and bridges of the refugee. Cultural capital is assessed by knowledge of the 'right' dialect, traditions, norms, and behaviors in the resettlement country. Economic capital refers to having the confidence in having resources to be economically embedded in the host society. Finally, the background of the refugee is influenced by legal factors influencing the individual's experience and is assessed by looking at entitlements with rights to participate in society. The micro-individual level takes into consideration the capitals of the refugee explored earlier, which contribute to access and participation, and to the feeling of belonging.

### **2.3.2 Institutional/organizational level**

The institutional/organizational level includes two types of stakeholders: HEIs and organizations supporting refugee resettlement, particularly highly qualified ones. With regards to support organizations aiming to assist resettlement, NGOs and associations are included, as they are oftentimes gatekeepers to social networks and information, which are both needed to seek tertiary study (Lee et al., 2020). In regard to HEIs, application procedures and institutional programs are elaborated on, taking into consideration language requirements, institutionalized support, etc. Thus, amongst both stakeholder groups within the meso-level, policies, processes, and hierarchies are assessed.

### **2.3.3 National/cantonal level**

The national/cantonal level stands for the macro-level and represents institutional structures, such as immigration and integration policies regarding access to financial services, social welfare, language courses, etc. Additionally, the sociopolitical climate of Switzerland and its cantons is considered. Previous research found that resettlement agencies often have insufficient expertise in existing processes regarding recognition of qualifications, leading to stereotypical occupations (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012). The sociopolitical climate is relevant to understand the dynamics of an inclusive environment. In fact, employment, or career opportunities for refugees in resettlement countries are influenced by the societal discourse and “politicization of refugees as a social burden” (Lee et al., 2020: 200). Thus, in this conceptual framework both laws and regulations concerning refugee resettlement as well as the sociopolitical interests form part of the macro-level analysis.

### 3 Background: refugees in higher education

Exploring the settlement experiences of refugee children and youth in schooling contexts has been an area of research interest for a long time, whilst refugee students' experiences in HE has received less attention. Studying in a resettlement country is contextualized by experiences of forced migration, asylum-seeking, persecution, and accessing the same opportunities and rights as citizens is not always guaranteed (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012).

Are people with refugee backgrounds enabled to or restricted from accessing HE? What are common difficulties on the path to studying as well as during studies, and how are those interrelated? In the following chapters, previous literature that focuses on these questions and that explores the role that HE can play for the inclusion of refugee students is discussed.

#### 3.1 Literature review

*Subquestion 1: What are refugees' experiences in regard to inclusion, access and participation to higher education, and how have this been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic?*

The under-researched and under-theorized nature of literature on refugee students results in variable, mostly inadequate policy frameworks and support systems for access to HE (Lambrechts, 2020). Partially, this might be due to challenges in collecting data on the actual number of those with refugee backgrounds in HE (Stevenson & Baker, 2018) and the methodological challenges arising when researching with marginalized communities (Bailey & Williams, 2018). Additionally, refugee students might not always be perceived as a distinct student body, but their needs might be expected to be similar to those of other disadvantaged groups or international students. It is suggested by multiple scholars that there is a need for more qualitative research on the experiences of refugees, focusing on the analysis of the kind of support that is efficient in meeting the specific needs (Naidoo et al., 2015; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). However, it is worth noting that whilst scholarly research in this field has not been the focus when looking at resettlement experiences of refugees, in the last decade, research has grown with a significant number of research published since 2010 (Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

In their meta-scoping study on previous research on HE and refugee students, Ramsay and Baker (2019) found that access to HE is broadly beneficial for the individual students themselves as well as their immediate family, friends and the wider society. Whilst it is relevant to recognize refugees and their experiences as heterogeneous (Baker et al., 2018; Sontag, 2018), there is a certain consensus in regard to the experiences made when accessing and participating in HE as a refugee student. Lack of resources to study, lack of proof of qualifications, and a

need to prioritize procedures regarding the asylum-seeking procedure are examples of challenges that most refugee students deal with.

Further literature attempts to conceptualize refugee students' experiences, arguing that those are influenced by three policy areas: asylum, social welfare, and access to HE (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Sontag, 2019). Könönen (2018: 55) mentions that "immigration law establishes legal statuses and respective legal identities [...] through which states can regulate non-citizens' rights and access to various institutions and public resources." Access to social welfare and HE, as well as refugee status, are decided upon by separate institutions. However, they are intertwined as the legal status has a direct impact on the individual's ability to access welfare services and to their probability to access HE (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Könönen, 2018). The embeddedness in the social structure in the resettlement country regulates the possibilities of refugee students to access HE, which then impacts their general experience in the studying realm (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018).

### 3.1.1 Barriers

*Subquestion 2: What are the main challenges from a refugees' perspective, how do they interrelate and what role does the agency of the refugee play in tackling those?*

Lambrechts (2020) notes that in previous studies barriers for refugee students have been identified, but the issues have mostly been presented as separate issues even though, in reality, these factors rarely appear in isolation. Therefore, when categorizing the barriers, identifying the role that different stakeholders play in the elimination of issues is regarded as valuable. This section identifies the informational, financial, procedural, environmental and educational barriers.

One of the main barriers for aspiring refugee students is the lack of accessible, quality *information* available to them, which influences all stages of their experience (Shakya et al., 2012; Stevenson & Baker, 2018). For example, studies show that most refugee students are unaware of their legal rights in relation to HE participation as these are not communicated to them during the asylum process. Additionally, they are often unable to access valuable information for study applications (Lambrechts, 2020).

There is also a significant gap in understanding the entitlements to *financial* support, which relates to the main barrier of lacking accessible information (Lambrechts, 2020). Generally, HE is not viewed as a priority for development donors. Within education, tertiary study is seen as a privilege or luxury and receives significantly less, if any funds (Wright & Plasterer, 2012; Zeus, 2011). Therefore, refugees' often experience difficulties when paying for the

application or tuition fees, purchasing necessary study equipment, or finding an appropriate study environment (Lambrechts, 2020; Schammann & Younso, 2017).

*Procedural* factors, such as requirements for the admission to HEIs present difficulties for refugees. Often, it is not easy for refugees to figure out whether their qualifications will be accepted by the institution. Some refugee students may have the acceptable prior qualification, but do not have the proofing documentation due to their unexpected leaving and migration journey (Lambrechts, 2020). It is highlighted that a great obstacle to HE is the missing proof of previous academic qualifications and birth certificates, both of which many refugees do not have documentation of (Bajwa et al., 2017; Saiti, 2020; Stevenson & Baker, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2019; Zeus, 2011). Another barrier for refugees are the formal language requirements, which involve a costly examination.<sup>3</sup> To be able to receive a sufficient score, adequate language training provision should be offered, which is often lacking (Lambrechts, 2020).

In regard to *educational* barriers, the language proficiency required at universities is viewed as a great factor hindering access and success (Lambrechts, 2020). Looking at some of the relevant existing body of literature, it can be summarized that the main barrier to studying at a HEI is the acquirement of the required language proficiency (Crea, 2016; Saiti, 2020; Streitwieser et al., 2019; Zeus, 2011). Additionally, communication between professors and students is often not clear enough, so that refugee students have problems with handing in assignments. Crea (2016) found that there seems to be a lack of understanding from the professors on the challenges faced by the students related to their ability and personal circumstances.

As *environmental* barriers, one challenge is that institutions do not view refugee students as a distinct student body with different needs. As Vogel and Schwikal (2015) mention, the lack of counseling and support structures is not well enough adapted to the needs of this group. Additionally, the restricted financial funds available to refugees, further connected to restrictions on employment, limit the ability to access housing or accommodation that allows for a productive study environment (Lambrechts, 2020).

### 3.1.2 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the HE sector globally, the particular effects on the refugee student population, including the potential (re)widening of gaps between domestic and refugee students, are yet to be seen. However, some equity implications online learning has brought about have already been identified. In the HE sector, it is assumed that students are independent and are expected to have know-how in using virtual learning environments and

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<sup>3</sup> For example, a Goethe-certificate C1-level costs about 380 CHF.

digital tools (Shakya et al., 2012). Whilst this may be true for domestic students, very little is known about how refugee students learn online, so the implications of online learning on their study accomplishments are yet to unfold. The COVID-19 pandemic might have influenced the students' financial stability due to lost jobs, which in turn is likely to have impacted refugee students' ability to purchase or access learning materials needed for remote studying (Mupenzi et al., 2020). Additionally, refugee students seem to prefer on-campus study support, and thus it may be that the digital format hinders students who need assistance and who generally are more jeopardized to drop out (Baker et al., 2018; Mupenzi et al., 2020).

In addition to the immediate impact on the learning experience, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced society to “social distancing”. For refugee students, social relations are an important aspect of learning; recreational activities and sports are important for inclusion and engagement within the institutional environment (Uptin et al., 2013). As the COVID-19 pandemic has put these activities on halt, the academic-social networks of refugee students have been impacted (Mupenzi et al., 2020). The lack of social interactions has also led to worsening mental health of refugees since boredom and isolation, prominent realities during COVID-19 times, exacerbate posttraumatic stress disorder (Brickhill-Atkinson & Hauck, 2021).

Despite the apparent challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has also forced the society to rethink policies and governance. As Hossain (2020: 29) points out, the “COVID-19 pandemic can be an opportunity for innovations in governance and, not only in refugee but also, restoring of the socio-cultural, sociopolitical, and socio-historical estrangements that breed vulnerability in a specific marginalized group”. This could be particularly useful if changes and responses from organizations and HEIs are considered from the perspective of refugee students and other vulnerable groups (Mupenzi et al., 2020; Orcutt et al., 2020).

## 3.2 Higher education and inclusion

With an increasing number of forced displacements globally, the relevance of sustainable inclusion pathways has become very important for resettlement countries. In this chapter, it is explored what role HE can play for the inclusion of refugees as they settle into a new environment.

### 3.2.1 Role of higher education for refugee inclusion

According to Goastellec and Välimaa (2019), equal access to HE is important for just and fair societies. The International Association of Universities (2008) states that “access and participation in HE is essential for the empowerment of all, especially those often excluded.” They go

further by mentioning that access solely without a realistic chance of success is not helpful and that inclusive policies should enable successful participation in tertiary study (International Association of Universities, 2008). Thus, inclusion and acceptance of culturally and ethnically diverse voices in HE is important for equitable access, engaged participation, and empowered success (Gidley et al., 2010).

HE can be important for the development of the human capital of an individual, and acts “as a point of critical reflection on national development not only economically, but also socially, culturally, and intellectually” (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019: 4). As Sampaio (2016) from the European Council on Refugees and Exiles points out, “higher education can maintain the hopes, help shelter and protect young men and women during crisis situations, [...] and we must prevent the creation of lost generations of academic graduates during wartime.” According to the UNHCR (2016), accessing education provides refugees “with the skills for self-reliance, problem-solving, critical thinking and teamwork. It improves their job prospects and boosts confidence and self-esteem.”

Relevant existing literature highlights that HE can provide refugees with skills that not only increase their human but also their social capital (Crea, 2016; Wright & Plasterer, 2012). It is suggested that HEIs are one of the most important places for refugees to establish connections and relations with host communities and can be very important for socialization (Bacher et al., 2020; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019). Through socialization, refugees learn how to exercise their agency to reimagine their future as they face and tackle political and social barriers. Additionally, by engaging with other students, confidence can be developed, and refugees can redesign their lives with dignity (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019).

For the refugee community, HEIs are perceived to not only provide improved opportunities to employment but are also connected to a higher degree of social status within their community (Gray & Irwin, 2013). In that sense, HE can function as a capitalizer for capacity-building so that refugees can become leaders in their country of origin and contribute to the country’s development once the conflict ends (Pherali & Lewis, 2019). As found by the European Social Survey (2018), receiving populations also have more positive attitudes towards refugees when they believe that the refugees bring valuable skills in demand.

Whilst HE has been recognized as a contributor to social and economic development (Lenette, 2016; Ramsay & Baker, 2019), there are notably also risks associated with this pathway. It can reproduce prevailing socio-economic inequalities, increase conflict potential through uneven distribution of access as well as quality, repress minority languages, and foster biased history (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019). Additionally, the experience of refugees in HE may be challenged due to disadvantages in the social and economic host country environment,



and the new circumstances at university in regard to the pedagogical approaches connected to cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds of refugees can limit their success. Completing studies successfully does not automatically lead to employment. In some host countries, attaining employment with appropriate cultural and social capital is challenging (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2019). Pherali and Abu Moghli (2019: 5-6) highlight that “particularly in contexts where political and legal constraints, protectionist policies, nepotism, and favoritism undermine entrepreneurship, fairness and talents [...], HE can serve as a place of false hope and frustration, problematizing the notion that HE qualifications can naturally lead to better employment outcomes.”

In aiming to answer the question of whether access to HE is a tool towards a more just society, Dougherty and Callender (2017: 46) offer insights: “Even if growing access to higher education by less-advantaged groups does not produce equality, it does give those groups access to forums and powers that bring immediate individual benefits and better position those groups for the next stage in their struggle for equality.”

### **3.2.2 Inclusive higher education systems**

Scholarly sources state that educational policies are crucial in moving from social exclusion towards enhancing social inclusion (Raffo & Gunter, 2008). In relation to the characteristics of inclusive educational policies, it includes having “equal opportunities to participate in relevant learning of good quality and in decision-making in education policies and practices” (Oh & van der Stouwe, 2008: 596). Additionally, inclusive educational policies not only involve the physical inclusion of all students but also adaptations to the university environment, and a reform of values and acceptance represented by the “hidden curriculum” (Corbett & Slee, 2000; Loreman, 2014).

Recent European frameworks, such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee 2017 and the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees aim to set standards to “make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means” (Dé-tourbe & Goastellec, 2018). However, oftentimes the required structures are not in place, even though it is known that investing in the skill development of refugees can boost economic growth and development not only in the resettlement country but also in the country of origin (UNESCO, 2018). If a country has policy frameworks that focus on increasing the number of refugees in tertiary study, that indicates acknowledgment of “the future-directed inclusion of refugees in national economies” (Dobson et al., 2021: 3). Therefore, initiatives that tackle refugees’ access to HEIs and terminate interrupted education in order to enhance wellbeing are seen as important for inclusion (Dobson et al., 2021).

## 4 Regional embedding

This chapter provides an overview of the asylum system in Switzerland, integration policies, the HE environment, and contextualizes refugee students' experiences in Switzerland. First, the asylum system and some facts regarding refugees in Switzerland are presented. Further, integration policies as well as HE system in Switzerland are discussed. Finally, the situation regarding refugee students in Switzerland and the geographical scope are explored.

### 4.1 Refugees in Switzerland

The Swiss asylum law is based on the Geneva Convention for Refugees.<sup>4</sup> In Switzerland, the SEM is responsible for the asylum procedure. In 2019, new regulations shortening the asylum procedure were implemented. As a result, their asylum status is being decided on within 140 days. Recently, the shortened asylum procedure has been criticized for reducing the quality of the evaluation processes. Since the implementation, the cases that needed additional evaluation from the SEM has doubled from 6.5% to 13%, reflecting the missing accuracy when handling asylum applications (Vuilleumier, 2020).

When asylum seekers are documented in a federal asylum center, they receive a confirmation as proof of their registration. Once they are assigned to one of the 26 cantons, they receive an N-permit. This does not count as a residence permit but confirms that the person is in the asylum process and is awaiting a decision by the SEM. If an asylum seeker has demonstrated (in view of the SEM) that their reason for seeking refuge is consistent with the asylum law under the Geneva Convention, the person will get recognized as refugee and receive a B-refugee permit. This means that the person has been granted asylum (SEM, 2019). In certain cases, the asylum seeker demonstrates 'qualifications' as a refugee under international law but is not considered a refugee under the Swiss Asylum Act, so the SEM rejects the asylum seeker. Switzerland initiates a formal order for expulsion, but since expulsion is inadmissible according to the Geneva Refugee Convention, the expulsion is postponed. In those circumstances, the asylum seeker is temporarily admitted into Switzerland as a refugee and receives an F-permit or F-refugee permit (SEM, 2019). If the asylum seeker does not fulfill the refugee status according to the Geneva Convention, the SEM rejects the asylum application. If, however, the SEM realizes in a second step that a return to the country of origin is unreasonable or impossible, e.g., because there is war in the home country, the expulsion may not be carried out, the person receives an F-permit as a foreigner and is thus a temporarily admitted foreigner.

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<sup>4</sup> To recall the definition of a refugee, see chapter 1.1.

As of end of May 2021, there are 50'342 recognized refugees with B-permit in Switzerland. Additionally, there are 53'636 people in the asylum process in Switzerland (FSO, 2021a). Amongst them, 47'783 are temporarily admitted people (F-foreigner or F-refugee). The remaining 5'382 people are currently seeking asylum with an N-permit. In 2020, 11,041 people asked for asylum in Switzerland, 3228 fewer than in the year before. This decrease is due to the restrictions in international traveling due to the COVID-19-pandemic. The SEM expects there to be an increase in 2021 and estimates around 15'000 new applications for asylum. The most represented origin countries are in descending order: Eritrea, Afghanistan, Turkey, Algeria and Syria (FSO, 2021a).

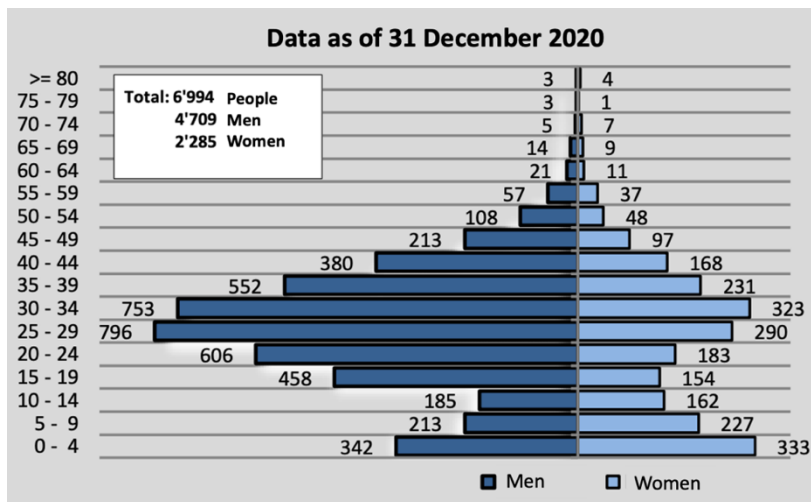


Figure 2: Asylum seekers by sex and age (FSO, 2021a)

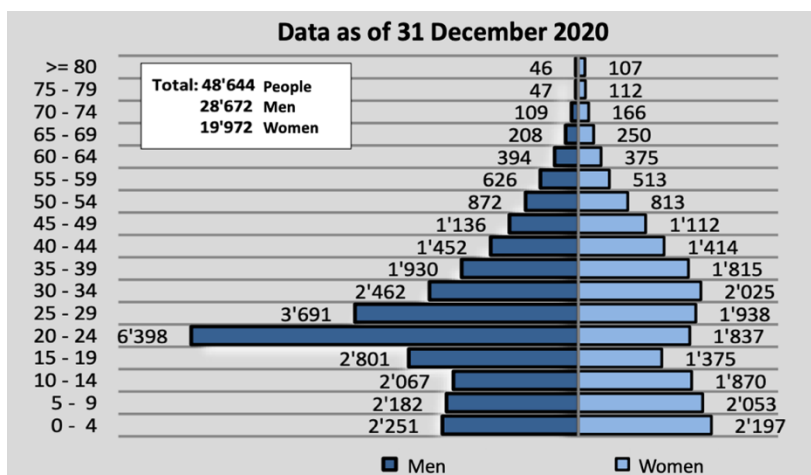


Figure 3: Temporarily admitted people by sex and age (FSO, 2021a)

## 4.2 Integration Agenda Switzerland 2018 – 2021

Switzerland has implemented the Integration Agenda Switzerland 2018 – 2021 (IAS), which indicates national integration goals. In Switzerland, many refugees and temporarily admitted refugees/foreigners have few social contacts, start employment only after multiple years and are dependent of social welfare (SEM, 2018). The agenda was formulated to tackle these difficulties, so that the potential of refugees can be used, and they can sustainably finance themselves long-term. Prior to the agenda, the cantons already implemented certain integration measures. However, the goal of the IAS is to intensify these integration promoting programs and to make them available earlier in the asylum-seeking process. Additionally, the refugees should be accompanied and advised throughout the whole integration process (SEM, 2021).

As such, 5 impact goals are outlined as part of the agenda:

1. All (temporarily admitted) refugees reach a level of language proficiency commensurate with their potential. Three years after entry all have at least basic language skills to cope with everyday life (at least A1).
2. 80% of children from the asylum sector who arrive in Switzerland at the age of 0-4 years can complete the obligatory school years in the region's language.
3. Two-thirds of all (temporarily admitted) refugees aged 16-25 are in a post-compulsory education.
4. Half of all adult (temporarily admitted) refugees are sustainably integrated into the primary labor market seven years after entry.
5. Seven years after entry, all (temporarily admitted) refugees are familiar with the Swiss way of life and have connections with the host community.

In order to achieve these goals, the state increased the integration flat rate per person from 6'000 CHF to 18'000 CHF (SEM, 2021). Additionally, the state recommends cantons to implement systematized processes in the following areas: information regarding the integration process as well as an individual resource assessment, advising by a specialist regarding their first integration processes, language courses according to their potential (and to their chances of staying), potential assessment for educational and labor market integration as well as measures to promote social integration (SEM, 2018).

## 4.3 Higher education system

In Switzerland, there are four types of institutions at tertiary education level: universities and federal institutes of technology, universities of teacher education, universities of applied sciences and colleges of higher vocational education and training. The Swiss HE system

distinguishes between Tertiary A level and Tertiary B level (SER, 2006). Tertiary A refers to two types of institutions. Firstly, traditional and cantonal universities and federal institutes of technology are part of Tertiary A level. Additionally, universities of applied sciences and teacher education are considered in this group. Tertiary B level institutions include colleges of higher vocational education and training, which offer certificates and diplomas focusing on practical aspects (SER, 2006).

The focus of the IAS is to provide two thirds of 16- to 25-years old refugees with basic vocational training. Tertiary study at universities, universities of applied sciences and teacher education are not primarily outlined as integration pathways. In order to shed light on refugee students who would like to access these institutions, in this analysis, universities, universities of teacher education and applied sciences are considered. Thus, on the meso-level, these HEIs are considered, and on the micro-level, participants who would like to continue with Tertiary A level education form part of the study target. In Switzerland, there are 10 universities, 2 federal institutes of technology, 20 universities of teacher education, and 9 universities of applied sciences (Swissuniversities, 2021). Whilst all of them are taken into consideration when analyzing the meso-level of inclusion, a particular focus is made on the institutions in the German-speaking (or bilingual) part of Switzerland. This includes 7 universities, 7 universities of applied sciences and 13 universities of teacher education. Since the HEIs in Switzerland are autonomous and there is no central office deciding on the recognition of foreign certificates in Switzerland, there are varying procedures for the application and conditions for the recognition of previous studies differs as well.

To put the education system into perspective, it is important to understand the educational level of the Swiss society. After the completion of secondary school, two-thirds of the students start an apprenticeship with on-the-job training combined with theoretical courses at a vocational school, which is a regarded educational and professional path. In 2019/20, 218'259 adolescents were in basic vocational training and 71'300 attended high school, the direct preparatory education for university (FSO, 2021b). However, after completing an apprenticeship, a student can further attend school to receive a 'professional baccalaureate', which enables to study at universities of applied sciences. In 2019/20, 258'076 people attended HEIs (Tertiary A level) whilst 61'566 people were studying at colleges of higher vocational and educational training (FSO, 2021b). It can be noted that the percentage of 25- to 34-years old who have obtained a tertiary degree has doubled in the last two decades. Thus, nearly every third person in Switzerland (as part of this generation) has obtained a HE degree, in addition to the 15% who have obtained a tertiary B level degree (Wolter & Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung, 2018).

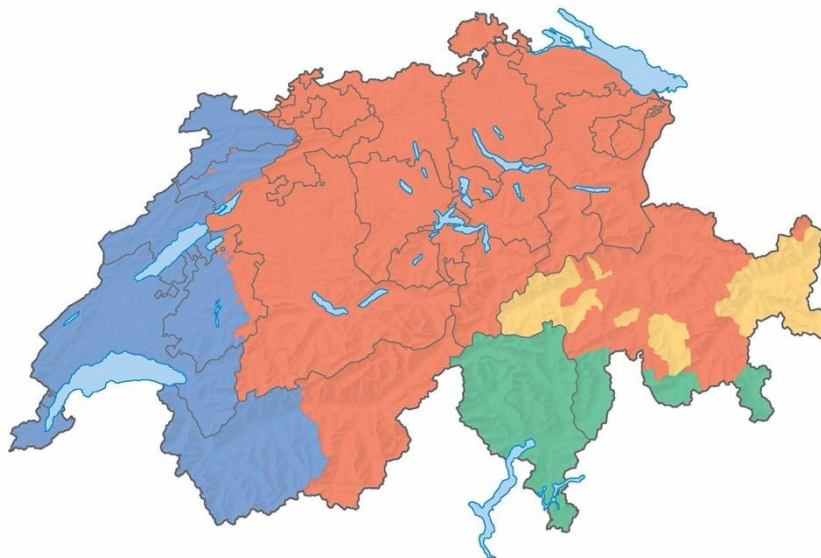
#### 4.4 Refugee students in Switzerland

Despite the existence of multiple projects that support refugee students, which are either institutionalized or led by voluntary students, Switzerland has not conducted a lot of research about highly qualified migrants so far. The central role that education can play in the process of social and labor market inclusion needs recognition in Switzerland (Arx et al., 2017). Whilst some cantons do assess the potential of refugees as part of the IAS implementation, overall, there is a lack of coherent assessment of the potential of refugees, which is why it is hard to estimate the amount of potentially interested and able refugee students (Arx et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Arx et al. (2017) estimated that there are a couple of thousands of potential refugee students in Switzerland, based on the number of people who attended discovery programs. Since monitoring of the potential of refugees has been implemented recently, no official data on refugees' previous educational level and titles can yet be found. Additionally, when refugees are enrolled at HEIs, they are mostly considered 'international' students, which further complicates the (assessment) of the existing data. All HEIs considered were contacted to collect data on refugee students, but it was reported that they do not record whether a student is a refugee or an international, which confirms that there is a lack of data on refugee students in Switzerland. The residence permit or asylum-seeking status is thus not collected. According to the estimations, it was reported that there are maximum 10-15 refugee students per year at a HEI.

In an analysis on refugee students' access to HEIs, Goastellec (2017) mentions that the Swiss HE policies are more elitist in comparison to France and Germany. As such, she argues that a particular focus is made on highly qualified migrants to save money on education whilst Germany approaches refugee migration and education as an investment. Additionally, a previous study on potential university students with refugee backgrounds found that skills may not be transferrable and recognized in Switzerland (Sontag, 2018). Further, Sontag (2018) concludes that refugee students' social and cultural capital may be reduced as the HE environment is restricted through regulations regarding recognition, mobility, finances, languages, and access to information.

## 4.5 Geographical scope

Switzerland is a confederation made up of 26 cantons which have a large amount of autonomy in articulating policies on education, taxes and integration. In Switzerland, there are four official languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. As of 2019, 62.1% speak (Swiss) German, 22.8% French, 8.0% Italian, 0.5% Romansh, and the remaining speak English, Portuguese and other languages (FSO, 2021c). In the figure below, the orange region represents German-speaking, blue is French-speaking, yellow stands for Romansh-speaking and green figures as Italian-speaking Switzerland. Whilst everyone in the German-speaking region knows Standard High German, Swiss German, a strong Alemannic solely spoken dialect, is used in almost all situations of daily life. The pronunciation of words in Swiss German can differ a lot from Standard High German. In fact, most people from Germany do not understand Swiss German. Since Swiss German is not a written language and there are no rules to the dialect, Standard-German is taught to refugees in Switzerland. This complicates the inclusion in social spaces as refugees are nearly unable to learn Swiss German, yet it is the primary way that the host society communicates amongst each other.



Map 1: Switzerland's language regions (FSO, 2019)

As a multilingual federalist country, Switzerland is an interesting yet complex case for research in refugee inclusion. Some studies found that German-speaking Switzerland is clearly more conservative in topics regarding social and foreign policy as well as topics regarding migrant politics (Manatschal, 2011; Probst et al., 2019). According to Manatschal (2011: 348-349), a researcher that explored the cantonal integration policies and politics, “the cultural-linguistic background of a canton, and linked to this factor, the attitude of citizens towards immigrants,

prove to be the most important predictor of cantonal integration policy.” The French-speaking Switzerland, also called Romandie, shows a more inclusive-multiculturalist politics of integration compared to a more restrictive environment in the German part, which resembles attitudes of assimilation (Probst et al., 2019). To illustrate how this influences the HE sector, it is worth noting that the canton of Geneva implemented an institutionalized program called ‘Horizon académique’ in 2016. This program supports refugee students in taking up their studies at the University of Geneva and is part of the cantonal integration policies (Université de Genève, n.d.). In universities located in German-speaking Switzerland, such programs are slowly being implemented, following the example of the Romandie (Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, n.d.; Universität Zürich, 2021a).

Garibay and De Cuyper (2018) point out that there is lack in impact analysis and evaluation of integration policies. As such, it is contested whether a nation-wide exploration is the most applicable level of impact analysis. Particularly in federalist states, where decentralized systems form integration policies, it seems questionable to incorporate the whole nation into the analysis (Probst et al., 2019). Further, it is mentioned that national models of research risk to ignore subnational politics and the local implementation of policies, which are important for an inclusive analysis (Garibay & Cuyper, 2018). As mentioned previously, the Swiss cantons have great freedom in interpreting the IAS, which respectively influences the experiences of refugees. To allow for more in-depth analysis, this research is focusing on the German-speaking part of Switzerland. As such, secondary data from multiple German-speaking cantons as well as stakeholder interviews representing these cantons are included in the analysis.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the previous reasoning, the geographical scope is also the most suitable for the partner organization SEET. The association offers a study support program for refugee students who want to continue or start their studies in Switzerland, focusing on the specific challenges of women. In collaboration with SEET, a stakeholder analysis was conducted, and its mentoring program was evaluated. Since SEET currently offers its program only in German, its geographical scope and reach is limited to the German-speaking cantons. Thus, in order to make the stakeholder analysis the most valuable for the association, this paper focuses on the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

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<sup>5</sup> Participants part of the analysis were living in three cantons during the time of data collection but had previously also lived in other cantons as part of the asylum process.



## 5 Research design and methodology

This research was conducted using a mix of both primary and secondary qualitative data collection. Qualitative research allows to explore people's experiences, perceptions and behaviors holistically and gives a platform to the participants to raise issues from their perspective (Henink et al., 2020). As this research primarily aimed to capture the voices and experiences of the refugees, a qualitative interpretive approach was viewed as suitable. A variety of primary qualitative methods, such as exploratory conversations, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions as well as participant observations were used. That way, the weaknesses of individual methods were minimized.

### 5.1 Operationalization

Refugees are the participants of this study, and the aim was to capture their voices in order to answer the research questions that are based on the identified issue of providing equal opportunities and access to tertiary study. When referring to refugees in this study, refugees with granted asylum (B-permit), temporarily admitted refugees (F-permit refugee), temporarily admitted foreigners (F-permit foreigner), as well as refugees seeking asylum (N-permit) are considered. As this study focused on refugee students, people who have a study background and who are currently studying towards or are interested in a Tertiary A level degree were considered. Particularly, currently enrolled refugees in HEIs, refugees that have begun with their studies in their country of origin and would like to continue and students that wanted to start their studies shortly before their escape were considered. The stakeholders that influence the development of refugee students were identified using the concept of stakeholder mapping introduced by Mitchell et al. (1997).

To understand the experiences of refugee students and their inclusion in the HE sector, a multi-scalar approach including the individual, institutional/organizational, and national/cantonal level was applied. Thus, to gain an understanding of the three-fold conceptualization of inclusion, research instruments were applied on all levels. The following table provides insights into the three levels, the specific target group, and research instruments used as part of the primary data collection.

Refugee students' inclusion	Target group	Research instruments
Macro-national/-cantonal level	Policy makers & workforce in the integration field	In-depth interviews Focus group discussion
Meso-institutional/-organizational level	Higher education institutions and support organizations	Exploratory conversations In-depth interviews Focus group discussion
Micro-individual level	(Prospective) refugee students	In-depth interviews Focus group discussions Observations

Table 1: Operationalization of the concept

## 5.2 Primary data collection

The aim of the sampling strategy was to identify a diverse study population from a cross-section of the refugee student population to get a holistic idea of the issue and to have a variety of experiences represented. That way, the sample could be strengthened, and diversity ensured regarding experiences made in the HE sector, as it is “important to understand the study issues in all their dimensions and contextual nuances” (Hennink et al., 2020: 94). The sampling strategy was purposive, with the study population being chosen deductively and inductive refining taking place during the data collection process. Various participant recruitment strategies, such as so-called gatekeepers, snowballing, and (in)formal networks were used (Hennink et al., 2020).

To approach the refugees, gatekeepers were contacted initially, followed by the usage of informal networks, and snowballing as many of the interviewees referred to fellow refugee students as possible participants. To approach stakeholders both on the meso- and macro-levels, gatekeepers and registers were used. In total, a focus group with 7 participants, 8 interviews with currently enrolled refugee students and 4 with potential prospective students, 10 stakeholder and expert interviews as well as a focus group with 6 participants in addition to informal exploratory conversations were conducted. In collaboration with the partner organization SEET, an evaluation of their mentoring program involving 5 mentors (students) and mentees (female refugees) formed part of the primary data collection. In the following paragraphs, the particular research instruments used with the specific target audience are discussed.

According to Swain and Spire (2020), *informal conversations* are an integral part of qualitative research. Exploratory informal conversations allowed to establish rapport quickly with the research community on the meso-level. These conversations aimed to explore the study environment, the current stage of development at HEIs and offered insights into the facilitators and barriers on the meso-level.

*In-depth interviews* are very widely used in the field of qualitative research methods. As the aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of what the experiences of refugee students are, as well as comprehend the interpretation of ‘inclusion’ on the organizational and national level, in-depth interviews were suitable for this research. 9 out of 12 interviews with refugees were held in-person outdoors, with the shortest lasting 40 minutes and the longest 2.5 hours. All the stakeholder in-depth interviews were conducted online and lasted up to an hour. Whilst interview guides based on deductive reasoning of reviewed literature provided questions, the semi-structure allowed for new topics to emerge during the interview. Thus, both the participants and stakeholders had the opportunity to raise their own thoughts, emphasize certain aspects and provide context of their interpreted reality. In collaboration with the partner organization SEET, 10 in-depth online interviews lasting up to 1.5 hours were conducted with mentors and mentees to assess and adapt the services the association offers.

Two *focus group discussions* were conducted in relation to this research. The first one was the initial data collection element and aimed to identify facilitators and barriers to tertiary study from the perspective of refugees. Hence, the stakeholders both on the meso- and macro-level were explored from a bottom-up perspective. 8 participants were part of the online focus group, and together a mind map was created.<sup>6</sup> As Hennink et al. (2020) point out, focus group discussions can be a means for more diversity in the study issue due to the group constellation of data collection. The second focus group involved 4 stakeholders, representing HEIs and integration workforce, as well as 2 current refugee students. Together, they defined what an inclusive environment in the HE sector should entail through a scenario-planning activity.

### 5.3 Secondary data collection

During the first weeks, an extensive literature review was conducted on previous research on refugee students, inclusion, belonging and how these concepts can be measured qualitatively. A diverse range of literature was used, including articles from verified journals but also storytelling blog posts, and other sources. The data previously collected by SEET, particularly previous interviews with stakeholders, was compatible with the aim of this research and used for the analysis of the meso- and macro-level of inclusion. Additionally, secondary sources, such as data from the Federal Statistical Office, policy documents, etc. were used. All the various sources of secondary data provided important background knowledge, increased statistical

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<sup>6</sup> For further information, see chapter 13.2.

power, and provided relevant insights for both the stakeholder analysis and the understanding of refugee students' experiences.

## 5.4 Data analysis

The in-depth interviews with refugees were transcribed verbatim whilst protocol transcription was applied for both the evaluation and stakeholder interviews. The transcripts were coded in the software NVivo. Initially, a deductive coding list based on literature, the interview guides and memorization from the interview, was used. As the semi-structured interviews allowed for the emergence of new topics, inductive coding was applied as well. During the coding process, key issues and themes were identified, classifying certain codes together. Overall, 76 codes were applied for the analysis of the interviews with refugees, and 33 codes were used for the analysis of stakeholder/expert interviews. To move from coding the data to analysis in a structured way, a codebook was developed to serve as a reference.<sup>7</sup> The data was described, categorized, and analyzed, aiming to comprehend the data more conceptually by following the analytic spiral outlined by Hennink et al. (2020). Finally, inductive theory based on the data and analysis was developed.

## 5.5 Limitations

This study was constrained to a 6-month period, so the depth of analysis is limited to the range of collected data. In qualitative research, saturation in data collection is viewed as important. Due to time limitation, theoretical saturation on the meso- and macro-level was not achieved, influencing the development of the theory. In regard to refugee research, it is suggested to use participatory methods, therefore creating a space that allows for a collaborative research structure rather than a 'top-down' approach (Ziersch et al., 2019). Whilst it was attempted to have participatory elements (e.g. initial focus group) as part of the research design, this was limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as time constraints.

Concerning the sampling of participants (refugee students), it is a limitation that not all HEIs or cantons in the German-speaking part of Switzerland are represented in the analysis. Additionally, the diversity of the refugees can be seen as a strength, but it can also be viewed as a limitation as the country of origin and age was widely diverse. The results cannot be generalized, and the inductively developed theory needs further testing. However, the study provides insights into the unique experiences of the individuals that formed part of the study.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see chapter 13.4.

Even though 75% of the interviews with refugees were held in-person outdoors, the closed university halls, libraries, etc. due to the COVID-19 pandemic limited the extent to which the space-belongingness as a dimension of an inclusive environment could be explored. Further, the depth of data collected in the online focus group discussions was reduced. Even though creative tools for mind mapping and developing an idea together were used in the focus group discussions, the outcome was experienced as limited to the online format.

Due to time and network constraints, only a limited range of stakeholders in integration services and HEIs were interviewed. The aim was to interview the stakeholders identified by the participants. Whilst primary data was collected both on the meso- and macro-level, the diversity of the institutional stakeholders was limited, thus not representing a holistic embeddedness in the environment. Moreover, it is assumed that only stakeholders who are open to the researched topic were taking the time to conduct an interview. 21 stakeholders were contacted initially, whilst only 10 people were interviewed. The fact that only 50% of the contacted stakeholders were open to an interview can have two explanations: the limited availability of these stakeholders or the limited interest in exploring the research topic. Thus, the stakeholder analysis and interpretation of inclusion on the meso- and macro-level might be limited due to the sampling diversity. Additionally, this study was limited to the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Whilst the reasons for this limitation were discussed in the previous chapter, it can be viewed as a limitation to not have conducted primary data collection nation-wide.

## 5.6 Reflections

The commonality in both the author and the refugees being students might have helped to establish rapport with the refugees. The author was able to relate to their experiences, and the participants were able to relate to hers, as explained here by RS2: *“I know that when I was in my Bachelor, I was always struggling with my thesis [...] And when [name] sent me your email, I read everything; that she's working on her thesis. Then, I remembered my thesis days. Oh, it was really stressful for me, some people helped me, and some people were not available to help me. So, it's a great opportunity to pay back and to help you with your thesis.”*

After growing up in Switzerland, the author has moved to different countries for her studies and work, thereby learning to adapt to different settings, which was helpful to understand the refugees' situation of resettlement in a new country. Whilst these experiences are obviously completely different and not comparable with the ones of refugees, they might have still enhanced her ability to empathize with getting a diploma translated or recognized and familiarized her with the challenges of arriving and settling into a new country. In January 2021, the author

became a member of the non-profit association SEET. SEET has given a better understanding of the concrete circumstances that occur to female refugee students, has been a great gatekeeper and helped to establish rapport with the study body. Particular attention was paid to transparency of the research to avoid any research bias, which required constant reflection throughout the research process. In order to establish a clear separation between the different roles (student researcher and member of SEET), different email addresses were used.

## 6 Micro-level: Refugee students' experiences

The primary aim of this research is to explore to what extent an inclusive environment for refugee students in the HE sector exists. As mentioned before, a multi-scalar approach is needed, with the refugees' experiences at the center of the analysis. This chapter provides answers to the subquestion 1 and 2 and is thus focusing on the micro-individual level of inclusion.

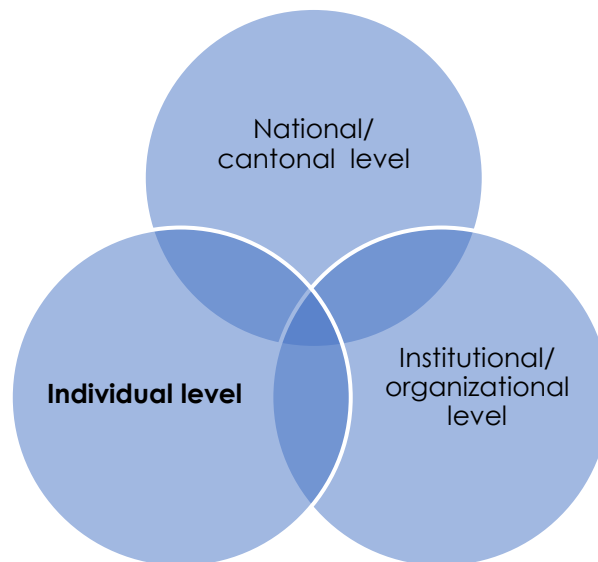


Figure 4: Conceptual framework for inclusion, focus on the micro-level

To answer the subquestions, 12 interviews were conducted, 8 currently enrolled students attending 5 different HEIs, 3 self-identified students with a wish to study, and one person who studied and dropped out, unsure which path to continue with. The students were between 21 and 39 years old, held N-, F-, or B-permits, and originated from 9 countries. 5 male and 7 female students were interviewed. It is crucial that research with refugees takes “a more proactive role in speaking along with, not on behalf of, those they research” (Halilovich in Block et al., 2014: 132). Thus, in this section, many quotes are used to illustrate the experiences of (prospective) refugee students. 3 out of 12 interviews were held in English, and the remaining were carried out in German. Whilst the transcripts are in the original language of the interview, the quotes in this section were translated into English. The following subquestions are discussed in this chapter:

*Subquestion 1:* What are refugees' experiences in regard to inclusion, access and participation to higher education, and how have this been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Subquestion 2:* What are the challenges from a refugees' perspective, how do they interrelate and what role does the agency of the refugee play in tackling those?

## 6.1 Experiences through the capital approach

In this section, the aim is to highlight key themes and issues of refugee students' experiences, to explore to what extent these reflect in-/exclusion of refugees, and to provide insights into the diverse experiences grounded in participants' perspectives. That way, findings on subquestion 1 are explored. To get an overview of the primary participants of this study, the table below offers insights into their human capital and background.

RS #	Country of Origin	Age	Permit	Yr. In CH	Language Skills	Academic/ professional roles	Academics in CH	Sex
1	Iraq	29	F	5	German B2/C1, English beginner	2 years of Bachelor in Telecommunication / Engineering	3 semesters Bachelor in Informatics, not studying anymore	M
2	Afghanistan	26	F	2	German B1, English fluent	Bachelor in Business Administration, two internships for 3 months each	Master in Economic and Management, University of Lucerne	M
3	Iran	31	N	1.5	French A1, English B2, German beginner	Master student in Construction Management and Engineering	Interested in attending university, currently interning	M
4	Ethiopia	21	F	8	German C1, English C1	International Baccalaureate in CH	Interested in studying Medicine	F
5	Syria	36	B	5	German C1, English B2	Bachelor in Dental medicine (5 years)	1st semester Master in Dental medicine, University of Zurich	F
6	Iran	31	N	5	German C1, English B1	Master of Law (7 years), work experience	2nd semester Bachelor of Law, University of Zurich	F
7	Azerbaijan	39	B	6	German fluent, English intermediate	Bachelor in Management and Tourism, worked as a journalist and human rights activist	3rd semester Master in Public Management and Policy, University of Bern	F
8	Ukraine	37	F	5.5	German B2, English C1	Bachelor in Management and Marketing	Master in Public Management and Policy, University of Bern	F
9	Afghanistan	36	F	5.5	German C1	Bachelor in History, worked as a reporter for the TV and newspapers	5th semester Bachelor in Film, Zurich University of the Arts	M



10	Turkey (Kurd)	27	B	4.5	German C1, English intermediate	Studied 3 different subjects in health areas (Bachelor level)	2nd semester in Bachelor in Biomedicine, University of Zurich	F
11	Colombia	32	B	5	German C1, English C1	Bachelor in Film	3rd semester Master in Transdisciplinary Studies, Zurich University of the Arts	F
12	Turkey (Kurd)	32	B	2	German B1, English fluent	Bachelor in International Relations	Discovery semester at University of Zurich, goal: study Architecture at the Federal Institute of Technology	M

Table 2: Background and human capital of participants

At multiple HEIs, refugees can participate in discovery semesters, which aim to provide insights into the study life. 75% of the participants had completed one or multiple discovery semesters. Some of the discovery semesters also allow taking German classes, which some refugee students participated in. Refugee student (RS) 4 shared her experience: *“This has helped me a lot because I have personally gone there with other students, and I have experienced how the lecture runs, how fast or slow, how the professor talks. And I made notes because first I need confidence that I know the language well enough.”* During the discovery semesters, reported sentiments by participants ranged from being extremely happy to participate to feeling pressured and anxious because not much was understood in German. However, a consensus was identified because discovery semesters provided good insights into university life, teaching styles and language requirements to all the participants. Additionally, it was raised by multiple participants that the discovery semester gave them something to do during the asylum-seeking process.

Once officially enrolled at university, it was reported by multiple participants that the level of education is experienced as high, which is additional to the challenges some experienced due to studying in German. Despite the challenges, participants were successful and received high grades during their studies in Switzerland. For example, RS9 studying Film recently had the chance to present his short film at a screening with students and lecturers. When asked about the role that HE plays for their lives, participants reported that studying gave them motivation, strength, and provided them with further knowledge.

Since the participants represented a diverse sample, the experiences made on the way and during studies varied a lot and the sample is not viewed as representative. Therefore, no conclusion on either positive or negative experiences can be drawn. Nevertheless, when

analyzing the experiences and influences on refugee students' experiences, a consensus appears that the social, financial, and cultural capital have an influence on their access and participation in HE. Thus, in the following subchapters, the role of those capitals is discussed, offering deeper insights into the various experiences made by the 12 participants.

### 6.1.1 Social capital and its influence on economic and human capital

To access and participate in HE and society, the social capital of an individual is important. Many participants established social bonds that helped them feel included. RS7 mentioned: *“For example, when I had a German presentation, then we could look together at my text. Always such help. I mean society, people do a lot, help a lot. That brings very good feelings. Then you do not feel that you are lonely.”* At the same time, one participant highlighted how isolated refugees are, particularly in camps, and how that negatively influences their state of well-being and complicates developing the social capital in the host country. A lot of times social bonds and bridges can be a means of accessing information, as illustrated by RS3: *“When I was in [village], [...] I got to know a Swiss woman and I talked to her about my background, about my situation. And she told me, I think the best way for you here is to continue your education because you have a good background. You can speak English. She suggested me the discovery program to know about the procedure and the education system in Switzerland.”* It was highlighted that the social bonds helped to not only access information to university but also to keep going, learn how to study in the Swiss HEIs, and to pass exams.

The findings also revealed that the social bonds increase the human capital of refugees. RS12 reported that a friend helped him navigating the university website and filling in the study application form. Further, RS10 mentioned that the connection with a well-respected woman helped pressure the social services into providing her with further language courses needed to enroll at university. RS11 stated that her social bonds helped her finding an internship needed to complete her studies. Looking at the experiences of the participants, a connection between social and economic capital can be identified. For example, RS7 knew a person who wrote a recommendation letter for her, which helped to successfully receive scholarships for university from multiple foundations. RS6, currently holding an N-status and waiting on the asylum decision, described that she met a woman who helped her not only with the application to university but who financed the C1-level language class and exam, and who is currently financing her studies. For this participant, making the social bond was particularly important as the social services would not sponsor the required language course or the tuition fees due to her N-permit. Whilst this participant was grateful for that connection and the financial support, she also raised the concern that people who do not have the exceptional luck do not have equal opportunities:

“*If someone has no opportunities, it is difficult, it is not fair.*” Further, RS4 explained that when arriving in Switzerland, she made social bridges with people at the church who ended up financing her education. These examples illustrate how the social capital can impact the economic capital, and thus the perspective of refugees immensely and influence their opportunities in accessing and participating in HE.

### 6.1.2 Cultural capital and its influence on social capital

Based on the previously discussed operationalization of cultural capital, examples of embodied cultural capital are legitimate behaviors, cultural attitudes, language skills, correct dialect, and accent, familiarity with academic structures, and aspirations. Multiple participants mentioned speaking the ‘correct’ dialect as an obstacle to gain cultural capital. It was highlighted how fellow students at university change to Swiss German, and that they continuously have to ask to switch back to Standard High German as Swiss German is hard to comprehend. Not knowing the Swiss German dialect led to being scared to ask questions and feeling like a burden. RS5 mentioned that even staff and professors tend to forget to speak Standard High German. RS11 reflected on the status quo that Swiss students mainly speak in Swiss German: “*It wasn't for them to be mean. I know it. I understood later. Though, at the time, I was like what the hell? This is not nice guys, don't do it. So, it was a very challenging semester because I was very emotionally unstable.*”

It seems that lacking skills in the correct Swiss German dialect does not only influence the experience in HE but also impacts the refugees in the daily life. RS10 has spent 4.5 years and reached C1-level in German. Yet, she mentioned that not knowing the dialect makes her feel excluded and automatically shows that she is a stranger. She explained the power behind knowing the ‘right’ dialect, and thus having cultural capital: “*I thought I'd better not speak dialect, because then it will be even more complicated. I have to write some exams in German. I don't want to make grammatical mistakes. [...] But after a while, I realized, [...] at some point, I will receive the question: and where are you originally from? [...] There are two things behind this question. Is it out of curiosity, out of personal interest or in a way rather racist? What are you doing in Switzerland?*”

In regard to having incorporated cultural capital, behaviors and attitudes influence their experience in the Swiss space, either at university or in daily life. Additionally, belonging and feeling included can correlate to being like the locals, as explained by RS11: “*Before, I felt very insecure around Swiss people. Subconsciously, [...] I felt that I needed the approval of the world, I needed to prove to them that I was as good. I became this hyperactive person, I was out because, you know - you're Swiss. [...] They've got all the sports in the world. They speak*

*so many languages, have traveled so much. It touched all my insecurities because growing up in Colombia, that was the life I always wanted to have. [...] I came here. [...] It was very complex, and it has many layers. I come here, and I meet these students who are super young and had a super cool life in my eyes. And I was like, subconsciously, I want to be like them, and this is my moment to do it. So, I started doing so much of sport. [...] I was going to ZHdK, I was studying German, I was playing. I could do everything. I was just doing everything. But it was from a place of insecurity and from a place of 'I need to fit in'.*"

Further, it is noted that missing cultural capital, such as 'legitimate' behavior and cultural attitudes, leads to difficulties in accumulating social capital, which enhances the feeling of social exclusion. RS12 reported: *"I can't say I'm bad here. But I can't say I'm quite happy, because you are foreigners. You will remain a foreigner, the foreigners will always remain foreigners."* RS10 and RS7 shared similar thoughts mentioning that the 'refugee' or 'foreigner' label immediately changes the host population's perception of the individual, which is often connected to prejudices about refugees stemming e.g. from the media. RS10 stated: *"I just want to be perceived as a human being and not with my passport. [...] That is also a kind of power relationship because I am here in a foreign country. And I'm not allowed to vote."* According to the participants, the Swiss are not approachable or do not accept anyone who does not speak their language, which challenges their ability to gain social and cultural capital and limits the feeling of belonging.

### **6.1.3 Influence of the COVID-19 pandemic**

In this section, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic both on the study and social life of the participants is discussed. Students reported that online learning was not as interesting as in-person and that the language barrier, including learning German online, was greater than before. Additionally, Zoom break-out rooms were seen as a challenge, because fellow students changed from Standard High German to Swiss German. RS6 explained: *"It is very difficult. Especially when we are broken up into Zoom groups. When we're divided, people start speaking Swiss German. And I can no longer participate. I can't talk to people like that and say I don't understand you. But if it were in person, then I could tell them."*

Further, it became apparent that the lack of adequate study places due to closed libraries and the living situation made it more difficult to study. Additionally, the means of communication being solely online was experienced as complicated by RS7: *"To go to professors and then everything is online. It takes so much time and for each meeting, you need to write emails and wait. That is why I am extending my studies now."* However, RS6 recognized the advantages of

online learning for herself: *“I also have to admit, the podcast can help you a lot, you can stop, write. Look again what I didn't understand in Google. It has advantages and disadvantages for me.”*

Being at a HEI does not only mean studying in-person but it is connected to socializing for many of the participants. Thus, multiple participants reported not having many active social relations anymore, and that they now regard it as more challenging to start meeting with people again and increasing their social capital. RS9 mentioned that social isolation made him feel unmotivated, lazy, and anxious. This resulted in less exercised agency to connect with people. Additionally, RS2 shared how the COVID-19 measures impacted his student life: *“It impacted me a lot. As I told you, I am taking classes at university here in my room all day long. Because it's really good and interesting when you meet new people, when you interact with your teachers, professors. [...] Before I used to go to university because I love some sports. [...] When I heard that these things are online, it's like, oh my God, is it possible to take online classes?”* Despite the difficulties that had been mentioned by multiple participants, RS11 reflected on the positively experienced side effects that came along with COVID-19 measures: *“With COVID, I have to say that personally, it is the best thing that had happened to my life. [...] That was always my sign of like, I'll be sick and tired all the time. [...] It was bad, bad, bad, bad. But then finally with covid, it was like otherwise, I wouldn't stop because I was so embedded.”*

## 6.2 Challenges

Many barriers or challenges were identified during all the primary data collection activities. The challenges discussed are categorized into meso- and macro-level barriers, with a particular lense on informational, procedural, financial, environmental, and educational factors. It is further elaborated on how the participants approach these challenges and how that influences their educational path. Thus, this chapter offers insights into the second subquestion:

*Subquestion 2: What are the main challenges from a refugees' perspective, how do they interrelate and what role does the agency of the refugee play in tackling those?*

### 6.2.1 Meso-level

*Procedural factors* through the admissions and enrollment procedure create challenges for the participants. Particularly, the certificates and diplomas required to be accepted into university are sometimes difficult to obtain due to high requirements and costs. To provide some background, most HEIs require C1-level in German, which is hard to obtain. Further, certain documents, certificates and diplomas are needed to enroll. However, due to the nature of escaping,

oftentimes refugees are unable to obtain these documents. Nevertheless, some HEIs ask for all these documents, creating procedural difficulties for RS10: *“My documents were not accepted. [...] They asked me for proof of study enrollment in Turkey. A current proof of study enrollment is demanded. Does it make sense? Not for a refugee. But for a normal student it makes sense. [...] That is also a structural problem. It shows that they don't even think about it.”*

In terms of *educational* factors, the main challenge raised was the language level at university, which is influenced by financial barriers on the macro-level that limit access to language courses. RS7 suggested that more time during exams would help combat the additional difficulty they face by studying in a foreign language. Some participants had to repeat certain classes or extend their studies, which resulted in stress or frustration, illustrating the risks correlated to continuing with HE on a micro-individual level. RS1 admitted that his German skills were not sufficient, which according to him, were the reasons why he dropped out of the HEI. An additional environmental factor raised during the focus group discussion was that providing childcare at HEIs is important, particularly to female refugees who would like to study.

### 6.2.2 Macro-level

Lack of access to correct *information* seems to be a great barrier to many of the participants. It was revealed that not knowing where to gain the necessary information is challenging and that advisory services lack the knowledge and resources needed. RS5 explained: *“One person was responsible for the different migrant families. And she has no desire, or she has no experience to provide such information.”* Further, RS3 reported how many refugees are not aware of their rights here (e.g. whether one can study with an N-permit) and do not receive adequate consultation about studying in Switzerland.

Further, RS1 mentioned that he is interested in studying but would preferably work first to become *financially* independent from social supports. According to him, it is easier to apply for a new status as a temporarily admitted foreigner if one is independent of financial support. Receiving funding for the language diplomas until C1-level is a barrier that many prospective refugee students need to overcome. A lot of times, refugees are only able to access language courses until B1-level. Depending on which municipality participants reside in, their chances to study German differ, as illustrated by RS11: *“It depends on the municipality. [...] I've been so lucky, and I want to say that I've had so many privileges and I wish there was a room for every refugee, but it's not the reality. So, you can't take me as a staple of this is how a refugee lived, because I've been very lucky in many ways, like having German courses from the start. After seven months in Switzerland, we started A2 every day for three hours. My German courses were always paid until B2 and even if I wanted to go on with C1, I'm sure the [HEI] would*

*arrange something or my social worker. I always had the chance, and I am very grateful for that. Yeah, but my brother and [wife] never had the chance. They've never been to an official German course. They speak German. They went to volunteer tandem and stuff, but they never had the chance like my mom, and I had.”* RS5 provided insights into her experiences regarding accessing funds for tertiary education: *“Pressure that you must be self-sufficient. [...] They are not interested. You should work as soon as possible, earn more money. That is the idea.”*<sup>8</sup>

As part of *environmental* factors influencing the study experience of refugees, it was mentioned by many participants during the interviews and focus group discussions that the living situation has an influence on the ability to proceed and succeed with studies. RS2 described: *“When my studies started there and I had a very small room [...], I didn't have any table and chair to study. And I was there all the time on the bed. And so, it was really tough for me to study. And [the roommate] was playing music and talking to the phone. It was really disturbing. First one week or two weeks then I told my boss, please do something for me that I cannot study here. It's really tough.”* Additionally, RS11 pointed out how collective accommodations are a difficult environment to focus in: *“I can go to school, but then if I'm living in a shelter, I cannot study either. [...] Once you live in those shelters, you realize. [...] There's no mind space, it's loud, it's bad. So why not making student residences for refugees and students, you know, like all these things before you actually enter school?”*

### **6.2.3 Role of agency**

Despite the challenges refugees face, many have the energy to tackle these issues and to find solutions. This chapter discusses the different manifestations of motivation for studies, and the exercised agency it leads to. According to Snyder et al. (1997: 401), agency is the ability to stay motivated using mental energy for “initiating and sustaining movement towards those goals.” Umer and Elliot (2019) point out that agency is particularly important to exercise and manifest itself in situations where barriers to the goal arise. Thus, this chapter aims to understand the role that motivation and agency play for the pathways of refugee students and their in-/exclusion in the HE sector.

To understand the agency that refugees practice when facing certain challenges, first, the motivation to continue with HE is discussed. One of the identified motivations was to gain human capital to have the ability to contribute to certain circumstances that led to their fleeing. For instance, RS6 is currently studying law so that she can solve the problems and circumstances that she faced. She described: *“I think when I will work as a lawyer, I will be happy.*

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<sup>8</sup> For more information, see chapter 7.

*Help people to avoid or that they do not experience so many problems, which I have experienced. [...] That is my only wish.”* Further incentives were being able to practice the jobs that they previously were active in, for which mostly a Swiss certificate is preferred, improving the German skills, networking, and making more social connections. RS10 mentioned that completing studies in Switzerland would allow her to enter the labor market and have a stable income. Further, RS7 shared that being a student can contribute to feeling less of a stranger: *“I had a few moments when I was always afraid to say I’m a refugee because I don’t want to get ‘Why are you here? What were the reasons?’ Such topics. I sometimes just avoid it because of that. I sometimes say, I am a student. And then, I realize that when you say that you study in front of these people, you have another value. Unfortunately.”*

Being aware of the motivation behind studies provides context to understanding the agency that refugees exercise to tackle the barriers they face. As one of the great barriers for the participants were correct information from the social workers, agency in looking up relevant information for studies is crucial. RS10 shared how she took initiative for accessing language courses: *“Because I talked to the social worker, and I told him I wanted to study. For that I need C1. I had already done all the research myself. I said, I will study here. I want to do that. [...] It was not clear whether my documents would be accepted or not. But for me it was clear. I don’t know, if an exam is needed, I will do it.”* RS3 is currently still waiting on his asylum decision and is not provided with language courses in his canton. He explained his approach to learning: *“I don’t take official courses but I’m just self-learning through different websites and through different channels, for example, YouTube and other stuff. [...] I learned during this year here, you have to make your situation. You cannot wait, for example, for the canton or even for your close friend or your family to make the situation. You have to make it by yourself.”*

Further, RS12 shared how he went about applying for university: *“My goal is to study architecture at the ETH. The municipality tells me ‘you don’t have an answer [regarding the asylum application] and we can’t send you’. I said, okay, they can’t send you, but I’ll try to find an alternative. I have made an independent application to ETH. [...] I had to register. I can’t wait one, two years for the paper. That’s why I signed up. If they fund it, fine. If they don’t fund it, I’m an international activist. I can find a solution.”* RS9 described his way of dealing with barriers in general: *“You just have to not give up. Be motivated. Always be motivated. And have a goal. Without a goal somewhere one gets lost, somewhere in yourself too, in society. You just have to have a goal.”* These examples illustrate the motivation and will of the participants and show the role that agency can play in tackling barriers and finding ways to HE.



### 6.2.4 Interrelation of barriers

The findings reveal the complexity and magnitude of the barriers that refugee students face. Thus, the findings of this research support previous literature (Lambrechts, 2020) that argues additional disadvantages are faced by refugee students in comparison with other under-represented groups. Both on the meso- and macro-level, participants reported informational barriers to access in HE. The lacking information may create larger procedural barriers. Further, if a person is facing informational barriers, s/he is likely not aware of financial opportunities, leading to an additional barrier. Lacking economic means creates a barrier for the application procedure and the financing of tuition fees. Missing funds can lead to less German classes taken, increasing the educational barrier experienced on the meso-level. Further, depending on where the refugee resides, varying financial support is accessible. The environment influences the ability to complete costly language certificates, which subsequently impacts procedural aspects. Finally, the environment in terms of living conditions is influenced by financial factors, and can impact the ability to study, potentially contributing to educational barriers. The environment also refers to the asylum-seeking status of a person, which can impact the application procedure and ability to access HE. The figure below illustrates the intersection of barriers that refugees face, which suggests that an integrated approach in analyzing experiences is crucial.

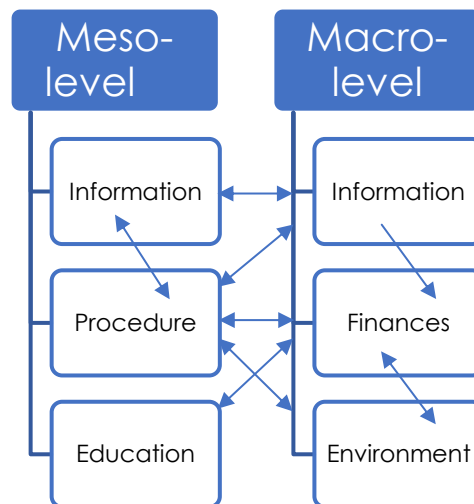


Figure 5: Interrelation of barriers

## 7 Meso-level: Higher education institutions and NGOs

The analysis for this section is based on 8 stakeholder interviews, 2 expert interviews, 6 exploratory informal conversations, and secondary data collected. This chapter provides insights into subquestion 3. The meso-level refers to organizational policies and hierarchies, mainly looking at HEI policies, such as enrollment requirements and support programs. Additionally, in this section, the role that a support organization can play for refugees is explored by looking at SEET's mentoring program.

**Subquestion 3: What are the institutional/organizational facilitators and barriers for refugees' inclusion in the higher education sector?**

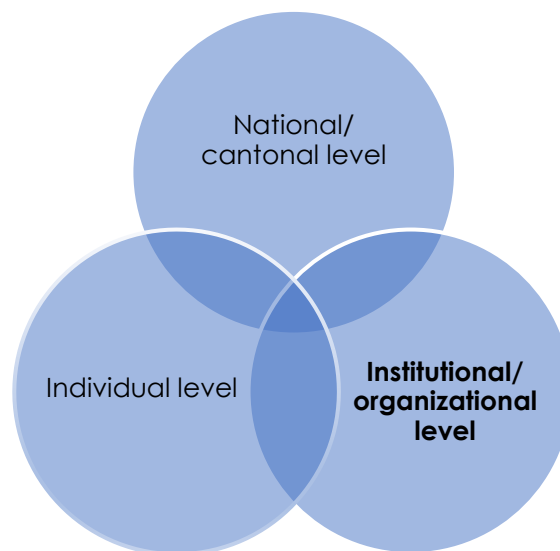


Figure 6: Conceptual framework for inclusion, focus on the meso-level

SH#	Date	Level of inclusion	Stakeholder
SH1	22.03.21	n/a	Expert and researcher on refugee students
SH2	06.04.21	Meso-institutional level	HEI, employee of bridging project
SH3	12.04.21	Macro-cantonal level	Cantonal integration service
SH4	16.04.21	Meso-institutional level	Job coach
SH5	19.04.21	Meso-organizational level	Support NGO
SH6	19.04.21	Macro-cantonal level	Office for migration
SH7	20.04.21	Meso-organizational level	Advisory center for educational pathways
SH8	22.04.21	Macro-cantonal level	Asylum center with social services
SH9	27.04.21	n/a	Expert and researcher on refugee students
SH10	14.05.21	Macro-national level	Policy maker at SEM

Table 3: Overview of stakeholder interviews

## 7.1 Higher education environment

As explained in chapter 4.3, there are 12 universities, 20 universities of teacher education, and 9 universities of applied sciences. In the German-speaking (or bilingual) part of Switzerland, there are 7 universities, 7 universities of applied sciences and 13 universities of teacher education. The HEIs in Switzerland reflect the federal system; there is no centralized system, and the admission is regulated by the individual HEI. The autonomy of the HEIs leads to diversity but can also complicate the information politics in the HE environment. In the following section, both facilitators and barriers for refugees' access and participation in studies in the HE environment are discussed. To explore the dynamics within the HEIs, 5 exploratory informal conversations were conducted.

Date	Institution	Conversation partner
06.01.21	University of Bern	Student/member "Offener Hörsaal"
12.01.21	Perspektiven Studium	Employee
23.03.21	University of applied sciences FHNW	Employees of bridging project
26.03.21	University of Zurich	Employee in the international office
02.05.21	University of Basel	Students/members "Offener Hörsaal"

Table 4: Exploratory informal conversations

### 7.1.1 Facilitators

Since 2015, many projects have been initiated both from universities and independent associations supporting refugees with their wish to study. In the German-speaking part of Switzerland, 6 universities have introduced so-called discovery programs. These give refugee students (N-, F-, or B-permit) the opportunity to participate in lectures for two semesters. The students are being supported by mentors, and have access to additional programs, such as language and skill courses, libraries and sports facilities. As part of the discovery program, refugees can get insights into the study life and topic free of cost. As can be seen on the figure below, trial semesters are available at many HEIs.



Map 2: Discovery semester & support programs at HEIs (Perspektiven Studium, n.d.)

In the canton of Geneva, tertiary study is part of the KIP, so the integration services cooperate with the University of Geneva. Currently, institutionalized projects are established in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and will start in fall 2021. The first project called ‘Start Studium’ at the University of Zurich prepares prospective refugee students for studies by offering academic courses, language courses, IT-skill building workshops, and further preparational classes. For that program, the German requirements are B1-level, and refugees with N-, F- or B-permit can participate. A similar bridging project is implemented at some faculties at the university of applied sciences Nordwestschweiz, which pilots in fall 2021 and aims to support 5 prospective refugee students in their preparation for tertiary study. Besides these two bridging projects available at German-speaking HEIs, many offer discovery semesters. In certain cases, these are run by the international office (e.g. University of Lucerne, Zurich University of the Arts) and in other cases, they are organized by voluntary students (e.g. University of Bern & Basel). If no bridging project is institutionalized at the HEI, it is more difficult to coordinate everything and to transition from the discovery semester to official enrollment. SH10 remarked the following about trial semesters: *“It was well-intentioned. A lot of trial semesters were implemented. What the students achieved was sensitization. Within the university management, the highest achievements was the establishment of a trial semester. Trial semesters don't*

*achieve anything. It's throwing sand in the eyes. It was nice, but you still don't belong."*

On the other hand, SH1 believed in the value of these projects enabling discovery semesters: *"I think the support programs are doing a great job. [...] I admire it. I find it incredible how students, apart from their own struggling with their studies, are investing so much time and creating such amazing structures against all odds, that they are really raising money [...] for financing language courses that they would then pay to the university and that kind of thing. And I think their students also said that [...] even if they cannot access the university just to have this kind of feeling of community and of like minded people and having some kind of touch, being in touch again with university life. And that's already really valuable."* She also remarks: *"But again, why does it need to be students who are connecting universities in Switzerland?"*

All the facilitating projects are coordinated by a project from the Swiss Student Union called 'Perspektiven Studium', which was launched in 2016. It aims to make access to HEIs easier for refugee students by offering important information on its website. Additionally, it creates a networking platform between the different HEI projects and raises awareness on a political level (Perspektiven Studium, n.d.). Whilst lots of information can be found on their website, it seems not to be attainable to refugees as during the workshop and the interviews the lack of accessible information was one of the most predominant barriers mentioned. In addition to 'Perspektiven Studium', the 'Uni4Refugees: Broadening Diversity at Higher Education Institutions' project was launched. The project runs from 2021-24 and is part of the swissuniversities program P-7 that aims to foster diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunities. As such, the Uni4Refugees project aims to include refugee students and researchers in Swiss HEIs. 4 HEIs in the German-speaking and 3 HEIs in the French-speaking part of Switzerland are members of Uni4Refugees. These projects reflect that the awareness regarding the student body is rising within the HE sector. In terms of receiving support from the HEI whilst being officially enrolled, some expressed that a mentor would be helpful to navigate through the study environment, but generally, they seemed to be satisfied with the services offered. RS7 described: *"I mean, the university really does a lot, very well. And you can also work part-time and study."*

### **7.1.2 Barriers**

As previously discussed in chapter 6.2, refugee students face many different barriers on their path to studies. Concerning challenges within the meso-level, informational, procedural, financial, and educational barriers were reported. These individually experienced challenges are connected to the educational policies in Switzerland. Arx et al. (2017) mention that the autonomy and individuality of HEIs can lead to a matter of luck in admission to studies, which threatens

the principle of equal opportunities. Since the requirements differ between HEIs, it is complex for refugee students to navigate through websites and find the information needed.

In regard to procedural barriers, the language requirements as well as proof of certificates of prior education are hindering the start of studies. If a refugee does not have a Bachelor degree from his/her home country yet, a certificate equal to the Swiss high school certificate is required to be admitted to HEIs. As such, many refugees need to take the supplementary exam called ECUS, which costs 980 CHF for German-speaking universities, excluding any preparation material or courses. Sontag (2019) points out the challenges this ECUS exam creates, as many preparation courses are offered by private institutes involving high costs, and the students might have difficulties finding employment to finance this because they do not have a working permit yet. Depending on the preparation needed, the courses for the completion of the whole ECUS exam can cost up to 25'000 CHF in German-speaking Switzerland (Arx et al., 2017). Sontag (2019: 74) concludes that “the combination of the demand of the educational system, the funding, and the position as asylum seekers creates a predicament for the students.” As she noted during the expert interview (SH1), she thinks about the ECUS exam *“that it makes a lot of sense to criticize that or try to work towards different solutions that make this access easier.”*

An additional barrier are the language requirements at university. One of the difficulties is that the integration services generally provide German classes until B1-level, whilst HEIs often require C1-level certificates. SH4, a job coach, wished that *“universities lower the thresholds and create programs where refugees have access. It is not only up to the refugee social services. That they can learn at least the language skills from the university.”* Whilst students from the Italian- or French-speaking part of Switzerland do not need to proof any language skills, and some foreign students are admitted from B2-level to study in Switzerland, refugees often need to have C1-level (Arx et al., 2017). Additionally, the multilingualism of Switzerland complicates the requirements as often multiple foreign languages need to be learned (Arx et al., 2017). However, there are also universities which do not require language skills for enrollment, e.g. the University of Basel. A further barrier can be the asylum-seeking status. Depending on which major, asylum-seekers are not allowed to enroll whilst others do not differentiate between N- and B-status. For example, RS5 waited 3 years to enroll in dentistry studies as medicine only allows enrollment to B-status holders (Universität Zürich, 2021b).

To conclude, the proof of certain certificates, asylum-seeking status, diplomas and language skills can create procedural and educational barriers, and informational barriers can contribute to financial barriers on the meso-level. SH6 reflected about the requirements: *“Diploma recognitions, one is extremely formalistic in Switzerland. [...] In the medical field, someone*

*from a third country is placed below someone who comes from a European country with the same diploma. The recognition of the diplomas - there is probably the biggest catch.”*

## 7.2 Impact of an organizational facilitator: SEET

Any of the organizations that offer language courses for free, empower highly qualified refugees, and promote social inclusion are viewed as facilitators. To understand the impact of a support organization for educational and personal purposes, this section provides a closer look at SEET, the partner organization for this research. SEET offers a study support program for female refugees who wish to study in Switzerland. At the heart of the program is the mentoring relationship between the mentee (prospective refugee student) and the mentor (volunteering student). As a second dimension, SEET offers the mentees a variety of workshops on topics such as how to make a CV, IT-skills, intercultural communication, and learning culture in Switzerland. Additionally, the association provides situational financial support for study-related expenses. By conducting evaluation interviews of the mentoring program with the mentees, the impact of an organizational facilitator is explored in this section.

Mentee #	Previous education	Goal/studies in Switzerland
Mentee 1	Bachelor in Sports Science	Goal: Bachelor in Physiotherapy
Mentee 2	Master in Physics	Currently: internship, goal: Ph.D. in Astrophysics
Mentee 3	Bachelor in Dentistry	Currently: Master in Dentistry
Mentee 4	High school	Goal: studies/apprenticeship in Architecture
Mentee 5	Bachelor in Chemistry	Fall: start studies (3rd semester) of Chemistry

Table 5: Overview of SEET's mentees

In terms of practical impact, it was reported that the IT and CV workshops provided were very helpful as skills were taught that prepare for (the application to) HE. Mentee 3 shared that it previously took her two weeks to work on a resume, and with SEET's help, she is now able to do it much quicker. Further, it was reported that the mentoring helped them plan out the concrete next steps towards studies and enabled access to correct and precise information. If possible, the mentees are matched with a mentor that studied the same or similar field as the female refugee aspires to study as well. Therefore, the mentor of mentee 1 could organize course material for biology, which helped her decide whether studies in this field in Switzerland are suitable. Additionally, it was reported that the subsidiary financial support for a laptop and a C1-level German course was helpful, as it helped decrease the strain on financial capital. Further, it was mentioned that it familiarizes the mentees with the HE system in Switzerland, which is complex due to the autonomous HEIs.

On a personal level, the most common finding was that all mentees finally felt heard and supported with their goal to (re)start their studies, and did not feel alone anymore. Particularly, mentee 4 shared that SEET respects her with her vision whilst social services want her to work in the hospital or a nursing home and has thus not only provided her with support to continue with HE but also assisted emotionally. She mentioned that she feels respected with her goals and SEET gives her hopes that those goals can be achieved. Mentee 2 shared that SEET helped her feel socially connected by sharing that it feels like a ‘second family’. Additionally, the support from their mentors and SEET contributed to having a realistic vision and plan for the future. Multiple mentees expressed gratitude for receiving support as a female refugee. They explained that it is harder for women to get supported with their wish to study and to establish social relations.

To sum, this support program helped tackle barriers and bridged the gap between macro-level services and meso-institutional level requirements. By assisting with finding language tandems or partly financing language courses as well as offering workshops, the mentees were able to enhance their human and cultural capital ‘valuable’ in Switzerland. The program has also given the women self-confidence, expanded their social bridges and links, and thus has contributed to the feeling of belonging. The positive impact of SEET in practical and personal aspects was revealed in the evaluation. However, since SEET is run completely on a voluntary basis, it is probably not sustainable if SEET and other similar associations are to be some of the few programs bridging the gaps between meso-institutional and macro-level barriers.

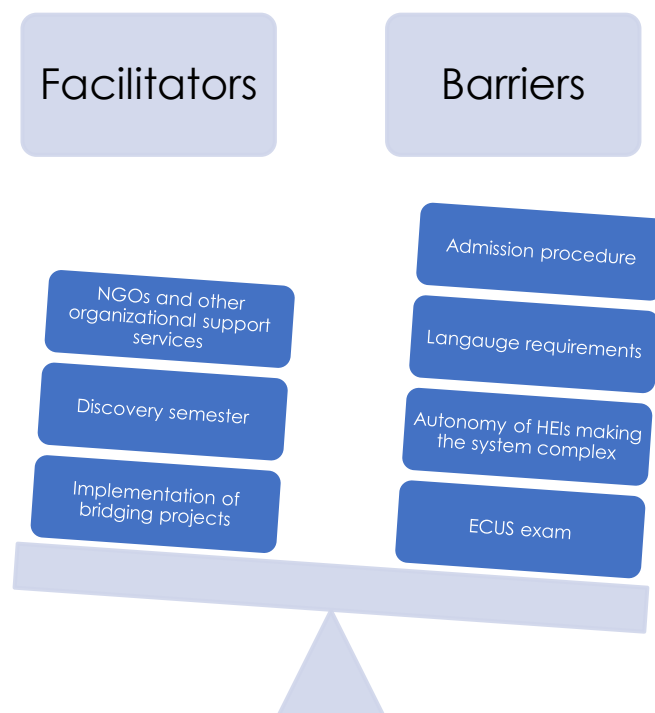


Figure 7: Summary of meso-level facilitators and barriers



## 8 Macro-level: National and cantonal integration policies

The analysis for this section is based on 8 stakeholder and 2 expert interviews as well as secondary data collected.<sup>9</sup> This chapter provides insights into subquestion 4. The macro-level refers to national/cantonal structures and includes an analysis of integration policies<sup>10</sup>, the legislative framework in regard to refugees, and how that affects the in-/exclusion of refugee students.

*Subquestion 4: What are the national/cantonal facilitators and barriers for refugees' inclusion in the higher education sector?*

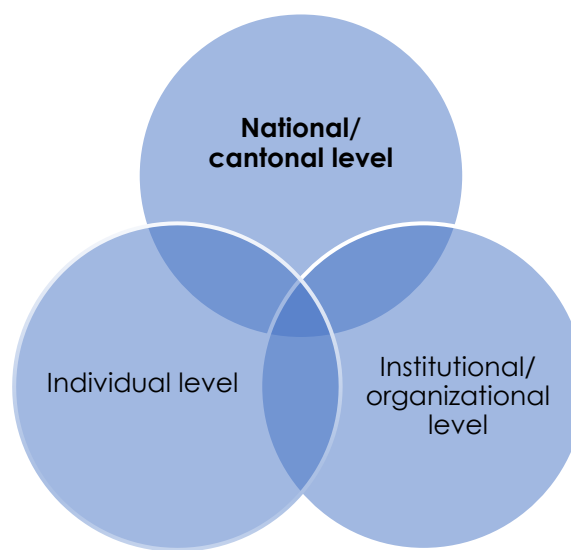


Figure 8: Conceptual framework for inclusion, focus on the macro-level

### 8.1 The IAS implementation in a federalist country

To understand the national and cantonal facilitators and barriers, it is important to comprehend the structure of Switzerland and how this influences the asylum system. Switzerland is a federalist country, in which the cantons have lots of autonomy. In Switzerland, it is not only the state that decides on citizenship but also the cantons and municipalities. In comparison with other federalist countries, Switzerland leaves lots of room for interpretation and autonomy to the cantons (Manatschal, 2011). Nevertheless, the state has outlined the IAS, which serves as a recommendation for cantons to adapt and implement integration promotion services.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For more information, recall chapter 7 for an overview of SH interviews.

<sup>10</sup> In policy discourse in Switzerland, the term 'integration' is used. Therefore, in regard to policies and support services, it will be referred to 'integration'.

<sup>11</sup> To recall the IAS goals, see chapter 4.2.

As part of the IAS, it is outlined that all (temporarily admitted) refugees reach a level of language proficiency commensurate with their potential, three years after entry all have at least basic language skills to cope with everyday life (at least A1-level), and two-thirds of all refugees (F- and B-permit) aged 16-25 are in a post-compulsory education. Systematic processes, such as primary information, advising throughout the integration process as well as potential assessment are implemented. In regard to education, the focus lies on vocational training. In the IAS, it is pointed out that “depending on the potential and skills of the juvenile other educational training of general education (secondary class II) or tertiary studies are an opportunity.” Marti (2020) criticizes that the IAS focuses strongly on the evaluation of potential in regard to labor market integration but does not mention tertiary education as an explicit path and opportunity. An additional IAS aim is to conduct more data monitoring and evaluation on refugees, because at the moment, no statistics are available on the qualifications, skills, or the number of enrolled refugee students in HEIs.

The actual implementation of the IAS and its processes is not competence of the state but happens on the cantonal level. In some cantons, competences lie within the cantonal structures, others fully delegate the operative aspects to NGOs, and some delegate responsibilities to municipalities. In general, integration promoting processes are two-fold in Switzerland. Primarily, the integration processes are covered by basic structures. Additionally, there are specific integration promotion offers that complement the basic structures (Probst et al., 2019). SH3 pointed out that it is extremely important that integration services have a wide range of basic structure integration programs. As she mentioned, in regard to the preparation for studying, there is a gap between the requirements at HEIs and the integration services that refugees can access. Therefore, there is a barrier for refugees who can access basic integration services solely, which generally support language classes up to B1-level, and who would like to study, which mostly requires C1-level in German.

## 8.2 Financial services

Regarding the financing of integration, including language courses and housing, cantons have contracts with the state. 16 cantons distribute, in addition to the federal integration allowance, budget for integration support (Probst et al., 2019). Amongst asylum seekers, mostly young ones with ‘perspectives to stay’ are able to access those funds. Concretely, a refugee receives an integration flat rate of 18’000 CHF, which is triple the amount in comparison to before the IAS. AS SH8 mentioned, this number seems like a lot, but taking into consideration that language courses often cost 6’000-7’000 CHF, it shows that this flat rate does not cover all costs,

which is why some would need to be covered by municipalities. As pointed out by SH4, a job coach, their *“mission is to bring people into the labor market as quickly as possible, to find as quickly as possible a training year for at least 6 months. [...] The financial independence is also a very big issue. For that, they are looking for companies offering vocational training for the highly qualified people.”* As became apparent, in the canton Bern, job coaches prefer to consult towards vocational training. A similar approach was also noted by SH6, calling the basic vocational training the ‘king/queen path of professional integration’.

### 8.2.1 Access to language courses

In 12 out of 26 cantons, the asylum-seeking status influences the refugees’ ability to access integration measures. However, in recent years, multiple cantons have implemented measures to also support temporarily admitted foreigners. In relation to language courses, asylum-seekers do not have legally set rights to access language courses, as this is not part of the integration assignment (Probst et al., 2019). Thus, cantons can decide whether they offer language courses to asylum seekers. Whilst RS3 did not attend any language courses as an asylum seeker, RS6 living in another canton was able to access language courses with an N-permit. Probst et al. (2019) found that 20 cantons offer language courses for daily life, and only six cantons support further language courses. Concerning courses offered for refugees with F-foreigner, F-refugee, or B-status, some cantons are offering more courses, whilst other are restricting access to language courses, which illustrates the freedom that cantons have regarding the implementation of the IAS. SH8 noted that the language courses offered depends on the political climate in the municipality: *“There are communities that are politically ‘colored’. They have to discuss whether a B1 course is financed. And then, of course, it's difficult for a person from that community to then study medicine. [...] Conditions in the city of Zurich are certainly different than in rural regions.”*

In fact, experiences of participants also reflected the municipal differences in accessing language courses. RS11 and her family both live in the canton of Zurich, but in two different municipalities. As she explained, her mother and her had many possibilities to learn German as asylum-seekers, but her brother was not able to study German as his municipality did not have any budget. RS10 added to this: *“Because it is profit oriented, [...] they don't know if you will stay. And then they don't want to pay that for your language education. [...] And I know people, [...] two years here, three years here and never attended a German course in the center. And they wanted to learn something themselves. In the end, they were not so motivated anymore, which I can understand.”* Another participant, who is currently still seeking asylum, mentioned

that her municipality paid all classes from A1 to C1-level. Therefore, the diverse range of interpretations regarding the funding of language courses is also represented in the study sample.

### 8.2.2 Access to social welfare

When accessing social welfare, a differentiation between F-foreigner status holders and F- or B-refugee status holders can be noted. According to the Foreign Act on Foreign Nationals and Integration (2005) Article 86, F-foreigners and asylum-seekers receive less social welfare than admitted refugees (B- or F-permit) and Swiss people. Overall, a big divide between the highest and lowest amount of social welfare between cantons can be noted within the last decade. For example, canton Aargau pays 270 CHF/month to both asylum-seekers and F-foreigners, the canton Solothurn offers 768 CHF/month to asylum-seekers and Zurich goes further by providing temporarily admitted foreigners with 960 CHF/month.

The political environment of the municipality or the canton can have profound influence on the options that are presented to refugees. As SH3, coordinator for the canton Zurich integration services, shared: *“In small municipalities, the case management is done by the municipal clerk. It is generally a dilemma. Municipalities want people to become independent of social welfare as quickly as possible, so that they no longer have to pay. Then the direct entry into the world of work goes much faster than if someone studies. That is also an important task for them, this sensitization, that the community notices that it is worthwhile.”* SH10 argued that it is understandable that going to university is not the most interesting pathway from the perspective of social welfare: *“Social welfare costs are a sociopolitical issue. It is a political question in the end. Who pays and is one willing to pay?”*

In 2020, it was revealed that the canton Aargau paid too little social welfare (9 CHF/day) to temporarily admitted and recognized refugees living in asylum camps. The amount they are receiving now is 200 CHF more each month, which makes a great difference (SRF Swiss Radio and Television, 2020). Multiple participants reported that the living conditions, particularly when first arriving in Switzerland, were unbearable and that it resembled to them to living in a jail. According to RS12, *“the camp is like a prison, [...] as if you are a criminal person. You come to a country for freedom, but you don't find freedom.”* These instances show how the payments of social welfare influence the living conditions, which can result in an environmental barrier for refugee students.

### 8.2.3 Access to scholarships

On a national level, refugees and temporarily admitted refugees are theoretically scholarship eligible (EDK, 2020). However, in most cantons, temporarily admitted foreigners and asylum-seekers are not eligible for scholarships. The number of scholarships provided depends on the canton. An additional factor that influences the access to scholarships is the age. Mostly, refugee students are older than local students due to their escape and the waiting time through the asylum-seeking process. The scholarship concordat (EDK, 2020) states that cantons need to provide stipends to refugees up to 35-year-olds. Older students generally receive loans; however, some cantons make exceptions. For example, RS7 is 39 years old and received two scholarships despite being above the national age limit. Harder (2019) concludes that refugee students need specific support measures to complete tertiary studies. With missing explicit cantonal measures for scholarships enabling highly qualified refugees to access funds, the risk of devaluation of skills remains.

## 8.3 Advisory services and experiences

As part of the revision of the asylum law, asylum-seekers now receive consultation from the beginning of their asylum process regarding their rights, responsibilities and opportunities. The experiences of these consultations and advisory services in regard to the integration opportunities vary. Due to the varying structures in terms of integration processes in cantons, sometimes multiple social workers are responsible for refugees whilst other times it is only one person. Participants mentioned that they felt that the responsible services and advisory centers lack information and are not sufficiently informed on how to advise refugees interested in studying at HEIs. RS5, who moved from canton Aargau to Zurich, reflected on the difference in advising she received due to varying competences: *“I understand perhaps that it depends somewhat on the canton. Because here in canton Zurich, it is a big one and financially it is stronger. And there are more employees in social welfare. Because with us, it was one who was responsible for the different migrant families.”* RS3 and RS11 mentioned that particularly when they were looking for internships as a preparation for studies, the social worker did not provide them with correct information.

In terms of receiving support to continue studies in Switzerland, many participants reported facing skepticism and barriers, and were continuously asked to find employment and an apprenticeship as opposed to accessing and participating in tertiary study. As RS10 mentioned, *“in society, there are opportunities, but these social services, [...] they are a big hurdle.”* From an integration services perspective, SH6 mentioned that apprenticeships and vocational

trainings can be beneficial as they provide an entry into the labor market, and studies can still be started after completing the basic vocational training. Another perspective is brought in by RS7 who discussed that *“it is also difficult that they always expect that migrants must make low-threshold training in the care sector, which they view as profitable for the economy. [...] We cannot choose for ourselves what we want, what is important to find the way for us. What are our desires about our future therefore are not respected.”* However, the same participant also mentioned that she received valuable support by some projects which helped her with finding suitable studies and employment.

The financial aspects when advising refugees with their pathways seem to play a significant role. During the interview with a job coach, it became apparent that she is driven by financial goals set by her employer: *“It is difficult to estimate how profitable it is for the [NGO responsible for social services] to encourage people to study. Another 3 years depending on social service. With certain majors, it is not clear whether they will find a job afterwards. [...] Language courses are of course very expensive. Usually, A2 is required for direct labor market entry. After A2, you need a justification why a higher level is necessary. EBA vocational training, for example, requires B1. The difficulty is to prefinance.”* This perspective is reflected in participants’ experiences. For example, RS11 mentioned that the social worker always told her that they were not paying for her studies, and that she had to organize herself. Despite the barriers experienced, RS5 pointed out that *“in Switzerland, we have many advantages too. We have an apartment. We have got a social welfare. We have now a hospital, a health insurance. [...] There are many advantages, but against that there is much, much pressure.”* Additionally, RS11 reflected on her experience with social workers, and mentioned that whilst she did not have a good relationship with them at all, her mother’s social worker was very motivating and encouraging.

#### 8.4 Sociopolitical climate

The sociopolitical climate is regarded as influential when it comes to the experienced in-/exclusion of refugees. Diversity, intercultural awareness, and sustainable inclusion are topics that have gained attention recently in Switzerland. In regard to sustainable inclusion pathways, more awareness is raised through the IAS. Probst et al. (2019) analyzed the correlation between multiple factors, such as language, economy, politics of a canton and their in-/exclusive practices in the areas of asylum and integration. They found that the more people rely on unemployment and social welfare services, the more inclusive were the integration policies. Surprisingly, the more economically fruitful a canton was, the more restrictive were the policies. Additionally, the more urban the canton’s population was, the more inclusive policies were applied

(Wichmann et al., 2011). Further, Probst et al.'s (2019) analysis revealed that the political atmosphere within a canton influences the integration and asylum system greatly. If a canton has a liberal attitude towards migration, most likely the practices are more inclusive than in a canton that approaches migration topics more conservatively.

In regard to the autonomy of municipalities, it is observed that whilst a canton might promote inclusive practices, restrictive policies and practices on the communal level are very common (Gutzwiller, 2016; Niederberger, 2018). This notion is confirmed by SH3, who works for the canton Zurich and is responsible for the coordination of the municipalities. She mentioned: *“That's a shame about the system. It depends on where these people are housed and in which municipality they live. There are communities that are very sensitized and others where that is not the case. There, it depends on how much support the refugees get from volunteers or from the environment.”* SH10 added to this: *“Does the canton have centralized or decentralized structures? [...] In the end, it's a federal system with very strong autonomy. The people of Zurich are happy that they are autonomous in relation to the canton. That is a political question. Perhaps a rural municipality is also happy that it is not dependent on the city of Zurich.”*

The refugees' perspectives are influenced by the sociopolitical climate they are assigned to, which leaves room for lots of varying opportunities in regard to continuing HE. SH3 explained how sustainable inclusion is interpreted on the municipal level: *“In principle, they think it's a good idea. But if you then ask the individual municipality or representatives of the politics of the municipality, they believe that it is ambivalent. Actually, they think it's a good idea, but it costs a lot until a person is there.”* On the other hand, an employee of a support organization (SH5) believed that the will to enable tertiary studies for refugees is not existing. According to her, the attitude is as follows: *“They are here, they have to integrate. We are already here, we don't have to do anything. The fact that integration should go hand in hand is clear among professionals or even in big cities. In Zurich or Geneva, it has a completely different status. In [village], of course, it is quite different again.”* To conclude, SH10 claimed that different attitudes meet each other, some coming from the ‘demand’ and some from the ‘support’ perspective.

Most cantons offer trainings for employees for sensibilization in diversity and intercultural awareness. However, only few require participation of their employees. Cantons report facing lots of skepticism when informing and raising awareness in this field. As Probst et al. (2019) mention, this might be because many people associate discrimination with racism. The discussion whether racism or discrimination exists is commented by RS10: *“I find it funny that people are talking about it now. Is there racism in Switzerland? And I think the question is wrong. The question should be: How can we eliminate racism in Switzerland like this? How*

*can we talk about it to make it disappear?”* The topic is complicated because many people perceive racism and discrimination as stimulating words, thus being avoided often (Bischof, 2018).

According to experts, discrimination protection as part of the IAS has received increasing attention (Probst et al., 2019). The greatest improvement might be the recognition of discrimination protection in the KIP, the implementation of anti-discrimination measures and advisory services with case management. However, it is pointed out that the skepticism towards these topics still needs to be removed in certain cases. Concerning the consultation of pathways with women, during the stakeholder interviews, no specific gender dynamics seemed to influence their work. However, RS10 experienced this differently, and mentioned that women are facing prejudices: *“I’ve heard several times ‘you’re going to stay home and take care of children anyway’. Why do you want to continue with education? And it’s so difficult for these women to somehow get out of the house. [...] The asylum system in Switzerland produces or reproduces traditional refugee women.”*

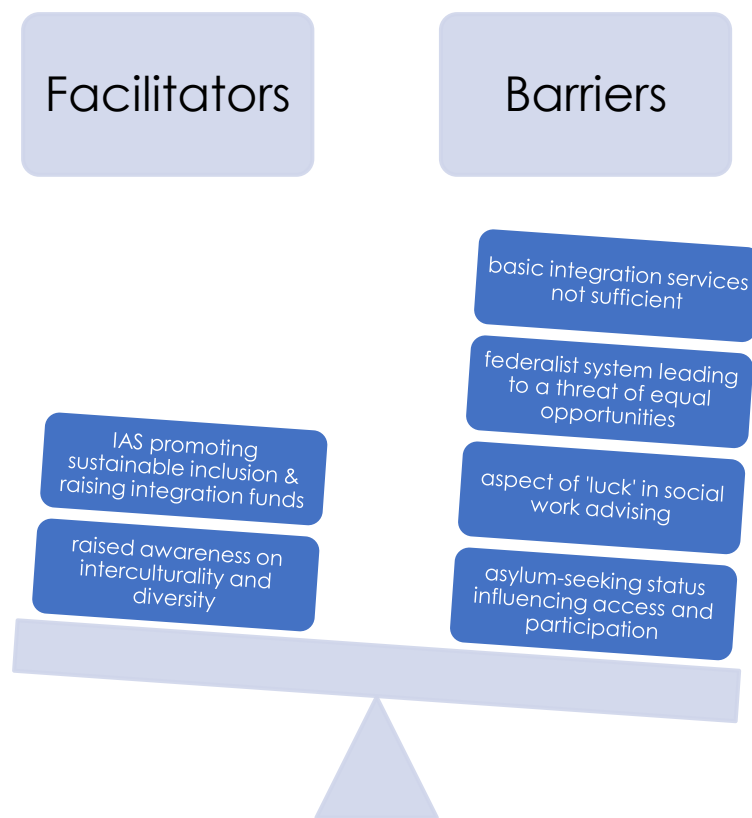


Figure 9: Summary of macro-level facilitators and barriers



## 9 Multi-level operationalization of inclusion

To understand what an ‘inclusive environment’ means, interpretations of the concept of inclusion are discussed in this section. First, refugee students’ perspective on feeling included and welcomed is reviewed. This is followed by an exploration of how interviewed stakeholders interpret inclusion. Finally, this section brings together the perspectives on the micro-, meso- and macro-level, comparing the interpretations of inclusion. As such, this section provides insights into the following subquestion:

*Subquestion 5: How do facilitators and barriers towards inclusion operate across the individual, institutional/organizational and national/cantonal level?*

### 9.1 Refugees’ perception on inclusion

When the refugees were asked whether they feel included and accepted, it became apparent that they have various ambivalent experiences in Switzerland. In regard to their first impressions in Switzerland, some mentioned to have felt safe, secure and welcomed, whilst others described the experience in the camps as traumatic and difficult. Concerning the feeling of belonging, RS2 mentioned that he is *“really happy with everything in Switzerland because until now the canton or Swiss government has done so much for me. I'm really satisfied because it's not easy to pay the studies for a foreigner.”* He has been in Switzerland for two years, has an F-foreigner status, and is currently officially enrolled in a Master in Economics and Management. RS10 also expressed the sense of belonging: *“In [city] I feel really comfortable and at home. For the first time in my life, I feel at home in a city. That's already something big for me.”*

Participants differentiated between various levels and spaces of feeling included. Some mentioned to not feel included nor supported, particularly in regard to the state, showing that the social links in certain cases are not that rich. As such, RS11 explained: *“I think on the political aspect, not [included] at all. Quite the opposite. We've been oppressed, traumatized, [...] driven into having psychological problems. [...] The oppression, it's real and it comes from the system. It came from my social work. [...] It came from having us waiting for four years, [...] being depressed because of this uncertainty that is oppression and that is cruel and bad. And I know they do it on purpose and I know the whole system. [...] The whole system is made for you to quit. Detain. [...] They want [...] for you to say I go back to my country.”* The uncertainty regarding the asylum status brought along fear and distrust for multiple participants, making it more difficult to feel included as well.

However, being accepted at university made multiple participants extremely happy. RS7 shared that being able to study gives her the feeling of being welcomed. *“They hug you, give you a chance, help you and that you are the same as other students, that you are worth the same.”* RS11 also expressed how being involved in a city tour guide project as well as studying influenced her: *“And I feel like right now [city] is my place and I feel more than blessed for that. And this whole thing of me for the past two years developing this project of the city has really helped me to ground myself. [...] Being in the ZHdK and having all this support and being able to bring my ideas for them to be reflected upon and criticized, [...] I feel like, OK, I have something to do here. I have a purpose. I need this project that I'm super excited about it. And through this project, I learned so much about Swiss history. And I love the city.”* She further pointed out, in order to feel included, it is important that people are accepted for who they are: *“I cannot expect for you to behave as a Colombian because you're simply not, as I wouldn't like you to expect me to act as a Swiss person. This is why I struggle with the integration term so much. I think it's about inclusion. It's all about Swiss people trying to make me Swiss. [...] And coming to compromises. I get it that I'm here and I get that I'm not the one to set the rules. But also, you need to know that if I'm here, then I'm going to bring a different input and I cannot just fully adjust to your way of living.”* An additional factor that makes refugees feel excluded are the bad living conditions, which have been even more impactful during the COVID-19 pandemic. RS7 noted: *“There is no table in the family room. Can you imagine? And you can't eat in the cafeteria during the Corona period. [...] And children go to school too. They visit and learn something, and normal people need a table. [...] How can an intelligent society be as careless?”* To sum, ambiguous experiences in relation to feeling included were made, ranging from feeling welcomed to excluded in the Swiss space. As has been shown, the participants experience multiple layers of inclusion, which illustrates how inclusion is a multidimensional concept.

Concerning ‘correct’ behavior and legitimate attitudes, ambivalent experiences were made by the participants. Whilst some mentioned that they were able to familiarize themselves with the culture, others reported having difficulties understanding the behaviors and accumulating cultural capital in Switzerland. Particularly, RS5 mentioned that hardly anybody greets her on the streets, differing very much from her home country, and making her feel that her ‘nature’ and mentality needs to be left behind to fit in. Thus, the cultural capital brought with might sometimes get lost in the Swiss space, which can impact the level of inclusion experienced by the refugees.

## 9.2 Stakeholders' perception on inclusion

Some prerequisites mentioned by multiple stakeholders are the feeling of acceptance, same access to opportunities, equal participation, usage of the full potential, ability to master the daily life, and feeling welcomed. At the bottom line, this means that a person feels equally able as others to move through the phases of life and participate in society. The expert interview (SH1) revealed that, in her understanding, access and participation are fundamental for inclusion: *“We need to talk about really bureaucratic basics. And it's very technical, who can access what, why and how before even talking about this societal idea of who belongs and who should be included in whatever. So that's why I like to start from this level.”*

SH8 mentioned that he puts successful inclusion in perspective with his own life: *“Equate it with our living environment. What do I need to be well? That the people around are doing well, that the people who are close are taken care of, that the children have a possibility of an education, [...] that money is granted for years, and that integration does not have to be carried out very quickly for reasons of cost.”* Further stakeholders mentioned that it includes not being viewed as ‘exotic’ but really accepted for who they are, including if their mentality differs from the ‘Swiss mentality’. SH4 interpreted inclusion differently and mentioned that it is ‘successful’ when the person can find sustainable employment, is financially independent and does not need to go back to social services when facing unemployment but is able to look for a job her-/himself. SH5 pointed out that, particularly the social services, interpret successful integration when a person has her/his own salary, is financially independent, and respects the rules.

Interestingly, ambivalence was noted in the interpretation of the process towards inclusion, such as whether the ‘refugee backpack’ should be embraced or left behind. As SH8 pointed out, regarding social inclusion it is important *“that a person can live here, with the backpack they bring, and give themselves as they are.”* SH5 suggested that from a psychological perspective, it is highly important that multiple identities can exist simultaneously, and that the refugee identity is not ‘deleted’. According to her, *“in personality development, a big issue is how to integrate all the different experiences into life. According to the definition, a successful life is when you can integrate everything, when you can say that it belongs to me. And don't look at it as a deficit or a mistake. It belongs to me. It is my story.”* On the other side, SH4, a job coach working for the social services, mentioned that the refugee needs to be open to let go of the worries in the country of origin. Many are limiting themselves due to traumata and thoughts about the home country, which is a hurdle, according to SH4. This illustrates the different approaches in acceptance of the ‘refugee backpack’. According to multiple SHs, HE may lead to an improved social status, increase of life quality, self-worth and -confidence, better

chances to the labor market after e.g. losing a job, and can provide continuity in the refugees' lives.

During the interview with SH7, she pointed out that the role HE plays on the inclusion of refugees might depend on the particular major and institution. She differentiated between HEIs and study field. If a person studies geography, psychology, media – quite broad field of studies – the refugee student may be confronted with many hurdles entering the labor market as those studies are often not qualifying for a specific profession. On the other side, universities of applied sciences are more practice-oriented and thus work very well to access the labor market after completing the studies. As such, SH7 argued that universities of applied sciences or higher technical schools promote the inclusion of refugees more than universities. However, she also reflected that those sometimes require previously completed internships, which is very hard to get as a refugee student.

To SH9, an inclusive HE education environment entails having the same chances to the same conditions, but also that existing disadvantages, such as language, are being compensated so that those are not an additional burden. According to him, *“inclusion has something to do with not simply denying or ignoring existing competencies per se, but also valuing and acknowledging this.”* Additionally, accepting foreign qualifications to enter the labor market according to the person's professional potential is viewed as important for inclusion (SH1, SH3, SH10).

### 9.3 Towards inclusion: proposed changes by level

During the focus group discussion at the end of the data collection, participants and stakeholders were brought together. After defining together what inclusion means, all of the focus group attendants were asked to share their ideas on changes towards a more inclusive environment. In the table below, the changes that were proposed both in that focus group and interviews are listed out of the perspective of each level.

Micro-level perspective	Meso-level perspective	Macro-level perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structural shifts and sensibilization of highly qualified refugees in the asylum system</li> <li>• Change mindset and reduce prejudices that lead to low-threshold employment</li> <li>• Create spaces for an appropriate study environment</li> <li>• Centralize HEIs to improve information politics</li> <li>• Offer German classes at HEIs before the start of studies and provide more time during exams</li> <li>• Access to more financial funds for studies</li> <li>• Ability to intern and study with N-status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensibilization and awareness at HEIs internally</li> <li>• More 'normality' that refugees complete tertiary study</li> <li>• Database or map of Switzerland with existing programs/responsible people to centralize information</li> <li>• Provide refugees with reliable perspectives and a stable environment</li> <li>• Show positive examples in media</li> <li>• Institutionalization of projects should become self-evident</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deregulation of requirements and more flexibility from the admissions system</li> <li>• Knowledge and awareness-raising to shift mindset in social services</li> <li>• Gaps in the basic structure need to be filled by integration services or HEIs</li> <li>• Expand scholarship system and establish bridging projects to reduce reliability on social services</li> </ul>

Table 6: Multi-level proposed changes for an inclusive environment

## 10 Discussion

In this research, the primary and secondary data contributed to a comprehensive understanding of refugee students' inclusion in which social, economic, cultural, and political aspects were considered. The lived experiences of refugees were explored in chapter 6. In chapter 7 and 8, the facilitators and barriers both on the meso- and macro-level were discussed to embed the lived experiences into a policy and practice context. Chapter 9 aimed to connect the various interpretations and the operationalization of inclusion by level. In this discussion, the main insights from chapters 6-9 are analyzed by a multi-scalar approach to inclusion. Therefore, this chapter summarizes the findings and discusses their contribution to theory.

### 10.1 Summary of inclusion factors by level

Based on the findings, several aspects are regarded as critically important for refugee students' inclusion. At the *micro-individual level*, it is identified that the capital of refugees, particularly social, financial, and cultural, has an impact on access to and participation in tertiary studies. Social bridges and bonds that refugees establish have considerable influence on their human and financial capital. Thus, this study confirms the relevance of social capital as outlined by previous scholars (Knappert et al., 2019). Wessendorf and Phillimore (2019) note that the forms of social capital with other migrants are crucial for the inclusion and the sense of belonging. The findings of this research, however, do not necessarily comply with their claims. Whilst the participants reported having friends who have a refugee or migrant background as well, local connections made by coincidence were crucial for their goals to study and their inclusion in HE. As missing cultural capital makes participants feel excluded, this conclusion draws on previous findings that cultural capital (as well as social and economic capital) is often partly or fully lost in the new country. The impact of lacking cultural capital was intensified through the COVID-19 pandemic, as factors such as being familiar with the academic structures (online lectures) have become increasingly important. Also, the measures implemented led to reduced social capital, which confirms previous literature suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the academic-social networks of refugees (Mupenzi et al., 2020). As opposed to Brickhill-Atkinson & Hauck (2021) findings, it is surprising that the mental health of RS11 was improved due to the slowed down rhythm of life that the pandemic has brought forth. To overcome barriers, it was shown that the individual agency of the refugee can be fundamental on the path to or during studies. Overcoming barriers can lead to further access and participation

in HE, which can enhance social inclusion. As such, this study underlines Carver's (1997) findings that argue for a connection between agency and a sense of belonging.

At the *meso-institutional/-organizational level*, strict language requirements and complex admission procedures were identified as the main barriers to HE, confirming previous literature on barriers for refugee students. The autonomy of the HEIs makes the sector extraordinarily complex for the refugees to navigate through. A particularly interesting finding is that universities of applied sciences are considered to play a more effective role towards inclusion. Nevertheless, those majors usually require previously done internships, which is often hard to obtain as a refugee due to legislative frameworks. This example illustrates the importance of analyzing the intersecting barriers between meso- and macro-level and establishing holistic solution approaches, as has similarly been highlighted by other scholars (Lambrechts, 2020; Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

As opposed to Baker et al.'s (2018) findings that 'warm' and trusted support at HEIs is preferred by refugee students, the officially enrolled students in this research felt supported well enough from the institution itself whilst studying. However, multiple did note that lecturers and staff should be more sensitized and aware of the student body and its distinct needs. As facilitators, discovery programs were identified providing insights into the HE environment in Switzerland. Moreover, the implementation of bridging projects that are meant to prepare for studies (and e.g. close the language gap) are viewed as facilitators towards inclusion. Looking at the impact of SEET, as a case study on the meso-organizational level, it is noted that the association is enhancing the feeling of inclusion of refugees as it provides services to support the underserved community.

At the *macro-national/-cantonal level*, it can be concluded that refugee students face many legislative hurdles when aiming to study in Switzerland. For example, access to language courses, scholarships, and social welfare are dependent on a residence permit. Due to the lengthy asylum process, participants sometimes need to wait with learning German or continuing HE, which is viewed as an excluding factor. As such, this study's outcome is in line with Hainmueller et al.'s (2016) findings who found a negative correlation between the waiting time for the asylum decision and employment integration. The increased integration flat rate, the promotion of post-compulsory education, the provision of long-lasting advisory services and the introduced discrimination protection measures are seen as facilitators towards inclusion. Nevertheless, within educational pathways, tertiary education does not receive much attention in the IAS, thus leading to integration services generally advising against taking up studies. The missing data on qualifications of refugees is seen as a barrier, as it might contribute to the lack of awareness about highly skilled refugees and thus influences the social services provided.

Lastly, the importance of the regional sociopolitical climate to access and participation at the national/cantonal level can be observed, complying with Lee et al.'s (2020) findings that the societal discourse around refugees impacts their resettlement outcomes. Therefore, the strong variations between cantons lead to a threat to the concept of equal opportunities.

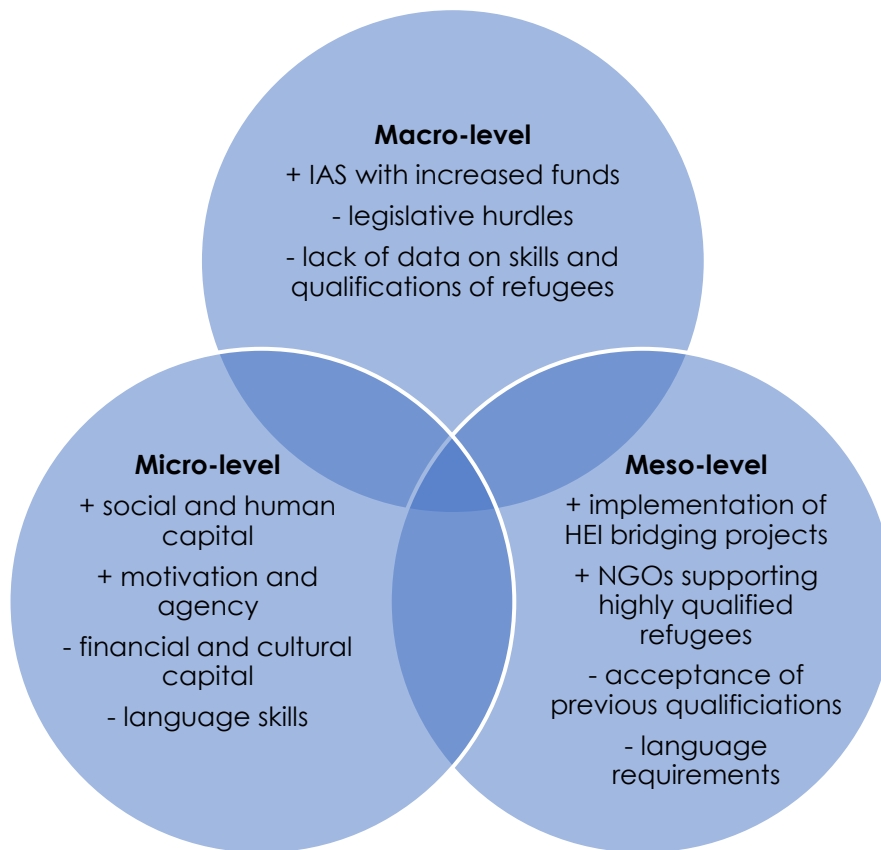


Figure 10: Crucial factors for inclusion

## 10.2 Interplay between the levels

When exploring the dynamics between the different levels, the influence on whether an individual can study is mostly ‘top-down’, as legislative frameworks regulated by the state form the foundation to access and participation, which is also the case in Knappert et al.’s (2019) study on refugee inclusion at work. The interplay between the micro- and meso-level can be described as rather ‘top-down’ than ‘bottom-up’. Language requirements are strict and often-times previous qualifications are not fully recognized by the admissions office. Whether a person is allowed to continue with his/her studies or needs to repeat some years is decided by the HEIs. However, it is also worth noting that multiple projects supporting the active participation of refugees have been implemented. For example, at the launch of the Uni4Refugees project, 2



female refugee students shared their story, which indicates that refugees are slowly given a platform to be part of decision-making processes and to make their voices visible.

Between micro- and macro-level, the power dynamics seem to flow ‘top-down’. The kind of advising the refugee receives can be a matter of randomness; whilst some social workers might be supportive of the pathway to HE, others seem to advise against it. These services impact the refugees’ ability to access HE and to feel included and illustrate the ‘top-down’ flow of influence. Further, the asylum-seeking status, the sociopolitical climate the refugee resides in, and further circumstances depending on the implementation of the IAS have a direct influence on the individual’s chances to access and participate in (preparatory programs to) HE.

The dynamics between meso- and macro-level are dominated by the macro-level’s interest and influence. However, it seems that HEIs are receiving increasing attention from policy makers and integration services with their aim to implement support projects. There is a gap between the integration services offered and the requirements for enrollment at HEIs, which creates a barrier for refugee students as they often do not have the social or financial capital to bridge that gap. Therefore, more cooperation between the meso- and macro-level is required to close those gaps and to contribute to a more inclusive environment.

To sum, this inter-scalar approach indicates a tendency of a top-down flow of influence, which indirectly affects barriers and facilitators for inclusion on the meso- and macro-level and impacts the (aspiring) refugee student on the micro-level. As such, this study reveals similar findings to Knappert et al.’s (2019) who suggested that country-level factors influence refugees’ inclusion at work indirectly. Whilst previous inter-scalar approaches mostly have focused on refugee inclusion at work, this research sheds light on the role that HEIs and national/cantonal policies and services play for refugee students’ inclusion. An intersectional approach is fundamental to analyze refugee inclusion in HE as many barriers experienced at the individual level are influenced by the meso- and/or macro-level. Thus, the analysis between the institutional/organizational level and the national/cantonal level is crucial as many of the barriers are due to ‘gaps’ between these two levels. As such, the study adds to D  tourbe and Goastellec’s (2018) argument that access to HE is linked to the HEI, social welfare, and national asylum policies.

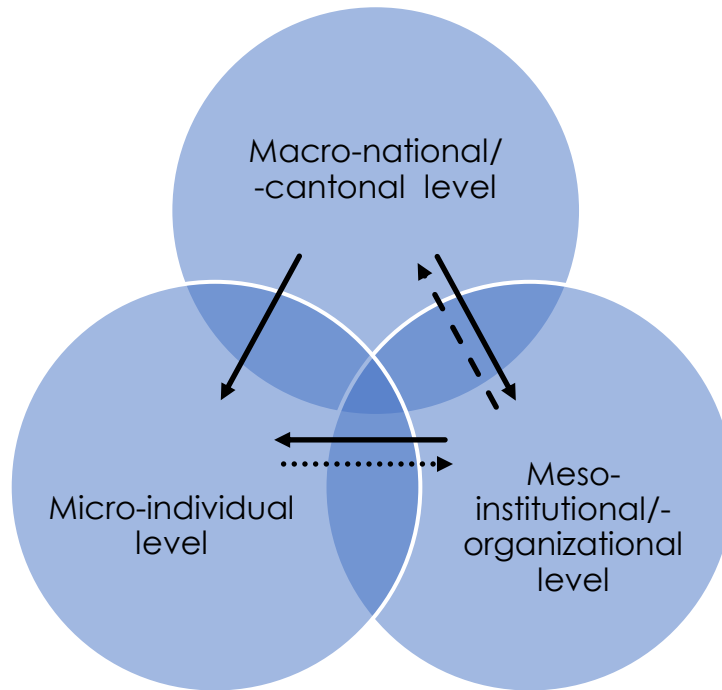


Figure 11: Flow of influence between the levels

## 11 Conclusion and recommendations

In this research, the HE environment influencing the experiences of refugee students in the German-speaking part of Switzerland was analyzed by the means of informal conversations, interviews, focus group discussions and secondary data. This final chapter aims to answer the main research question and provides suggestions for improvement areas and future research.

*Research question:* To what extent does an inclusive environment for refugee students exist in the higher education sector in the German-speaking part of Switzerland?

### 11.1 Conclusion

Whilst recent developments facilitating the inclusion of refugee students' were identified, participants are still facing many intersectional barriers to the HE sector. As the economic, social, and cultural capital is usually reduced in Switzerland, refugee students often do not have the means to close these gaps, which results in not being able to pursue tertiary studies. That is unfortunate given the fact that HE can function as a capitalizer towards societal inclusion and increase the refugees' economic contribution to the resettlement country.

To recall what an inclusive vs. exclusive environment is, two previously stated definitions are shared. An inclusive environment exists if “policies, procedures, and actions of organizational agents are consistent with fair treatment of *all* social groups, with particular attention to groups that have had fewer opportunities historically and that are stigmatized in the societies in which they live” (Shore et al., 2011: 1277). Oppositely, an exclusive environment is described as “the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political areas” (Levitas et al., 2007: 25).

Concluding to what extent an inclusive environment in the German-speaking part of Switzerland exists is difficult as many decisive factors happen on the cantonal/municipal level and at HEIs themselves. However, since refugees are sometimes restricted from services depending on their asylum-status and the municipality or canton they reside in, the environment is not regarded as equally fair nor fully inclusive. Additionally, the human, social, and cultural capital of refugees is often disregarded. The barriers refugees face outweigh the facilitating services they can access. Despite the existence of inclusive approaches, particularly on the meso-level, many restrictive policies are still existing and need removal for a more inclusive HE environment. Therefore, the findings of this analysis suggest that exclusive practices in crucial areas towards access and participation prevail, suggesting that the environment tends to

be exclusive. Due to the federalist highly decentralized system, it is argued that the level of inclusion in HE is a matter of coincidence. Since HE pathways for highly qualified refugees can contribute to the social and economic development of the host country (Lenette, 2016; Ramsay & Baker, 2019), it is a pity that the perspectives and opportunities to access and participation tend to be arbitrary for highly qualified refugees who would have the human capital to continue with HE. The influence of ‘coincidental’ factors increases the risk of missing identification of skills that could be an asset to the host country if further developed.

This conclusion calls for a multi-scalar approach addressing the gaps and barriers in the field. The involvement of multiple stakeholders on each level is required. Firstly, it is recommended on the individual level to learn the host country’s language as missing language skills are a challenge. This, however, is influenced by macro-level stakeholders offering more language courses and supposes less mobility within Switzerland as moving can imply having to learn a new language. Additionally, it is relevant to sensitize refugee students of the education system in Switzerland, which offers great alternatives to tertiary study through apprenticeships and higher vocational education and training.

On the meso-level, it is recommended to implement further bridging projects at HEI, enabling refugee students to explore HE in the resettlement country and allowing them to have the opportunity to potentially complete tertiary studies. Further, centralized information on HE could reduce informational barriers. The suggestion by SH1 to establish a map of Switzerland with all the relevant information on the various HEIs is viewed as a constructive idea. Also, more flexibility in regard to proof of certificates and documents should be considered. As such, it could be taken into consideration to introduce the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees as a measurement for previous qualifications and education. HEI staff and organizational employees are encouraged to continue sensitizing people about this distinct student body and the importance of sustainable inclusion pathways.

On the macro-level, it is recommended to establish a system that assesses and identifies previous titles and qualifications of refugees, so that the risk of devaluation of skills can be minimized. Further, more funds should be provided for language classes to N-, F- and B-status holders in order to prepare for tertiary studies. It is important that asylum seekers can access German classes to shorten the education or workforce inclusion time. Further, the scholarship system should be extended to reduce pressure on social welfare and provide refugee students regardless of their asylum-seeking status with opportunities to increase their financial capital needed to study. Additionally, more sensitization through clear regulation and trainings of employees on highly qualified refugees and the importance of sustainable inclusion is crucial to create a sociopolitical climate in which refugees are given the chance to express their wishes.

The implementation of such programs could help ensuring fair and equal procedures and consultations across Switzerland.

## 11.2 Recommendations for future research

As mentioned in chapter 1, the number of refugees worldwide has risen significantly, and most of the refugees stay in their host country. Making sustainable inclusion pathways accessible is thus increasingly important. As part of the 2030 Agenda, the SDG 4 aims to provide “equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all”, and the SDG 4.3 targets to ensure “equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.” The goal targets to enroll 15% of university-eligible refugees in education programs or technical and vocational education and training. Increasing the number of refugees who are able to access and participate in HE is only possible if all stakeholders address and improve the situation, establishing adequate policy frameworks and support systems. This requires further empirical research on refugee students’ inclusion.

In the context of this particular research, it is recommended to conduct further research on the role of stakeholders both on the meso- and macro-level. As such, particularly the intersection of factors facilitating or hindering inclusion in HE is important to be recognized and explored further. Specific attention given to the way that factors such as age, asylum-seeking status, social relations, and other support systems influence the refugees’ perspective in Switzerland is recommended. Additionally, a comparison between the experiences and practices on each level between multiple language regions and urban vs. regional settlement within Switzerland is regarded as interesting. Further, it can be relevant to explore the impact of HE on the individual’s live in more detail and the experiences after successful completion of studies into the labor market.

From a more general perspective, multiple foci within inclusion in HE that deserve further attention are identified. Firstly, it could be interesting to focus specifically on the experiences of female refugee students and explore how gender dynamics impact their pathways in resettlement contexts. The research area of post-degree employment is regarded as important in a general context as well, as it is suggested that many students struggle with discrimination when attempting to enter the workforce. Additionally, more participatory approaches taking into consideration the aspects relevant to the refugee students and other involved stakeholders are encouraged.

Overall, it is important to analyze refugee inclusion holistically, as barriers and facilitators should not be regarded in isolation from each other. This means that more research focusing

on the intersection between the micro-, meso- and macro-level would provide a deeper understanding to refugee in-/exclusion. It would enable to gain further insights into the dynamics between the levels and could provide potential suggestions to improvements to create more inclusive HE environments. Therefore, this study encourages further research to take into consideration the various levels influencing inclusion and collecting empirical insights into the dynamics between levels. As such, literature on 'inclusion' can be extended and represent the reality of interplaying factors between individual, societal, cultural, institutional, organizational, and national level.

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## 13 Appendices

### 13.1 Interview guides

#### 13.1.1 Interview guide micro-level: (prospective) refugee students

##### **Introduction researcher and research:**

- Introduction researcher
- Aim of the research
- Ethical formalities: anonymous, informed consent, recording

##### **Introduction participant:**

- Age
- Country of origin
- Ethnicity
- Arrival to Switzerland
- Asylum-seeking status
- Type of residence

##### **Opening questions:**

Tell me about your path and time here in Switzerland from your arrival to talking to me today as a (prospective) student. Feel free to mention anything that is important to you.

1. How and why did you come to Switzerland? How long have you been here?
2. How did you experience your first weeks here?
3. How informed were you about Switzerland before coming here? Did that information (e.g. about studies) determine where you go?
4. Were you asked about your background and was your educational level assessed?
5. (How) does your asylum status influence you generally?

##### **Questions about human capital:**

1. What did you study in your home country?
2. What was the goal behind it?
3. Were you already working in your field?
4. What languages do you speak and which level?
5. How are you learning German now?

##### **Experiences with HEIs - prospective student interested in enrollment:**

1. How were you provided with information on how to continue with your studies / take on studies?
2. How have you experienced your path to continuing / starting your studies?
3. What are the main difficulties?
4. What kind of support have you received with your wish to study?
5. Have you attended a discovery semester at university?
6. How could it bring you further on your way to higher education?



7. What do you think are your next steps to take in order to enroll at an institution?

**Experiences with HEIs - currently enrolled student:**

1. How were you provided with information on how to continue with your studies / take on studies?
2. What kind of studies or training have you done since you've been in Switzerland?
3. How would you describe your path to enrolling at a higher education institution?
4. What are the support services you receive from the university administration?
5. What are the obstacles that you face while studying in this institution?
6. Do you have good interactions with people at your higher education institution?
7. How has it been for you to study online due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
8. How do you think this education will help you in your future path?

**Questions about social capital:**

1. How is your living situation?
2. Who do you mix with/meet with (online) each day?
3. How do you get to know most of your friends?
4. Have you made social connections through your studies?
5. Do your studies help you in feeling socially connected in Switzerland? If yes, how?
6. Do you feel included / welcome here?
  - 6.1 If yes, where do you feel welcome, which places? What helps you to feel the sense of belonging?
  - 6.2 If no, what would help you feel more included?
7. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your social life?

**Questions about the role of higher education / access:**

1. What role does being able to study play for your life and your future?
2. What do you think are the main things that need to be done to provide equal access for people with refugee backgrounds to study?
3. What do you think universities / community groups / state administration could do to help you achieve your learning / training / career goals?

**Closing questions:**

1. What do you hope / plan for your future?
2. Do you have anything else that you would like to say?

### 13.1.2 Interview guide meso-level & macro level: stakeholders

#### Einleitung

- Vorstellung Studentin
- Ziele des Gesprächs und der Forschung
- Ethische Aspekte: Anonymisierung, Aufnahme des Gesprächs

#### Einleitungsfrage:

1. Können Sie mir von Ihren hauptsächlichen Tätigkeiten in den verschiedenen Themenbereichen erzählen?

#### Meso-level Stakeholders: Hochschulinstitutionen

1. Wie akquirieren Sie potentielle Projekt-Teilnehmende? Wie treten Sie mit ihnen in Kontakt?
2. Wie ist der Bewerbung-/Auswahlprozess beim Schnuppersemester/-jahr?
3. Mit wem kooperieren Sie auf Seiten der Hochschule? Wer unterstützt Sie?
4. Wie evaluieren Sie den Projekterfolg? Sind Anpassungen des Projekts geplant?
5. Wie viele Flüchtlinge und Asylsuchende waren in diesem akademischen Jahr an Ihrer Einrichtung eingeschrieben?
6. Wie viele der Teilnehmenden schreiben sich nach dem Schnuppersemester offiziell an der Hochschule/Universität ein? Wer entscheidet über deren Zulassung zur Fortsetzung des Studiums? Gemäss welchen Kriterien?
7. Was sind die Hindernisse für ihren Studienerfolg?
8. Wie viele der Teilnehmenden haben ein Studium abgeschlossen? Werden hierzu Daten erfasst?
9. Bietet Ihre Universität offiziell Dienstleistungen speziell für Flüchtlinge oder Asylsuchende an, um deren Studium zu unterstützen?
10. Wie finanziert sich das Schnuppersemester der Hochschule?
11. Denken Sie, dass das Geschlecht in Bezug auf Zugang zu tertiärer Bildung eine Rolle spielt? Falls ja, wie gehen Sie konkret damit um?
12. Inwiefern denken Sie, dass COVID-19 einen Einfluss auf Geflüchtete und deren Studium hat?

#### Meso- und Macro-Level Stakeholders: Beratungsprozess von Geflüchteten

1. Wie wird der Bildungsstand und die Qualifikationen der geflüchteten Person erfasst?
2. Wie wird das Thema berufliche Laufbahn mit den Geflüchteten thematisiert?
3. Was sind die Anforderungen, damit Geflüchteten ein Studium empfohlen wird?
4. Was sind die Limitierungen / Rahmenbedingungen? Gibt es politische Vorgaben, die diesen Prozess beeinflussen?
5. Wird eine schnelle Arbeitsmarktintegration einer Skill-basierten Ausbildung allgemein oder auch in jedem Fall vorgezogen? Wenn ja, warum?
6. Bietet ihre Gemeinde/Organisation offiziell Dienstleistungen speziell für Flüchtlinge oder Asylsuchende an, um deren Studium zu unterstützen?

**Fragen zur Kollaboration mit anderen Organisationen:**

1. Wie wird entschieden, ob eine geflüchtete Person von Ihnen (z.B. Gemeinde) oder von einer anderen Organisation betreut wird?
2. Mit welchen Organisationen kollaborieren Sie bei der Beratung/Betreuung von geflüchteten Studieninteressierten / Studierenden in der Schweiz? Wie sieht diese Kollaboration aus?

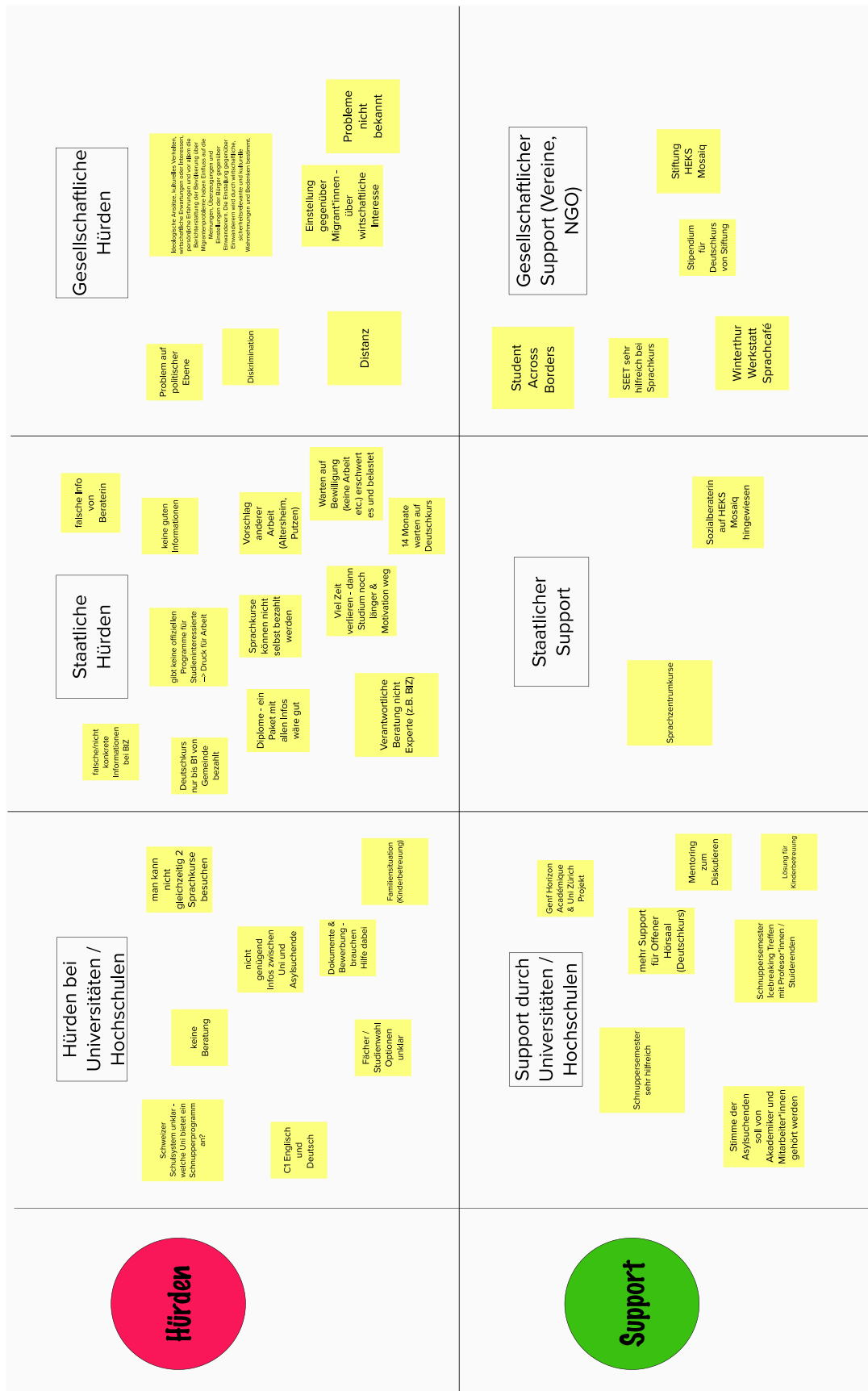
**Fragen zur Rolle der Bildung und der soziopolitischen Situation:**

1. Was sind Ihrer Meinung die wichtigsten Dinge, die getan werden müssen, um Geflüchteten einen gleichberechtigten Zugang zum Studium zu ermöglichen?
2. Was ist ihre Meinung zur (fehlenden) Akzeptanz von Qualifikationen vom Ausland?
3. Gibt es potentielle Nachteile, wenn eine geflüchtete Person ein Studium aufnimmt?
4. Denken Sie, dass das Geschlecht in Bezug auf Zugang zu tertiärer Bildung eine Rolle spielt? Falls ja, wie gehen Sie konkret damit um?
5. Inwiefern denken Sie, dass COVID-19 einen Einfluss auf Geflüchtete, deren Laufbahn und Inklusion hat?

**Abschliessende Fragen:**

1. Besteht Ihrer Meinung nach auf politischer und gesellschaftlicher Ebene der Wille, Geflüchteten auch den Weg zu einem Studium zu ermöglichen?
2. Wie würden Sie erfolgreiche Inklusion definieren?
3. Haben Sie noch etwas, das Sie gerne sagen möchten?

# 13.2 Mind map “Identifying barriers and facilitators”



## 13.3 Focus group summary

# Inklusion



## Zusammenfassung des Webinars zur Inklusion von geflüchteten Studierenden

### Was bedeutet Inklusion?

- Potenzialausschöpfung
- Gleiche Chancen & Möglichkeiten erarbeiten
- Teil der Bevölkerung sein
- Augenhöhe
- Wohlbefinden
- Offenheit der Gesellschaft
- Hochschulbildung für Geflüchtete als Normalität ansehen

### Was sind Barrieren?

- Finanzielle Mittel
- Zugang zu Informationen (fehlendes Wissen bei fallführenden Stellen)
- Anforderungen der Unis (Sprachzertifikate)
- Wohnsituation
- Föderalistisches System (Möglichkeiten sind Wohnort abhängig)

### Was sind Lösungsansätze?

- Institutionalisierung des Supports
- Enge Zusammenarbeit mit Institutionen
- Angepasste Studienbedingungen (z.B. Zeit bei Prüfungen)
- Sensibilisierungsarbeit / hochschulinternes Bewusstsein
- Deregulation der Anforderungen
  - Finanzielle Unterstützung
  - Übersicht involvierter Akteure

## 13.4 Codebook

### 13.4.1 Codebook refugee students

Name	Files	References
Agency of refugee	9	35
Application procedure to HEI	9	21
Acceptance of previous qualifications	7	7
HEI requirements	6	12
Asylum seeking procedure	8	31
Assessment of potential	9	11
Camps	2	6
Asylum status	7	18
Barriers to studying	8	18
Access to study information	7	15
Cultural capital	2	5
Culture clash	3	6
Family situation	9	22
Family situation in home country	2	2
Relatives in CH	2	3
Remittances to home country	1	2
Financial capital	4	8
Financial support for studies	6	13
General refugee experience in CH	7	11
Awareness about refugees	2	2
Narrative	1	5
Reflection on refugee life	6	11
General study experience	6	28
Accomplishments at HEI	8	15
Discovery semester	7	16
New teaching styles in CH	5	8
Human capital and background	8	29
Personal motivations	8	14
Personal skills	1	1
Previous education in home country	10	30
Work experience	7	13
Inclusion	1	6

Name	Files	References
Belonging	7	12
Belonging to society	2	6
Bottom-up participation	1	4
Changes for equitable HE access	1	1
Feeling of social acceptance	6	8
Social exclusion	3	9
Influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on studies	7	10
Language level	8	24
German in the daily life	1	1
Standard High German vs. Swiss German	4	11
Language at HEI	7	18
Language courses - municipality	10	37
Living situation	9	21
Migration Journey	7	12
Decision for Switzerland	7	9
First impressions	6	9
Reasons for escape	5	17
Motivation to study in CH	7	15
Motivation for studies in home country	3	3
Pathways in CH	4	6
Perception of Switzerland	6	18
Postcolonialization and globalization	3	8
Potential of refugees	1	1
Psychological health	5	20
Psychological help	4	8
Trauma	4	4
Role of higher education	8	20
Role of higher education for CH	4	4
Social relations	9	34
COVID-19 on social life	7	16
Crucial acquaintances	9	18
Neighbourhood connections	3	3
Refugees helping refugees	3	4
Social relations - geographical influence	1	2
Social relations at university	6	11

Name	Files	References
Social worker counseling	5	18
Educational pathways counseling	7	16
Experience with social workers	2	8
Prejudice female refugees	1	3
Social work - financial independence	3	6
Support with wish for studies	8	16
Urban vs regional influence	4	8
Wishes for future	9	23
Work participation in CH	5	9



### 13.4.2 Codebook stakeholder analysis

Name	Files	References
Acceptance of previous qualifications	6	7
Agency	1	2
Apprenticeship	2	2
Asylum case management	2	3
Barrier	3	6
Capital framework	1	4
Cooperation with stakeholders	2	2
Culture clash	1	3
Definition of inclusion	9	15
Dual education system	4	4
Facilitator	7	11
Finances per asylum seeker	3	7
Financial capital for access	1	1
Gender dynamics	4	4
Geographical influence	6	8
Higher education system	2	3
Historical background	3	5
IAS	2	7
Influence of COVID-19	7	8
Influence of studies on inclusion	7	7
Institutionalized facilitator	2	7
Language course	5	5
Motivation of refugees	1	1
Number of highly qualified refugees	3	5
Pathway consultation	3	4
Political environment to include students	9	15
Potential assessment	5	5
Potential disadvantages	4	4
Proposed next steps	5	6
Provision of information	3	3
Requirements for studies	8	11
Stakeholders	1	1
Trauma	1	2