

“We’ll Manage”?—European Public Universities and the Refugee Crisis

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Introduction: Europe’s Refugee Crisis

“[Our] great universities simply cannot afford to remain islands of affluence, self-importance and horticultural beauty in seas of squalor, violence and despair.”¹ Thus declared Ira Harkavy, the founder of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, and reaffirmed his belief that universities were responsible for more than providing excellent research and education. In his eyes, universities are required to take care of the communities within which they operate and they need to teach their students what it means to be responsible citizens. While “horticultural beauty” is seldom a feature setting public² universities in German-speaking Europe apart from their environs, they were and are in fact increasingly challenged to (re-)define their role in society and to acknowledge the necessity to take on more than an educator’s stance. These changing expectations became particularly apparent in the context of the most recent, still persistent crisis³ that Europe—and Germany more than most other countries—is facing.

In recent years, Western Europe has been confronted with events that will lastingly affect the livelihoods of its citizens, yet no one can tell them what changes to expect or what consequences to bear. The EU, its member states, and other European countries had for a long time been trying to hold up the streams of migrants intent on reaching the continent via the Mediterranean Sea. In 2015, however, it became evident to citizens and governments alike that the status quo could not be upheld and that a beloved fiction had to be abandoned: The Dublin II Agreements stipulate that refugees and migrants have to apply for asylum in the country through which they first enter the EU. As a consequence, countries like Germany should, in theory, not have to process applications by migrants taking the Mediterranean route. However, with Italy and Greece being overburdened by the number of applicants, it has for a long time been tolerated that authorities let migrants pass through Italy and submit their application in another member state. Once the main refugee and migrant route shifted to the Balkans and numbers kept rising, the breach of the Dublin Agreements had disastrous consequences for member countries like Germany and Austria:⁴ In 2015, Germany

became the destination of 1.1 million asylum seekers, more than a third of them from Syria.⁵ The numbers remain high, with 745,545 asylum applications filed in 2016, and nearly a 100,000 submitted within the first five months of 2017.⁶ In Switzerland, which is not a member state of the EU yet party to both the Schengen and Dublin Agreements, numbers pale in comparison, as 2016 saw 27,207 people seek asylum.⁷ At the same time, Switzerland is one of the primary recipients of asylum seekers in relation to its own population.⁸

With a view to these migrants and refugees, experts expected a considerable number to be highly qualified, having already graduated from university or been forced to abandon their studies. With a better integration of these new arrivals in mind, the role of the universities suddenly became topical: should they not contribute to overcoming the challenge of integration by welcoming qualified refugees as their students? Were they not morally obliged to open their doors to those in pursuit of knowledge? Many students, administrators, and professors agreed and reacted to the influx of refugees with a remarkable level of dedication. In what follows, the activities they engaged in will be briefly outlined. More importantly, though, the article will inquire whether it was indeed the responsibility of universities to react to such circumstances—and, if this was the case, where limits should be drawn to a university's activism.

Refugees Welcome?—The Reaction of German and Swiss Public Universities

In 1956, thousands of Hungarians fled their home-country in reaction to the Soviet Union's violent suppression of the popular uprising. Among them were students, many actively resisting the Socialist regime, who had to leave their academic life behind. However, Western Europe received them and the other Hungarian refugees with great solidarity. At many a German and Swiss university, including the University of St. Gallen, plaques commemorate the generosity with which refugee students were met. Some university administrators went beyond simply admitting refugee students to their student body; for instance, the University of St. Gallen's vice president travelled to Vienna in person to pick up 200 refugee students.⁹ Past examples of such charity and dedication would often be referenced during the height of the ongoing refugee crisis during which universities were trying to write a new history of campus charity.

German universities were the first to respond to the increasing numbers of refugees during the summer of 2015 and launched different initiatives to support prospective students. As a survey by the German Rectors' Conference (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*, HRK) showed, of its 268 member

institutions¹⁰ sixty responded that they had either already set up services for refugee students or that they were in the course of defining such services. Today, most major German universities and smaller institutions of higher education have established procedures that define how to deal with refugee students interested in continuing their education. These commonly include, as the table below shows, courses tailored to the needs of these prospective students that shall enable them to follow academic courses. In addition, Universities admitted refugee students to the regular courses as auditors, i.e., refugee students may attend regular lectures and seminars, but they cannot earn any credit points towards a degree. In the case of the German University of Siegen, help went beyond the mere integration of refugees into the student body, by offering parts of its campus for a different purpose than originally intended: the University's gymnasium served as a shelter for one year, a temporary home for up to 450 people.¹¹ For the University's president, Professor Holger Burckhardt, it was beyond any doubt that the University had to step in when the municipality needed its support: "It is our duty as a university to help. That's the most important thing. We are taking on this responsibility, it is our desire to make a culture of welcome—a *Willkommenskultur*—our own."¹²

In Switzerland, no university went as far as Siegen, but the majority of the country's twelve public universities opened their doors to refugee students. In comparison to Germany, they launched their initiatives with some delay, probably because the situation in Switzerland was less dramatic and therefore did not trigger the same sense of urgency. Moreover, cautiousness defines Swiss politics and public relations in general which, combined with a strong belief in the principle of subsidiarity, may slow down initiatives by public institutions and instead encourage civil society to step in. Consequently, the first university to admit refugee students as auditors, the University of Basel, primarily did so in response to a student-driven project. Students rather than administrators take care of the applications and make sure that the prospective auditors receive guidance in the choice of courses.¹³ In other cases, it was a mixture of individual initiatives and an inter-institutional consensus that led to action: *swissuniversities*, the Swiss counterpart to Germany's HRK, reached out to its member institutions, informing them that the UNHCR was urging universities to grant refugees easier access and admonishing them to step up to this challenge.¹⁴ At my own alma mater, the University of St. Gallen, this coincided with an individual senior professor suggesting to our president that we address the refugee situation as an institution and academic community. As a result, a *Taskforce Migration* was founded in fall 2015 and would

eventually be coordinated by myself. We started exploring ways and means to help the region in its efforts to integrate refugees. Among other services, we established a “discovery semester,” i.e., the possibility for refugee students to attend university courses during one term. Such discovery semesters seem to have become a staple of university tool kits in catering towards refugee students, as we see such programs both in Germany and Switzerland.

Select Universities	Enrollment	Services for refugees
<i>Germany</i>		
University of Cologne*	52,132	Courses in mathematics and academic German for refugees interested in pursuing university studies; various teaching initiatives for children and adolescents; integration of refugee scholars
Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich	51,052	Introductory program that allows refugees to earn ECTS points; German courses; various initiatives including a Refugee Law Clinic
Technical University of Berlin	34,428	Language courses for refugees; regular students as mentors
University of Göttingen	30,600	Language course program “Integra” that should enable refugees to commence studies; auditor status for refugees; Task Force “Geflüchtete” (refugees) dedicated to questions of integration; Refugee Law Clinic
University of Siegen	19,506	Pre-college for refugees; peer-mentoring program (refugees helping refugees); 200,000 Euros to sponsor student projects aiding refugees
Leuphana University of Lüneburg	9,239	Open lecture hall (auditing program); bridging courses; counselling services.

<i>Switzerland</i>		
University of Zurich**	26,356	“Discovery semester,” i.e., free access to lectures as auditors for up to forty refugees with previous university experience; regular students as mentors; access to language lab
University of Geneva	16,484	Project “Horizon académique” (“Academic horizon”) offers discovery years for up to twenty refugees; students as mentors; courses in academic French language skills
University of Basel	12,852	Project “Offener Hörsaal” (“open auditorium”) launched by students to offer refugees a discovery semester; students as mentors
University of St. Gallen	8,232	“Discovery semester” for unlimited number of refugees; faculty member as mentor; Taskforce Migration (November 2015–September 2017) as coordinator for research and philanthropic projects

* Germany’s largest public university; ** Switzerland’s largest public university

Table: An overview of select public universities who opened their doors to refugee students

Source: The information about the activities has been retrieved from the respective universities’ websites. Institutions were selected based on their size and the media attention they received for their efforts.

Both in Switzerland and Germany, initiatives for refugee students were met, for the most part, with appreciation and received considerable media attention. With attention, however, comes scrutiny, and some problematic aspects were soon brought forth. As many universities have come to recognize themselves, one major issue lies in the lack of knowledge regarding the educational background of asylum seekers.¹⁵ Educational backgrounds are usually not recorded during the initial asylum application process, and we have no reliable figures as to what number of refugees

would indeed qualify as refugee students. For the German state of Bavaria, for instance, between seventeen and thirty percent of refugees older than twenty years claim to have an academic degree¹⁶—this seemingly high percentage is, however, not backed by official numbers and it is not reflected in the enrollment in programs for refugee students. Establishing the number of potential future students is further complicated by the differences in the respective education systems, particularly when we are looking at Germany and Switzerland: both countries are known for their so-called dual professional education systems, i.e., well-established apprenticeships combined with formal education that lead to nationally recognized diplomas. In Switzerland, only twenty percent of the population obtain an advanced high school diploma (*Matura*), as other, more popular professional avenues lead to successful careers.¹⁷ This is further complicated by the existence of so-called University of Applied Sciences and other institutions of higher education that are not classic universities. Consequently, some refugees keen on entering university in their new country would have to turn to other institutions of higher education—and might be frustrated at the prospect, as they regard such avenues as less prestigious.

Frustration is also the sentiment shared by those who may have finished a discovery semester, but reach a dead-end: as several German universities acknowledge (and as I have come to realize as well for our own efforts), the Achilles' heel of their programs lies at the transition to regular studies.¹⁸ On the one hand, some students might realize that either their academic background or their language skills render it impossible for them to further pursue their studies. On the other hand, funding is a key issue for these hopeful students: scholarships and loans are often unattainable, and additional mentoring would require the kind of financial commitment universities cannot agree to, in many cases.¹⁹ As a matter of course, such obstacles led to criticism by left-wing student groups who feel that their refugee peers are not given equal opportunities.²⁰ A group of innovative students in Germany has therefore developed a new solution to these issues by founding their own university: Kiron University offers long-distance courses, MOOCs, and online seminars designed by partner universities to which participants can eventually transfer, if they pass their online coursework.

Criticism stems, however, not only from the political left, but also from the other end of the political spectrum. Browsing through comments to online reports on Swiss university programs for refugees, one stumbles across questions regarding the usefulness and necessity of such efforts. An argument I frequently came across included the fact that only a minority of Swiss citizens ever

attended university and little was done to encourage people with professional diplomas to move on to university. While one could be tempted to dismiss such considerations as potentially xenophobic and an expression of status envy, ignoring them would come at its own risk. After all, public universities draw on one main funding source: taxpayers. Blatantly disregarding their concerns would (further) alienate them from the institutions that anyway have to fight a reputation of being removed from and uninterested in the public's general concerns and fears.

Welcoming Refugees and the Mission of a Public University: A Contradiction?

Student organizations, NGOs assisting refugees and migrants in their efforts to adapt to their new circumstances, individual professors and administrators as well as those in political circles claim that universities are not doing enough to help refugees. In this debate, one question remains unasked: Why should universities do more? What requires public universities to become active, to basically act as concerned citizens, and to assist refugees? Some will probably quash this question as unwarranted if not cynical and as an expression of a conservative-nationalist mind-set, arguing that it was a mere question of humanity and a moral obligation to help. However, our states and societies have already designated public institutions that are expertly equipped to deal with refugees and questions of integration, which have the experience and expertise most universities as institutions simply lack. Why, then, the call for action?

One source to turn to for an answer is the law: on the one hand, article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates every individual's right to education which, combined with the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, ensures this right to refugees as well. However, this right is commonly interpreted not to go beyond primary education and does not encompass higher education. On the other hand, public universities are subject to statutes, either on the state or federal level, which stipulate the purpose and duties of universities. In the case of my own university, article 7 of the statute defines teaching and research as its primary purpose (§1) which it pursues autonomously (art. 8 §1). The closest the statute comes to defining a responsibility for dealing with wider social issues is in the context of education and academic culture: article 7 §2 requires the university to promote "a personal and social sense of responsibility among its members" and to prepare students to act "according to ethical principles."²¹ This is mirrored in international efforts such as the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in which the participating countries—among them the United States, Germany, and

Switzerland—agreed that the “principal objective of higher education institutions should not simply be to educate the individual but also to provide future generations with the skills and knowledge necessary to address global challenges such as poverty, conflict, and climate change.”²² In sum, the university does not have a legal obligation to engage in social issues beyond being a responsible educator and employer. This does not, however, preclude the university’s right and, potentially, *moral* obligation to go beyond that.

Assuming such a moral obligation, though, depends on a certain understanding of a university’s general purpose. Said understanding has evolved in the past decades and while some shared, if vague ideas can be identified, cultural differences persist, particularly if we compare the German-Swiss and the U.S. perspective. On both sides of the Atlantic, universities have moved away from their original set-up as a shielded, singular community of masters and students—an institutional setting that never applied to most American universities and colleges anyway. While the development of European universities depended on the relationship with the state, their American counterparts were early on shaped by various forces, private and public, that came along with different conceptual ideas and visions.²³ In Germany, the most impactful vision of higher education originated in Prussia, with Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1767–1835) founding of the University of Berlin which would later be named in his honor. As a classic liberal, he defined the university as a space that should be free from state interference and grant liberty and autonomy from interference to those teaching, researching, and learning in its halls. Although the educational goal still was the *Weltbürger*, the enlightened citizen of the world, Humboldt would deny any institutional responsibility beyond that. This perception is reflected in calls for institutional neutrality by the university.

Today, breaches with this Humboldtian tradition are apparent, both in Germany and Switzerland. Apart from never-ending discussions on whether or not the current academic programs or publication cultures reflect Humboldtian ideas, we can see this in the institutionalization of sustainability reporting and other measures that can be likened to a move towards “university social responsibility”²⁴ as the academic counterpart of “corporate social responsibility.” A group of public and private German as well as Austrian universities have underlined such a commitment by establishing a network dedicated to, as its name says, “education by responsibility” (*Hochschulnetzwerk Bildung durch Verantwortung*). The network’s member

universities claim that higher education influences progress in societies and that they were thus obliged to pass more than skills and knowledge unto the next generations.²⁵

In the United States, the idea that universities cater to more than one stakeholder and are anything but isolated islands of learning seems to have reached the mainstream earlier than in Germany and Europe. In his seminal treatise *The Uses of the University* (1963), Clark Kerr—first chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, and former president of UCLA—coined the term of the “multiversity” which encompasses “a whole series of communities and activities held together by a common name, a common governing board, and related purposes.”²⁶ Among these purposes and communities ranges the relationship with society and the state at large, and thus the question of the university’s social responsibility. Harold T. Shapiro describes the latter as a dual role, with the university being “society’s servant and society’s critic.”²⁷ Specifically, he believes that universities needed to “raise questions that society does not want to ask and generate new ideas that help invent the future, at times even ‘pushing’ society toward it.”²⁸ Others go further and promote, like Ira Harkavy, closer ties between universities and local communities, for instance by letting their students establish a sense of responsibility for the latter through “service learning” and other forms of coursework that forces them to leave the idyllic confines of their campuses. Arguably the most dedicated form of social commitment and expression of political views is the call and establishment of sanctuary campuses, i.e., of campuses that offer a safe haven to undocumented students, either by not cooperating with immigration authorities, symbolically supporting these students, or by offering them physical sanctuary.²⁹

Good citizen, society’s critic, or a civilly disobedient institution: ideas vary of what the socio-political role of a university should amount to. One can, however, roughly distinguish two approaches: on the one hand, the university is considered an intellectual habitat that should allow and empower *its members* to act responsibly and take on an active role in society, if they so wish; on the other hand, the university is seen as responsible to act and take a stance *as an institution*. While the latter approach may be viable for private universities or colleges that have committed themselves to a certain worldview and thus may expect or even require faculty and students to commit to the same values (or at least tolerate the consequences of such a strong institutional identity), public universities cannot and should not be able to do the same. As intended by Humboldt, they should strive to remain a habitat for a diversity of opinions and approaches, and while they should require adherence to basic liberal principles that define liberal-democratic

societies anyway, they cannot and must not expect campus communities to stand as one. Universities are not, as we all experience every now and then, democracies. They usually lack forums of deliberation that include all stakeholders. They thus can not articulate the political views of their members, nor should they try to. The university as an institution has to respect the triad of original duties, namely research, education, and public service, as stipulated by their fundamental statutes.

That does not preclude, however, that universities can be “society’s critics” or offer services to a designated group of people: providing information on how to get access to higher education and encouraging such steps should generally be considered as part of any public university’s public service, irrespective of the status of those approaching its administrators. So, while we may not expect universities to replace social workers, we must hold them accountable if they foster an environment in which minority students feel unsafe or in which they feel treated unfairly or even discriminated against.

The role of a critic, though, should be reserved not to the university as an institution, but to its members: universities have to foster the kind of diversity—ideological and otherwise—among its scholars and other members that society can rely on more than one mirror. Particularly in a country such as Switzerland, renowned for its direct democracy, universities should cultivate a climate in which debates are possible, in which every member of the academic community can articulate their opinion and agree to respectfully disagree. As in every liberal democracy, there are limits to the freedom of speech when it is abused, i.e., by instigating violence or rewriting historic facts. However, the university should only censor its members in clear cases of such abuse. A unified ideological front, an exercise of groupthink and suppression of dissenting opinions, however commendable the cause may be, is neither in the interest of the public as the university’s owner nor in that of the university itself.

Conclusion

Helping others feels good. At the same time, it can instill a sense of righteousness and moral superiority in the Good Samaritan. Looking at the refugee crisis in 2015, acting German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed optimistically that the country would be able to handle the situation: “*Wir schaffen das*”—“We’ll manage.” The same attitude seems to have pervaded many universities when they decided that they needed to become yet another actor in an intricate web of

federal and state-level agencies, NGOs, and political parties, all of whom had decades of experience in the integration of asylum seekers. While the goals and motives were commendable, some universities may have expected too much of themselves in the services they set up and ignored the context within which they became active. Opening lecture halls and keeping admission procedures transparent, un-bureaucratic, and only as demanding as necessary, should be a policy upheld by every public university, irrespective of the group of students that are requesting support.

Universities should refrain from engaging in the refugee question beyond the triad of original university responsibilities—*as institutions*, that is. As institutions of higher education, they have to guarantee the freedom of research and learning of their members, including the freedom to differ from what seems to be the dominant attitude towards the situation of refugee students. If a university becomes politically or socially active as an institution, it ignores that fundamental freedom of its members and risks to create an environment that will weaken its members' ability to uphold one of their most important duties: to be observant critics of society. As such, they may take it upon themselves to enter the kind of research projects and initiate the debates we need to enable our societies to cope with challenging situations.

Notes

1. Qtd. in Rice 30. I would like thank Professors Carol McNamara, Christoph Frei, and Lee Trepanier for their feedback to earlier drafts of this paper. The views expressed in it are my own.
2. In German-speaking Europe, most universities are public. For this reason, this article will simply speak of “universities” whenever it refers to public universities.
3. The term “crisis” has been heavily criticized in the context at hand, particularly in comparison to the number of refugees who fled to Turkey, Lebanon, and other states in the Syrian neighborhood. What constitutes a crisis is, after all, a matter of perspective and a social construct. I am still using the term given the shared feeling of many citizens, media outlets, and governments that the wave of migrants reaching Europe in 2015 was unprecedented in terms of numbers and the sense of urgency it instilled in the countries that it reached.

4. Münkler 6.
5. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.
6. Ibid.
7. Staatssekretariat für Migration 3.
8. Reimann.
9. Schwabach.
10. The HRK includes different types of institutions of higher education, including, for example, so-called schools of education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*), universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*), and classic universities. Its members are listed on the webpage, though only in German: <https://www.hrk.de/mitglieder/mitgliedshochschulen/>.
11. Schopper.
12. Universität Siegen. My translation. Original wording: “Es ist unsere Aufgabe als Universität, zu helfen. Das ist das Wichtigste überhaupt. Diese gesellschaftliche Verantwortung übernehmen wir, diese Willkommenskultur möchten wir leben.”
13. Dawudi.
14. Letter by *swissuniversities* from September 2015; on file with the author.
15. Donzé 12.
16. Pointner.
17. Bundesamt für Statistik.
18. Kirst 5.
19. Bühlmann.
20. Bühlmann.

21. My translation. There is no official English translation of the statute. Original wording in the statute: “Art. 7: Grundsatz. Abs. (1) Die Universität lehrt und forscht in Wirtschafts-, Rechts-, Sozial-, Kultur- und Politikwissenschaften. Abs. (2) Sie fördert das persönliche und gesellschaftliche Verantwortungsbewusstsein der Universitätsangehörigen und bereitet die Studierenden darauf vor, in Beruf und Öffentlichkeit nach wissenschaftlichen Methoden und Erkenntnissen sowie nach ethischen Grundsätzen zu handeln. (...) Art. 8: Hochschulautonomie und Wissenschaftsfreiheit. Abs. (1) Die Universität erfüllt ihre Aufgaben im Rahmen der gesetzlich gewährleisteten Autonomie und wahrt die Freiheit der wissenschaftlichen Lehre und Forschung. (...)”
22. UNESCO 19.
23. See Trepanier for a short summary of the university’s evolution.
24. See Vasilescu et al. 4177–4182, on the term and its implications.
25. Hochschulnetzwerk Bildung durch Verantwortung 6.
26. Kerr 1.
27. Shapiro 15.
28. Ibid., 4–5.
29. Délano Alonso 55.

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