

Warwick Think Tank

Education

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Education of Syrian Refugees in West Germany

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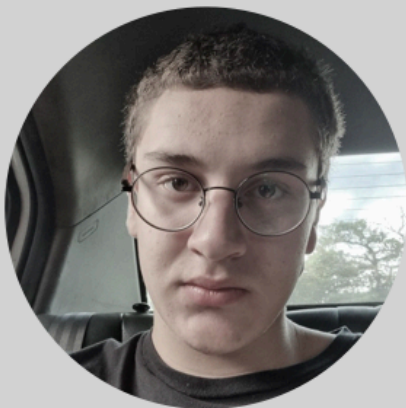
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Introduction

The integration of Syrian refugees into West Germany presents a complex array of challenges spanning educational, sociocultural, and professional spheres. Amidst the broader refugee population, Syrian refugees in Germany encounter unique barriers and complexities that warrant focused attention and advocacy.

Educational access and enrolment, for instance, are marred by bureaucratic red tape and restrictive housing regulations, impeding Syrians' pursuit of higher education. Recognition of qualifications earned in Syria proves elusive, exacerbating the issue. These hurdles not only limit individual opportunities but also perpetuate cycles of disadvantage, hindering the full potential of Syrian refugees and contributing to broader societal inequities.

Sociocultural integration efforts, while well-meaning, often impose assimilation strategies that overlook Syrians' cultural backgrounds, leading to mental health concerns and discrimination. By disregarding the rich tapestry of Syrian culture and heritage, these initiatives risk erasing important aspects of refugees' identities and further marginalizing them within their new communities. Therefore, it is imperative to amplify the voices of Syrian refugees, ensuring that their experiences and perspectives shape integration policies and practices.

Moreover, divergence in educational systems between Syria and Germany compounds challenges in professional and occupational integration, with mismatches in skills and qualifications hindering employment prospects. Without adequate recognition of the knowledge and expertise that Syrian refugees bring, valuable human capital remains underutilised, perpetuating economic disparities and inhibiting social cohesion.

In light of these complexities, giving Syrian refugees a voice is not just a matter of equity but a pragmatic necessity for effective integration. By centering their experiences and perspectives in policy discussions and decision-making processes, policymakers can develop more informed and inclusive approaches that address the multifaceted barriers faced by Syrian refugees in Germany. Therefore, as Germany navigates the complex terrain of refugee integration, it is paramount to prioritise the voices and experiences of Syrian refugees, ensuring that their perspectives inform policies and practices that promote genuine inclusion, dignity, and opportunity for all.

Briefing

Educational access and enrolment:

The demands of the refugee system and Higher Education Institutions often conflict.

- There are bureaucratic complications that result in refugee students having to work while studying which affects their ability to complete their bridging academic courses and to advance to full university studies.¹
- 2015- 2016 reforms in Germany placed further restrictions on where refugees could live, which hindered access to HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) and preparatory schools in certain cities for asylum seeking students. It was thus not possible for some of the students to follow the rules of the educational system and the asylum system at the same time.²
- Due to asylum regulations, they are often not allowed to undertake basic language or integration courses immediately.³

HEIs often do not recognise credentials earned in Syria and there is a lack of transparent information around admissions criteria.

- HEIs are often unable to recognize the credentials refugees have earned in Syria, and some refugees cannot provide proof of their qualifications.⁴
- There are one to four preparatory schools (Studienkolleg), which validate certificates, in each German federal state⁵
- Uniassist e.V. is often used to see if students meet admission criteria in German universities. This process has been criticised for being complicated and not transparent.⁶
- In Germany, in 2015, 17.8% of all adult asylum seekers had been to university (completed and interrupted), and 20.4% had completed high school before migrating⁷

¹ Sanaa Ashour, 2022, [Access for Syrian refugees into higher education in Germany: a systematic literature review](#)

² Katrin Sontag, 2018, [Refugee Students' Access to Three European Universities: An Ethnographic Study](#)

³ Grüttner et.al, 2018, [Refugees on Their Way to German Higher Education: A Capabilities and Engagements Perspective on Aspirations, Challenges and Support](#)

⁴ Sanaa Ashour, 2022, [Access for Syrian refugees into higher education in Germany: a systematic literature review](#)

⁵ Katrin Sontag, 2018, [Refugee Students' Access to Three European Universities: An Ethnographic Study](#)

⁶ Streitwieser et.al, 2018, [Not a Crisis But a Coping Challenge: How Berlin Universities Responded to the Refugee Influx \(in press\)](#)

⁷ Anna-Katharina Rich, 2016, [Asylerstantragsteller in Deutschland im Jahr 2015: Sozialstruktur, Qualifikationsniveau und Berufstätigkeit](#)

- This compares with 28.2% of the German population having a degree.⁸

The classification of Syrian refugees as ‘international students’ and numerus clausus makes it nearly impossible for refugees to be admitted to competitive programmes.

- The numerus clausus, a cap on the number of places available for competitive degree programmes, is used in German universities to avoid overcrowding on courses such as medicine and dentistry.
- This means that there is an extremely high academic threshold to be admitted to these programmes, making it near impossible to access for refugees and asylum seekers.
- Many German universities place a cap on the number of international students they admit, particularly for more competitive programmes.
- For example, the University of Hohenheim reserves 8% of study places for competitive programmes for international students.
- These policies impact the ability of refugee students by restricting their access to certain academic fields and prestigious institutions.⁹

Financial insecurity can deter refugees from enrolling in higher education.

- A lack of financial support prohibits access to and attainment in the university sector for refugees in many countries around the world, including Germany
- A study by Halkic and Arnold shows 57% of refugee students in Germany reported experiencing concerns about the cost of living.¹⁰
- large scale funding has not been made available for student services that facilitate degree granting programmes for refugees and asylum seekers. There have only been student initiatives and ‘one-off’ institutional interventions.¹¹
- Although many refugee students benefit from a package of subsidised government loans and grants known as BAföG, studies have shown that these funds are insufficient to cover all financial needs.^{12, 13}

⁸ Eurostat, 2023, [Population by educational attainment level, sex and age \(%\) - main indicators](#)

⁹ Lisa Unangst, 2019, [Refugees in the German higher education system: implications and recommendations for policy change](#)

¹⁰ Belma Halkic and Patricia Arnold, 2018, [Refugees and online education: student perspectives on need and support in the context of \(online\) higher education](#)

¹¹ Lisa Unangst, 2019, [Refugees in the German higher education system: implications and recommendations for policy change](#)

¹² Undine Zimmer and Olga Drossou, 2011, [Dossier: Öffnung der Hochschule - Chancengleichheit, Diversität, Integration](#)

¹³ Elke Wild and Wiebke Esdar, 2014, [Eine heterogenitätsorientierte Lehr-/Lernkultur für eine Hochschule der Zukunft](#)

- Refugees and asylum seekers often find themselves having to work while enrolled in the preparation course and sometimes experience labour market discrimination.¹⁴
- These challenges are amplified by difficult housing market situations, causing further financial limitations for refugees. Many preparation courses of HEIs and Studienkollegs are found in larger cities, creating intense competition for low rent flats.¹⁵

¹⁴ Grüttner et.al ,2018, [Refugees on Their Way to German Higher Education: A Capabilities and Engagements Perspective on Aspirations, Challenges and Support](#)

¹⁵ Ibid.

Sociocultural integration:

The assimilation pressure by the government is reflected in education which fails to integrate refugee students, posing a danger to refugees' mental health.

- The German government provided school courses on language and cultural knowledge to student refugees as part of the integration policy. However, imposing cultural values while disregarding their cultural background is categorised as assimilation, which harms healthy and efficient integration.¹⁶
- Schools do follow the government's orientation of teaching German values and culture ignoring Syrian refugees' cultural values.¹⁷ Despite trying to reduce the language barrier, which is one of the biggest issues regarding refugee integration, psychological problems and dealing with traumas are ignored, disregarding Syrian refugee students' mental health.¹⁸
- An education based on the principle of assimilation weakens refugees' cultural competency, and thus their ability to fit into a new society, which increases their levels of psychological distress.¹⁹
- One-third of Syrian refugees showed symptoms of depression, while around 15% for anxiety disorder²⁰ and 35% for PTSD²¹ which is a consequence of this bias.

The lack of efforts to integrate refugees in the German Education System makes the process uniform, thus creating a discriminating education gap.

- The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 shaped the current German educational system from an economic perspective, ignoring moral, social development and emotional aspects.²²

¹⁶ Safdar, 2021, [Multidimensional Individual Difference Acculturation \(MIDA\) model: Syrian refugees' adaptation into Germany](#)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Timm, 2016, [The Integration of Refugees into the German Education System: A Stance for Cultural Pluralism and Multicultural Education](#)

¹⁹ Safdar, 2021, [Multidimensional Individual Difference Acculturation \(MIDA\) model: Syrian refugees' adaptation into Germany](#)

²⁰ Borho, 2020, [The prevalence and risk factors for mental distress among Syrian refugees in Germany: a register-based follow-up study](#)

²¹ Georgiadou, 2018, [Prevalence of Mental Distress Among Syrian Refugees With Residence Permission in Germany: A Registry-Based Study](#)

²² Timm, 2016, [The Integration of Refugees into the German Education System: A Stance for Cultural Pluralism and Multicultural Education](#)

- The PISA perspective is not efficient for integrating refugees properly and undervalues Syrian students since they are less valuable to the German economy than home students.²³
- This perspective sees integration as a one-way process, which means the German government ignores the Syrian refugees' role in integration and requires them to adopt cultural values.²⁴ The effect of this on the German population is to judge and discriminate against unadapted Syrian refugees.²⁵
- The majority of refugees who reported discrimination were young people,²⁶ which fit them in the students' category. Syrian students recognize asymmetric power relations between German individuals and themselves, all of which negatively influence their social integration into German society.²⁷
- Around 45% of Syrian students affirmed to have suffered discrimination in school at least once while 10% reported to suffer it often.²⁸

Non-inclusive education increases criminal behaviour.

- The uniform and economic approach that characterises refugees' education in Germany fails to achieve the sociocultural adjustment of Syrian refugees.²⁹
- By harming their mental health, the educational system by not dealing with sociocultural integration effectively influences migrant crime rates.³⁰
- There is a positive relation between the poor mental health of Syrian refugees and the propensity for criminal behaviour.³¹
- The highest rates of migrant crimes are used as a political strategy by far-right parties to gain popularity. In 2017 around 500 events happened referring to killings or attempted killings by all asylum seekers and refugees, mostly Syrian.³²
- In 2022 there were around 300,000 Non-German suspects of any kind of crime not counting immigration crimes. These were mostly young Syrian refugees or asylum seekers.³³

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Safdar, 2021, [Multidimensional Individual Difference Acculturation \(MIDA\) model: Syrian refugees' adaptation into Germany](#)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Viazminsky, 2022, [Perceived discrimination among Syrian refugees in Germany and its associations with mental health](#)

²⁷ Safdar, 2021, [Multidimensional Individual Difference Acculturation \(MIDA\) model: Syrian refugees' adaptation into Germany](#)

²⁸ Pirner and Bradtke, 2021, [Significance of the Religiosity and Educational Backgrounds of Young Refugees in Germany: Results from an Empirical Mixed-Methods Study](#)

²⁹ Khoury, 2018, [Factors that impact the sociocultural adjustment and well-being of Syrian refugees in Stuttgart – Germany](#)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² BBC, 2018, [Reality Check: Are migrants driving crime in Germany?](#)

³³ Mellersh, 2023, [Germany: Crime statistics and migration](#)

Professional and Occupational Integration:

Despite government policies aimed at alleviating the financial burden of Syrian refugees, there has been a counterintuitive impact that hinders Syrians from achieving economic independence.

- Even though 25% of Syrian refugees have pursued higher education or vocational training, a striking 65% of those capable of working depend entirely on public benefits for their livelihood.³⁴
- Despite Syrians being the main beneficiaries of refugee protection in Germany, with them being more likely than other migrant groups to be receiving Hartz IV benefits, many are still forced to rely on state welfare to survive.³⁵
- The number of refugees claiming German welfare benefits soared by 169 per cent last year

Although Germany has made efforts to integrate Syrian refugees into the workforce, there has been a mismatch of skills in terms of skills and qualifications.

- According to the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), 41% of refugees residing in Germany for six years reported being employed at a level lower than what they had before arriving.³⁶
- The majority of hires of refugees in Germany for regular jobs (two out of three) and for internships (one out of two) were for low-skilled positions.³⁷
- Participation rates of Syrian refugees in the “active labour market measures” offered by the BA or in vocational language courses remain low which may be due to the prerequisite-based, linear integration framework of Germany.³⁸
- Despite the introduction of the Integration Act in 2016, specific conditions for certain rights are contingent on German proficiency and participation in ‘integration courses’, which makes it harder for Syrian refugees to enter the job market due to longer waiting periods.³⁹

³⁴ Marion MacGregor, 2021. [Two thirds of Syrian Refugees unable to support themselves](#)

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ben Knight, 2023, [Refugees overqualified and underpaid in Germany](#)

³⁷ OECD, 2017, [Finding their Way Labour Market Integration of Refugees in Germany](#)

³⁸ Asli Selin Okyay, June 2017, [Labour Market Integration of Syrian Refugees in Germany and Turkey: Challenges and Prospects](#)

³⁹ Asli Selin Okyay, June 2017, [Labour Market Integration of Syrian Refugees in Germany and Turkey: Challenges and Prospects](#)

The restriction of economic power in areas such as Entrepreneurship poses a barrier to the education opportunities of future generations.

- Although in 2015 refugees established 2000 businesses in Germany, with a high concentration in Berlin, the yearly average income of refugee entrepreneurs is far below the average of all self-employed people.⁴⁰
- Refugee entrepreneurs in Germany tend to have less social capital in the host country and fewer economic resources, with start-up social capital being a strong predictor of business success.⁴¹
- While incubation support in terms of business planning and mentoring is available to some refugee entrepreneurs, access to start-up capital and finance is still restricted.⁴²
- Despite the introduction of a micro-credit program for refugees, providing loans of up to €25,000, only two loans have been granted since October 2017.⁴³

⁴⁰ Alexandra Embiricos, 2020, [From Refugee to Entrepreneur? Challenges to Refugee Self-reliance in Berlin, Germany](#)

⁴¹ Alexander Newman, Luke Macaulay, Karen Dunwoodie, 2023, [Refugee Entrepreneurship: A Systematic Review of Prior Research and Agenda for Future Research](#)

⁴² Swati Mehta Dhawan, 2018, [Financial Inclusion of Germany's Refugees: Current Situation and Road Ahead](#)

⁴³ Ibid.



Professional & Occupational Integration

Education Insight

Overview

This section will now expand on the principal factors introduced in the briefing, which must be tackled in the Policy Recommendations.

The Insight will be divided into three sections, seeking to explain the background, effects and dynamics of the educational systems of Syria and Germany.

The insight will start by exploring how the bureaucratic hurdles hamper Syrian refugees' access to higher education in Germany, stemming from restrictive housing regulations and qualification validation challenges.

Secondly, it will then dive into how the government's assimilation strategy imposes cultural norms on refugees, exacerbating discrimination and mental health issues.

Lastly, the third section will tackle the disparities between the Syrian and German educational systems that impede refugee employment prospects, compounded by logistical barriers. Resolving these challenges demands comprehensive reforms to recognise refugees' diverse backgrounds and provide tailored support mechanisms for successful integration.

Bureaucracy and the challenges refugees face in accessing education.

The government restrictions on housing and the lack of financial support that limits access to higher education for refugees in West Germany is ultimately due to overly bureaucratic decision-making processes within the German government.

One way in which refugee access to higher education is limited is housing regulations. The 'residency requirement' means that they must remain inside the district they were allocated to upon arrival for up to six months.⁴⁴ For those who have received asylum status, the 'abode constraint' requires refugees to take up residence to remain in their allocated state for three years.⁴⁵ There are provisions for allowing individuals to leave before three years if they enrol in a university in a different state, but this does not apply to access courses. This makes it more challenging for refugees to access higher education as it limits the number of universities that they could apply to, showing how decisions made by the German government can unintentionally create barriers for refugees trying to access higher education.

Another limit to accessing higher education for refugees in Germany is the acceptance of their qualifications. Many refugees find that they are not able to produce the formally certified qualifications that satisfy German University admissions. The process of making their qualifications acceptable is challenging and can be very costly. Many Syrian refugees find that their qualifications, even when presented correctly, do not gain them acceptance due to differing educational standards and structures in the two countries.⁴⁶ University admissions officers themselves have admitted that the application process is extremely confusing. Furthermore, the social and economic barriers that refugees experience are not addressed by admissions policies.⁴⁷ In summary, the overly bureaucratic process of getting their qualifications recognised by German HEIs is a severe limit to accessing higher education for Syrian refugees.

In addition, bureaucratic barriers in the search for financial aid is another explanation for the struggles faced by Syrian refugees accessing higher education. The financial aid system in Germany, BAföG, can be seen to disadvantage refugees. Students from Germany and other EU countries are given priority and the students are asked to provide proof that they can achieve the diploma which requires an assessment of their previous academic records.⁴⁸ It is clear that the government has not considered refugees when making this policy. There are two government programmes that provide funding to groups that support refugee education. The Integra programme offers financial incentives to HEIs to provide access courses for refugees.⁴⁹ The government also set up the 'welcome' programme which provides funding to pay

⁴⁴ Nihad El-Kayed and Ulrika Hamann, 2018, [Refugees' Access to Housing and Residency in German Cities: Internal Border Regimes and Their Local Variations](#)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Lynn Schneider, 2018, [Access and Aspirations: Syrian Refugees' Experiences of Entering Higher Education in Germany](#)

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Marianne Guille, 2000, [Student Student Loan in Europe: An Overview](#)

⁴⁹ Lukas Eckhardt, Jens Jungblut INCHER, Karolina Pietkiewicz, Isabel Steinhardt, Martina Vukasovic, Robert Santa, 2017, [Refugees Welcome](#)

students to support and counsel refugees.⁵⁰ Some individual states also offer a range of funding programmes. For example, North-Rhine Westphalia has offered £30 million a year in funding since 2017 to provide language courses and counselling.⁵¹ One programme that has received praise is the IN-Touch programme in Bremen that allowed refugees with an academic background to access classes and resources at 3 universities in the area.⁵² This is one of many projects that began as a volunteer project but later received funds from the government. However, since the total number of refugee students is not known due to their classification of 'international student', large-scale public funding is difficult to justify and plan. There is also a lack of research available on the success of the schemes that are already in operation which would be required to justify an expansion of funding.⁵³ Overall, the financial aid system in Germany clearly disadvantages refugees and the classification of refugees as 'international students' means that an expansion of government funding schemes is unlikely.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

The Consequences of Assimilation for Syrian Refugees.

One of the ways the German government approaches the Syrian refugee situation is through education. In the whole world, an inclusive education approach is one of the most common ways of supporting refugees.⁵⁴ However, the inclusiveness in German education is questionable. This is due to the fact that the strategy taken by the government to include refugees is an assimilation strategy.⁵⁵ Assimilation is the process of individuals changing their home country's culture to the host country's culture.⁵⁶ The policy of mandatory teaching school courses on language and cultural knowledge to refugee students⁵⁷ shows this assimilation trait where inclusion is carried out through the forceful imposition of culture.

Assimilation harms the process of integrating refugees.⁵⁸ For example, this cultural imposition might harm Syrian refugees' cultural competence, and, as a further effect, their mental health where⁵⁹ cultural competency refers to the capacity of a person to fit in the new society and when failed, enhances mental health problems.⁶⁰ This, in addition to the many cases of discrimination Syrian refugees suffer in Germany,⁶¹ one-third of them suffer from depression and PTSD.⁶²

The issue of mental health is already considerable before Syrian refugees come to Germany. When it comes to students, half of them indicate suffering from PTSD mostly related to war traumas.⁶³ Despite schools being a common strategy for supporting the mental health of refugees, German schools not only do not provide resources for supporting them but have historically been sites of segregation and discrimination.⁶⁴ The assimilation strategy of the German government harms even Syrian refugees' mental health by not providing the safe space schools should play for refugees.⁶⁵

⁵⁴ Viazminsky, 2022, [Perceived discrimination among Syrian refugees in Germany and its associations with mental health](#)

⁵⁵ Safdar, 2021, [Multidimensional Individual Difference Acculturation \(MIDA\) model: Syrian refugees' adaptation into Germany](#)

⁵⁶ Timm, 2016, [The Integration of Refugees into the German Education System: A Stance for Cultural Pluralism and Multicultural Education](#)

⁵⁷ Safdar, 2021, [Multidimensional Individual Difference Acculturation \(MIDA\) model: Syrian refugees' adaptation into Germany](#)

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Timm, 2016, [The Integration of Refugees into the German Education System: A Stance for Cultural Pluralism and Multicultural Education](#)

⁶² Borho, 2020, [The prevalence and risk factors for mental distress among Syrian refugees in Germany: a register-based follow-up study | BMC Psychiatry](#)

⁶³ Zbidat, 2020, [The Perceptions of Trauma, Complaints, Somatization, and Coping Strategies among Syrian Refugees in Germany—A Qualitative Study of an At-Risk Population](#)

⁶⁴ Podar et al., 2022. [How schools in Germany shape and impact the lives of adolescent refugees in terms of mental health and social mobility](#)

⁶⁵ Safdar, 2021, [Multidimensional Individual Difference Acculturation \(MIDA\) model: Syrian refugees' adaptation into Germany](#)

This issue is present at the root of the German educational system. The system is based on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) with an economic perspective, ignoring moral, social development and emotional aspects.⁶⁶ When it comes to the refugee perspective PISA reality, the “PISA-200 shock” reveals a causality between social background and educational success.⁶⁷ Clearly, this is not due to natural facts but social and structural ones, where refugees have been undervalued socially and economically since school. This causes serious issues in their mental health since this perspective is more an ideology, to the neoliberal ground, which shows the effects of discrimination inside schools.⁶⁸ The structural barriers to social mobility of refugees is not only a reflection but a maintenance and enhancing tool of discrimination against Syrian people in Germany. The PTSD reality then is to come from a traumatic situation to a new country that imposes on them their culture, ignoring their situation and home cultural values. When it comes to students, who stay at school most of the time, their mental health is even more harmed by the undervalued and discriminative scenario faced there, summed up with the lack of support and other problems such as the language barrier.⁶⁹

A commonly discussed topic regarding refugees in Germany is criminal rates, however, there is a clear link between criminal behaviour and poor mental health which was and is not appropriately approached in German media and the political sphere.⁷⁰ PTSD and other mental conditions can indeed lead to aggressive and criminal behaviour, but the role the German education plays in fostering these conditions is rarely appreciated by the media.⁷¹ Social mobility to lower classes when leaving their home country, PTSD and discrimination are all factors that are important for criminal behaviour but the media, instead of approaching it in this systematic way, individualises the problem and generalises the refugees' situation, harming Syrian refugees widely.

While a large percentage of European citizens link refugees with terrorism and higher crime rates, the immigrant crime rates in fact decreased in West Germany.⁷² The growing idea of linking crime with refugees coincides with the rise of right-wing parties in West Germany. All of these are joined by an increasing fear strategy by the one-sided media which exposes the “refugee problem” as an individualised issue.⁷³ This

⁶⁶ Timm, 2016, [The Integration of Refugees into the German Education System: A Stance for Cultural Pluralism and Multicultural Education](#)

⁶⁷ Podar et al., 2022. [How schools in Germany shape and impact the lives of adolescent refugees in terms of mental health and social mobility](#)

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Podar et al., 2022. [How schools in Germany shape and impact the lives of adolescent refugees in terms of mental health and social mobility](#)

⁷¹ Kury, 2019, [Refugees: Post Traumatic Stress, and Crime – Experiences from Germany](#)

⁷² Podar et al., 2022. [How schools in Germany shape and impact the lives of adolescent refugees in terms of mental health and social mobility](#)

⁷³ Ibid.

marginalisation of refugees affects Syrian people mostly because of the size of their community in Germany and is mostly misunderstood by the population as an effect of the political interest of far-right parties.⁷⁴ The omission of data and appealing reports and speeches are only some of the strategies used for political interest.

The criminal behaviour is linked, after all, with the education failure to integrate Syrian refugees properly. The effect the assimilation strategy causes among them harms their mental health which is even worse in PTSD student refugees. The PISA, cultural shocks, discrimination and language barriers are some of the challenges a Syrian refugee faces in Germany and the lack of support given by school harms the whole German population but more importantly, the refugees. The criminal behaviour cases caused by the assimilation policies became a cyclic harmful strategy for Syrian people in Germany where discrimination only grows and an effective integration strategy in education goes only further.

⁷⁴ BBC, 2018, [Reality Check: Are migrants driving crime in Germany?](#)

Divergence in educational systems and its effect on job prospects for refugees.

The integration of Syrian refugees into the German educational and labour systems has been a topic of increasing complexity in recent years. Central to this discussion is the significant contrast between the educational systems of Syria and Germany, which often results in challenges for refugees seeking to find employment commensurate with their qualifications upon resettlement in Germany. This insight section explores the divergence of educational systems between Syria and Germany and its implications for refugee education in West Germany.

One notable statistic sheds light on the magnitude of the issue: a staggering 41% of refugees who have resided in Germany for six years or more reported being employed at a level lower than what they had before arriving.⁷⁵ Further analysis reveals that the majority of hires of refugees in Germany, whether for regular jobs or internships, were for low-skilled positions.⁷⁶ This trend not only presents immediate challenges for refugees in terms of employment prospects but also poses a significant barrier to education opportunities for future generations of Syrian refugees in Germany.

Understanding the root causes of this phenomenon requires an examination of the differences between the educational systems in Syria and Germany, with educational resources known to be a pivotal factor in explaining the labour market placement.⁷⁷ These differences encompass various aspects, including curriculum structure, academic standards, and language of instruction. Syrian refugees may find themselves at a disadvantage in the German job market due to the need for more alignment between their educational background and the expectations of German employers. Additionally, the recognition of qualifications obtained in Syria may be limited in Germany, further complicating securing employment at an appropriate skill level.

Syrian Educational System

Although the current education system in Syria – established by the Al Baath regime has had successes, such as reducing illiteracy rates and keeping education free, it remains unable to fully meet the requirements of social development. Firstly, although literacy rates are at 86.4%, the definition of what it means to be literate must be revised according to contemporary values. According to NCTE February 2013, “Active, successful participants in this 21st-century global society must be able to develop

⁷⁵ MacGregor, 2021, [Two thirds of Syrian Refugees unable to support themselves](#)

⁷⁶ Knight, 2023, [Refugees overqualified and underpaid in Germany](#)

⁷⁷ Hunkler.C, Edele.A & Schipolowski.S, 2021, [The role of educational resources in the labor market integration of refugees: The case of Syrian asylum seekers in Germany](#)

proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology, build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought and create, critique, analyse, and evaluate multimedia texts.”⁷⁸

Should modern definitions apply, the literacy rates would fall considerably and one of the main factors attributing to this pressing issue would be the lack of acknowledgement of critical thinking. The style of teaching is rather indoctrinating. Students, at most educational levels, are not encouraged to question ideas. “In the Syrian education system of the mid-1980s, the concept of examining a "truth" to confirm or refute it was largely unknown, and, in any event, was often viewed as an unacceptable challenge to authority.”⁷⁹

Furthermore, many refugees find themselves compelled to leave their home countries after completing a substantial portion of the required coursework for a degree, without actually attaining it.⁸⁰ This phenomenon contributes to the observed disparities between their educational qualifications and practical skills. Notably, a significant majority of Syrian refugees about 76.2% had commenced higher education but hadn't completed it, a trend that wasn't uncommon in Syria even before the crisis but was undoubtedly exacerbated by the war. As a result, interrupted educational trajectories are particularly prevalent among Syrian refugees.⁸¹

German Educational System

In Hamburg, located in Western Germany, numerous initiatives have been implemented to support Syrian refugees who have surpassed the age of compulsory schooling in integrating into the workforce and enhancing their qualifications. These endeavours encompass integration courses tailored to different demographics, including youth integration programs for individuals under 27, courses for parents and women, as well as alphabetization programs. Moreover, there are specialised remedial courses designed to address specific language needs. Access to these programs varies depending on the residency status and country of origin of refugees and asylum seekers, ranging from free, limited, to no access. Additionally, apart from language support initiatives aligned with the ESF-BAMF-Programm7, avenues exist for individuals beyond compulsory schooling age to pursue a school-leaving qualification or participate in vocational preparation courses. However, it's worth noting that refugees and asylum seekers from countries categorised as 'safe countries of

⁷⁸ Federal Research Division, 2002, [Syria, a country study](#)

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hunkler.C, Edele.A & Schipolowski.S, 2021, [The role of educational resources in the labor market integration of refugees: The case of Syrian asylum seekers in Germany](#)

⁸¹ Ibid.

origin' are often marginalised in these efforts, given their limited prospects for long-term residency in Germany.⁸²

The integration of Germany's dual vocational system, known as Ausbildung, into the national education framework markedly exacerbates the gap in labour market quality between Syrian refugees and their non-refugee counterparts. This structured program, deeply entrenched within the German educational landscape, presents formidable hurdles for refugees who have acquired their occupational skills through on-the-job training initiatives in their countries of origin or during their journey to Germany. These challenges are compounded by several factors. Firstly, the rigorous nature of the Ausbildung system demands a level of theoretical knowledge and practical proficiency that may not align with the informal or semi-formal training pathways often undertaken by refugees in their home countries or while in transit. Secondly, the program's emphasis on standardised qualifications and certifications may overlook the valuable experiential learning and practical competencies gained by refugees through their diverse life experiences and prior employment.⁸³

Moreover, the logistical barriers faced by refugees residing in rural areas further exacerbate their difficulties in accessing vocational training opportunities. Issues such as inadequate transportation infrastructure and a lack of childcare support compound the already complex challenges refugees encounter in navigating the German education and labour systems. Furthermore, the psychological toll of family separation and trauma adds another layer of complexity, potentially hindering refugees' ability to fully engage with and benefit from vocational training programs.⁸⁴

In light of these multifaceted challenges, addressing the disparities in labour market outcomes between Syrian refugees and their non-refugee counterparts requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach. This entails not only reforming the vocational training system to recognize and accommodate the diverse backgrounds and learning pathways of refugees but also implementing support mechanisms to address the logistical, socio-economic, and psychological barriers they face in accessing education and training opportunities.

⁸² Koehler.C, Schneider.J, 2018, [Refugee Education in Germany](#)

⁸³ Helen Schwenken, 2021, [Differential inclusion: the labour market integration of asylum-seekers and refugees in Germany](#)

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Insight Conclusion:

In this insight we have delved deeper into the issues surrounding the treatment of Syrian refugees in West Germany.

We have delved into the primary issue of cultural assimilation, and how the pressure on integrating Syrian people and children in work and schools can have lasting effects on their mental health, something that has already been harmed from their experiences in Syria.

We have also analysed how stringent bureaucracy acts as a barrier for Syrian children to entering higher education and better schooling, something which inevitably reproduces cycles of poverty among migrant populations.

Finally, we analysed specifically the education system that Syrian children are forced to undertake, and how the notable distinctions between this and the education system of German children sets these young migrants up in a worse position within the labour market.

Policy Recommendations

Overview

Now, having delved into the primary challenges facing Syrian refugees within the German education system, our aim is to ignite a discourse and propose effective solutions. The policy recommendations we advocate for have been meticulously chosen based on their feasibility and proven efficacy, with careful consideration given to tailoring them to the unique needs of Syrian refugees in Germany.

Action 1: Enhancing Refugee Access to Education through Freedom of Movement.

Action 2: Implementing a holistic education integration process for refugees.

Action 3: Conducting short-term internships or trial periods, in collaboration with Arabic-speaking educators.

Action 1: Enhancing Refugee Access to Education through Freedom of Movement

As discussed in the insight, there are several barriers for Syrian refugees trying to access higher education in West Germany. One of the main limits to accessing education in Germany is legal restrictions on freedom of movement for refugees, including the 'residency requirement' and the 'abode constraint'.⁸⁵ This severely limits the ability of refugees to undertake the access courses that are necessary to progress onto university and limits the number of universities that they could apply to. Removing the legal requirements that restrict refugees from moving freely around Germany for a minimum of six months and, in some cases, up to three years would allow for much greater access to education for Syrian refugees in Germany. This would also improve longer-term integration of refugees into Germany. Education is a fundamental human right and therefore it is very important that the German state recognises these laws should not remain in place.⁸⁶

The German government should enact legislation which aligns with international human rights standards. This is a challenging process as changes to German law require the support of the federal government and the German parliament.⁸⁷ Therefore, it will be necessary for the relevant charities in Germany to mobilise their resources and run awareness campaigns on why restricting movement for refugees limits their educational opportunities and strips them of a fundamental human right. One challenge for tracking the progress of this policy is that most data on university admissions class refugees as 'international students', making it impossible to see the progress of this policy.⁸⁸ As a response to this, I recommend that German universities start to collect data on the number of refugees they admit and their subsequent academic achievement to inform future policy. Additionally, to ensure the success of this policy higher education institutions need to ensure that information on course options and requirements is easily accessible so that refugees can maximise their chances of admission by applying to the institutions that match their qualification and abilities the best.

In Germany, in 2015, 17.8% of all adult asylum seekers had been to university (completed and interrupted), and 20.4% had completed high school before migrating.⁸⁹ Syrian refugees in Germany also tend to have very high educational aspirations. This means that this policy is expected to result in a dramatically increased enrolment of refugee students in higher education as the currently small uptake is due to accessibility and not because of a lack of interest in education. The successful implementation of this policy should also lead to improved integration and social

⁸⁵ Nihad El-Kayed and Ulrika Hamann, 2018, [Refugees' Access to Housing and Residency in German Cities: Internal Border Regimes and Their Local Variations](#)

⁸⁶ UNESCO, 2024, [State obligations and responsibilities on the right to education](#)

⁸⁷ Bundesrat, 2024, [The legislative procedure](#)

⁸⁸ Lisa Unangst, 2019, [Refugees in the German higher education system: implications and recommendations for policy change](#)

⁸⁹ Anna-Katharina Rich, 2016, [Asylerstantragsteller in Deutschland im Jahr 2015: Sozialstruktur, Qualifikationsniveau und Berufstätigkeit](#)

cohesion of Syrian refugees in West Germany, as education is a crucial factor in this. Furthermore, this should increase the long-term prospects of refugees.

Overall, allowing Syrian refugees in West Germany to have freedom of movement would improve their access to education as it would give them a wider range of educational institutions to choose from. In turn, this would allow the refugees to rebuild their lives through education, fulfil their potential and give back to their host communities.



17.8%

of adult
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university

Action 2: Holistic education integration process for refugees.

The issue of the German assimilation process of integrating refugees is complex, and its solutions are therefore also complex. Inroads have already been made however, putting education at the foreground of the process. Education is in fact an effective way of integrating refugees.⁹⁰ The issue in the German case study is their method, that of assimilation, which was shown to have many weaknesses as stated previously. By adopting a holistic integration process, caring about the learning, social, emotional and economic considerations to integrate refugees, the outcomes would be much better for the country.⁹¹

By considering ethnic identity in order to create social bonds, integration means approaching refugees in education by caring about their ethnic past while ensuring the creation of a safe and functional space to immerse them in a new ethnic and social environment.⁹² There is no better way to do this than education programmes implemented to integrate children. The outcomes will not only be seen in these younger generations but the process in fact involves communication and some other strategies that, even by focusing on children's education, would create a positive effect on the whole society.

Case studies all around the world provide material for a plausible structure to be applied in the German education system according to the holistic assimilation educational process stated above. To begin with, the scale of implementation should be at a national level and should contribute to broad structural change. However, focus areas of Syrian refugees should receive extra support. The West German area (more specifically North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony, Bavaria, and Baden-Wuerttemberg), contain a higher concentration of Syrian refugees,⁹³ and thus would receive more investment to implement the system, and thus make it more efficient.

This would facilitate traits of the programme such as mental health support and popular informative communication. As pointed out, discrimination was a great problem partially influenced by the assimilation system of German education and harmed drastically Syrian refugee students' mental health even inside schools.⁹⁴ A similar influx of Syrian refugees to Iraq prompted the implementation of an education system organised specifically to avoid discrimination, the "Refugee Education Integration

⁹⁰ Katsarova, 2016, [Integration of migrants: The education dimension](#)

⁹¹ Cerna, 2019, [REFUGEE EDUCATION: INTEGRATION MODELS AND PRACTICES IN OECD COUNTRIES](#)

⁹² Ager and Strang, 2008, [Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework](#)

⁹³ Pries and Savci, 2023, [Syrian refugees arriving in Germany: choice of corridor and individual characteristics of forced migrants](#)

⁹⁴ Podar et al., 2022, [How schools in Germany shape and impact the lives of adolescent refugees in terms of mental health and social mobility](#)

Policy” (REIP).⁹⁵ Joined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), educational partners created the Communicating with Communities (CwC) to enhance the social cohesion of refugees with the community through awareness campaigns, focus group discussions, door-to-door visits and different channels of communication in social media.⁹⁶ This program increased the interest of refugees to join schools and worked as an anti-discrimination policy,⁹⁷ not by assimilating Syrian refugees into their home country's culture but by integrating them. Such a strategy would also prove to reap benefits in Germany.

From an educational system perspective, restructuring teachers' training would be an important part of the integration process in Germany. It is crucial to equip teachers with the tools to identify psychological disorders in Syrian refugee students. According to the Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, teachers play a vital role in offering psychosocial support by promoting a secure environment through their interactions and implementing specific psychosocial activities.⁹⁸ Teachers are encouraged to observe student behaviour for indications of distress and to seek assistance from specialised professionals when necessary.⁹⁹ However, it is important to note that teachers should not attempt to provide therapy to students, as mental health interventions require the expertise of trained therapists. One effective approach to achieving this is through programs like Refugee Action Support (RAS), which integrates tutoring for new arrivals with the professional development of student-teachers.¹⁰⁰ Embedded within the secondary teacher education degree at the University of Western Sydney, RAS allows pre-service teachers to engage in one-to-one or small-group tutoring sessions.¹⁰¹ Through this experience, they enhance their pedagogical and interpersonal skills while offering valuable support to vulnerable students.

A final comment on the positive potential of the policy, a holistic education system in Germany need not put a strain on public finances. The former educational system money directed to assimilate Syrian refugees should be moved to its implementation. Despite the extra costs because of specific training and focus area intensity of implementation, the economic rewards of it would be worth it considering the ageing population and social security situation in Germany. Politically speaking, to go against right-wing political parties is doable since their argument on immigrant crime is

⁹⁵ Cheewasrirungruang and Nokam, 2022, [The Refugee Education Integration Policy \(REIP\)](#)

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Cerna, 2019, [REFUGEE EDUCATION: INTEGRATION MODELS AND PRACTICES IN OECD COUNTRIES](#)

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

fallacious and easily contradicted, mainly by showing the economic benefits of a policy such as the one suggested.

The outcomes of this policy would range from the social and economic areas. Firstly, immigration crime rates would fall since, as previously stated, there is a relationship between poor mental health and criminal behaviour. The integration programme has a core focus on increasing the mental health of Syrian refugees and this fall would be one of its effects. Besides that, economically, integrating refugees would generate economic growth, manpower and qualified people working in the country.¹⁰² Most importantly, the outcomes of the policy would radically increase the conditions of life of Syrian refugees in Germany. A faster and more humane process of adapting to a new culture might improve their life in many aspects such as mental health, economic life, social life and others.

¹⁰² Hajduković, 2021. [Integration of migrants and refugees: benefits for all parties involved](#)

Action 3: Conducting short-term internships or trial periods, in collaboration with Arabic-speaking educators.

Rather than advocating for the complete abolition of established vocational training systems, such as the Ausbildung, which have effectively equipped non-refugees in Germany with essential skills, I advocate for a nuanced approach aimed at facilitating the integration of Syrian refugees into the workforce. This approach entails easing the transition for refugees by providing apprenticeships in both traditional vocations—such as motor vehicle mechatronics technician, salesperson, and hairdresser—and exploring non-conventional career pathways in corporate and medical fields.¹⁰³

This step involves first promoting the adoption of short-term internships or trial periods as a preliminary step before finalising an employment contract or vocational training agreement. This strategy enables both employers and prospective employees to gain deeper insights into each other's capabilities, work dynamics, and compatibility. Refugees are more likely to experience depression-related syndromes, post-traumatic stress disorder, and psychological disorder—all of which would most likely hinder social and economic integration, for instance making it harder to find and retain work.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, by experiencing the workplace first-hand, Syrian refugees would be given more time to ease themselves into the workforce and make more informed decisions about their career paths, while employers can assess the suitability of candidates for long-term positions.¹⁰⁵

However, it's essential to be cautious about the potential drawbacks of extending trial periods excessively. There's a risk that prolonged trial periods could inadvertently lead to the development of an unpaid labour force. Therefore, it's crucial to establish clear guidelines and timeframes for these trial periods to ensure that they serve their intended purpose without exploitation or unfair labour practices. This balanced approach fosters transparency and fairness while maximising the benefits of trial periods for both employers and employees.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge the significance of cultural familiarity and understanding. While skilled migrants are typically believed to possess significant integration abilities, numerous studies indicate that many experience social exclusion in the workplace and encounter subpar career outcomes in the host country. It has been proposed that the generalised self-efficacy crucial for migrant career success in their home countries might diminish when they operate in a foreign environment.¹⁰⁷

Therefore, these apprenticeship programs should be accompanied by Arabic-speaking educators who possess the cultural competency to effectively support and guide Syrian refugees through their vocational training journeys. By embracing such

¹⁰³ Schwenken, 2021, [Differential inclusion: the labour market integration of asylum-seekers and refugees in Germany](#)

¹⁰⁴ Brucker.H, Jaschke. P, Kosyakova.Y, , 2019, [Integrating Refugees and asylum seekers into the German Economy and Society](#)

¹⁰⁵ Schwenken.H, 2021, [Differential inclusion: the labour market integration of asylum-seekers and refugees in Germany](#)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Eddy S. Ng, 2022, [Promoting workplace inclusion and self-efficacy among skilled migrant workers in Australia](#)

measures, we can offer refugees viable pathways to employment while simultaneously upholding the standards and efficacy of existing vocational training frameworks.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Helen Schwenken, 2021, [Differential inclusion: the labour market integration of asylum-seekers and refugees in Germany](#)

Conclusion:

In contemplating the multifaceted issue of Syrian refugee integration in Germany, it's imperative to highlight the profound potential of education as a transformative force. Despite the upheaval and displacement endured by Syrian refugees, their journey is not devoid of hope, especially when we consider the resilience and untapped talents of these individuals, particularly in the realm of education.

In conclusion, addressing the complex issue of refugee integration in Germany requires multifaceted approaches that prioritise education and employment opportunities tailored to the specific needs of Syrian refugees. A holistic education integration process, focused on social, emotional, and economic considerations, offers promising solutions by fostering ethnic identity, social cohesion, and mental health support. Implementing such a process at a national level, with targeted support in areas with high refugee populations, can yield positive outcomes for both refugees and German society.

Additionally, rather than abolishing established vocational training systems, a nuanced approach involving short-term internships or trial periods, accompanied by Arabic-speaking educators, can facilitate refugees' transition into the workforce while addressing potential mental health challenges and promoting cultural understanding. By combining these strategies, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that enhances the integration and well-being of Syrian refugees in Germany, ultimately benefiting both refugees and the broader society.

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