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Integrating refugees and migrants into higher education in Portugal? An action research experience in a Portuguese university

Cristina Santinho and Dora Rebelo

This article results from research comprised of fieldwork ethnography, participant observation, collection of life stories, interviews and testimonials of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, living in Portugal. We focus on a particular experience of the research named Living in a Different Culture (LDC), which took place between 2017 and 2019, aimed at participants who shared the goal of becoming university students, before migration. LDC supported students who wanted to continue their academic training and those wanting to find alternative pathways of inclusion and autonomy, using new academic skills and knowledge. The project included a tailored course in Portuguese society and culture, created with an anthropological lens, Portuguese language classes and other disciplines. Several of the students who attended the course, in both academic years, continued their studies, or found work within their area of expertise. Obstacles highlighted in the paper perpetuated cycles of precarious living and structural violence. We argue that by devaluing migrants and refugees' knowledges and skills, host society loses important resources to its own development. We conclude by stating that projects such as LDC require a long-term commitment with interinstitutional support, a sustainability strategy, and a decolonial mindset.

KEYWORDS: refugee and migrant students, higher education, action-research, integration.

Integrar refugiados e imigrantes no ensino superior em Portugal? Uma experiência de investigação/ação numa universidade portuguesa • O artigo surge a partir de uma investigação baseada em etnografia: observação participante, recolha de histórias de vida, entrevistas e testemunhos de refugiados e migrantes, residentes em Portugal. Centramo-nos numa experiência particular de projeto/investigação que designámos Living in a Different Culture (LDC) (2017/2019), destinada a migrantes que tinham em comum o objetivo de se tornarem estudantes universitários, antes da migração. O LDC apoiou os estudantes que queriam continuar a sua formação académica e aqueles que queriam encontrar caminhos alternativos de inclusão e autonomia, utilizando novas competências e conhecimentos académicos. Incluiu um curso sobre sociedade e cultura portuguesas, usando uma lente antropológica, aulas de português, entre outras disciplinas. Vários alunos continuaram os seus estudos, ou encontraram trabalho dentro da sua área de especialização. Destacámos obstáculos relacionados com ciclos de vida precária e violência estrutural. Argumentamos que, desvalorizando conhecimentos e competências de migrantes e refugiados, a sociedade de acolhimento perde recursos importantes

para o seu próprio desenvolvimento. Concluímos, afirmando que projetos como o LDC exigem um compromisso de longo prazo, com apoio interinstitucional, uma estratégia de sustentabilidade e uma abordagem descolonial.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: estudantes refugiados e migrantes, ensino superior, investigação/ação, integração.

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INTRODUCTION

Asylum is an international right stated by the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, under which the signatory countries committed to respecting the fundamental principle of non-refoulement.[1] The Geneva Convention establishes minimum standards for the treatment of refugees in different domains, including their access to education, and specifies, in article 22, that "the Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favorable as possible, and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, in regards to access to studies, the recognition of foreign educational certificates, e.g. diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships." This resolution is consistent with the evidence that our current economic and technological developments demand a workforce that is highly skilled, meaning Higher Education (H.E.) qualifications. Furthermore, the United Nations' Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly mentions in Goal 4.3.: "By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.".[2]

1 UNHCR, 2019, retrieved from: < https://www.unhcr.org/4d9486929.pdf > (last consulted in June 2024).

2 UNSDSN, retrieved from: < https//indicators.report/goals/goal-4 > (last consulted in June 2024).

Current figures by UNHCR[3] show that only 1% of refugee youth are integrated in university-level education. Host countries have the responsibility to take up measures to develop a holistic integration framework that includes H.E. as part of protecting human rights and human dignity. The integration of refugees as a whole is a global challenge that concerns all societies. Many of the barriers to educational achievement experienced by refugees are shared by other social disadvantaged groups, such as racialized minorities. These include precarious living conditions, experiences of oppression, violence or abuse, interrupted education, and language barriers. Educational support needs for these students must be tailored to ensure fair access and equal inclusion in H.E.

Refugees and Migrants (R&M)[4] are likely to endure precarious living conditions which include difficulties to access housing, healthcare, clothes, and food, among other basic needs. The unemployment rates are higher and fewer jobs are available. Adding to that, R&M are significantly less likely to speak the host country's language than other non-foreign groups (Kirk 2004). The social support needs for R&M often include healing from multiple losses, dealing with family separation, ongoing threats of deportation or imprisonment and a consequent insecurity over the viability of their legal status and the right to remain in the host country.

Under such a complex and challenging scenario, the access to H.E. hasn't been a top priority addressed by migration/asylum policies, nor a relevant research topic. In international literature conducted in Canada, Australia, Austria, United States of America, and the United Kingdom we can find a few examples of qualitative research, mainly based on case studies (Mangan and Winter 2017; Grüttner *et al*. 2018; Prandner and Moosbrugger 2020). They elaborate on several challenges that R&M face during or upon accessing H.E. (Kanno and Varghese 2010); as well as a few examples of good practices (Grüttner *et al*. 2018; Prandner and Moosbrugger 2020). Literature has found high educational aspirations among migrants and refugees (Brücker *et al*. 2016).[5] The hope for improving social capital (better employment, higher income, more sustainable living), was pointed out as the key motivation to enter university, alongside expectations of increased prestige and social status

3 UNHCR, 2018, retrieved from: < https://www.unhcr.org > (last consulted in June 2024).

4 Critical migration and border scholarship (Jones 2016; Walia 2021), as well as people with lived experiences of mobility, have been rejecting distinctions between migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in academic work, as it reproduces hierarchies of "deservingness" which are unfairly divisive and hinder possibilities of creating fair policies. We therefore chose to utilize R&M to encompass any form of mobility.

5 Available at < https://www.diw.de/en/diw_02.c.219247.en/research_advice/public_finances_and_living_conditions/the_research_infrastucture_soep/research_projects/research_projects.html?id=diw_01.c.538695.en > (last consulted in June 2024).

(Grüttner *et al*. 2018; Prandner and Moosbrugger 2020). H.E. is described by research participants as the foundation to building a new life in the host country, providing R&M with a possibility to address and overcome structural discriminations and to earn social respect among peers, social networks and the host society. However, R&M are confronted with many structural obstacles in accessing H.E. Financial difficulties are one of the central issues mentioned in the studies (Kanno and Varghese 2010; Grüttner *et al*. 2018; Prandner and Moosbrugger 2020). The precarious living circumstances and the many economic losses along the migration routes often make daily university expenses impossible to comply with. R&M are more likely to provide for their families from a very young age (Kanno and Varghese 2010; Grüttner *et al*. 2018), and this financial pressure may lead to accepting the first available job, to earn money as fast as possible (sometimes rendering R&M vulnerable to labor exploitation). Other structural constraints reported by R&M are finding dignified accommodation, reliable transportation to university, and access to language courses. Commuting in public transport may take long hours for R&M living in more affordable suburban areas. This becomes a factor that compromises class attendance, even for the successful applicants to H.E. Studies also mention stress and anticipated fears of stigmatization as relevant factors conditioning R&M's application to H.E. (Prandner and Moosbrugger 2020). This challenge can be aggravated by not being given credit for previously acquired knowledge and skills upon arrival. Obtaining equivalence to foreign degrees is a long and bureaucratic process, which may require even more economic investment. Additionally, some students are the main caretakers of their children or other family members – a stronger challenge among women – which, combined with gender norms and potential family or social constraints, may be conflicting with H.E. aspirations. Another key factor to be considered is the sometimes confusing bureaucracy demanded by different universities in the application process. Compared to more privileged international students, the everyday living conditions of R&M students comprises particular challenges, *e.g*., lengthier processes to authenticate diplomas, degrees, and certificates. Equally, R&M are more likely to require intensive language training to be able to follow classes in the host country. Another central deterrent discussed in academic studies is the lack of appropriate information on how to enroll in universities, alongside poorly prepared academic support services. Some universities come up with mitigation strategies such as informal "buddy programs" (Prandner and Moosbrugger 2020), but overall R&M encounter several barriers to information. In some of the cases that we followed during the Living in a Different Culture (LDC) project, the information given to R&M students by a Portuguese university's academic services was wrong, or contradictory. Under this complex framework, the LDC project was created to facilitate both the access and the inclusion of R&M in H.E. in Portugal, using a community-based

approach, knowledge-sharing, peer-support, and career guidance, before and throughout the H.E. admission process.

R&M CONTEXT IN PORTUGAL

Despite its overall progressive stance on migration, Portugal has been identified by critical border scholars as a country where good intentions in policy does not match the practices (Vacchiano 2018; Santinho 2013). Portugal has been replicating the "trends" of the European Union migration policies, while maintaining a positive narrative about the need to welcome R&M. However, while designing legislation that permits the regularization of migrants through work contracts, and supporting the UNHCR's resettlement program for refugees, Portugal has been, simultaneously, multiplying internal bordering practices (Formenti *et al*. 2019). We can see some of these bordering effects in a variety of sites and locations, such as the neighborhoods where R&M are living in overcrowded hostels, the labor market, where R&M are often exploited; the health centers, where R&M rarely find interpreters or support during treatment, and the many state offices in which technological, legal, conceptual and administrative devices constitute a complex system of deterrence and control (Formenti *et al*. 2019). These bordering practices, enmeshed in forms of slow violence (Nixon 2011), have a strong impact on the lives of R&M, generating multiple exclusions and discriminations.

According to a distribution set up by the European Commission – based on an index that measured the size of the population, total GDP, number of refugees previously received and unemployment rate – Portugal was set to receive, between 2015 and 2018, 4700 refugees and asylum seekers stranded in Greece and Italy, a number later resized to 2951 (Vacchiano 2018). According to the official data, the country received, until March 2018, a total of 1552 "relocated" refugees distributed among 99 municipalities.[6] With the end of this program, in 2018, Portugal started to accept refugees and asylum seekers through bilateral agreements with third countries (*e.g*., Greece and Germany) and through the UNHCR resettlement program. Simultaneously, "spontaneous" asylum seekers arriving to the Portuguese border by their own means were rejected in more than 60% of the cases, according to SEF (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras, known as Border Control Services).[7] In 2020, Portugal was in 20th place, among the 27 EU countries, as a receiving country

6 Figures retrieved from ACM (High Commissioner for Migrations), Portuguese Government, 2019; 2021. Available at: < https://www.om.acm.gov.pt/publicacoes-om/colecao-imigracao-em-numeros > (last consulted in June 2024).

7 Figures retrieved from SEF (Portuguese Border Agency), 2021. Available at: < https://www.sef.pt/pt/pages/conteudo-detalhe.aspx?nID=92 > (last consulted in June 2024).

for asylum seekers and refugees (0.2%), according to the Migration Observatory. The highest number of asylum seekers ever received was 1820, in 2019, followed by a surge of 33.106 asylum requests during the recent response to the Ukrainian war.[8]

According to the European Social Survey,[9] concerning the degree of openness to refugees, Portugal was one of the countries whose population most agreed with the statement that "the government should be sympathetic in the assessment of applications for refugee status". This welcoming stance has slightly decreased in the following years. Nevertheless, when we look at the numbers of refugees who stay in the country after their reception, we observe that many prefer to leave. One of the explanations given by refugees is that their precarious living conditions and continued poverty in the host country has become unbearable (Rebelo, Abdullah and Hussein 2020). As a result, many refugees and asylum seekers are likely to feel unsupported and to struggle to receive the services they are entitled to. These difficulties have multiple implications in social integration, wellbeing, sense of agency and autonomy.

A SPIRAL OF PRECARIOUS LIVING: REFUGEES AND MIGRANT'S CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION

If we are willing to make universities safe places for all students, regardless of their migratory status, it is essential that we look critically into our institutional practices. Understanding the obstacles and hurdles faced by R&M students can help academic managers to gain insight and create better solutions to assure equality and social inclusion. We would like to think about LDC's action-research project as a small contribution towards this goal. Looking into the official statistics and reports on refugee integration in Portugal over the past five years and contrasting them with the experiences narrated by the students and stakeholders engaged in the LDC project, we can draw a few conclusions.[10] One of them is that many refugees and asylum seekers who contributed to the statistics of "success cases" are people in situations of precarious employment (temporary jobs, no reliable contracts, or doing part-time work). Other refugees reported as success cases in official documents [11] used

8 Figures retrieved from SEF (Portuguese Border Agency), 2021. Available at: < https://www.sef.pt/pt/pages/conteudo-detalhe.aspx?nID=92 > (last consulted in June 2024).

9 Figures retrieved from ESS, 2016. Available at: < http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/ > (last consulted in June 2024).

10 LDC project was suspended in 2020 and 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The numerical data presented in the text refer to the years in which the project took place.

11 *E.g.*, ACM annual reports on migration (High Commissioner for Migrations, Portuguese Government 2019; 2021). Available at: < https://www.om.acm.gov.pt/publicacoes-om/colecao-imigracao-em-numeros > (last consulted in June 2024).

their own personal resources to improve their living conditions (refugees that were able to start their own business with personal savings, refugees that were employed using their own social networks). These contradictions showed us that there are nuances which are not captured by the available quantitative data, and that these nuances are quite relevant to understand R&M's lives. As to migrants, there seems to be an apparent "divide" between those who are treated as international students, paying expensive tuition fees in Portuguese universities, and then expected to return to their home countries; and those who come to live as "migrant workers". Nonetheless, our experience in LDC showed us that many "migrant workers" have the aspiration to enroll in H.E. and to use it to improve their social capital as residents.

PILOTING LIVING IN A DIFFERENT CULTURE (LDC)

The decision to pilot this project resulted from a long fieldwork research from Cristina Santinho on R&M in Portugal. Using ethnographic methodologies in state institutions and non-governmental organizations hosting asylum seekers and refugees, the author found that many people interrupted their studies either in their countries of origin, or in transit. The first step to create LDC was to personally contact R&M's who expressed an intention to continue their university studies (known during the prior fieldwork of co-author). The second step was to organize meetings with NGO's (in Lisbon) that held responsibilities in the reception and integration of refugees, namely: Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR); Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) and High Commissioner for Migration (ACM). These organizations indicated other students that had interest in taking part in the pilot project. After this process, 22 potential students (all refugees or asylum seekers) were enrolled, and participated in private meetings with the project coordinator, to deepen their situations and to share the main objectives and methodology of the pilot project.

The criteria of admission included residence in the refugee reception center ran by the municipality and being part of the relocation program.[12] Students' native languages included Arabic and Tigrinya, whereas secondary languages included English, French and Italian. Some of the students completed their H.E. in the country of origin (but lacked recognition in Portugal); others attended H.E. but couldn't complete their degree, and some had finished high school but didn't have a chance to access university. A few of the admitted LDC students did not intend to continue their studies after the course. According to them, the initial motivation was to increase knowledge about Portuguese

12 This requirement was not a condition imposed by the project. It was stipulated by the partner, Lisbon Municipality. LDC informally admitted three Syrian refugee women who requested to attend the course. These students were sponsored by the Academic Emergency Platform for Syrian Students.

society and culture to then decide upon their future choices. On average, 19 out of the 22 enrolled students participated regularly in the classes.

In concomitance, at the beginning of the project conception, the coordinator organized meetings with professors from the anthropology department at the host university, and a Portuguese professor with expertise teaching Portuguese as foreign language. All potential collaborators were informed that there was no funding allocated to this project and therefore classes would be a pro bono activity. Collaborators decided to take this opportunity as an exercise of civic solidarity and even activism, within the academic context. The motivations pointed out by those who accepted the challenge were (1) the opportunity *per se* (being able to contribute to a cause they defended), (2) the academic discipline that shaped the concept of the project (as most collaborators were anthropologists), and (3) learning directly from R&M students, about their own society and culture.

LDC coordinator provided an initial immersion training to all collaborators, based on her ethnographic research, including political, social, cultural and emotional aspects that were relevant to working with refugees' students. Additionally, there was a detailed description of each student profile, to maximize rapport and class preparation. After this initial training, the conceptual work was collaborative, with all stakeholders contributing with their ideas. The topics that would be addressed during the student training were decided together, as were the schedules and the evaluation and follow-up methodologies.

It was agreed among all staff that the personal data of the students (names, age, country of provenance and dominant language) were to be kept confidential and could not be included in any document or publication outside the context of the course. Identical ethical principles were safeguarded by the authors, noting that all students that attended LDC were aware of the research purposes of the project, and the results were disclosed.

LDC: A PATH INTO PERSONAL AGENCY. PART I

Apart from being an enabling and inalienable human right, education has been shown to protect the psychosocial, physical, and cognitive wellbeing of R&M (Smith 2010) and serve as a catalyst in coping with their situation, thereby affording meaning (Alzaroo and Hunt 2003) and allowing for new opportunities and alternative pathways of social inclusion. H. E. facilitates the integration into host societies and helps to promote autonomy and self-reliance. But R&M's are firstly embedded within the microsystem which consists of their individual selves, home and relationships with others. This is where significant stress may arise due to a combination of factors, such as multiple forms of loss or separation from significant others, inability to meet basic needs, due to structural constraints, and difficulties to care for themselves and/or family members.

H.E. is part of an *exo*-system (Jack, Chaise and Warwick 2019) formed by the educational system, the governmental agencies that have power over the access and permanence of R&M in university and even other liminal aspects such as mobility/transport networks can play an instrumental role in shaping the lives of refugees aspiring to restart their academic studies. This *exo*-system, however, is a place where R&M may experience structural violence, stigmatization, societal isolation and discrimination (Jack, Chaise and Warwick 2019). In essence, H.E. in the host country could be a way to cope with these issues, while developing new skills, visibility, and better opportunities for the future.

Aware of this reality, LDC's first edition was focused on the context of each student, and comprehended a curriculum based on knowledge-sharing about Portuguese society and culture, national legislation on asylum, and H.E. access and guidance. It was intentionally decided that knowledge sharing between students and teachers was the main goal. The coordination team attempted to establish a decolonial approach, non-hegemonic, and non-eurocentric, valuing the students' own teachings on sociocultural and political contexts and promoting debates about their worldviews. According to Tim Ingold (2018: 6), "[…] communing and variation depend on one another, and both are necessary for the continuity of life. The educational community is held together through variation, not by similarity". Ingold's approach values the recognition that is made between diverse actors in the same context. The development of communities of education is based on meeting others, establishing relationships, and together recreating collective learning spaces.

The pilot LDC lasted five consecutive weeks, including daily level A1 Portuguese language classes and modules called: Portuguese Society and Culture; Culture, Ethnicities and Nations; Different Families; Gender and Identities; Institutions in Portuguese Society; Constitutional Rights and Duties and Asylum Law; Compared Religions; Groups and Social Relations: Practices of Integration in Portugal; and Urban Experiences. This latter module aimed at using an experiential methodology where refugee students reflected upon their own representations of the city of Lisbon and its surroundings. Mappings and real trajectories were designed in a collective work using photographic cameras and audio recordings to express what was more and less appealing. The output was a video and photography exhibition presented collectively at the closing ceremony of the course.

At the end of the five weeks, students were invited to actively participate in debates/class discussions to stimulate self-expression, critical thinking, and knowledge sharing. It should be noted that during the first LDC course all classes were taught in English. Although strongly encouraged to share any perspective or idea they thought was pertinent throughout the classes, when asked about this method in private evaluation conversations, some expressed their unwillingness to expose themselves; not to Portuguese teachers, but to

other refugees they did not know. Indeed, one of the risks encountered by refugees in the process of asylum claim, was meeting homeland perpetrators, or people that held antagonistic positions in their country of origin. These meetings are not uncommon in the host society context and justify this need for self-protection during exercises of public exposure.

The pilot course ended with a closing ceremony where a more informal and affectionate environment was created among the learning community, sharing Syrian food, delivering the diplomas to all finalists, ensuring the official presence of the university's dean, the municipality's high representatives and all the participant teachers. A small concert with a musical fusion between Portugal and Eritrea closed both the final ceremony and the course.

LDC: A PATH INTO PERSONAL AGENCY. PART II

Having in mind all the challenges learned and described during its first edition, LDC's part II had a more holistic approach, welcoming and integrating not only refugees but also migrant students. The second edition was held in the academic year 2018/2019, when immediate changes needed to be addressed. In 2018, a new national law [13] defined the criteria for admission of refugee students into H.E., leaving significant "grey areas" to be defined by each university. To promote a more open and transparent access, regardless of legal status or administrative category, LDC expanded the scope of its partnerships. In addition to the municipality of Lisbon, all state institutions and NGO's with responsibilities in the social inclusion of R&M in Lisbon and beyond (including satellite suburban cities) were included. As the number of registered refugee students in the academic year 2018/19 did not justify opening a new course, the new LDC team decided to expand the admission criteria to migrants. The team quickly found that R&M students require tailored solutions to guarantee equal opportunities in accessing H.E. The regime for H.E. admission of migrant students was substantially different to that of refugees, as most would need to enroll through the "international student" program (with very expensive tuition fees). In its second edition, LDC welcomed 33 students (nine women and 24 men), seven of which were refugees from Syria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Brazil, and Iraq. Twenty-six students were migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh, mobilized through a partnership with a grassroots association in Lisbon called Portugal Academy. Five dropped out of the project, proven incompatible with classes' schedules.

Universities' social responsibility is key to ensure efficient measures to address the challenges related to the inclusion and retention of R&M students.

13 Available at: < https://dre.pt/dre/detalhe/decreto-lei/62-2018-115924012 > (last consulted in June 2024).

These challenges may differ from one individual student to another, but there are common needs which can be predicted and addressed. Mobilizing the existing resources in the academic community and creating relevant partnerships with stakeholders, including civil society actors, was our first step. This strategy allowed for a more open and transparent registration process as well as the mobilization of students' own agency. The engagement of migrant and refugee communities in the process of dissemination and registration for LDC aimed at helping potential students to become more familiarized and comfortable with both the LDC team and the ISCTE-IUL campus.

All LDC team members were simultaneously engaged with research projects concerning the integration of R&M. During the course, Anthropology PhD students were included in extra-class activities, considering specific LDC student's interests (business creation, Portuguese history and cultural exchanges).

Some R&M students were not yet familiar with the culture of the Portuguese work sector, which inspired the option to include transition into the labor market and entrepreneurship projects as part of the extra-curricular activities. Other measures taken by LDC's 2nd edition included creating a "child-friendly area" in the classroom, with blankets and toys, to make sure that students with babies or toddlers could bring them into class. This measure facilitated regular attendance of five students (women) that couldn't, otherwise, keep the class schedule. As not all students had a good level of English, class exchanges and discussions among peers were essential ways to facilitate communication, democratic participation, and freedom of speech among peers.

LDC team was present daily to welcome the students and guide them through any obstacles they encountered and answer any questions or doubts. The team found out, in this process, that some of the challenges reported by the students were connected to psychosocial vulnerabilities. Universities are called to have a leading role in helping R&M students overcome psychosocial barriers that could jeopardize academic performance and social integration. The staff in LDC was attentive to these needs, and linked the students to support systems outside university, during and beyond the period of the course.

Another important measure in the second edition was the presence of two refugees who completed the first edition of LDC. They acted as mentors and mediators, helping the new students feel welcomed and supported. Being university students themselves, their accounts of personal pathways into H.E. had the potential to encourage the new students to believe that it was possible to pursue their studies.

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT AND A LESSON LEARNED

One LDC student in the second edition was a 32-year-old asylum seeker from Cameroon. She was an experienced performer, choreographer, and musician,

living in Portugal since September 2018. Her first interactions with the Portuguese Employment Office (IEFP) illustrate an important obstacle: the total absence of orientation for newly arrived asylum seekers in what concerns the evaluation of skills, desires and aspirations.

She had worked as an artist all her life, presenting a curriculum and an artistic portfolio that included specialized professional experience as a choreographer, leading theater and musical productions in several African and European countries, teaching children with special needs and training percussion skills. Her reasonable expectation was to find a professional or educational pathway that could lead her into finding similar jobs in Portugal. Nonetheless, she was told by the employment officer at IEFP that these types of professional pathways were "not available" in the country. She was offered, instead, an internship at a cleaning agency, which would give her the opportunity to have "an actual job" within three months. She expressed that she had no interest in cleaning, nor had she ever worked as a cleaner before; however, she had more than 10 years of experience as an artist and a performer. The employment officer dismissed her resumé and told her that working as an artist in Portugal would be "extremely difficult", if not "impossible", but that she should use her "regular knowledge on domestic chores" to get an immediately available job. She insisted that she did not like domestic chores at home and had no interest in following up on this suggestion. The employment officer conveyed her that this refusal signified an "unwillingness to comply with her duties" as an asylum seeker. She left this interaction feeling frustrated and neither herself nor her case manager pursued a follow-up session. This lived experience demonstrates the cycle of precarious living, or "bare life" (Agamben 2007) embedded in R&M's integration pathways. Institutions often contribute to depoliticize R&M through practices and policies of subordination, slowly dragging them to spaces of non-citizenship and dependency from the state.

Some of the precarious living conditions associated with R&M is explained by the ongoing economic crisis that has been hitting Portugal since the IMF debt of 2011, and the subsequent years of austerity. Portuguese have been enduring harsh economic consequences such as a "housing bubble" that has heightened rents and real estate value in metropolitan areas, high unemployment rates, higher emigration of youngsters, and so on. Portugal was slowly recovering, until the pandemic, although relying strongly on the exponential growth of tourism. Renting available houses to tourists and transforming city-center apartments into small hostels and temporary tourist rentals became the main source of income for many local landlords. R&M have been caught in the middle of this economic and housing crisis, and many struggles to rent their own room or apartment, while charities and institutions seem unable to find alternative solutions.

Nixon (2011) pointed out a phenomenon he designated as "slow violence" which can be used to better grasp these frustrating interactions. He highlighted the inattention we pay to the attritional lethality of environmental crises, in contrast with more sensational, spectacle-driven mediatic forms of violence. Slow violence relates to the events that are ignored by a brutal capitalist system, exacerbating the vulnerability of people who are poor, disempowered, and involuntarily displaced. This notion is closely linked to the concept of structural violence (Farmer 2005), which tells us that there are systematic ways by which some individuals are more likely to become neglected or targeted by violent practices than others. It underlines how this structural suffering can go unnoticed and undetectable in communities where inclusion and integration are seen as being addressed by policy. Slow violence leads to a subtle suffering whereby individuals seemingly included are experiencing social disadvantage.

Borrowing Agier's words (2016), all R&M's existence is based on politics. A politics of life against the politics of indifference. This politics of life can be manifested through fluidity, agency, control of resources, building relationships and peer-support networks, and helping to deconstruct stereotypes.

ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION (H. E.) IN PORTUGAL

At the end of the two editions of LDC, we learned different things from each of the two groups. The project report included the students' own evaluation narratives, and a set of recommendations to improve the access and integration policies in future academic years.

Exploring good practices through and within H. E. was beneficial to all stakeholders, helping them finding out new ways to contribute to the elimination of the various and multiple challenges raised by the students. Following the research carried out during the two editions of LDC, it is possible to assert that public policies aimed at refugees' integration did not even contemplate, until 2018, the access to H. E. for newcomers. No measures were taken to facilitate either the recognition or the equivalence of refugees' academic diplomas nor to consider their professional skills and experience prior to the arrival. In Portugal, the recognition of academic diplomas is an exclusive competence of universities, and they are granted autonomy by the State in this matter.

In 2013, Portugal designed a scholarship program for Syrian students – Global Platform for Syrian Students (GPSS) – which was implemented to welcome Syrian refugee students. The platform was based in a non-profit multi-stakeholders organization, founded by Jorge Sampaio, a former Portuguese president, supported by a core group of institutional partners, such as the Council of Europe, the League of Arab States, the International Organization of Migrations (IOM) and the Institute of International Education (IIE). The aim of the platform was: "[…] to provide access to H. E. for Syrian

students affected by the war, in safe countries throughout the world. […] to provide emergency scholarships to Syrian students and enable them to acquire professional qualifications". The platform integrated an academic consortium where participant universities ensured full or partial tuition waivers for at least one academic year. One of the differences between this first platform and the latter programs, recently implemented in Portugal (namely LDC), concerned their scope and the legal framework under which the students were admitted. In the platform, applicant students were selected while living abroad (in Syria or in transit countries). Upon their arrival to Portugal, they were immediately enrolled as "international students" and did not have to go through the process of accreditation that other refugee students do. For refugee students living in Portugal there was a "gap" in national legislation concerning access and attendance of H.E. During LDC's first edition, the university rectory created its own rules of admission and refugee students' inclusion, whereas in the second edition, held in 2018-2019, a national law (dec.-lei 62/2018)[14] was already in place, standardizing the access rules. However, access and evaluation of candidates was not specified in the national legislation, leaving it to each university to decide whom to admit and under which criteria, a situation that has created confusion and different treatment of students. Up until July 2019, there were still applicant refugee students waiting for universities to determine the conditions by which they could apply for the courses they wanted, in the upcoming academic year. Some of the undefinitions that students were confused about concerned the language of the evaluation tests, the criteria for recognition of their diplomas, the registration fees applied to different specializations, the translation norms for documents and forms, among others.

THE EXPERIENCE OF REFUGEE STUDENTS

Five students that attended the pilot LDC course were in their second year of masters or postgraduate studies, with tuition exemption, by 2020. Another, from LDC's second edition, was able to validate and see her professional experience in arts recognized, and to find work in her field, as a choreographer and dance teacher in a professional dance company. But what was their overall experience in what comes to accessing H.E. studies? What does it mean, for these students, to study again, at an older age, in a foreign country? Farid, Aziz, Osman, Emir and Youssef[15] are all university students at ISCTE-IUL. Four of them came from Syria and one from Iraq. They arrived in 2016 and were categorized as "relocated refugees". None of them chose Portugal as their host

14 Available at: < https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/62-2018-115924012 > (last consulted in June 2024).

15 The real names of the students are purposely omitted.

country. They have in common their native language, a shared culture, and a wish to continue studying and obtaining Portuguese citizenship. All had the same motivation in pursuing an academic career: finding the necessary autonomy to choose the kind of life that they wish for. Between Syria, Iraq, Cameroon, and Portugal they travelled through several transit countries, for similar reasons.

Osman, before the war in Syria, was studying Law in Damascus. When the war broke out, he went to a private university in Lebanon, completed an internship in Egypt, went to Turkey and from there he applied for asylum in Greece. He now studies Management at a Lisbon university. Farid is from Aleppo, in Syria, studied Interior Design in Saudi Arabia and when the war broke out, he fled to Turkey and from there to Greece. He now studies Architecture. Aziz was practicing law in Iraq when the war forced him to flee to Turkey and from there to Greece. He almost lost his life when he crossed the Mediterranean Sea. He chose to study International Relations, as an equivalence to his completed Law course was not possible in Portugal (due to different legislation framework). Emir was a KurdishSyrian Physics student at the University of Damascus. When the war broke out, he crossed several borders on foot, he was arrested three times, and arrived in Greece by boat after two failed attempts. In his first crossing, the boat broke down midway and he was pushed back to Turkey, and finally made it back to Greece. There, he applied for relocation to an English-speaking country, naming Ireland as his main preference. However, the migration services in Greece "offered him" to come to Portugal. He accepted without reservations, although knowing very little about the country. He now studies computer science at a Lisbon university. All these refugee students had their academic studies interrupted for more than five years. To retake their academic lives after such difficult journeys was not at all an easy task. The following is an excerpt of an interview that took place during LDC's first edition evaluation, in 2018, with one of the students:

> "Today was a normal day of study. I talked to my teachers; I am studying a lot for the exams. I also talk to my family every day by WhatsApp. They are happy because they know that I am fulfilling my dream: to study. I feel good in this environment. It is much better this life than going to load crates at a supermarket.[16] This was the life I used to have. I spent time with my colleagues at the university and then went home to my family. Here at ISCTE I do not feel like a refugee. In classes, if I do not mention it, and nobody asks me, I'm a simple student, with my own identity. Only the social support services know that I am a refugee. But they are always very friendly and always help. They made my temporary resident status recognized as a

16 A Portuguese supermarket chain where many other refugees found a job.

refugee. Now, I have a scholarship. Here, I forget my troubles, I forget all the suffering I've had before."

Another student reported:

"I chose Belgium first, then France, then Ireland and then Sweden. Then I came to Portugal, that I did not know. My brother, who has lived in Denmark for six years as a refugee, told me that he would give me money to catch a plane and go live with him. But I do not want to. Now I am studying, I want to stay in Portugal and finish my course (Business Management). In the future, maybe I will live in Dubai. There is good for business. I would like to do business between Portugal and Dubai."

Education is generally perceived by these refugee students as a precious opportunity, bringing stability and new beginnings. As such, it provided them with a sense of security. Security here does not equate with safety, but rather with a feeling of coherence, order, routine, and predictability about life. Beyond the feeling of stability, according to the students' narratives, there is a sense of possibility, by envisioning their future: life can be more easily projected with more freedom and agency.

Another important point is autonomy and the regained sense of control. Having been totally dependent on governments, legislation, asylum policies and host institutions that determined so many aspects of their lives, contacting teachers, peers and the academic environment helped them to foster a sense of freedom which, for some, was never experienced before. Emir, in an almost perfect Portuguese, stated:

"There is a big difference between university education in Syria and in Portugal. In Syria we do not have technology. The courses are more theoretical. There are no working groups. We only have one exam at the end of the year. If we do not pass, we must repeat everything. In Syria there is no relationship with teachers. We do not talk to them. Teachers do not talk to us in private. Each class has more than 150 students. There is no motivation to study there. We just must finish the degree and go home. But here there are activities, we have relationships with companies, teachers give us their contact and we have the platform with e-learning that helps us. In Syria, we must pay for all the classes materials. There is a store for each college: physics store, chemistry store. They sell the subject of study in these stores which belong to the teachers. Teachers do not let students write in class. It's a big business. We must buy the material to study. Tuition in the course is cheap, but the books, the materials for the practical classes, are all paid for. There, you cannot argue with the teachers. You cannot question anything. Here, we

> can. There is no group work there either. Just exams. They give us no opportunity to think. Just to memorize. Here, teachers are very accessible. They respect the students. We can even contact them by e-mail and say what we think. My teachers do not know I am a refugee. Only a few. In the presentation I only said that I came from Syria. But even so, there are some who realize that I have difficulties in Portuguese and send me the tests in English."

LDC project's findings suggest, therefore, that refugees can experience H. E. as a double-edged sword. Although all the students were clearly satisfied with the possibility of resuming their academic careers, they also all pointed out outstanding difficulties they had to face. One of the most significant was the insufficient mastering of the Portuguese language. To understand and express themselves better in classes and within campus, all students felt the need to improve their language skills. In fact, this is a common problem for a successful integration in Portugal and is a systemic problem. Usually, refugees are entitled to a level A1 course, which is clearly not enough. Besides, Portuguese teachers provided by the Portuguese State are rarely trained to address the diversity of students in class: in the same classroom there can be younger and older people, university students and illiterate people. Adding up to these challenges, students that come from repressive political and/or religious states may take some time until getting used to a more open, gender equal, democratic education system. Active participation in classes, verbal exchanges, group work and critical analysis of academic texts can be extremely difficult tasks in the beginning. However, this shouldn't be interpreted by teachers and peers as a limitation, but rather a challenge to be overcome. With time and lived experience on campus, students eventually adapt and develop new sets of skills, with commitment and appropriate support. Mechanisms of academic solidarity, peer-to-peer mentorship and other measures of campus integration can facilitate the familiarization with new habits, new concepts, and alternative interpretations of the learning materials.

Youssef experienced an event that altered his whole sense of purpose. One day, while working at the university library with his computer, he went to the toilet and found that the computer had been stolen when he returned. This event triggered a set of negative emotions that made him question his own ability to continue studying. He became uninterested in classes, isolated and got into a point where he almost lost his will to live. By sharing his experiences to the LDC team and being supported to link up with both psychotherapy and psychiatric consultations, he remains in university until today, expecting to finish his course in 2022. Aziz also had some bad moments. Despite the enormous effort to have good grades, he faced a dark period in 2018. He couldn't sleep enough, had nightmares, struggled to go to his morning classes on time, tried to study during the day, but his memory could not retain anything. His

main problem was the fact that he could not make any friends in university or outside. The situation was so bad that he was considering going back to his country.

ISCTE-IUL administration staff and the teachers that worked with refugee students, in their academic formal courses, were also interviewed for LDC's final evaluation. All of them declared that, despite their will to make things easy for the students, there was always a sense of frustration, mainly due to the difficulties in communication and the lack of mutual understanding concerning the demands in class, for instance, when there was a need to critically analyze academic texts or to engage in group work. These findings suggest that more training and ongoing supervision is needed to university teachers, creating a more inclusive academic community through trial and error, knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer support.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the political will to integrate refugee and migrant students in H.E. in Portugal, the existence of projects like Living in a Different Culture and, even more important, the will of R&M to pursue their academic careers, much more work needs to be done. Based on the continued research of LDC's coordination team, one crucial aspect to be considered is the sustainability of these projects. If universities aim at integrating refugees, there needs to be a systemic change in the academic structures. LDC coordinator developed a proposal for a cross-cutting training to the entire academic community, including the management, the administrative services, the course directors, the departments, and the student associations. The aim of this training was to briefly make known the specificities, current life circumstances and needs faced by refugee students. The program was also presented to other universities in Portugal, including a training module for academic communities that were interested in taking part in this initiative. Our hope is that these initiatives can multiply the effects of LDC project, making it a growing and engaged community of academics, civil society, and migrant/refugee communities, working in close collaboration to improve university's social justice. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic got in the way, as universities closed during consecutive lockdowns, focusing only on minimum services needed to keep the already existing courses running online. Additionally, a change in the university board altered the priorities and methodologies that were previously put in place for R&M, including LDC.

As noted by several scholars (*e.g.*, Czigány 2009; Brewis 2014, 2015 *in* Tronchet 2019) across history, universities have served as educational emergency platforms for academic refugees. In the Portuguese case, we had the Global Platform for Syrian Students and the project Living in a Different

Culture. However, to adapt to the needs of R&M students and to help the staff that will relate to them in academia (including teachers, administrative staff, and peers' students); universities should prepare themselves for diversity and hypermobility. Embracing, rather than resisting diversity and mobility, universities can continue to bring an added value to society at large, but it will require profound changes in the academic structure. A more in-depth dialogue between grassroot associations of migrants and refugees and academic institutions could be a next step in this direction.

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