

Supporting prospective refugee students' pathways to German higher education institutions – The perspectives of key actors in access, admission and study preparation

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Durch verstärkte Fluchtbewegungen nach Deutschland etwa seit 2015 stehen Hochschulen und Organisationen der Studienvorbereitung wie *Studienkollegs* vor der Herausforderung, teils hoch qualifizierten Geflüchteten mit starken Bildungsaspirationen Zugänge ins Hochschulsystem zu eröffnen. Mittels einer qualitativen Fallstudie aus acht Expertinnen- und Experten-Interviews, basierend auf einer qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse mit ergänzender vergleichender Fallrekonstruktion, wird untersucht, wie Schlüsselakteurinnen und -akteure im Bereich des Hochschulzugangs, der -zulassung und Studienvorbereitung versuchen, die Wege von Geflüchteten an deutsche Hochschulen zu unterstützen. Wir fragen insbesondere nach ihren Handlungsspielräumen im professionellen Alltag, sowie formalen und informellen Barrieren, durch die Studienübergänge von Geflüchteten entscheidend mitgestaltet werden. Der Beitrag schließt mit einer Diskussion von Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Organisationsentwicklung in den relevanten Einrichtungen und Netzwerken von Akteurinnen und Akteuren.

1 Introduction and research background

Studies have shown that higher education (HE) is important for refugees as a basis for hope and building a new life, accompanied by opportunities to counteract social exclusion and marginalisation. Educational processes contribute to their empowerment and agency, strengthen their sense of belonging and mental health (Crea, 2016; Grüttner, 2019; Morrice, 2013). Participating in HE allows refugees to integrate into the labour market due to enhanced language skills and the possibility of transferring the cultural capital they acquired into valuable degrees in the host country (Abamosa et al., 2019; Harvey & Mallman, 2019; Mangan & Winter, 2017). However, they have to face personal, social and organisational challenges to navigate the unfamiliar HE systems of their host countries (Baker & Irwin, 2019; Berg, 2020; Cin & Dogan, 2020). Overcoming these barriers is not merely a question of their individual aspirations, expectations and capabilities (Grüttner et al., 2018). Even in attractive host countries like Germany, there could be better coordination among policy frameworks concerning migration, social issues and higher education; linguistic, professional and academic preparation concepts; and social support and counselling (Grüttner, 2020). As in the

following case study, this would require the involvement of actors across the entire network of organisations that contribute to increasing refugees' chances of participating in HE.

Following the influx of highly qualified refugees in 2015, German higher education institutions (HEIs) and preparatory colleges (*Studienkollegs*) have initiated support measures and study preparation programmes for prospective refugee students, which enable them to continue or start studying (Beigang et al., 2018; Fourier et al., 2020; Grüttner et al., 2020). Since HE access can be crucial to refugees' future social status and chances of integration, these initiatives have received public funding. Although, for example, many HEIs have established *first contacts*¹ to counsel prospective refugee students (Berg et al., 2021), the issue concerns actors throughout the HEIs, including academic staff or admission officers, and beyond, such as counsellors for German language courses and managers of study preparation organisations. Yet, only a few studies have looked into the role of the actors involved in various capacities as important gatekeepers with opportunities to shape refugees' pathways to and through HE (Baker et al., 2017; Berg, 2020; Ramsey et al., 2016; Schröder, 2021).

In the German HE access regulation and study preparation system, prospective refugee students are categorised as a subgroup of the non-EU international student body in terms of application and admission (Berg et al., 2019; Pineda & Rech, 2020; Schröder, 2021). Like other international applicants who have received HE entrance certificates in non-EU countries, they have to prove the equivalence of their qualifications to German high school diplomas and are channelled into distinct HE access routes. Holders of certificates that fulfil the entrance criteria can apply directly to study programmes (*direct entrance qualification*). Nonetheless, they have to prove a German language level of C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Holders of certificates that do not fulfil the entrance criteria (*indirect entrance qualification*) have to apply to a preparatory college (*Studienkolleg*), which includes entrance examinations in mathematics and German. The courses aim to effectively prepare students to pass the final exam, the *assessment test*, which counts as the HE entrance qualification and includes the required language certificate.

However, succeeding in study preparation often leads to another competitive situation. As almost all German HEIs have limited capacities for highly demanded subjects, such as medicine and pharmacy, grades determine whether applicants can actually enrol in their preferred study programme. Especially in light of their various disadvantages, fulfilling the formal HE entrance criteria in terms of subject- and language-specific

¹ *First contacts* are central contact points and part of the ongoing formalisation of HEIs' support for refugees (Berg et al., 2021).

ability to study often becomes an arduous process for refugees (Baker et al., 2019; Dippold et al., 2022; Lambrechts, 2020; Park, 2019).

Based on data from a qualitative case study as part of the mixed methods project *Refugees' Pathways into German Higher Education Institutions (WeGe)*², this article aims to explore how key actors in the field of HE access, admission and study preparation try to support refugees' pathways to HEIs. Prospective refugee students represent a new aspect of internationalisation (Berg, 2018) and a formal, organisational and social challenge (Lenette, 2016) for HEIs and related study preparation organisations. Therefore, this analysis focuses on the experiences and perspectives of actors who are concerned with prospective refugee students' access to HE, such as university and counselling staff. Our main research interest is to investigate how they experience and use their scopes of action³ while counselling study applicants with refugee backgrounds⁴, making admission decisions or managing study preparation programmes. In this way, we strive to reconstruct the multi-faceted barriers influencing refugees' educational pathways and, at the same time, find starting points for organisational learning and professional development in the organisational areas of the actors who have opportunities to facilitate prospective refugee students' access to German HE (Berg et al., 2021; Unangst, 2019; Webb et al., 2019).

2 Heuristical framework

Following Détourbe and Goastellec (2018), we suggest conceptualising the German system of HE access, admission and formally necessary study preparation as a *space of opportunity*. Completing a formal application, identifying appropriate study preparation offers or academic language courses and ultimately starting to study require prospective refugee students to actively negotiate within these opportunity structures (Goastellec, 2018). Ambiguous situations arise, which lead to risky biographical and educational processes that pose complex challenges for refugees (Baker & Irwin, 2019; Berg, 2020; Lambrechts, 2020). Some crucial issues include how to get accurate and reliable information at the right time (Bajwa et al., 2017), how to get credentials validated and recognised (Mangan & Winter, 2017) and how to find (and make use of) appropriate HE counselling and support services (Berg, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018).

²The WeGe project was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research [01PX16015; 01.04.2017–31.03.2021].

³In this paper, we use the term *scope of action* (German: *Handlungsspielraum*) to refer to the range of actions at the actors' disposal based on similar formal framework conditions, tasks and decision-making requirements.

⁴In some cases, HEIs have established target group-specific counselling programmes; others have retained the general structure of student counselling. Further research might look at whether and how this has affected the counselling practice of staff who originally performed general counselling tasks and later (additionally) had to carry out target group-specific counselling for (prospective) refugee students.

Nevertheless, these individuals have to make subjectively meaningful educational decisions in this phase. It becomes urgent for them to find out what – or more precisely, who – can help them take advantage of opportunities for self-determined negotiation within these structures. In other words, prospective refugee students seeking access to HEIs are actively involved in channelling processes (Sandoz, 2018), as are the staff they encounter during this sometimes lengthy and complex process. Channelling processes into HE can be characterised as a strictly regulated field guided by the aims of validating and evaluating the equivalence of admission criteria determined by German HEIs. This process is shaped by multiple instances of selection (Schröder, 2021), implying that an applicant's performance is assessed according to the established formal rules of the educational organisation (Saner, 2019), whether it is a study preparation organisation or a language course. In the following analysis, we look into key actors' experiences with and perspectives on such channelling processes and assume that they are not only influenced by *formal access criteria* – which apply in selection and admission procedures and manifest in the transferability of prospective refugee students' cultural capital – but also by various *informal access criteria* that are necessary to reach each stage in the *assessment chain* (ibid.). These prerequisites indirectly influence these individuals' chances of accessing HE. For example, they may include secure asylum status (allowing them to plan for their professional futures), appropriate prior language learning environments (making up for disrupted educational careers), sufficient financial resources, work permits and (if necessary) support to overcome traumatic experiences and mental health restrictions (Grüttner et al., 2018). We, therefore, assume that refugees' successful access to HE is a question of how to meet both formal and informal access criteria. Furthermore, we suppose that this specific social context shapes the perspectives, decisions and actions of all actors involved (Bourdieu, 1977); including prospective refugee students and the various professionals they get in touch with. If refugees manage to get access to these actors, they have the opportunity to interact with professionals possessing specific knowledge of the field, who comprehensively understand its goals, structures and rules and thus function as important gatekeepers (Palanc, 2019).

In the following case study, we examine this space of opportunity and its underlying organisational rules and norms through the eyes of the professionals working in the network of institutions concerned with HE access and admission, as well as study preparation (Webb et al., 2019). This perspective is particularly useful in terms of providing insights into the everyday professional practices of so-called *street-level bureaucrats* and how they experience and use their scopes of action while dealing with the claims and needs of their clients (Lipsky, 1980). In the analysis, we focus on actors in charge of either the access procedures of HEIs or the distribution of relevant information on HE access regulations, including study preparation. Their positions, decisions and actions substantially shape the process of channelling refugees into

German HE, in the sense of a *space of opportunity*. Therefore, we seek to identify their experiences, perspectives and opinions with regard to formal and informal barriers, as well as starting points for organisational learning and professional development in the field of HE access, admission and study preparation.

3 Methods

The following analysis is based on eight expert interviews (Bogner et al., 2014; Kruse, 2015) that were conducted as part of the explorative preliminary qualitative study of the research project *Refugees' Pathways into German Higher Education (WeGe)* in 2017/2018. This research project was the first to analyse the situations of refugees in preparatory courses and the conditions of effective access to higher education for prospective refugee students in Germany. The overarching study design of *WeGe*, a mixed-methods panel study, combined an exploratory-sequential approach with a convergent parallel approach (Creswell, 2014). The preliminary study included 22 qualitative expert interviews with teachers of preparatory courses, actors in HE governance and administration and episodic interviews with prospective refugee students. The objectives of this initial phase were to provide a deeper understanding of the circumstances and conditions of study preparation programmes for refugees and to identify significant topics and possible theoretical approaches for the main investigation (Grüttner et al., 2021).

For the present qualitative case study, we selected interviews from one regional cluster of organisations (one university, one university of applied sciences and one preparatory college). Thereby, we sought to ensure a minimum level of comparability in terms of access to HE, because this is specific to each federal state. We defined the focus on one region as the framework of our particular sample (Merkens, 2004). At the same time, we considered different professional positions in the organisations, striving to represent one regional case with as many facets as possible and achieve the multi-perspectivity suggested by theoretical sampling procedures (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). We used a pre-structured interview guideline (Gläser & Laudel, 2010) which aimed to generate ex-post narrations with a focus on professional experience in the areas of HE access, admission and study preparation. Among other issues, the interview guideline addressed interviewees' perceptions of their clients at the level of personal interactions. One part, at the end of the interview, focused on their experiences with the increasing number of highly qualified refugees they encounter in their everyday professional lives, as well as organisational changes related to the counselling and study preparation of prospective refugee students. We conducted the interviews in German and translated them into English for this article.

All interview partners had longstanding professional experience in HE access, admission or study preparation processes or related information and counselling services. The sample included two members of matriculation offices (Interview 4; Interview 8), three student counsellors (two members of a foundation offering counselling and funding for refugees during study preparation [Interview 3⁵] and one member of the university's general student counselling service [Interview 6]), two first contacts for refugees (Interview 1, Interview 2), the head of the preparatory college (Interview 5) and the faculty coordinator of study preparation courses at the university (Interview 7).

The following qualitative case study focuses on the subjective perceptions, experiences and interpretations of professionals in the areas of HE access, admission and study preparation, as well as their views of the relevant access criteria and scopes of action that support prospective refugee students. Thus, it is guided by the following analytical questions: How do the key actors experience formal and informal access criteria while dealing with the claims and needs of prospective refugee students? How do they use their scopes of action in supporting these individuals' access to HE? The empirical approach is oriented towards qualitative content analysis, as described by Mayring (2004), and case reconstruction in the sense of thematic field analysis (Rosenthal & Fischer-Rosenthal, 2004). In the first step, different members of the research team coded the interviews based on a preliminary categorical scheme in order to summarise and structure the content of the interviews by applying the analytical questions. Then, we inductively supplemented and revised the codes. In addition, we used a case-analytical, contrasting approach (Rosenthal, 2008) to condense the most relevant information of each case and gain a more detailed understanding of local organisational developments. Therefore, we wrote case memos for every case aiming to represent and further integrate the interviewees' narratives of how they experience and use their scopes of action.

4 Street-level perspectives on scopes of action to support refugees' access to HE

In this section, we present our findings regarding the interviewees' perceptions of formal and informal access criteria as well as their professional scopes of action in applying those criteria.

Formal and informal access criteria

From the perspective of the interviewees, application procedures and access to German HE are highly influenced and even determined by a variety of formal and informal access criteria. In addition to the formal application criteria of German HEIs and preparatory colleges, complementary support programmes often have their own formal

⁵The two actors took part in an interview together.

access criteria. Therefore, it can be stated that official support programmes indeed channel refugees towards HE by creating a relevant channel and opening spaces of opportunity. This even includes formal exceptions for refugees.

"For example, someone [...] reaches only 59.9% in Syria but he has to have 60%⁶, then he cannot enter higher education. The only thing that could help him, in this case, would be if he could prove a finished study programme in Syria. [...] A year or something does not help; it has to be finished. But it is different with the refugees because some of them could not finish their studies. If you can clearly prove that [you were] at this higher education institution for five semesters, all credits are attached and are good enough, but [you] had to drop out because [you] had to flee. Then I can say, okay, I'll send you to the preparatory college." (Interview 4)

It must be noted that access to HE and even the support structures are highly selective. Access pathways can be seen as a network of formal selection points at a variety of levels, each including its own selection criteria (Schröder et al., 2019). While HEI members acknowledge the need to support prospective refugee students, institution-alised support programmes mainly aim to help them fit the existing and accepted formal access criteria for entering higher education. This does not address challenging organisational factors, such as the shortage of places in the courses creating strong competition and therefore a more selective situation than is entailed by the formal criteria alone. This aspect is enhanced by the understanding of quotas for international students as maximums, which intensifies the competition among refugee applicants.

"Yes, it is very unfortunate, as I said. Because many who could actually be accepted if they perform accordingly, cannot be accepted because of this lack of places." (Interview 5)

In addition to the formal access criteria, the interviewees provided examples of informal factors that influence prospective refugee students' chances of entering and obtaining HE in Germany. These informal access criteria are often interconnected combinations of contextual and individual challenges.

As some interviewees highlighted, language learning in German study preparation courses aims to help students achieve a very high, *almost-academic* level of German and requires changing deep-rooted learning styles. From the interviewees' perspective,

⁶When certificates of Syrian refugees are reviewed, the statement of comparability depends on the overall grade. While Syrian refugees with an average grade above 70% receive a direct entrance qualification for a specific field of study, applicants with an average grade between 60% and 69% are obliged to first prepare for HE and prove their suitability for the programme in which they wish to enroll.

this challenge is amplified by the refugees' disrupted educational careers and fragmented learning biographies. One interviewee illustrates why refugees have specific disadvantages in successfully preparing for their studies:

"Simply due to the partly very long time that has passed between [...] leaving school and restarting, they lack subject knowledge. [...] and in the meantime, a great deal has happened." (Interview 6)

Furthermore, informal access criteria at the individual level include social networks, interest in studying, persistence to follow that interest against all odds, resilience, trust in counselling, etc. Overall, it seems fair to state that informal access criteria play an important and notable role in one's success in entering HE, as well as passing study preparation courses and applying to HEIs in Germany.

Additionally, the interviewees identified finances and access to the labour market as examples of contextual informal access criteria that consequentially determine the possibility that one can study in Germany. This shows how access to HE can be directly influenced by settings and circumstances beyond the essential application, study preparation and admission process. One interviewee reported that some refugees drop out of study preparation due to difficult housing situations (Interview 7).⁷ Problems with housing during study preparation are amplified by daily commuting time and related costs that further limit these individuals' already scarce financial resources:

"We funded a participant of the Studienkolleg [...] who travelled daily during the first period [...]. He told me, 'I travel two hours and then two hours back'. Somehow he was busy with travelling four hours a day." (Interview 3)

Furthermore, if refugees have remote accommodations, they likely have to face a lengthy language learning process to meet the admission criteria for study preparation:

"In my opinion, the whole language course system needs to be improved. [...] How can we take care of refugees living out of town in rural areas? This is a big problem. [...] They sometimes have to wait a year until the courses there reach the registration numbers the providers require to begin." (Interview 4)

⁷Upon arrival, refugees are usually placed in communal accommodations, often in remote locations. They seldom get to choose their own places of living at first. Furthermore, racial discrimination in the housing market and financial challenges often prevent them from moving to inner cities even when they could technically choose to move. Research indicates that restrictive housing policies, the design of housing infrastructure and structural challenges in finding appropriate accommodation inhibit refugees' chances of social participation and inclusion (Tietje, 2020).

Applying formal and informal access criteria

The analysis reveals that the interviewees' understandings and assessments of official regulations vary from rather critical to neutral to mainly positive. While we primarily considered formal access criteria in a general sense, every institution has its own specific regulations, which makes gathering information on access to HE a crucial challenge for refugees – and an informal access criterion on its own (Berg, 2020; Gateley, 2015). In most interviews, the plurality of admission and selection criteria was criticised as overly complex and unclear.

"This is only valid for this preparatory college. Meaning, every preparatory college has its own exams, yes? [...] Unfortunately, it has to be said, but that is how it is at the moment, in the individual states, they are very, very differently constructed. [...] Yes, this is a downside of federalism, you just have to [laughing softly] see it that way." (Interview 5)

When it came to language proficiency, none of the interviewees questioned the formal access criteria established by the HEIs. This implies a position of helping prospective refugee students to compensate for specific disadvantages compared to German students, or other international applicants without refugee backgrounds. Since access to German HEIs generally relies on rather rigid requirements and performance standards, the fact that the interviewees highlighted the importance of meeting established access criteria legitimised these selection procedures according to the logic of meritocracy (Liu, 2011).

Strikingly, while the participants generally spoke approvingly of formal access criteria, one interviewee criticised the language course certificates as insufficient. Based on the argument that standardised certificates do not actually represent a realistic or uniform estimation of language skills, the interviewee – who is in charge of deciding whether applicants can be admitted to subject-specific preparation courses at the university – only accepts prospective refugee students after an additional test.

"It is always a mosaic, what we are doing. Meaning, on one side, what kind of courses they took. Also, what kinds of certificates they have. I also speak to everyone individually here. Form an impression and give them my own assessment test. Which is imperative and sometimes delivers surprising insights." (Interview 7)

It is also worth mentioning that, in most interviews and across professional positions, the interviewees expressed the expectation that prospective refugee students initiate and continue their own preparation and application process. While describing support as important and necessary, in the end, most interviewees see the central responsibility as belonging to the prospective refugee student, thus suggesting the significance

of informal access criteria for successful access to HE. They acknowledged that this process will probably take a long time. However, while research indicates that persistence despite insecure prospects of staying in the country, potential financial hardship and unclear chances of successfully entering HE are fundamental challenges (Baker & Irwin, 2019; Berg, 2020), our interviewees mainly described them as necessary skills for prospective refugee students. Strikingly, the head of the preparatory college even pointed out that one benefit of a longer study preparation period is more time to adjust to a new education system (Interview 5).

Experiencing and using scopes of action

All of our interviewees hold positions that are related to channelling refugees into HE. Thus, they are all gatekeepers and influence prospective refugee students' chances to enter and obtain HE by providing information and advice or making decisions on applications. The analysis revealed variances in how they experience and use their professional scopes of action in supporting refugees' access to HE – for example, by providing help and support beyond their professional duties. This can have immense practical consequences: whether the actors in charge of channelling refugees towards HE advise them to study or do something completely different during counselling, whether they go out of their way to support an individual case or whether they make admission decisions, they have scopes of action throughout the channelling process. The extent varies greatly depending on the interviewees' estimation of their own position and their ability to consider informal access criteria, but also seems connected to their interpretation of the *worthiness* of individual prospective refugee students. Whether and how key actors use their scopes of action can alter individual cases and make huge differences for those they encounter.

The counsellors we interviewed – including student counsellors and *first contacts* – mainly emphasised that their task was to help target groups and individuals. For example, they support target groups by building networks with external actors and disseminating general information to refugees and relevant professionals, such as members of housing institutions and employment agencies. In addition, they provide information about formal regulations and further official contacts. Their work can also include accompanying and supporting applications for funding and other urgent issues. Most interviewees in counselling positions described their efforts to help students meet formal requirements while simultaneously being confronted with informal selection processes. The *first contact* of the sampled university mainly discussed official rules and formal criteria in terms of the knowledge of how to circumvent them:

“One has to know the rules too in order to see [...] there might be loopholes. [laughs softly] Often. So, often in the area of BAFöG [public, interest-free student loans], there are really tough rules. But there are always exceptions as well.

And then one has to, the better one knows the rules [laughs], the better one can see, where there might be an exception as well." (Interview 1)

Receiving information at the right time can be crucial to the success of applicants. Thus, counsellors tend to view themselves as important supports for refugees to transition to HE successfully. They are especially focused on becoming familiar with formal regulations, but also find additional ways to support prospective refugee students. The extent to which they can do so is closely related to their formal position. While counselling for refugees is generally available at the foundation (Interview 3), more extensive support depends on whether they meet the foundation's formal access criteria. Moreover, while the *first contact* at the university (Interview 1) is supposed to actively coordinate offers for refugees and build a respective network, the *first contact* at the university of applied sciences (Interview 2) counsels refugees voluntarily and stated that she does not have an overview of the activities for refugees at her HEI. Therefore, the interviewee has neither the time nor the official position to initiate organisational change or to conduct extensive work on individual cases.

The members of matriculation offices (Interviews 4 and 8), in contrast, understand their role to comprise neutrally applying official regulations. They tend to view these rules as external frameworks that they do not make or change, only apply. They described the ordinary interpretations of rules, but did not clearly separate them from the official rules; instead, they seemed to think of them as their application. In this way, the rules are externalised by being attributed to existing rule books, ministries, laws, etc. This leaves them with limited scopes of action. As previously mentioned, the interviewee in charge of admitting refugees to faculty preparation courses at the university (Interview 7) showed a great sense of responsibility to not only apply formal rules but also check whether they fulfil their aim. Therefore, he has created his own language proficiency test since he is not satisfied with the validity of the language certificates brought by most of the refugee applicants. This procedure is meant to ensure that only prospective refugee students with the necessary language skills can enter HE. On the other hand, the interviewee strongly supports individuals who he sees as promising. The fact that he approves of official regulations but also extends them in order to apply them properly shows that he makes great use of his scope of action.

5 Discussion and implications

As the empirical analysis shows, offers of counselling and support in HE access, admission and study preparation processes indeed represent crucial *entry points* (Gürer, 2019) into the new and complex German HE system. These offers lead to the evolution of important social relationships that continually affect refugees' educational pathways and their chances of further integration in Germany. In line with other find-

ings, our analysis highlights that refugees' successful transition to and participation in new educational contexts can be facilitated, in particular, through interactions that are simultaneously personal and professional (Baker et al., 2017; Naidoo, 2015). Focusing on the issue of formal and informal access criteria reveals the need to respond to multi-faceted access barriers at the earliest possible stage of the application and study preparation processes, provide counselling and support and consider the diversity of prospective refugee students, who are especially burdened by multiple disadvantages.

In addition, the analysis shows that – in addition to the standardised requirements for application and admission to pre-study programmes – locally variable settings and circumstances can influence access to HE. While assumptions about *which person is presumed to fit the institution* (Berg, 2020, p. 211) were omnipresent in the interviews, the interviewees tend to take different courses of action. On the one hand, the interviewees in counselling positions mainly provide support for prospective refugee students on an individual basis, building networks with external actors and providing accurate, transparent information to refugees and relevant professionals. On the other hand, the interviewees in charge of managing admission processes seem to understand their task to comprise the neutral execution of the given rules for the performance-based selection of applicants. Others experience insufficient ability in their professional positions to advocate for and assert the legitimate claims of refugees while considering their specific needs. In contrast to the widely acknowledged political goal of expanding HE access for the new target group of refugees, the relevant institutions are not sufficiently proactive in finding ways to reduce both formal and informal barriers. Instead, the underlying norms and rules of the organisations rely on a meritocratic notion of success, amplifying the risk of reproducing educational inequalities (Schröder, 2021).

As a study by Webb et al. (2019) indicates, innovative approaches to organisational learning and inclusive educational concepts are more likely to evolve when staff members have the opportunity to reflect on their everyday experiences. They suggest using *staff workarounds* as a starting point for facilitating tailored support measures for refugee students. Thus, we propose the further development and enhancement of individualised and holistic approaches to support, which consider the various facets of prospective refugee students' lives. In addition, professional training strategies could provide opportunities for systematic reflection on refugees' needs and resources at the organisational level and initiate local engagements to make pre-study programmes more responsive to their lived experiences.

However, our analysis also points to the significance of structural limitations to organisational development and professional training. For example, further qualitative developments of study preparation offers can only be realised with sustainable financing and the necessary further training. In particular, this would include the development

of new models for individual counselling and learning support, as well as more subject- and subject-language-oriented teaching. Additionally, measures to overcome these organisational barriers might include expanding the capacities of study preparation programmes and HEIs to reduce competition, as well as sustainable funding arrangements allowing for delays and detours in study preparation.

It is fair to state that increasing educational opportunities for highly qualified refugees is not only a question of individual capabilities but also a matter of engaging all relevant areas and organisations. For example, it could mean politically promoting early and sustained institutional counselling systems that accompany refugees with academic aspirations through every stage of their educational careers. In general, the search for innovative approaches to organisational learning should not be restricted to support structures and the offers of HEIs and study preparation organisations. Rather, refugees' successful post-migration trajectories rely on cooperative organisational learning that includes the institutions and networks of actors throughout the entire *assemblage* (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018) that shapes their educational pathways and chances to achieve subjectively meaningful integration in Germany.

Due to our methodological decision to define our sample as one regional cluster of organisations concerned with prospective refugee students' HE access, admission and study preparation, our findings are limited in terms of range. Preparatory studies in Germany are a heterogeneous and not uniformly institutionalised field. With regard to the successful transition of refugees to HEIs, various, sometimes contradictory legal, social and labour market policy issues intertwine, making local and regional differences in practice likely. Further studies, especially representative ones, are necessary in order to get a more comprehensive picture of the situation of refugees in study preparation and their chances to access HEIs. So far, however, there is a lack of suitable data on educational transitions of study applicants with refugee experience and, most of all, organisation-specific data on pre-study programmes is not even collected. This is especially problematic, as once again increasing expectations to open up the HE sector for highly qualified refugees, this time from Ukraine, can be observed. Nevertheless, this article contributes to the understanding of key actors' experiences, perspectives and crucial roles in the development of innovative equity strategies in the field of study preparation for refugees.

Since 2020, the German HE and study preparation system had to face wave after wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, an organisational challenge affecting all HE areas, staff and students. However, it is important for us to make one final comment: refugees benefit exceptionally from experiences of social integration, accompanied by social recognition and appreciation in personal counselling situations and study preparation programmes (Baker et al., 2017; Grüttner, 2019). Existing educational inequalities are

likely to worsen in the wake of the pandemic. This underscores the need to make every possible effort to improve responsive support for refugees in German higher education and study preparation.

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