Challenges and Directions for the Right to Education of Refugees in the Post-pandemic Era—A Case Study of Germany

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of many people around the globe. Apart from the health issues, among other groups, refugee children are exceptionally impacted on their right of education and the population of refugee children increased in recent years. When those two situations happened at the same time, detailed analysis and tenable solutions are required to stop this worsening trend. Taking Germany as an example, the only developed country among the top-5 host countries, the right to education of refugees in the post-pandemic era is discussed in this paper, and the data was mainly collected from BAMF, UNHCR and Deutsche Welle. Promoting the development of digital era might reduce the demand of teachers and other resources. From an indirect perspective, encouraging entrepreneurship is another feasible approach to make refugees to be educated. The directions highlight the pivotal roles of the adjustment of integration courses. This study needs more attention to be concerned and solved constantly with the change of global trends.

Keywords: refugees · Germany · educational challenges · post-pandemic era · safeguards

1 Introduction

The past decades have witnessed an influx of asylum-seekers with refugee backgrounds. Nowadays, the world is experiencing an unprecedented wave of refugees unleashed by COVID-19 and the turbulence of international situations. Consequently, the research in this field is once again in the spotlight and needs to be addressed urgently. According to the data from The UN Refugee Agency, it is noticeable that nearly 26.4 million refugees in 2020, around half of whom are under 18, which implied that there will be great problems in the education system. Germany is facing tough issues, for which its initial embrace of refugees led Germany to become one of the target countries for applicants with refugee background, so the number of children among German refugees has risen sharply.

In recent 10 years, scholars have begun to study the impact of this trend on education by illustrating the methods of school enrollment, pointing out the barriers in refugees' education, and doing interviews and comparative experiments to conclude. Previous
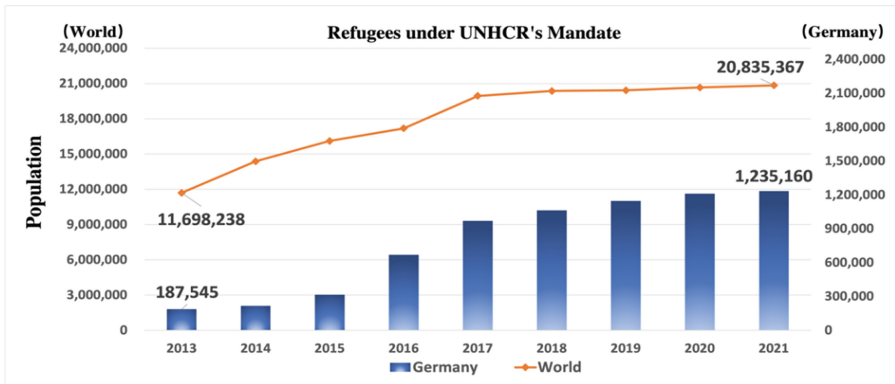
Fig. 1. Cumulative number of refugees received from Germany and worldwide (2013–2021). *Note: original by the author*

studies haven't dealt with the worldwide refugee situations which were influenced by the pandemic, so the related research is sparse, only a few annual reports mentioned this issue. This case study of Germany investigates the anticipated crisis in the domestic education system when confronted with increasing number of refugees and summarizes the problems to come up with reasonable practices to protect their educational rights. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in this investigation, the data is collected from official websites and available databases to illuminate the developing current situations and verify the reliability of support systems. Therefore, this study aims to the protection of refugees' right to education by identifying emerging problems in Germany and exploring practical measures, providing new insights into the post-pandemic era at the same time.

2   Refugee Context in Germany

From the influx of refugees in early 2015 to the outbreak of refugee crisis at the end of 2018, the refugee issue has become an inevitable problem for German Government. In Fig. 1, the total number of refugees (including people in refugee-like situation) in Germany reached 1.2 million at the end of 2021, which is around 10 times more than that of 2013. During past 10 years, Germany has played a much more important role in offering haven for refugees than before (nearly 6% currently).

2.1   Pandemic Impact on Refugees

Due to the spread of COVID-19, Germany's Federal Ministry of the Interior has decided to suspend programs for humanitarian admission of refugees for the time being. Programs aiming at providing shelter for refugees in distress and refugee admissions in the context of the EU-Turkey agreement are affected [1]. Meanwhile, some experts pointed out that the high risk of COVID-19 outbreak could lead to widespread deaths in refugee camps because of the severe overcrowding and a lack of medical equipment. However, the

Table 1. Age structure and sex ratio of refugee asylum seekers in Germany in 2020

Age	Population	Percentage	Among the Data				Male Ratio	Female Ratio
			Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage		
Under 4 years old	33,892	33.0%	17,354	29.2%	16,538	38.3%	51.2%	48.8%
4-10 years old	10,724	10.5%	5,714	9.6%	5,010	11.6%	53.3%	46.7%
11-15 years old	6,754	6.6%	3,738	6.3%	3,016	7.0%	55.3%	44.7%
16-17 years old	3,967	3.9%	2,629	4.4%	1,338	3.1%	66.3%	33.7%
18-24 years old	13,920	13.6%	9,791	16.5%	4,129	9.6%	70.3%	29.7%
25-29 years old	10,033	9.8%	6,588	11.1%	3,445	8.0%	65.7%	34.3%
30-39 years old	13,663	13.3%	8,229	13.9%	5,434	12.6%	60.2%	39.8%
40-49 years old	5,996	5.8%	3,388	5.7%	2,608	6.0%	56.5%	43.5%
50-60 years old	2,506	2.4%	1,360	2.3%	1,146	2.7%	54.3%	45.7%
Over 60 years old	1,126	1.1%	568	1.0%	558	1.3%	50.4%	49.6%
Total	102,581	100.0%	59,359	100.0%	43,222	100.0%	57.9%	42.1%

Source: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2020, Asyl, Migration und Integration, Berlin, 2021, S.25

pandemic did cause side effects on the asylum applications, for which, from January to the end of November in 2020, Germany received a total number of 93,710 initial asylum applications, decreased 30.1% compared with the same period last year.

The sharp decrease of asylum applications is to a large extent associated with travel restrictions, the closure of borders and asylum institutions. Furthermore, some travel restrictions remained in place at the end of 2020, and will likely continue to impact arrival numbers into 2021. Therefore, the German government implements some form of adaptive measure to minimize risks because of COVID-19. A robust asylum system, which is adaptive and prepared, is important as the COVID-19 pandemic strained the system designed to facilitate access to territory, register, and document asylum claims, and determine refugee status [2] so that they can not only continue to function but also simplified the application procedure and strengthen their response forward. From January to September in 2021, the total number of refugee applications received by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees was 131,732, an increase of 52.9% compared with the same period last year [3].

2.2 Demographic Analysis of Refugees

According to the reality in Germany, we divided asylum applicants into three groups: the young population aged 0–16, the working-age population aged 16–60 and the elderly population over 60 years old and analyze how the age structure of asylum applicants will affect the education system, vocational education in Germany. Age and sex data of refugee asylum seekers for 2020–2021 provided by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, see Tables 1 and 2.

After comparing two tables, the age structure of asylum applications tends to be younger, while the proportion of infants (< 4) and children (4–10) decreased. There are some detailed conclusions:

Table 2. Age structure and sex ratio of refugee asylum seekers in Germany in 2021

Age	Population	Percentage	Among the Data				Male Ratio	Female Ratio
			Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage		
Under 4 years old	38,799	26.2%	19,840	22.6%	18,959	31.3%	51.1%	48.9%
4-10 years old	18,210	12.3%	9,581	10.9%	8,629	14.2%	52.6%	47.4%
11-15 years old	10,595	7.1%	6,014	6.9%	4,581	7.6%	56.8%	43.2%
16-17 years old	5,677	3.8%	3,981	4.5%	1,696	2.8%	70.1%	29.9%
18-24 years old	23,373	15.8%	16,425	18.7%	6,948	11.5%	70.3%	29.7%
25-29 years old	16,615	11.2%	11,071	12.6%	5,544	9.1%	66.6%	33.4%
30-39 years old	20,901	14.1%	12,908	14.7%	7,993	13.2%	61.8%	38.2%
40-49 years old	8,776	5.9%	5,057	5.8%	3,719	6.1%	57.6%	42.4%
50-60 years old	3,657	2.5%	1,931	2.2%	1,726	2.8%	52.8%	47.2%
Over 60 years old	1,630	1.1%	824	0.9%	806	1.3%	50.6%	49.4%
Total	148,233	100.0%	87,632	100.0%	60,601	100.0%	59.1%	40.9%

Source: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2021, Asyl, Migration und Integration, Berlin, 2022, S.25

(1)   The principal group of applicants is still the working-age population, and its proportion increased slightly from 2020 to 2021. In 2020, the percentage of working-age population is 49.9%, which number is 50,085, while this percentage in 2021 is 53.3% and the population number is 78,899. Compared with those figures, the population increased by 28,814, which indicated that the related vocational education could play an essential role in mitigating serious aging problem in Germany.

(2)   The number of asylum applicants, ranging from 4 to 24 years old according to each stage of education, grew up from 35,365 to 57,855 and the percentage of this age group increased by 4.5%, from 34.5% to 39%. The demographic changes in this specific group proved that the rejuvenation trend of population, which also mirrored the unprecedented pressure of refugees' education. Those young children are the potential labor forces of the society, so that they must be well-educated and carefully monitored to avoid society security issues.

While the young children are important for Germany's future workforce, there are some major problems to be handled in time. Considering the exclusive social welfare and policies towards young children, some asylum applicants decide to cheat on their age to gain individual benefit [4], which will reduce the credibility of data collection and influence the implement of related policies.

3   Challenges for Right to Education

The specific situation of refugees differs widely, depending on their status, available resources, infrastructure and networks and other factors. As all newly arriving migrants, refugees are obliged to participate in 700 h of Integration Courses, which include training in basic language skills [5]. After a certain time and depending on their status, refugees are eligible for public financial student support.

From a general perspective, the education system for refugees in Germany is quite comprehensive because of the national capability and resources. However, considering the rapid rebound in the number of refugees and applicants in the post-pandemic era, the government is facing a series of problems, which not only include the possibly having to learn a foreign language [6], having their credentials evaluated and approved [7], and dealing with psychological trauma [8] (these normal problems before the pandemic), but also some emerging troubles due to the COVID-19.

3.1   Shortages and Mismatch in Educational Resources

Today the largest displacement has been recorded since WWII. This has great ramifications on educational access where, according to the UNHCR, only 1% of this global refugee population will have the opportunity to find a place in tertiary education [9]. Besides, we must take the birth of every child from refugee registers into account, for which UNHCR estimates that almost one million children were born into a refugee life between 2018 and 2020, an average of between 290,000 and 340,000 per year. However, the analysis for 2020 most likely underestimates the number of children born. Hence, in the future, there are several problems anticipated based on this trend.

Firstly, the government and society must tackle the shortage of educational resources. Enrolling 300,000 additional children each year requires 6,000 classrooms and the recruitment of 10,000 additional teachers (Based on a ratio of 50 pupils per classroom and 30 pupils per teacher). This kind of shortage will cause imbalances within the teachers' teaching activities, so they cannot have detailed and close carness and supervision towards these students and dent the effectiveness of courses. Besides, because of the limited teachers and schools, a few children will lose their opportunities to be educated.

Furthermore, the diversity of their educational background and other factors caused the mismatch between the course setting and students' status. "There were 21 students, ranging in age from 10 to 16," Gwendolyn Dembowsky, a German middle school teacher, told Deutsche Welle. The difficulty of teaching these children is that their levels vary widely, with some already having a lot of experience and others having to start from scratch [10]. Such situations made it hard to implement the teaching schemes settled by the government and teachers cannot carry on the teaching at the same time. Apart from the mismatched teaching, the textbooks need to be adjusted constantly. "Most of the material starts with games," Klaus Holloch in Cornelsen Press said, "But not everyone likes games, especially older boys, who can get bored immediately if textbooks are written childishly" [10]. Overall, the mismatch is a more serious and major problem in German, even all the host countries around the world.

3.2   The Growing Dropout Rate

Consequently, especially during the pandemic, the closures of schools and limited access to technology cripple displaced children's academic progress [2]. According to *Global Trend in Forced Displacement - 2020*, there are around half of school-age refugee children were out of school since the data was collected in 2015. "One-third of German students have a high school degree or higher, but only one-tenth of foreign students graduate from high school. From this dropout rate, the proportion is disproportionate. This rate

of German students is 6%, while that of foreign students is 15%" [11]. Because the integration policy in Germany, the foreign students are mostly constituted by refugee children, so the drop rate is higher than 15%. Nowadays, the government lowered the restrictions of pandemic control, allowing schools to carry out offline teaching, but teachers and parents do not want to take any risks so that they prefer online courses going forward. On the other hand, the restrictions impeded their access to the right of education, for which they cannot afford electronic devices and telecom fee. Additionally, parents must take care of them so that the family income reduced, and expense increased, which will at last force them to drop out of school or even cause greater problems like child labor.

3.3   Low Social Integration

In both pandemic period and post-pandemic era, as mandatory integration and language courses were moved from classrooms to home-based e-learning and social interactions were limited, migrants lost contact with native speakers. According to a survey, refugees with better language knowledge, that is, with excellent reading and writing skills, will increase their employment rate in the labor market by 19%. In addition, foreign languages are seen as the key to successful integration into the host country [12]. Such online learning will impact their working competence and stay in the culture shock for a long time due to poor language performance.

According to a research project directed by four researchers in June 2018, when the enrolled interviewees (all of them are college students of refugee background) were asked about the most important needs they have and barriers they face to feeling integrated at the university, they mentioned the need of more preparation and other help type courses and barriers to integration due to absence [9].

For college admitted students, they prefer to have more preparatory courses because they have been out of school for too long, and they already forget the basic knowledge which requires some lectures to recall that knowledge back. The second barrier is absence, that lack of more regular, sustained time at university hurt their feeling of being more integrated. Most of the extra-curricular activities were suspended due to status quo, demolished their feelings of getting involved in cherishing campus life.

As for obligation education, teaching plan is fixed, which contains 15 h of language learning and 5 h of math in one week [10]. However, this plan did not adequate or suitable for them, for which their educational background normally devoid. When they apply for German higher education, they generally must hold an entrance qualification and proof of fluent German on a C1 level or intermediate level of English [13], which narrowed their chance of higher education.

3.4   Political Barrier

From Merkel's "We can do it" (Wir Schaffen Das!) to a new round of concerns about refugees' survival and health caused by the COVID-19, the problem of refugees has been the focus of the political parties in Germany and the domestic and foreign affairs in Europe for many years [14]. The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) seized the refugee issue to make a big fuss, criticizing the refugee policy of the

Merkel government, pointing out political demands such as anti-refugees and resetting border control, which exerted huge pressure on Governing Party and to some extent slowed down the process of relevant refugees' policy, including the permission procedure for enrollment. Vicious competition between parties will inevitably lead to the worsening prominence of the refugee problem.

State governments have greater autonomy on educational regulations. Refugees in some states are waiting too long for compulsory education. In Germany, many scholars and politicians said that it has a greater impact on the education and social integration of refugees [15]. Due to the pandemic control, the waiting time has increased significantly, while some states need more than half a year for examination and verification.

4 Safeguards for the Right of Education

However, the pre-existing and emerging educational challenges faced by refugee children as mentioned in this policy brief were already exacerbated during the COVID-19 period [16]. Educational policies should thus take into account their specific vulnerabilities in times of the pandemic to avoid long-term systemic inequalities [17].

4.1 Enhance Educational Resources and System

Germany's use of digital technology revolution initiates in the 1990s, and the development, for three decades, of digitalization is driving the transformation of higher education with an unprecedented influence in all directions, including Open Educational Resources and Massive Open Online Courses. Government should support financially the improvement to expand the gateways of resources and offer access to the students from a refugee background. Besides, the government, NGOs, foundations, and telecom companies can improve Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT) to build digital learning platforms, join the international digital cooperation agenda, and establish a global digital teaching cooperation network [18]. This not only provides educational opportunities for refugees in the post-pandemic era but also promotes the process of international education in Germany.

The General Integration Courses (GIC) in German should become more dynamic. Based on a special data sample from the Integration Business File (InGe) of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), the 700 teaching units (TU) are not suitable or necessary for all refugees [19]. The government could categorize them according to their academic level and implement different integration courses to minimize the cost and maximize the efficiency of integration. The setting of the courses should be more reasonable as some students drop out of school to avoid intensive classes and some disinterested courses [19].

4.2 Encourage Entrepreneurship

This is an indirect approach to protect the right to education. Direct financial assistance for their education can be helpful, but it increases the domestic financial burden. In their

entrepreneurial activities, refugees contribute to their host societies by offering not only economic but also various types of socio-political values.

Previous studies have highlighted refugee entrepreneurship as a source of innovation [20] that promotes the homeland's culture [21] and fills institutional voids within refugee camps [22]. Refugee entrepreneurial activities are additionally a mechanism to improve the image of refugees [23], contribute to political activism [24]. Government can offer not only investment to start-ups but also simplify the censorship process to reduce their cost and begin business as quickly as possible. After establishing a firm, they can offer jobs for students to reduce the unemployment rate and make them be involved in society. Gradually, among refugees, they will understand the importance of knowledge and skills, which cultivate their motivation towards studying and reduce the dropout rate caused by internal factors. Thus, the status quo will change into a positive track in a long-term.

5 Conclusion

This research paper set out to come up with the protection of their right to education by analyzing domestic dilemmas in Germany and exploring practical measures, providing new insights into the post-pandemic era and unprecedented refugee tide at the same time. In conclusion, this paper illustrates the potential problems, starting from the demographical analysis of refugees in recent years, which contain the demand for more teaching resources, and the low social integration influenced by the mismatch between asylum-seeker and teaching methodology. Those challenges need new directions to be resolved, including developed digital resources, "partial" but feasible encouraging policies, which require cooperation from all aspects of the society. In doing so, the heaviest refugee influx into Germany will be abated and legal processing will settle many into more secure living, education situations. This thesis has provided a deeper insight into refugees, but also hope to draw attention over the world to follow the Charter of the United Nations to reach out their hand and pull them out of "chaos". Refugee issue, especially children, should be prioritized out of humanitarian instead of the tools for politicians to earn political benefits.

A limitation of this study is that the delayed update of the data related to refugees, like the refugee population in 2021 will be revealed at the end of May 2022. In addition, the absence of some important date was replaced by reasonable inferences in an undirected way. The context of Germany presents an only generalized situation, the reality in each state could be various with each other, the solution of the current dilemma as well. Another factor is language, for which it is a case study about Germany and there will be some disparities between English and German illustrations.

More broadly, research in this filed should be emphasized and studied further for the upcoming refugees from the unstable and insecure status of world affairs, like the war between Ukraine and Russia. Refugees should have been accepted and received all over the world, if every country can develop a practical and comprehensive receiving system, there will be no more humanitarian crisis and we can build a real community of shared future for human beings.

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