

Experiences within a pre-bachelor programme for refugees - Insights from Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands.

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The European context of migration

The current 'migration crisis' in Europe started at the end of 2014, as migrants, primarily from Africa and Syria, and mainly due to war, arrived in Europe in big numbers. Initially, the European Council labelled the situation as tragic (European Council statement 2015, European Commission and its priorities, 2018). With the growing influx of migrants, member states started referring to the situation as a security problem, resulting in a greater reluctance to accept newcomers into their territory.

In February 2016, the EU member states imposed a European border, deployed coast guards and implemented a joint Turkey action plan. "Fortress Europe" was gaining momentum. Europe promised aid to Western Balkan countries in handling the massive migration waves. Countries were forced to accept a quota of migrants (Bauerová, 2015).

According to the Dutch Refugee Council, in 2016 more than 1.2 million people applied for asylum in Europe. In 2017, 651,250 people were seeking

protection in a European country. One third of these migrants were welcomed by Germany, 16 % were Syrian refugees.

The impact of migration on societies in Europe and on politics cannot be neglected. Europe seems to be divided into at least two blocs on the issue, racism and violent racist attacks have become a daily occurrence, and populism is on the rise. The general popular mood ranges from cautious acceptance of migrants to outright rejection.

The Dutch context of migration

As a direct result of the war in Syria, the peak number of asylum applications in the Netherlands was registered in the second half of 2015. Subsequent spikes in the number of family reunions took place in late 2016 and early 2017¹.

Although immigration is still on the rise in the Netherlands, the demand for asylum and family reunion stabilized in 2018. The total amount of Syrian refugees is on the decrease in the Netherlands. However, migration from Africa, Europe and other parts of the world is still increasing.

Since 2000, public opinion and the media in the Netherlands became increasingly negative about the rights of migrants. The government's policy on integration stressed "inburgering", the adaptation of the migrant to dominant Dutch standards. Though hardly anybody dares to refer to it as such, Dutch policy is an assimilation policy (Ingleby,2005).

Once an application for asylum is accepted by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND), refugees and asylum seekers are obliged to 'integrate' and receive a DUO subsidy of EUR 10,000 to finance integration courses. After three years from their arrival in the Netherlands, migrants have to pass a state exam in the Dutch language (minimum A2 level NT2) and an exam in Dutch culture. They also have to familiarise themselves with the Dutch labour market. Repeated failure of State exams could result in a reimbursement of the EUR 10,000. In addition to the subsidy mentioned

¹ <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2018/44/aantal-immigranten-en-emigranten-ook-in-2018-hoog> consulted the 30th of October 2018

earlier, the migrant receives a regular monthly allowance from the government, in cases where there is no income.

In 2015, a decentralization policy shifted the responsibility of the central government concerning labour, welfare and care to municipalities. Each migrant (refugee as well as asylum seeker) is supervised by a care consultant of the municipality. In case of long-term unemployment the care consultant will try to enable the migrant's active participation in society by advising the person to do voluntary work or to attend reintegration courses for jobs. If a refugee meets the requirements for higher education, the municipality will support the refugee in furthering his/her studies.

Pre-bachelor programme for refugees at Dutch national level: stakeholders

With the support of Dutch municipalities, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (DUO integration²) and the Foundation for refugees (UAF³), sixteen higher education institutions in the Netherlands agreed to start a one-year pre-bachelor programme to prepare potential refugees for higher education. Participants are required to have a minimum of a secondary school certificate, officially validated by Nuffic, the Dutch Organization of Internationalization in Education, or by IDW⁴, the International Credential Evaluation. They are expected to be legal inhabitants of a municipality and have a refugee status. In addition, before entrance they have to be in possession of a certificate indicating a B1 level in the Dutch language and pass an intake interview successfully.

The higher education institutions offer a one-year programme which consists of Dutch language (from B1 level to B2 level - which is an admission criterion in case of higher education) - mathematics, study skills and other subjects directly relevant to the students. The main objective of the programme is to help participants to access and profit from higher education.

² DUO inburgering: <https://www.inburgeren.nl/en/> consulted 30th of October 2018

³ UAF Foundation for refugees: <https://www.uaf.nl/home/english> consulted 30th of October 2018

⁴ IDW: Credential evaluation: <https://www.idw.nl/en/credential-evaluation.html> and Nuffic The Dutch organization for internationalization in education <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/> consulted 30th of October 2018

Pre-bachelor for refugees at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, Sittard, Maastricht, Heerlen

Refugee students

In academic year 2017-18, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences started a pre-bachelor programme with twenty-five students, seventeen of them refugees of a non-western provenance. The cohort consisted of students who had been living in the Netherlands for not more than two years, were mainly from Syria, and aged between nineteen to thirty years. After the first year, sixteen refugees entered higher education and one started professional vocational training in pharmacy assistance.

During the first semester of the first year (2017-2018) we realised that the problem-solving strategies of refugee students were different from those of Dutch students. When faced with problems, refugees did not consult their peers. They reached out only to lecturers. Working in groups had to be prompted and constantly encouraged. They had no experience with problem-based learning strategies.

Various departments' didactic orientations are primarily based on principles of "Problem- Based Learning." This pedagogical orientation requires the active participation of students and cooperation in peer groups. Students are expected to be able to share knowledge and experiences with each other, to receive and give feedback and to be able to evaluate peers. Being able to trust each other is basic within this perspective.

Given the difficult experiences of war, refugee students could not trust each other and especially in emotional distress were not prepared to utilise Dutch care, welfare and services. As the academic year progressed we adapted our training line, targeting integration in new educational structures as well as in society.

Method & didactics

Starting points of the training course were based on the mission of Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in which working in teams and groups is a prior requirement. We were also inspired by and adopted some of the principles of Berry, Segal and Kagitcibasi (1980) and the Dutch translation of

the Cultural Formulation (Braakman, Beijers, Van Dijk, Groen, Oomen & Rohlof, 2017) to meet the needs of the refugees in a culturally sensitive way. The idea was to train for competences needed in Dutch higher education and in society (which are mainly western oriented) combined with a coaching line which positioned and reinforced the refugee's identity and wellbeing. While the essence of integration is that it is a two-way process of adaptation (Ingleby, 2005), it requires respect for the self, the cultural identity and skills and willingness to participate in the new environment.

The approach of the pre-bachelor programme is informed by two orientations: in the first semester, besides cultural identity and intercultural communication, academic and problem-based Learning skills were the main subjects. In the second semester the focus shifted to skills to cope with emotional problems.

The pre-bachelor programme consists in total of forty, five-day weeks. In the first thirty weeks the refugees get twelve hours of Dutch language per week, three hours mathematics, two hours study training and one-and-a-half hours of coaching. The remaining time is spent on homework, computer skills and visits to organizations and private enterprises. In the ten last weeks, after passing their state exam B2 of Dutch language, they can learn technical vocabulary used in their further educational programme. If needed, they can apply to different departments to study mathematics, chemistry or physics. They can also do volunteering work at a hospital or care service.

In the first semester, besides cultural identity and intercultural communication competences, students were trained in academic skills. They all made a video presentation, learned to refer to literature, to give and get feedback, to formulate arguments, and to formulate learning goals.

In the second semester, to prepare the refugees to cope with life challenges, we used the seven life domains, which is a method practised by social workers in the Netherlands to empower participants (Van Leeuwen, Den Dekker & Pol, 2016). It is a constructive didactic approach in which students work in small groups together with a social work student. The refugees appreciated the presence of Dutch peers. They practised role plays based on a case in small groups, talking about problems (using cases/helicopter views), making own cards with terminology and expressions to get access and to practice interactions with professionals (Klein, 2017).

Learning objectives of the programme

Refugees:

1st semester:

- Can identify problem solving strategies, can work in groups, are able to use own capacities and those of their peers.
- Can give and receive feedback and
- Can participate in co- and peer assessments
- Can present, find, evaluate and refer to literature

2nd semester

- Practise talking about problems in groups (helicopter view).
- Can find information about system.
- Practise getting into contact with a professional (for help).

Outcomes of the programme

Refugees:

1st semester:

- Are aware of required Problem Based Learning skills. (teamwork/feedback/evaluations/academic skills selection, evaluation and reference to literature in presentations).
- Did practice and made video presentations of their own learning goals and demands.
- Got insight in own skills and orientations on the labor market and education needs.
- Liked working with Dutch students in same group.

2nd semester:

- Are aware of own problem solving strategies and practices / expectations in NL.
- Can formulate problems with helicopter view, are aware of own capacities and potential capacities of peers and are able to work in groups.
- Can get in contact with professionals, if needed.

Results

At the end of each semester Refugees were asked to give feedback. The following is some of their feedback:

1st semester

- Appreciation of attention to cultural identity (belonging) and intercultural communication;
- Advantage of formulation of learning objectives/personal development plan and SWOT analysis was at first not recognized as being important. Students of the previous year came back to explain why it is useful for their next stage of their educational journey;
- Soft communicative skills: giving and receiving feedback, formulation of arguments and contra arguments and co- and peer assessments were experienced as possibly useful;
- Making an own video presentation, visits to organizations (academic hospital) and private enterprises as well as cooperating with Dutch students was really well appreciated.

2nd semester

- Ability to talk with a helicopter view about problems (not own/but cases);
- Refugees are aware of expectations of the Dutch system, and learned to interact to get access to care and services and establish a first contact with professionals if needed.
- Refugees appreciated our intentions to help them.

Case study

M. a young Syrian male, left his family in a warzone and arrived in Turkey. He had to cross the Mediterranean sea by boat and came walking from Greece to the Netherlands. He could trust nobody, in the whole journey only one Macedonian family helped him to stay overnight.

At home he has a brother, mother and father. He did not inform his mother about the difficulties he experienced during his escape. In the Netherlands, after his interview with the immigration service, he immediately received a legal refugee status. His primary needs are completely met: he lives in a small flat and receives a monthly allowance by the Dutch municipality. He has no

friends, no relationships with neighbors, he feels lonely. At home he was studying engineering at the university. His father was a successful engineer and had finished his study in the USSR. He projects his experiences and expectations upon his son. He expects M. to finish his studies in the Netherlands, and that he will be as successful as he was. M. feels the pressure and the expectations of the family as a burden. More problematic is that much happened during his journey, he was raped and has no words to tell about this trauma even to himself. He feels ashamed and guilt and there is no way to share this with his family.

Although he continuously receives good comments and results in the Pre-bachelor program – he communicated a loss of energy and severe feelings of depression. He needs help to process his traumas and has been referred to a psychologist. The psychologist (representing the mainstream culture) decided to place M. in a groups therapy, with Dutch people, which was not successful.

In private conversations with the coach, M. could understand that the situational and legal context of his father’s situation is not comparable to his situation. By explaining the difficulties our society imposes on newcomers, he agreed that circumstances are completely different and that he himself is not to be blamed. More personal matters were not disclosed.

Despite all good intentions, we do realize that we are not able to adequately meet all the needs of refugees. M. communicated that the structure and experiences of normality in the classroom within the pre-bachelor program helped him to process his problems. He followed the programme to its end.

Reflection

Due to traumas – loss, feelings of guilt, most of the refugees in the pre-bachelor program somehow required special attention. Leaving the own environment and sometimes the own system, combined with difficulties experienced during acculturation in the new environment, self-esteem is under pressure. Especially in a neo-liberal system with completely different cultural orientations – where self-reliance, autonomy and individualism are core values – it is hard for non-western refugees to feel at home.

While basic needs are guaranteed and provided by the Dutch government in the sense of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (McLoud,2007), integration remains challenging. Using the Dutch language at a profound level (B2) and

making adequate use of the digitalized technocratic system, proves to be problematic.

The neo-liberal system in the Netherlands expects that before people ask support from professionals, they attempt to get support from their own informal network. This is really a challenge especially for refugees who lack trust and experience feelings of shame. Care and services are evidence-based oriented in the Netherlands – refugees must learn to take care of themselves and to utilize the existing services. Getting access to professional support, was the first objective.

R. a young Syrian mother, has an 8-month old baby. During the winter the baby got ill, mother wanted to consult a physician. She phoned to make an urgent appointment. The doctor's assistant asked the reason why she should urgently consult a doctor. She started asking questions, but the young Syrian mother felt offended. In her eyes an assistant is not sufficiently medically trained to make such decisions ... As a result, the Syrian mother got no priority to see the doctor and was put on a waiting list. She had to wait a week before she could speak to the doctor.

In line with the Dutch system, we used a similar strength based, constructive didactic approach. But we cannot expect refugees to adapt to a new system without any preparation and without any explanation of logics / values. In a context where education represents the mainstream culture, special attention to cultural identity is required to enable equity in relationships and in learning.

Conclusion

Working with refugees (in education) requires regular professional reflection (Groen, 2006) and an adapted interaction towards the voices of the refugees, for their personal situation and experiences – history of war (lack of trust), religious conflicts, on cultural patterns and taboos (shame/honor). Even if basic needs (such as housing, finance and organizational support) are provided, the consequences and effects of war and acculturation problems, require special attention. Supervision for educators and internship students is needed to cope with the challenges.

In our pre-bachelor programme we helped refugee not only to develop themselves to participate in higher education in an educational way, but we also helped boost their confidence.

The preparation of the trainers (students of social work) based upon the principles of the Cultural Formulation helped to increase cultural sensitivity.

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