

Challenges faced by Refugee Students in Institution of Higher Learning in Malaysia

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Abstract: Global conflict has resulted in a serious dislocation of citizens from many countries and Malaysia is facing major influx of refugees. Among the number of asylum seekers there are individuals with ambition to pursue higher education. The aim of this study is to survey the current challenges faced by refugee students in the educational environment in Malaysian Higher Institutions of Learning. This exploratory study leads to the flaws in the educational policy for refugees. The sequential mixed method has been implemented to gather and analyze the data. This exploratory study is framed by global policy of human rights and suggests the importance of educational opportunities for refugees to avoid major crisis in Malaysia.

Keywords: refugee, education, policy, human rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thousands of people are fleeing their homes every day in search of safety—in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria), and elsewhere, a common phenomenon these days. Refugees are crossing borders, arriving in remote rural communities, or in sprawling cities affected by urban poverty, fed by security operations, ethnic cleansing or armed clashes. In 2017 alone, more than 600,000 people crossed from Myanmar to Bangladesh within weeks. In Yemen, two in three of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance, and South Sudan, 25% of the population is displaced, and refugee outflows continue unabated. Some of these crises are decades old, such as in Afghanistan and Somalia, where hundreds of thousands of people uprooted, leaving millions stranded in exile. Malaysia being a close proximity to some of these crisis has attracted a fair number of refugees. The majority of whom are women, young people and children.

Refugees are one of the groups prone to being “left behind,” given their past experiences, sparse populations across the world, and the unique challenges they face resettling in a new country. Additionally, many of these individuals bring a traumatic past with them, including children and youths’ disruption of schooling. Some countries, like Australia, USA and European countries have policy in place for refugees’ educational needs to allow continuation of education, albeit, in the new environment. But some other countries, like Malaysia, has no education policy for refugees and only concern groups, especially the NGOs, provide limited opportunities for people coming from war-torn countries and this study is focusing on Malaysian educational environment and challenges it imposes on refugees’ education in Malaysia

Malaysia remains a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the absence of a legal framework has created a challenging environment for escapee education, students, who do not have access to formal education in the national system nor opportunity for higher education. Some 158,000 refugees and asylum-seekers are registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, 21% percent of registered refugees are in higher institutions of learning. In Malaysia there are neither scholarship programs, nor a clear-cut policy in place for such students, only few universities provide special arrangement, for example: wages, discounts for the school fee. Majority of the students hurdle to get their ways to pursue education and at the same time facing ample of challenges in the new educational environment. This research falls in line with human rights global policy and suggests creative awareness towards stabilizing the situation in the form of providing educational opportunities and creating a peaceful educational environment.

1.1 Statement of Problem:

Thousands of refugees enter the country yearly; some are register and carry the ID from UNHCR, however, the number of refugees, not registered is unknown and it is one of the major problems that can cause consequences. Along the line students who apply for higher institutions of learning in Malaysia face lots of difficulties. One of the major issues is to fullfill the requirements provided by the institution. Lots of refugee students receive basic education in their countries of origin, unfortunately some of those educational sectors are blown away by war or any other terror acts. It becomes challenging for students to apply and meet all the requirements. Apart from that, refugee students find the language and cultural barrier. Students, who are seeking for peaceful educational environment, are becoming a “black sheep” in the society due to cultural and religious differences. Addressing the fact that Malaysian Government doesn’t have a certain policy regarding the refugee education, the whole scenario becomes far more troublesome. Based on the stated problem this research focus on the following objectives:

Main Objective:

To examine the current situation in educational sphere for refugees in the context of Malaysia:

Objective 1: to examine the current challenges faced by refugee students prior to entry Higher Education in Malaysia

Objective 2: to identify the educational challenges faced by refugees upon entry to Higher Institution of Learning in Malaysia.

Target Issues

Malaysia is considered to be one of the destinations for asylum seekers and refugees (UN Journal, 2016). Holders of UN ID and non-holders of UN ID, who are eligible to enter into the education system, who meet the entry requirement to apply to Higher Institution of Learning currently stands at 21% only. UN ID holders have no permission to work in the country, this could become a push for young adults to choose the wrong choices in life and lead to criminal activities and a burden to the host country. If young adults would be involved in the academic environment and pursue education it reversely may open doors for them to become future leaders and get an opportunity to stabilize the situation in their countries of origin, besides, contributing to the global wellbeing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Background of Refugees in Malaysia:

The Cultural Orientation Resource Center has produced numerous publications providing key information about various refugee populations. These refuge backgrounders and culture profiles include a population’s history, culture, religion, language, education and resettlement needs, and brief demographic information.

Refugee: Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (Convention and Protocol, 1951/1996, p. 3). A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.

It is important to differentiate *refugees* and *immigrants* for a reason, that for these two categories of people exist different kinds of procedures and requirements based on international migration policy.

Definition	An immigrant is someone from a foreign country who relocates to live in another country. They may or may not be citizens.	Refugees move out of fear or necessity. For example, to flee persecution, or because their homes have been destroyed in a natural disaster.
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(Refugees from Syria, November 2014, Refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo, January 2014, Darfuri Refugees June 2011, Refugees from Iraq December 2014, Refugees from Burma June 2015, Muslim Refugees September 2014).

In the context of Malaysia as of November 2014, the UNHCR reported that the asylum population registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, including refugees and asylum seekers, is some 150,460. And this number is increasing and to know the exact number of refugees on the current period of time of 2017 can only be a guessing game, as people take

boats or pathways in order to enter Malaysia to run away from poverty and wars. However, the expectations of settling down in a new country could be quite dramatic, the reality is human trafficking and criminal rates can increase due to the rising range of refugee population.

Many refugees fleeing the country employ human smugglers also known as 'agents' to smuggle them across borders, often into India, Thailand and Malaysia. The journey to Malaysia would often involve boat rides across borders (e.g. from Yangon to the border town of Kawthaung and then on rivers into Malaysian waters) and then car rides in the backseats or car boots to farms, jungles or specific bases in North Malaysia before refugees make their way to the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur to have their asylum claims heard. While waiting to receive their refugee status, they live in makeshift camps in jungles and the outskirts of urban areas and in cramped spaces in urban low-cost residential spaces. (Lee Chin, 2016)

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the article to survey the current challenges faced by refugee students in the educational environment in Malaysian Higher Institutions of Learning. Therefore, this study was conducted in the form of a survey, with data being gathered via snowballing sampling with implementation of quantitative and qualitative sequential (mixed) method. Snowballing sampling is appropriate to this study as the target population is uncertain and hardly predictable as not all refugees are officially registered. Qualitative part of the survey is gathered via interviews with Malaysian educational institutions providing academic opportunities for these individuals; quantitative part of the survey is gathered through questionnaire distributed directly to refugee students. The qualitative interviews will be used to support the quantitative findings in sequential approach as identified by (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The following subchapter is focused on the presentation of results.

Profile Analysis:

In this section the results are presented in tables 1 and 2, which are representation and visual display of the descriptive demographic statistics of the sample (N=85) of respondents.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution on The Country of Origin of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yemen	20	23.5	23.5	25.9
Syria	20	23.5	23.5	49.4
Iraq	14	16.5	16.5	65.9
Libya	8	9.4	9.4	75.3
Pakistan	10	11.8	11.8	87.1
Other	11	12.9	12.9	100.0
Total	85	100.0	100.0	

From the result in the table 1 below, it is seen that majority of respondents come from countries Yemen and Syria (47.0 %) the average number of participants come from other countries (12.9%) and the lowest number falls on participants from Libya (9.4%).

Table 2: Demographic profile of the respondents based on UNHCR ID holders

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2	2.4	2.4	2.4
Yes	36	42.4	42.4	44.7
No	47	55.3	55.3	100.0
Total	85	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 gives us a general understanding that not all participants who consider themselves as refugees are holding an ID from UNHCR. 55.3% out of 100% of participants do not hold and ID whereby 42.4% do. Hence it can be observed that unregistered number of refugees is quite high.

Answering Objective 1: to examine the current challenges faced by refugee students prior to entry Higher Education in Malaysia

Table 3: Highest Qualification Among Number of participants

	Diploma and below	Bachelor Degree	Post Graduate	Total
Yemen	8	12	0	20
Syria	11	7	2	20
Iraq	4	8	2	14
Libya	3	7	0	10
Pakistan	1	4	5	10
Other	2	7	2	11
Total	29	45	11	85

Out of the number of participants (N=85) the highest qualification held is Bachelor Degree (N=45), the lower number falls on Post Graduate students (N=11), Diploma and Degree holders are (N=29).

Among the current number of participants out of 85, 76 has stated that they are not on scholarship and only 7 are on scholarship.

Table 4: Challenges Faced by Refugees' Prior Entry Higher Institution of Learning

	Yes. Its quite difficult to get wages/scholarships	Somewhat difficult	No. There is no challenge to get free education	
Total	69	13	3	85

Refugee students find it difficult to enter Higher Institutions of Learning in Malaysia stated 69 participants out of 85, due to the reasons of selective process, high requirements and not taking into account the refugee status of participants. The requirements per entry are rather high, which is quite difficult to fulfill. (based on the interview).

Answering Objective 2: to identify the educational challenges faced by refugees upon entry to Higher Institution of Learning in Malaysia.

Along the line with the entry challenges, refugee students as well experience more difficulties in the educational environment. This subchapter will elaborate on that.

Table 5: Adaptation to the learning environment among participants

	Yes. People treat me differently	Sometimes it's not easy. But overall I enjoy the environment	No. I feel comfortable in this environment	
Total	34	40	11	85

The table 5 above shows the responses among participants about their own feeling of belonging in the current learning environment, out of 85 refugee students 40 experience challenges and find it difficult to adapt to this educational environment, however they overall enjoy the learning process. Based on the interview, students have stated that they experienced depression and desire to return to the country of origin, but due to circumstances it is not possible. To overcome this, students form groups and societies to seek support and courage, whereby the small number of them remains being isolated.

Moreover, during the interview, it has been discovered that University staff do show compassion and encourage students in the educational environment, as demonstrated in the table below, the number of students who find support from university staff is 55 out of 85 number of participants. Although majority of the participants find the support from the staff, not a small part of participants 30 out of N=85, are not facing the compassionate from university personnel, which is quite disturbing, therefore the rest of the students find it challenging to adapt to the educational environment.

Table 6: University staff expresses encouragement and support based on survey respondents

	Yes	No	
Total	55	30	85

Table 7: The impact of new educational environment based on survey respondents

Total	How it is impacted you personally?			Total
	It has changed me a lot	It has changed me a bit	It hasn't changed me at all	
	47	29	9	85
Total	Have you felt discriminated or isolated in your educational environment?			Total
		Yes	No	
		39	46	85
Total	Have you experienced the language gap or a cultural barrier in your educational environment?			Total
		Yes	No	
		59	26	85

The table 7 above demonstrates the responses of participants (N=85), majority of the refugee students agreed that the new educational environment has changed them a lot, as it is entirely new country for them with its own customs and traditions. Majority of refugee students (59) have experienced the language barrier and cultural gap, the adaptation process hasn't been easy due to the fact that Malaysia is a multinational country with its cultural contrasts and variety of languages and religions. Moreover, the traumatic past carried from the country of origin has its certain impact on the students. Although culture shock and discrimination could be major challenges faced by refugee students, however it is important to highlight that 39 out of 85 respondents were the victims of discrimination.

4. DISCUSSION

This cross sectional study has been undertaken to identify few of many challenges faced by refugee students' prior entry and inside the educational environment of higher institutions of Learning. The analyses of 25 face-to-face interviews were undertaken through a systematic process. Multiple readings of the interview transcript were done on the raw data. This analysis enabled the development of classifications of the raw data to get a deeper understand on the subject. The names of the participants used have been hidden to maintain the ethics of the research. Survey questionnaire has been distributed to 85 number of participants to undertake the quantitative part of the analysis and examine the survey results on current challenges faced by refugee students in Malaysia.

Followed by analyzing factors that contribute the overall objectives namely; high requirements prior entry the educational institutions, lack of scholarship and wages followed by challenges inside the educational environment: discrimination and ignorance from the society, researchers have identified these critical problems, which answer the objectives of the study.

Moreover, based on the interview 70 out of 85 of participants' desire to return the country of origin in order to contribute and improve the situation. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that students in Malaysia are for education purposes, to gain the knowledge in specific fields to use it to improve the life in the countries of origin.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Topics that are absent but evident in this study *school belonging, self-awareness and resilience*. Further studies required to identify more challenges and possible solutions to create awareness and possibly improve the situation for refugee students not only in Malaysia but worldwide. This study contributes the human right global policy and the enormous work of UN.

Throughout the study one important factor has been identified, majority of current number of participants' desire to return to their home countries after gained educational certificate in order to contribute and improve the current situation. Therefore, countries shouldn't be looking at refugees as a threat. Further investigations will be taken place...

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