

# *Academic Dugnad and Academic Practice: A Norwegian Approach to Higher Education Inclusion*

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*European governments focused on policy initiatives prioritizing refugees' entry into the workforce require equally robust initiatives to prepare and assist refugees for labor market entry to ensure policy goals are reached. Two programs developed at Norwegian universities aimed at higher education inclusion offer successful models to both prepare and train refugees to enter the skilled labor workforce and fill in labor shortages. Based on a mentorship model, the Academic Dugnad and Academic Practice programs expand refugees' networks by encouraging the active participation of local communities. However, such policies require support by strong integration policy focused on social inclusion, allowing for greater upward mobility beyond access to higher education.*

**Keywords:** *Higher education, recognition, academic dugnad, integration.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In response to the refugee flow of 2015 European Union member states largely adopted a policy approach to refugee integration focused on labor market entry. This response can be viewed as rooted in Europe's social democracies dependency on robust tax revenue to support generous welfare programs, increased austerity measures, aging populations and growing populous movements. Although seemingly practical, the approach provides policymakers with easy markers to measure the success or failure of refugees' ability to enter the workforce, without providing a rubric to evaluate the efficacy of bureaucratic and societal mechanisms intended to prepare refugees for vocational opportunities. These policy objectives are a short-term fix to a long-term issue and increasingly place greater responsibility on refugees to self-integrate into receiving countries. It is the responsibility of receiving countries to provide refugees with the mechanisms in which to integrate; refugees cannot self-integrate. The involvement of multiple local actors is pivotal for the integration process to successfully occur and it is incumbent on receiving countries to arrange societal infrastructures to accommodate the integration process (Abeytia 2019, Hagelund 2010).

Refugees frequently face multiple obstacles that potentially inhibit vocational

functionality (Abeytia 2019, Bandaranaike 2015, Campbell 2012, Fischler and Booth 1999). The acquisition of the appropriate language skills, the development of personal and professional networks, as well as access to higher education impacts refugees' ability to participate in the labor market. (Abeytia 2019). Labor-market-focused policies also do little to address discriminatory hiring practices that disproportionately impact refugees of non-European backgrounds (Connor and Koenig 2017, Campbell 2012). An additional challenge remains, how to integrate highly skilled and highly educated refugees into the labor market to allow for greater upward mobility that continues to benefit subsequent generations?

Norway initiated an integration policy shift in May 2016 to focus on ensuring that, "newly-arrived immigrants with refugee backgrounds enter the labor market or start an education without delay and acquire a permanent connection to the labor market." (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2016). This new policy direction marks a shift away from refugee-centered policy and places the nexus of the discourse on job readiness. Yet without programs supported at the national and municipal levels aimed at preparing refugees for work, these policy initiatives will inevitably fail.

Prior to a focus on vocational integration of refugees in Norway, Oslo Metropolitan University (Oslo Met, formerly Oslo and Akershus College University of Applied Sciences) introduced two academic inclusion programs, the Oslo Met introduced the Akademisk Dugnad (Academic Service) and later University of Oslo's (UiO) initiated Academic Practice. The Academic Dugnad and Academic Practice programs are nuanced, long-term approaches to social inclusion based on a mentorship approach and are an investment in a future skilled workforce.

The aim of this policy brief aims to provide an overview of the Academic Dugnad and Academic Practice programs as an approach to academic inclusion of refugees to encourage similar policy initiatives that support labor market entry.

## **ACADEMIC DUGNAD**

The term *dugnad* holds cultural significance for Norwegian society as a form of community service. The term originates from the Old Norse *dugnaðr*, which means help or good deed (UiO 2017). The word describes a group of people engaged in voluntary work to produce an extraordinary effort of lasting value within their community (Abeytia 2019). As UiO Rector described in a speech at Information Day Event in December 2015, *dugnad* is a vehicle for

society to help others and as academics, the way UiO can assist asylum seekers is through an academic *dugnad* (Otterson 2015).

The idea for an Academic Dugnad was developed by Oslo Met with the intention of streamlining the process of higher education inclusion for asylum seekers. The program was introduced across the university and UiO was invited to participate. Through a partnership between Oslo Met and UiO a framework was developed to welcome refugees and asylum seekers into Norwegian society and explain the numerous layers required to enter the Norwegian higher education system (UiO 2017). At this initial stage, the initiative was presented to the network of Norwegian universities and was implemented on a handful of campuses throughout Norway. The University of Agder (UiA) in Kristiansand was one institute that embraced the concept early on and continues with the program's implementation.

The Academic Dugnad enjoyed substantial support from the administrations of Oslo Met and UiO. "Within the first few months, the *dugnad* project was presented to and discussed by the deans as well as the University Board," and this support was translated into "embedding the initiative in the organization" to garner support for the program at all levels of the university (UiO 2017, 3).

As the concept of an Academic Dugnad evolved it expanded to comprised five components:

- Lecture series *På Flukt* (displaced)
- Information Days, Academic Dugnad events
  - Book drive
  - Student-to-student mentoring
- Funding for online Norwegian language classes
- Cooperation with national and international agencies
- Academic Practice

### *På Flukt (displaced)*

The lecture series began early in the resettlement process and was a means for asylum seekers to engage with Norwegian culture, society and language. The series provided lectures on numerous topics from law, education to medicine, and by May 2016, the series arranged over 3, 014 lectures (UiO 2017). The series was discontinued.

### *Academic Information Day for Refugees and Asylum Seekers*

In November 2015 Oslo Met arranged the first Information Day event and student-to-student, buddy/mentor program. A second event was held in December of 2015 and was held on the UiO campus. The event was jointly hosted by UiO, Oslo Met, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), the Norwegian Universities and Colleges

Admissions Service (SO) and the Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service (NUCAS). The event required vertical and horizontal coordination across Norway among multiple agencies that oversee international admissions. A flowchart was the deliverable presented at the event, which outlined the pathway to entering the Norwegian university system. An Arabic version of the flowchart was made available by NOKUT. Also attending the event were the Norwegian University<sup>1</sup> of Life Sciences, the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, the Norwegian School of Theology and The Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education. The Academic Dugnad Information Day was adopted by other Norwegian universities who hosted similar events on their campuses for refugees and asylum seekers. The Information Day was intended as a one-day event and served as a model for similar events at other Norwegian universities.

### *Book Drive*

Prior to the information day the UiO library issued a call for collecting literature through donations. The “free bookstore” enjoyed great success and was well received by the participants who eagerly procured books on multiple topics in English and Norwegian for themselves and their friends.

### ***Student-to-Student Mentoring***

The student-to-student mentoring sessions introduced at the Oslo Met event was included at the conclusion of the event and was later implemented as a stand-alone program. This initial session was informal and meant to connect student mentors with refugee students. Student mentors shared their experiences and answered questions. Prior to the event student mentors participated in an intensive training course, which included a lecture by an expert on refugee mental health. This mentoring program served as a supportive network for refugees and assisted in acclimating to academic life and acquisition of Norwegian language suitable for university work.

### ***Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)***

In response to a significant demand for Norwegian language courses UiO contributed financially to the expansion of MOOC. The expansion and support of MOOC provided on-demand access to Norwegian language course despite geographic location and increased refugees' ability to acquire language skills. UiO did not continue funding the project nor was it adopted by another agency. Currently MOOC does not offer online Norwegian courses.

### ***European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR)***

Recognizing the need for the fast-tracking of certifying refugees' educational certification and credentials NOKUT began working on a pan-European solution for the recognition of international credentials. In 2015 NOKUT proposed the EQRP to establish a multi-national framework to fast-track the evaluation of refugee's education and training background (NOKUT 2019). NOKUT partnered with numerous agencies, including the United Kingdom National Recognition Information Center (UK NRIC) and the European Council. A pilot program was implemented in Greece in 2016 and the first recipient of an EQRP, a Syrian woman, was admitted to Oslo Met (Council of Europe 2017). While studying at Oslo Met she received an internship. She is currently employed after arriving in Norway three years ago. The EQPR was utilized by the Integrating Syrians into Turkish Higher Education through Recognition of Qualifications (REFREC-TR) program to provide passports to eight Syrian candidates to study in Turkey (Yıldız, 2019).

### ***Academic Practice***

Following the Academic Dugnad, UiO began the Academic Practice program that was implemented on a few campuses throughout Norway, including the University of Agder (UiA).

The Academic Practice Program was a response to addressing challenges identified by UiO and was adopted by Oslo Met. Initiated in the Oslo area through the Introduction Program, it required cooperation with the municipalities. Candidates applied for the internship through their Introduction Program adviser who forward the application request directly to the Academic Practice Working Group.

Acceptance into the program required: 1) recommendation from the Introduction Program, 2) at least one university degree, and 3) a department within the university with the capacity to accept an intern. The program provides interns with: 1) relevant work training, 2) language training, and 3) preparation for further studies or academic work (UiO 2017). Internships were offered to eight candidates in 2016. Sixteen applications were rejected and thirteen were being processed in 2017 with no further published updates (UiO 2017).

Academic Practice provides a flexible solution to support the diverse needs of refugee students and served as the implementation of the Academic Dugnad through the day-to-day inclusion of refugees in an academic setting. The program required multiple actors to actively engage with refugees to support their progress. The support of mentors to create a network of support for refugee scholars to reach their academic goals was identified as critical.

*Case Study: University of Agdar (UiA),  
Kristiansand Norway*

*The Academic Practice Program was independently implemented on campuses throughout Norway. The participation of UiA allowed refugees living in southern Norway the opportunity to participate without traveling to Oslo. UiA's entrance criteria emphasized academic level Norwegian and English language skills and sought asylum seekers who held a bachelor's degree or higher. However, basic Norwegian language courses provided through local kommuners (municipalities) were not preparing participants for academic or profession life.*

*Marlene Romme Morch, Project Manager, Division of Student and Academic Affairs UiA, emphasized that Academic Practice program focused on assisting refugees in acquiring higher-level English language skills required for university. She stressed the significance of local, Norwegian language mentors, as pivotal in providing academic level Norwegian language to refugees who were successfully awarded internships (Abeytia 2018).*

*In 2017 UiA received four applicants and by 2018 the number of applicants increased to 20 applicants. In 2019 a Syrian intern of the Academic Program was admitted into a PhD program at UiA. Successful candidates received internships and were paired with mentors who matched refugee candidate's background within a compatible department. Morch emphasized the need to expand the number of mentors paired with inters to provide adequate support. In general, program administrators found Syrian refugees easier to integrate into the program because they entered with a higher-level educational background (Abeytia 2018).*



## **Challenges to the “Academic Practice” Initiative**

Access to higher level Norwegian language is not provided through government programs and limits refugees’ access to higher education. The place of residency of refugees plays a factor in the ability to participate in the program; Academic Practice was not ubiquitously applied throughout Norway and few refugees were resettled in the Oslo area. Refugees were largely resettled in small rural towns and villages which limits their access to these programs. The program at UiA expanded access outside the Oslo area. The Academic Program at UiA did not enjoy the same level of administrative support as universities in Oslo, so it did not have a robust network of volunteers and mentors. The UiO report (2017) highlighted that greater flexibility in the bureaucratic system is required to expand and fully utilize these programs. It also indicated, “support from the academic environments is generally high, but cannot be expected to maintain in the long run unless the majority of participants are genuinely able to contribute to the workplace (UiO 2017, 12).”

## **ACADEMIC DUGNAD INITIATIVE OUTCOMES**

Oslo Met signed an agreement with the largest refugee center in Oslo aiming to provide daytime activities to the refugee center, which included computer and English language courses, daytrips and sports activities. The Center was subsequently

closed by the government. Oslo Met continued to offer English and computer courses to refugees and asylum seekers at four of the largest welfare offices in Oslo. Oslo Met was approached by the Norwegian government to establish a year-long bridge program for nurses, teachers and engineers to fast-track authorization to work.

Hasina Shirzad provides an early success story. Shirzad, an Afghan refugee who arrived in Norway, received permanent residency. In 2015 she traveled from the city she was living in to attend Oslo Met’s initial Academic Dugnad Information Day where she was introduced to the Norwegian higher education system and how to navigate the system to apply for enrollment. After attending the Academic Dugnad she applied to Oslo Met to continue the education she halted when she left Afghanistan. She is currently a student at Oslo Met with an internship in the Journalist Department (Shurzad 2019, Halvorsen 2017, Lindholm 2016).

The success of the Academic Dugnad included UiO’s and Oslo Met’s ability to make it a national priority and to expand the program to other European universities via the Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UiO 2017) and at international conferences in Bilbao and Brussels. The greatest lesson of the initial phase was provided by participants on the Information Day. They reported, “this was the first day, since leaving their home country, that they had felt like the person they used to be” (UiO 2017, 7).

The Institute of International Education and Jusoor launched a similar program in 2012 matching Syrian refugees with US universities via IIE's Syria Consortium for Higher Education (Sengupta and Blessinger 2018). The University of Indiana at Evansville partnered with the Consortium and after the arrival of Syrian students on campus, the Director of International Admissions and Recruitment at the recognized refugees' required support beyond academics if they were going to flourish. Her office provided additional, non-academic support to refugees, to create a community of support.

In 2011 a group of Syrian Americans sponsored 33 Syrian students and brought them to the U.S. to complete their studies. The students thrived and all entered the work force as highly skilled workers (Higgins 2019). In Mexico a similar initiative was developed and funded by a Mexican national that since 2015 awarded 30 Syrian refugees scholarships to study at Mexican universities. Since their initial start in 2014, Habasha expanded to include international partners and donors (Proyeco Habasha 2020, *Daily Sabah* 2019). In 2019 they received funding from the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) to refurbish student living facilities (*Daily Sabah* 2019).

IIE's Syrian Consortium and the Academic Dugnad experienced similar challenges in the implementation of their programs, refugee's lack of adequate language skills and placement within departments and universities willing to accept refugee students. UiO and Oslo Met sought to embed the Dugnad programs within the administrative cultures of the university systems and were greatly successful. UiA also was successful in implementing the Dugnad programs, despite a lack of strong support by the university administration. UiO and Oslo Met expanded the reach of the Academic Dugnad through the Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe who in turn sought to introduce Dugnad programs onto their campuses. Oslo Met's development of a bridge program to fast-track accreditation of teachers, nurses and engineers, could be expanded to include other professions to meet the individual needs of other European countries.

The Academic Dugnad and Academic Practice programs initiated by UiO, Oslo Met and UiA sought to provide long term benefit to refugees and the receiving country, while providing a cultural bridge for the establishment of mutual understanding between refugees and the receiving population. The Norwegian Academic Dugnad and Practice programs are not unique in their approach to providing a model of higher education inclusion. However, unlike other initiatives, it was successful in its ability to recruit



support vertically and horizontally across a broad spectrum of society to create support for these programs based on a mentorship model. Two recent US Rhodes Scholarship recipients, Safar Jalani, a Syrian refugee and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) student, Jin Kyu Park, both acknowledge their academic success required the support of a network of communities (Mitchell 2019, Wei 2019). The adoption of a mentoring style proved to be highly effective in producing successful academic and vocational outcomes (Månsson and Delander 2017, Salazar-Stanton 2001).

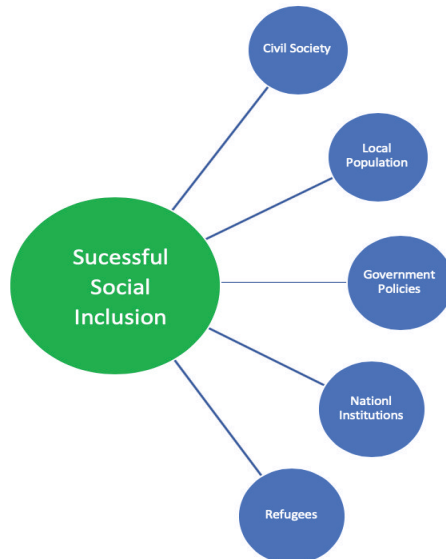
Two challenges identified by refugees who wished to continue with their studies or high-skilled work in Norway: 1) adequate access to appropriate language skills and 2) the recognition of previous education (UiO 2017). Additionally, placement of highly skilled refugees through the Norwegian Introduction Program continues to be problematic. At the time of the implementation no refugees were resettled in the Oslo. Participants were residing outside of Oslo, which reduced the number of refugees with ability to participate. Matching and placing refugees within an appropriate department also was challenging and departments were often slow in responding to requests, which frustrated refugees eager to begin the program (UiO 2017).

Unfortunately, the Academic Dugnad activities did not continue to be a national priority and the long-term benefits that could be derived from the programs was drastically reduced. A change in UiO leadership also marked a reduction in Dugnad activities at the university.

### ONLINE NETWORKS: SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media provided expanded access to both refugees and Norwegians at various intersections throughout the Academic Dugnad's stages. Oslo Met and UiO leveraged social media to advertise the Information Day event. The information provided on the Information Day was further disseminated by attendees via Facebook groups, amplifying the impact of the event to include asylum seekers who were not able to attend the event (Abeytia 2020). Online networks were utilized to advertise for student volunteers for the student-to-student mentor program with great success (UiO 2017). Online language classes offered through MOOC significantly increased on-demand Norwegian language resources for refugees.

Figure 1: The Active and Passive Paradigm



Source: Anisa Abeytia

*The Active and Passive Paradigm is measured by the level of participation by Norwegian individuals, institutions and Syrian refugees. The active participation of all three actors contributes to producing inclusive model of integration through active behavior, while a lack of active participation by any of the three actors results in a passive paradigm and limited integration.*

## AN ACTIVE OR PASSIVE APPROACH

Social inclusion and integration require the creation of multiple layers of interconnected networks to produce the most successful outcomes (Figure 1). The lack of participation, or passivity, on the part of one or multiple actors resulted in limited social inclusion or a lack of integration (Abeytia 2019). The involvement of receiving countries is essential to successful integration programs (Abeytia 2019, Hagelund 2010). Fernandes’s (2015) research also identifies a marked passivity in reception center programs in Scandinavia that stem from a policy that grants asylum seekers little agency. An active approach to integration and academic inclusion is present in both the Academic Dugnad and Academic Practice programs and the instances where the greatest coordination between refugees, locals, civil society, government and

Norwegian institutions occurred with greater successful outcomes. The mentorship program offered refugees is emblematic of the multilayered framework required to expand potential networks for upward mobility for refugees and has the potential to both provide vehicles for social inclusion and entry into the workforce (Higgins 2019, Månsson and Delander 2017, Salazar-Stanton, R.D. 2001).

## DISCUSSION

“When you reconnect a refugee to education, they thrive,” is the spirit behind the Academic Dugnad and Practice programs, to provide refugees a means to access higher education in Norway (IIE 2019). Existing bureaucratic apparatuses require restructuring and institutional flexibility to facilitate successful outcomes to: 1) assist highly skilled refugees enter the work force, and 2) to provide training to refugees to acquire new skill sets.

The Norwegian shift in policy away from a refugee centered approach to a focus on workforce entry coincided with a right shift in Norwegian politics, and a European populous backlash against refugees. Administrative structures and policy are not immune to the fickleness of public opinion, especially in regard to funding asylum and refugee programs and can often shape discriminatory policy that run counterproductive to the needs of both refugees and the receiving countries (Amnesty 2019, Perry 2019, Brant and Crawford 2016, Pred 2000). Failure to provide ubiquitous support at the national and local levels to programs designed to aid refugees in entering the work force ensures policy failure. Refugees require substantial emotional, physical, linguistic and educational support to thrive and become vocationally functional and it requires both local and national commitment.

Today's European social democracies require skilled workers. As Europe's populations atrophy and the tax base shrinks, refugees can invigorate the economies of their new home countries. Refugees' ability to contribute will not happen overnight. Some may need to acquire new skills, or continue their education, and others may require a safe place to heal from years of physical and emotional trauma. It will need to be a process that requires mutual respect and understanding on both sides. European policy makers would do well to begin to develop legislature unencumbered

by populous sentiments rooted in arcane animosities and instead focus on the creation of programs that will best tap their new human capital. Oslo Met, UiO and UiA offer viable models for other European countries to expand and immitate that are both refugee centered and vocational focused as well.

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