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Educational Mobility of Highly Skilled Refugees:

A Phenomenological Study

by

Samra Culum

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in the Department of School Psychology and Educational

Leadership

Idaho State University

Fall 2021

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Samra Culum find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Dear Ms. Culum:

I have reviewed your request for expedited approval of the new study listed above. This is to confirm that I have approved your application.

Notify the HSC of any adverse events. Serious, unexpected adverse events must be reported in writing within 10 business days.

You may conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. This study is not subject to renewal under current OHRP (DHHS) guidelines.

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Sincerely,

Ralph Baergen, PhD, MPH, CIP
Human Subjects Chair

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Samet and Nijazeta Culum. Because of you, all things are possible. Mom, thank you for reminding me on a regular basis that my education is something no one can take away from me.

Hvala ti za sve!

Thank you for everything!

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Above all, thank you to my husband, Brandon. Your encouragement means more to me than words can express.

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List of Abbreviations

DQP   Degree Qualifications Profile

EAR   European Area of Recognition

ENIC   European Network of National Information Centers

EQF   European Qualifications Framework

GAO   Government Accountability Office

NARIC   National Academic Recognition Information Centers

ORR   Office of Refugee Resettlement

RPC   Refugee Processing Center

UNHCR   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WES   World Education Services

Educational Mobility of Highly Skilled Refugees: A Phenomenological Study

Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2021)

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to analyze student's decision-making strategies as they engage in the processes of transferring institutions and awarding of academic credits. To date, research in higher education has explored the transfer experience of students at both vertical (2-year) and horizontal (4-year) institutions (Government Accountability Office, 2017; Handel, 2011). Researchers have looked at this topic from the lens of students, faculty, and administration (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The field has a long way to go in understanding the transfer experience for students with foreign credentials. Because of the decentralized evaluation model in the United States (U.S)., the transfer experience for students with foreign credentials can vary greatly. To better understand the experience, this research focused on a particularly vulnerable student population, refugees, and their outcomes. A refugee is a person who is forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020). There is little research on refugee students, their experiences with higher education, or their system of accessing foreign credentials (Abdul Satar, 2017; Campbell, 2017).

This research may help institutions reflect on their policies and practices to ensure they operate in a manner that is fair and equitable to all students. This research will describe unique and common experiences amongst highly educated refugees who are looking to have their foreign credentials recognized by a U.S. college or university. The use of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework provided a structure to describe and examine the lived experiences of refugee students (Cannon, et al., 2003; Longley &

Maxwell, 2003). Using an exploratory qualitative research design, this study described

perceived experiences with systems and processes that either allowed or restricted a

person's ability to access assets.

Key Words: Higher Education, Refugees, Academic Credentials, Qualifications,

Certification, Livelihood

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Students' decision-making strategies as they attempt to have their credits transferred and awarded from one institution to another are a captivating challenge. In times characterized by ever changing systems and processes, the transfer and awarding of academic credits continues to intrigue administrators, policy makers, and prospective students. In many instances, quality education means smooth academic transfer among colleges, universities, and programs (Council of Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2019). Most students will lose credits during the transferring and awarding of academic credit from one institution to another (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2017). To make judgments about the quality of education a student has received, colleges and universities adopt standards and practices that attempt to address the following elements of quality: student achievement, curriculum, faculty, services and academic support for students and financial capacity (CHEA, 2006). If colleges and universities are to maintain their reputation of quality, their system of evaluating academic credits must be equitable to all students, no matter where the educational credentials derived from.

This study looks to explore the topic of transfer and awarding of foreign education credentials by U.S. colleges and universities. It is difficult to estimate how many foreign education credentials are lost during the transfer and awarding process because of the decentralized approach taken in the United States. Additionally, the decision-making strategies used by students with foreign credentials when navigating U.S. college and university systems remains largely unknown. The first chapter of the dissertation presents the background of the study, identifies the problem of the study,

describes its significance, and presents an overview of the methodology used. The chapter concludes by stating the delimitations of the study and defining relevant terms.

Background of the Study

Placing value on the learning that has occurred at a different institution is no easy task. For many students, the issue of whether schools will accept academic credits earned elsewhere is a significant one. Colleges and universities most frequently evaluate academic credentials from public schools, specifically 2-year public to 4-year public institution within their state, followed by out-of-state public institutions (GAO, 2017). Students who transferred from private nonprofit schools to public ones accounted for nine percent of all transfers. A significant number of challenges contribute to the process of analyzing and accepting credits from institutions for transfer, including limited resources, developing buy-in from faculty, and educating prospective students on the process (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2016). For many colleges and universities, the challenge remains of how best to streamline the transfer process without hurting the quality or reputation of the degree (Handel, 2011).

This study is not about domestic qualifications, but it is relevant to mention the frequency and scale of all students that attempt to have their learning recognized by another institution. According to a 2017 report developed by the United States Government Accountability Office, from 2004 to 2009, an estimated 35 percent of all college students attempted to transfer credits from one institution to another. Students who transferred lost on average about 13 credits in total. This loss equates to about four courses: a semester of full-time enrollment. Students who transferred from private nonprofit schools to public schools on average lost an estimated 54 percent of their

credits (GAO, 2017). This additional cost in time and money is often shouldered by the student. There may be additional costs for the federal government who provide student aid. As a result of retaking lost credits, the government's cost to support the student may increase if the transfer student takes longer to complete a degree (GAO, 2017). In some cases, students exhaust available aid before they complete their degree.

The transfer experience is not well documented for students who are looking to have their foreign academic credentials recognized by a U.S. college or university. It is difficult to determine how many credits are lost between foreign and domestic institutions because the U.S. does not have a federal agency that monitors the process of awarding and recognizing foreign academic credentials. There is minimal guidance and monitoring at the state level. As there is a "general lack of transparency in the credential evaluation process, it is often wrongly assumed that there is a consistent way to interpret foreign credentials" (Kacenga, 2017, p. 2). Because of the decentralized model, it makes it difficult to have credible quantitative data.

To develop a better understanding of the transfer experience of foreign academic credits, this study will focus on a specific student population. Centering on a specific student population can help institutions identify distinct opportunities for improvement (Wang & Wickersham, 2014). This study will generally focus on students who have identified themselves as refugees. A refugee is a person who flees one's own country in fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, social, or political affiliation (United Nations General Assembly, 1967). Worldwide, an estimated total of 1% of the 20.4 million refugees engage with the higher education system after resettlement (UNHCR, 2017). Since 1975, the U.S. has admitted over 3.1 million refugees, and

approximately 15 to 20 percent self-identify as having a higher education (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2020). The total number of refugees coming to the U.S. fluctuates based on global events and U.S. priorities. In the last two decades, admitted refugees came from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Admitted refugees that enter the U.S. come with a wide range of education and work skills (Farrell et al., 2008).

Upon arrival to the U.S., local community agencies help refugees with the integration process which includes access to economic achievement, education, housing, and health care (Ager & Strang, 2008). Education is one of the most influential assets when it comes to successful integration and self-sufficiency (Halpern, 2008). The systems and processes established by U.S. colleges and universities that either recognize or deny educational credentials and the options provided to students thereafter have a significant impact on that person's ability to successfully integrate into a community (Campbell, 2018; Capps et al., 2015). A highly educated refugee looking to practice a regulated profession in the U.S. typically starts by having their education and training credentials assessed by a licensing board (McHugh & Morawski, 2017). If a licensing board identifies deficiencies in their credentials, many refugees will turn to a college or university to fulfill their educational gaps. This research begins when refugees engage with colleges and universities. The interaction with a college or university can be via a refugees' self-interpretation of deficiencies, third-party credential evaluation agency, or those identified by a licensing board.

Refugees that engage with higher education institutions quickly learn that the systems and processes are different than the licensing board and present a whole new set

of challenges. This research focuses on the lived experiences of refugee students who have engaged in the process of transferring and awarding credits to U.S. institutions. Once credentials are evaluated and awarded by a college or university, the researcher will describe refugees' perceived options and limitations and their decision-making strategies to fulfill their goal of practicing their profession in the U.S.

Without the legal protection of their own country, refugees depend on their host country to protect their fundamental rights (Campbell, 2018). When the U.S. adopted the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees, it agreed to uphold all articles included Article 19. Article 19 declares refugees who hold diplomas and are desirous of practicing their liberal profession shall have treatment as favorable as possible (Refugee Convention, 1951). Article 19 refers to equitable treatment of refugees who have qualifications, a special license, a degree, or certificate required to practice a particular profession. Colleges and universities are implicated in this because they are viewed as a competent authority that can recognize a refugee's educational credentials and influence their ability to practice their profession. The themes that arise from this study may give insights about the way refugee students are treated by colleges and universities and if institutions are upholding the rights of refugees under Article 19 of the 1967 Protocols regarding the 1951 Refugee Convention.

It is difficult to form a clear picture of the refugee experience in higher education because research is scarce. The research that has been done on the refugee experience primarily focuses on accessing higher education or the social and emotional well-being of refugee students while attending a higher education institution, and only in recent years has the topic of transferring academic credits obtained elsewhere surfaced as a topic of

discussion (Hawthorne, 2013; Horst, 2006; McBrien, 2005; McHugh & Morawski, 2017; Morrice, 2013; Shakya, et al., 2010; Stevenson, & Willott, 2007; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). One of the primary challenges when discussing the refugee student population is that they are commonly placed into larger classification groups such as first-generation students, low-income, or an ethnic or race group (McBrien, 2005). With no identifying markers on their academic records, many schools do not have a clear picture of the refugee student experience. After one year of living in the country, refugees apply for a Green Card to receive permanent residency status. Unlike the status of international students, residency status means that there is no reporting or monitoring duties placed upon the student or institution. When international students are issued a visa, it is for the specific purpose of study. College officials are required to regularly report on the quantity and compliance status of all international students enrolled at their institution (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2020). This mandatory reporting has given colleges the ability to understand who is enrolled and in what programs, and their graduation rates. As a result of colleges and universities grouping refugee students into larger demographics, there is little information on their lived experiences. This has ultimately minimized the ability to describe their unique experiences (Abdul Satar, 2017; Campbell, 2017; Mozetic, 2018).

This research will go beyond the basic conclusion that educated refugees face challenges when attempting to have their qualifications recognized by colleges and universities (Campbell, 2018; Capps, et al. 2015; Hannah, 1999; Karakas, 2015; Rasheed & Munoz, 2016; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). To understand a refugee's behavior, "we need to understand the process by which people interpret and

define their environment" (Slavin, 2007, p. 149). Understanding refugee experiences may provide insights into challenges they face and to the phenomenon as to why and how particular strategies are used when engaging with U.S. colleges and universities. From these lived experiences, themes may arise that would be beneficial to college administrators and, refugee students as well as the communities that host refugees. As a result of this work, colleges and universities may consider refining policies, procedures, program admissions, or adjusting their day-to-day operations to ensure equitable treatment for refugee students and other populations who have foreign credentials or experiences.

Statement of Problem

Understanding the refugee experience is of interest as 49 out of the 50 U.S. states host refugees (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2020). There are several trends in the United States that underscore the importance of this topic. The aging U.S. population, specifically the large "Baby Boomer" generation, is set to retire, which will result in intense demands for labor. The current U.S. population growth is small, the second slowest in the nation's history (Batalova & Fix, 2021). The U.S. population cannot meet the demands of the retiring generation. As a result of these demographic trends, a "disproportionate share of this demand for workers across skill levels will need to be met by immigrant-origin populations, including those trained abroad" (Batalova & Fix, 2021, p.4). According to the same authors, nearly half of recent arrivals (immigrants who've arrived in the past five years) have a bachelor's degree or higher, and most often, credentials were obtained abroad. "Despite a strong influx of human capital, the states and the nation overall are failing to fully leverage the skills that millions of college-

educated immigrants have to offer" (Batalova & Fix, 2021, p.1). As a result of not capitalizing on a person's skillset, states are leaving millions of dollars on the table. The underutilization of their skills translates to lower earnings, which in turn affects the person and their livelihood as well as the community because it collects less taxes. These demographics serve as an opportunity for policymakers, service providers, educational institutions, and immigrant advocacy organizations at the state and federal level to streamline systems and processes to reduce brain waste in their community. Brain waste is the underutilization of professional skills that comes at the cost of the person, their family and broader society (Batalova & Fix, 2021). One tool for increasing the pool of skilled and talented professional is to have institutions, such as colleges and universities, support efforts to reduce immigrant underemployment.

As more students with international credentials come to colleges with existing credits, schools must have systems and processes in place that recognize learning in a fair and competent way. If not, colleges may face public scrutiny and judgment about their ability to measure quality and achievement in learning. If equitable systems are not set up, colleges will fail to meet the workforce demands of their state and community.

To understand what is available and accessible to people with foreign academic credentials, an examination of the group's lived experience will be done. This phenomenological study looks to go beyond the conclusions that challenges in transfer education exist and credits are lost (Government Accountability Office, 2017; Rasheed & Munoz, 2016; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). The result of this work will provide opportunities for colleges and universities to reflect on their own practices and how best to reduce barriers and brain waste in their community.

Resettled refugees experience a lengthy journey when attempting to return to their professional identity and reclaim their careers. Part of the process consists of reobtaining certifications, credentials, or licenses that require significant financial and time commitment (Bernstein, 2018). Currently, there is little research on the rationale behind strategies used by refugee students when engaging in the process of having their foreign educational credentials recognized (Abdul Satar, 2017). The strategies used by refugees can give us insights as to their decision-making strategies, which may be layered and multi-dimensional. A re-credentialing pathway that is harmonized should be of great interest to hosting communities, prospective students, local employers, resettlement agencies, and administrators of higher education institutions. An efficient system and readily accessible resources that recognize professional credentials can provide refugees and other highly educated immigrants the opportunity to contribute to their new community at higher levels and opportunities for colleges to develop a new revenue stream for their institution.

The research questions (RQ) for this study are:

RQ1: How do refugees in the Rocky Mountain Region with international higher education credentials perceive their experience with institutional systems when attempting to have these credentials recognized?

RQ2: How do refugee students perceive their experience with colleges and universities when attempting to have their credentials recognized in the United States?

RQ3: What assets and decision-making strategies do refugee students use when attempting to practice their profession in the U.S.?

RQ4: When engaging with systems, what resilience mechanisms do refugees utilize to practice their profession in the U.S.?

Significance of the Study

In the coming years, the United States is set to have an imbalance between retiring workers and US-born workers who are able to fulfill job vacancies (Batalova & Fix, 2021). The country will turn to foreign-born labor to meet the workforce needs. If we are to have a discussion around foreign-born individuals meeting the U.S. workforce needs, we cannot ignore who will take on the jobs and where they will come from. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the total number of refugees worldwide in 2016 was more than 20.4 million. In the next two decades, communities will see migrants coming from nations they have not seen in the past. By 2050, it is estimated that there will be over 140 million climate-change driven migrants from the regions of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and some Southeast Asian countries alone (Rigaud, et al., 2018). With a looming employment imbalance and a large influx of refugees landing in the U.S. and Europe, long-term strategies of integrating refugees into these respective societies needs to be addressed. Refugees leave more than just their home; they leave established careers and educational pursuits. Well-developed and clear systems to recognize foreign educational credentials have an enormous impact not only on refugee's ability to be self-sufficient but also on their ability to contribute to the community at a higher level (Brucker, et al., 2016). For communities to develop systems that are equitable, a discussion needs to occur now.

Educational recognition leads to greater financial success which benefits not just the refugee, but the economy of the state in which the refugee resides in (Batalova et al.,

2016; Rietig, 2016, Sumption, 2013). The Migrant Policy Institute has "estimated that the forgone wages of unemployed college-educated immigrants in the country amounted to almost $40 billion annually, and that the federal, state, and local governments combined were losing $10 billion in taxes as a result of these forgone earnings" (Batalova & Fix, 2021, pg. 3). Meeting workforce needs and helping to maintain the aging population is important to the stability of a community, state, and nation. Established systems to recognize foreign academic and work credentials are necessary, and colleges and universities play a key role in the process.

Ultimately, the countries that host refugees thrive when a dynamic two-way process exists, wherein all residents can enjoy full participation and the perception that they are of value (Petsod et al., 2006). For adult refugees with a higher education from their home country, engaging with a system that can recognize existing human capital is crucial both for successful long-term integration and for the community to reap the shared economic and civic benefits from their new residents (Sumption, 2013). Refugees face complex barriers in practicing their profession, including emotional trauma, gaps in the profession, and incomplete evidence of their credentials (Brucker et al., 2016). The process to recognize foreign academic credentials can often be complicated, expensive, and time-consuming (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2018). Through their relocation, refugees experience not only a loss of national identity but a loss of a professional identity.

This work seeks to contribute to the broader conversation regarding the benefits and value that receiving communities place on a refugee's knowledge and skills. Social closure is a "form of collective social action, results in exclusion and poverty and gives to

social categories of eligible and ineligibles" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014 p. 101). For refugees with foreign academic credentials, U.S. colleges and universities play a substantial role in determining who is eligible and ineligible based on those credentials. Systems that are not equitable create a form of social closure for refugees, making it difficult for them to reclaim a sense of identity.

Several groups may benefit from this study on the educational mobility of refugee students. Administrators at colleges and universities may leverage the findings of this study to better institute change in their systems and processes. These changes can serve a population that is growing while being underserved and can help administrators leverage new revenue streams. This study may benefit relocation agencies and advocacy groups who work with the refugee population by communicating the lived experiences of those who engaged in U.S. higher education systems. Maximizing this kind of support can help refugees feel more empowered and contribute economically at higher levels (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014). An investment by colleges to improve the process of recognizing and awarding academic credit can save the student time and money, as well as federal government dollars. Refugees are an eligible noncitizen group who can receive federal student aid. The government could be wastefully awarding dollars or distributing loans for courses that have already been taken by the student. The strategies used by refugee students today can help shape and refine systems and processes developed by colleges and universities for tomorrow and may help other vulnerable populations receive equitable treatment.

Methods

Reliable quantitative data does not exist for the transfer and awarding of foreign credentials because there is no single authority in the U.S. that recognizes or tracks foreign degrees and other qualifications (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Three different entities are given the authority to recognize foreign qualifications: (1) the admitting school or higher education institution, (2) the hiring employer, and (3) state or territorial licensing boards. Most of these entities turn to independent credential evaluation services like World Education Services (WES), International Qualifications Assessment Services (IQAS), or International Education Research Foundation (IERF) to do their evaluating (U.S. Network for Education Information, 2007). Because of the decentralized framework, the researcher is not able to collect reliable quantitative data. A qualitative study is most appropriate. This qualitative study will focus on one of the three designated entities that recognize academic credentials, higher education institutions.

A phenomenological study with a holistic analysis will be used because it is people-centered, participatory, and it emphasizes the importance of partnership (Scoones, 1998). The strength of a qualitative phenomenological study is the ability to recognize diversity among the individuals studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher will be facilitating in-depth interviews with refugee students who live in the Rocky Mountain Region (Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Montana). Refugee students will reflect on and share their experiences with the researcher, who will identify themes by synthesizing participant's lived experiences into unites of meaning, patters, and commonalities (Baker et al., 1992). This study hopes to understand how and why refugee students' sequence

and/or combine resources when seeking to have their foreign academic credentials recognized by a U.S. college or university.

The research will make connections between the micro (daily lives) and macro (policies and processes) levels that most impact refugee students. De Vriese (2006) synthesizes the basis for such analysis as having the ability to be "more responsive to opportunities and more focused on addressing actual vulnerability and threats faced by communities" (p. 36). Research will look at the assets, strategies, and activities that are required by a person in order to develop a means of living.

The environment in which one conducts their study with refugees is often defined by social chaos and subversive economies where refugees experience a profound sense of confusion and disorientation (Rodgers, 2004). Bottom-up and dual imperative methods are necessary when working with vulnerable communities, such as refugee students. The bottom-up approach recognizes refugee students as actors and agents who must be respected as being able to identify their needs and priorities for research while at the same time engaging in that research (Turner & Fozdar, 2010). The benefits of social research are its ability to reveal a lived experience which is an indispensable tool for the formulation of informed, creative, and self-critical responses, responses that college and university administrators can enact.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

This study will focus on higher education institutions, defined as "postsecondary education emphasizing degrees and credentials rather than training limited to skill development within a specific trade" (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, 2017, p.91). An assumption in this study is that data on the strategies used

by refugee students to have their educational credentials recognized can be garnered from coded interviews and attached to an identified phenomenon. Variances in responses may present challenges when attempting to identify common themes. Another assumption is that all participants will answer the in-depth interview questions truthfully and as completely as possible.

A delimitation of this study is that participants are volunteers and are individuals who arrived in the community under refugee status and perceive their formal educational achievement to be equivalent or greater than an associate or technical degree. Participants status as a refugee will be self-identified. Researcher will not ask for documentation to confirm status. Another delimitation of this study is that the participants are from the Rocky Mountain Region. All participants will be over the age of 18 years old, no minors will be a part of the study. The study seeks to interview 18 participants; however, this number may not fully represent the norm for all refugee students in the U.S. Language barriers may interfere with interviews and limit the study's findings. Upon arrival to the U.S., refugees are free to relocate to other regions of the country. This relocation can impact the researcher's ability to identify qualified participants to interview.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided to ensure consistency throughout the study. Some definitions have been adapted from the source provided.

Asylees: A person who is already in the United States or at its boarders who meets the definition of refugee.

Economic capital: "The capital base (cash, credit/debt, savings, and other economic assets) which are essential for the pursuit of any livelihood" (Scoones, 1998, p. 8).

Human capital: The knowledge, skills, and ability to labor, adapted from Scoones (1998).

Knowledge: "Body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study" (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2008, p. 1).

Qualification: "The formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to give standards and/or possess the necessary competences to do a job" (Schuster et al., 2013, p.21).

Recognition: Verifying that education, training, and job experience obtained in a foreign country are equivalent to the standards established for workers trained domestically, adapted from Canada's Evaluation of the Foreign Credential Referral Office (2013).

Refugee: "Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Emergency Handbook, 2020, p.1).

Self-sufficiency: "Capacity of a community to either produce, exchange or lay claim to resources necessary to ensure both survival through and resilience against life-threatening stresses" (Lautze, 19997, as cited in De Vriese, 2006, p.2).

Social capital: Accessing resources that requires coordinated actions through relationships and networks, adapted from Bourdieu (1983) and Scoones (1998).

Transfer: "The movement of students from one college, university or other education provider to another and to the process by which credits representing educational experiences, courses, degrees or credentials that are awarded by and education provider are accepted or not accepted by a receiving institution" (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2017, p. 1).

Vulnerability context: "Frames the external environment in which people exist. People's livelihoods and the wider availability of assets are fundamentally affected by critical trends as well as by shocks and seasonality-over which they have limited or no control" (Department for International Development, 1999, p.15)

Summary

Previous research has revealed challenges in the process of transferring credits; however, there is a knowledge gap as to the perceived experiences of students when engaging in the recognition and awarding of academic credits from their foreign institutions. This qualitative phenomenological study will describe the lived experiences of refugee students who have engaged in the process to have their academic credits recognized by a US college or university. This research will follow up by discussing perceived academic options by refugee students after the evaluation of their credentials. The results of this study may serve multiple stakeholders, such as higher education administrators, prospective students and their families, and the various agencies that work with vulnerable populations like refugees.

Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of the education mobility of students. In Chapter II, the primary topics discussed are the processes of transfer and awarding of academic credit in the U.S. and Europe, and the models that systems look to as they

frame their processes. The chapter continues by going into depth on a specific student

population, refugees, and then introduces the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. The

framework looks at what people do to cope and recover from shocks and stresses while

maintaining or enhancing assets (capital) without undermining the natural base

(Chambers & Conway, 1992; De Vriese, 2006; Ellis, 1998; Scoones, 1998). The

framework will be further described in Chapter II and Chapter III. Chapter III discusses

the research design and specific details of how the study is conducted. Chapter IV

focuses on the results, followed by an interpretation of the findings in Chapter V.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study presents a large body of literature on the educational mobility of refugee students in higher education. Humans enhancing their capabilities to be and to act. This chapter will focus on how U.S. colleges and universities assess a student's education prior to enrolling in their institution, particularly when those students were educated outside the United States of America. In order to have a grasp of these experiences, conceptually we will consider the environment and the person, as well as a framework that can help describe behavior. First, the researcher will discuss the topic of transferring and awarding of non-U.S. credit by describing practices and frameworks used by institutions of higher education. The researcher will then identify and describe the specific student demographic, refugees, and their unique circumstances. Finally, the researcher will explain why the Sustainable Livelihood Framework is a feasible model when describing the lived experiences of refugee students. Due to limited data, this literature review will include global studies and will focus on common themes. The studies cited in this literature review have similar experiences, and the details of those similarities will be a primary focal point.

Transfer and Award of Credit

College and universities are institutions that develop and evaluate learning. The value of a higher education depends on the quality of that learning. Within U.S. higher education institutions, requirements to maintain quality have been established by the federal agency known as the United States Department of Education (USDE). Regional accreditation agencies like the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) work with USDE to evaluate colleges/university systems in accordance with

national regulations. Compliance with standards established by USDE are necessary if students who attend those school are to receive federal financial aid. Schools in the Northwest (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington) look to NWCCU to validate the quality of education in accordance to the federal requirements. The process of a college being accredited by NWCCU is a collegial one comprised of self-review and peer review done amongst the institutions.

Regular evaluation of a college or university helps with accountability and public trust. The public holds colleges and universities accountable by having them maintain a level of academic quality and the judgment of that quality is based on the colleges' own mission and accreditation (CHEA, 2019). Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a nonprofit organization, describes itself as a national advocate for academic quality through accreditation and is made up of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. Accreditation helps institutions be accountable to the public and involves the following stakeholders: accrediting organizations, higher education institutions and programs, recognition bodies, state government, federal governments, and students and families (CHEA, 2019). The roles of NWCCU, CHEA, and USDE are to ensure accountability for colleges and universities and to establish transparent processes that are available to future and current students.

According to CHEA (2019), accreditation plays a role in U.S. society by easing the transfer of credits between colleges and universities; smooth transfers among entities are an indicator of quality. For colleges and universities, the goal in recognizing educational qualifications is to streamline the process without hurting the quality, and to

scale up without losing buy-in and overwhelming resource capacities (Rietig, 2016).

Researchers suggested institutional variables such as curriculum alignment, transparent transfer credit policies, and a transfer-receptive culture can influence student transfer outcomes (Davies & Casey 1999; Handel, 2011). Developed policies by colleges and universities greatly influence the student experience when transferring academic credits from one institution to another.

According to NWCCU (2013), the Transfer and Award of Academic Credit policy language is directed to those who are "concerned with the transfer of academic credit among institutions and award of academic credit for course taken at another institutions" (p. 3). According to the policy, inter-institutional transfer of credit requires three considerations when recognizing or awarding academic credit taken at another institution:

1) the educational quality of the institution from which the student transfers, 2) the comparability of the nature, content, and level of credit earned to that offered by the receiving institution, 3) the appropriateness and applicability of the credit earned to the programs offered by the receiving institution, in light of the student's educational goals. (p. 2)

The underlying principles of the policy states that institutions are responsible for their own policies and practices and should regularly review them to ensure they are accomplishing the institution's goal and that the process is fair and equitable to students. Academic information must be obtained both by the sending and receiving institutions. This is done by engaging with knowledgeable and experienced faculty as well as reviewing catalog language and other appropriate institutional materials. When such standards are satisfied, the receiving institutions should have reasonable confidence in

student's success in their institution's program. When credits are not accepted, the college should make clear to the student as to their reasons (CHEA, 2019). Colleges that have transparent policies and practices can help students understand what level of skills their credentials demonstrate as well as their gaps in education.

Non-U.S. Academic Credentials

In the U.S., the "federal government plays no direct role in credential assessment…and have no supervisory authority" in regard to the transfer and awarding of foreign academic credits (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2018, p.37). Between World War I and 1970, the federal government administrated credential evaluations conducted by the Foreign Credential Evaluation Services (FCES), an umbrella agency of the Office of Education (Campbell, 2018). Major responsibility of FCES

> was to collect research materials and data concerning all of the educational
> systems of the world, to publish research studies of various types, and to answer
> requests for specific information concerning the educational systems of other
> countries and concerning individual educational institutions (Frey, 2014, p. 7).

The service was free and was used by colleges and universities, private organizations, and professional associations to obtain information needing to decide on an applicant. Students submitted their foreign educational credentials to determine their evaluation. In 1970, FCES stopped accepting requests and was terminated completely after two commissioned studies in 1964 and 1967 advocated for its closure (Frey, 2014). Since the termination of FCES, private credential evaluation services, like World Education Service (WES), International Qualifications Assessment Services (IQAS), and

Foreign Credentials Evaluation Service (IERF) have formed. These agencies develop

their own metrics when assessing foreign credentials. Many colleges and universities,

state-level licensing boards, and employers turn to these agencies to do their credential

reviewing. The variation in standards and interpretation among these agencies can

jeopardize a student's chance of obtaining recognition for their educational credentials.

Due to a lack of national standards, biases and inconsistencies may result among

credential evaluation services (Campbell, 2018).

Regionally, the NWCCU transfer and award of academic credit describe non-U.S.

institutions as typically being chartered and authorized by their ministry of education or

head of state. The same policy states that "it does not produce useful information about

comparability from one country to another" (NWCCU, 2013, p.3). It is up to the colleges

and universities to decide what policies, practices, and resources are most appropriate.

US National Learning-Centered Framework

At the center of the transfer discussion is a college or university being able to

develop an evaluation system and process that is fair and equitable. For colleges and

universities to be transparent and consistent with students, many will adopt a framework

to help describe what students should know and be able to do at various education levels.

To add to the discussion, this literature review will focus on one national framework in

U.S., the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP).

The DQP is regarded as a learning-centered framework. The DQP was co-authored in

2011 by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, National Center for Higher Education

Management Systems, Kent State University, and Association of American Colleges and

Universities (AAC&U). The DQP framework focuses on the student's ability to

demonstrate skills in specialized knowledge, broad integrative knowledge, intellectual

skills, applied learning, and civic learning at various levels of education. Faculty are

responsible for providing specific expectations for specialized knowledge. AAC&U

(2020), DQP incorporated all of its essential learning outcomes and believes it can create

a new and more productive context for facilitating transfer of learning. The framework

stresses the need for quantitative outcomes at various levels to be demonstrated in active

verb form and established proficiencies should describe what graduates know and can do,

not aspirational statements. The strength of the DQP is in the integrative discipline-

specific process that fit easily into a college or university system. The value of the

framework is that it can help students communicate their skill sets to future employers.

DQP is not intended to standardize degrees in the U.S., rather, to describe what

student performance looks like at various levels. DQP has created a reference point to

describe meaning and value of degrees at the associate, bachelor's, and master's level.

According to the DQP website, every learner should be able to collect evidence of their

stated proficiencies to better exhibit their abilities. In the context of transfer, the

framework has the potential to enhance educational productivity by assessing

proficiencies at both vertical (2-year) and horizontal (4-year) institutions as well as

international college and university degrees.

Global Learning-Centered Framework

As U.S. Higher Education communities' grapple with frameworks, Europe

benefits from a long history of addressing the topic of recognizing educational

qualifications amongst institutions outside of their own country. In modern history, a

gathering on how to best recognize the qualifications of students in higher education was

held at the Lisbon Convention in 1997. This robust dialogue was convened as leaders grappled with the educational qualifications of refugees, where the conflict in their homelands left them unable to access educational records because of the physical destruction of such records or for the fear of retaliation to those left behind. During the Lisbon Convention, European nations agreed to set fair and transparent procedures and policies of recognizing qualifications within institutions, even if verifiable documents could not be obtained. The gathering set forth an international dialogue on how best to recognize the qualifications of all students in Europe. Following the Lisbon Convention, the Sorbonne Declaration was signed in 1998 in Paris by the ministers of education in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, declaring:

> [Europe is] heading for a period of major change in education and working conditions, to a diversification of courses of professional careers with education and training throughout life becoming a clear obligation. We owe our students, and our society at large, a higher education system in which they are given the best opportunities to seek and find their own area of excellence. An open European area for higher learning carries a wealth of positive perspectives, of course respecting our diversities, but requires on the other hand continuous efforts to remove barriers and to develop a framework for teaching and learning, which would enhance mobility and an ever-closer cooperation. (para. 3)

This declaration laid the groundwork for the joint declaration by 29 Ministers of Education in Bologna on June 19, 1999, which was issued around a common vision to enhance the competitiveness of higher education by harmonizing the system, more commonly known as the Bologna Process. In order to facilitate compatibility and

comparability, the work focused on three objectives: introduction of the three-cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), quality assurance, and recognition of qualifications and periods of study (European Commission Education and Culture, 2010). One of the main principles of intergovernmental cooperation is to ease recognizing qualifications and periods of study by adopting a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. Students and job seekers have stronger mobility within Europe when qualifications from one country to another can be assessed and recognized. By 2018, over 48 European countries have implemented the Bologna Process at various stages (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2018).

The Bologna Process reform was positive for the U.S. because it took most of the old European degrees system, where the first degree was at the Master's level and adopted the Anglo-American three cycle degree system (Inamete, 2015). Under the Bologna Process, a European three-year bachelor's degree is equivalent to a traditional U.S. four-year degree. This equivalency has received mixed reviews because it questions the equivalency of programs. Bode (2006) responded to this criticism by highlighting the variations in length of study that exist within and between universities in the U.S. In addition, the U.S. has a long history of accepting degrees from Britain (which have had three-year bachelor's degree programs for centuries). Bode argued "US institutions have always accepted British Bachelor graduates', and therefore, they cannot in principle deny continental Europeans the same treatment" (2006, p. 6). The Bologna Process set forth a framework to build consensus for recognizing credentials and open information centers across the continent to inform the public of such changes and opportunities.

In 2008, the European Parliament and Council adopted the recommendation for the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning. The framework declared, "the development and recognition of citizens' knowledge, skills, and competence are crucial for the development of individuals, competitiveness, employment, and social cohesion in the community" (p. 3). The EQF aimed to provide a translation between different qualification systems and their levels. These developments facilitated transnational mobility to meet the supply and demands of the labor market. The framework did not define the qualification system, rather it described the levels of knowledge, skills, and competencies for the degree. The more visible the framework is to individual citizens, the more valuable it is in societies. The EQF is complex because many nations participate at various levels. The EQF is different from the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) because the U.S. operates on an entirely voluntary basis. The EQF is fixed and complex, while the DQP is new and dynamic.

One of the main goals of the Bologna Process was to open information centers that would help the public better understand the process of educational mobility. The European Network of Information Centers (ENIC) and National Academic Recognition Information Centers (NARIC) were developed and tasked with assisting people with obtaining recognition of their academic credentials and mobility across nations. The United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) worked on a joint initiative to create ENIC-NARIC Networks whose goal is to provide:

> Up-to-date information supplied and maintained by the competent bodies in each
> member country and by each member organization. It is also its expressed
> purpose to help other interested organizations and individuals easily find

information on current issues in international academic and professional mobility, and on procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications (paras. 5).

The ENIC Network is made up of national information centers with the goal of providing information on (1) foreign credentials, degrees, and other qualifications, (2) the educational systems in foreign countries and, (3) practical questions of mobility and degree equivalency. NARIC does not make the decision on admission and exemption of courses of study, but rather offers information and advice on systems and qualifications. NARIC's goal is to improve the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study in Member States of the European Union (EU) countries, the European Economic Area countries and Turkey. By working together, these national centers have the role of assisting people by promoting educational mobility and by providing authoritative advice and information regarding academic recognition of diplomas and study by other nations.

With a large baby boomer population set to retire, and the U.S. population slowest rate of growth over the past decade (second slowest in the nations history), the workforce is disproportionately going to relay on immigrant-origin populations, including those trained abroad (Batalova & Fix, 2021). The process to recognize foreign credentials in the United States is decentralized and there is an undeveloped picture of the lived experience. The transfer process for students with foreign academic credentials is a captivating one because the experience can vary greatly from person to person, college to college.

Leaders in academia should seek greater insights about the student experience when transferring foreign academic credits to a U.S. college or university. These insights will help to ensure systems and process are developed and can help meet the nation's

workforce demands. In order to understand the lived experiences of students with foreign credentials, research should focus on a specific student population and follow their progress and outcomes within and across institutions (Davies & Casey, 1999 and Wang & Wickersham, 2014). This effort can help better understand the function and utility of programs and practices by U.S. institutions of higher education when dealing with foreign academic credits.

Refugees

In order to have a good understanding of a transfer experience, this study will examine a specific student demographic, refugees. The first part of this section will discuss refugee legislation dating back to the 1950s and demographic data. The second part will discuss refugee integration and its connection to credential recognition. The third section will discuss refugee habitus in higher education and will conclude by discussing conditions that are unique to the refugee student population.

Brief History and Demographics

As new and dynamic methods to assess qualification are developed, it is crucial to similarly assess how these processes impact students. Refugees are one population whose lived experience needs to be better understood. Immigrants' motives to come to the United States can vary; however, refugees are in a unique position because their relocation is due to circumstances outside of their control, like war or natural disaster.

The U.S. has a long history of refugee legislation, dating back to 1948, when the country admitted more than 250,000 displaced Europeans after World War II (Scoones, 1998). The Geneva Convention of 1951, also known as the 1951 Refugee Convention, ratified a treaty that defined who was a refugee and the, rights of those individuals, and

responsibilities of nations that granted them asylum. The convention was intended to bring about solutions for the thousands of refugees fleeing Nazism and Communism. According to Article 1(A) (2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and its 1967 Protocol Amendments, a refugee is someone who:

> Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (p.3).

Refugee is a capacious category that has a lot of varying circumstances in which people who do not plan to leave their home are forced to flee (Bell & Walkover, 20201). The United States signed the 1967 protocol relating to the status of refugees, which removed both the temporal and geographical restrictions. The Convention framed a basic standard for treatment of refugees.

Before hosting refugees, the impact on a country's economy, development level, and population are considered. According to the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, prior to refugees being admitted into the United States, security checks are conducted by multiple members of the intelligence community. Agencies like the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Department of State are all part of the admission process. These entities serve as vetting check points to ensure the validity of people's identities and relocation destination. An "individual's employability is not a determining factor for admission to the United States" (GAO-11-369, p. 46). "Refugees come to the U.S. under

very different circumstances and with a wide range of education and work skills" (Farrell er al., 2008, p. ES-1). Because conflict impacts all residents of a country, those refugees who resettled in the U.S. come with a wide distribution of educational levels and professional skills.

Since 1975, the U.S. has admitted over 3.1 million refugees (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2020). According to the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, the U.S. admitted the largest number of refugees in the late 1980s and early 1990s from Asia and the former Soviet Union (2020). On average, the U.S. has admitted 115,000 refugees annually from 1989 to 1995 and saw the smallest admission levels post 9/11, admitting fewer than 29,000 refugees in 2002 and 2003 (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2020). The last two decades refugee admission numbers have been on the rise and the prominent countries of origin have shifted to African and East Asian countries. In 2015, the U.S. admitted 60 percent (66,500) of the total resettled refugees worldwide (UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, 2015). As specified in 8 United States Code (U.S.C.) Section 1157, the president of the United States has the responsibility to determine the maximum number of annual admissions of refugees. In fiscal year 2020, the ceiling for refugee admissions in the United States dropped to its lowest number since 2004: 18,000 (Refugee Processing Center, 2020). This is the lowest number in the program's forty-year history.

In more recent times, refugee immigrants have been at the center of a politically polarized national discourse. The U.S. drop-in admission numbers does not mean there are fewer refugees around the world. Refugee numbers change with the executive branch

of government. Drastic changes in admission numbers can occur after leadership

changes, whether that be four or eight years. When change does occur, colleges and

universities and their systems and processes must be ready to respond to that change.

The World Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) is built to process

and track the movement of refugees from various countries to the United States (2020).

The Refugee Processing Center (RPC) assists in the technical and functional support for

the system. Prior to 2002, data was collected via a legacy system. Therefore, WRAPS

data is the most reliable since 2002, including arrivals by state, nationality and religion,

arrivals by destination and nationality, and demographic profiles, such as age, gender,

ethnicity, religion, language, and education. According to the RPC active reporting

system, since 2002, over 934,366 refugees have been admitted from over 113 countries.

Over a quarter of the refugees resettled in California (105,974), Texas (84,995), and New

York (56,057). The RPC data can be differentiated by calendar years. In 2016, California

(8,921), Texas (8,932), and New York (5,830) relocated the most refugees. States like

Arizona, Illinois, Michigan, and Washington each admitted over 3,000 refugees. It should

be noted that, while refugees may relocate to any state, they are also free to move from

one location to another, within the United States. Refugees may choose to relocate to

other regions of the country for various reasons, from reconnecting with family and

friends to leveraging economic opportunities.

The exact number of professional and skilled workers admitted into the U.S is

unknown. Since 2002, over 103,000 refugees have self-reported possessing a higher

education degree from their home country, credentials either from a technical school,

university/college, or graduate school (Refugee Processing Center, 2020). "Refugees

entering the United States between 2009 and 2011 were more likely than U.S. citizens to hold a university degree and more likely than other immigrants to have at least a high school diploma" (Campbell, 2018, p. 146). There has been little research conducted in the U.S. on how many refugees were able to get their education recognized, the strategies used by refugees when engaging with systems, or the impact it has on someone's livelihood.

Integration of Refugees into Host Communities

Once refugees are relocated to their new community, domestic resettlement agencies begin the process of integration. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) does not have an official definition of integration because experiences differ from one community to another. In 2007, ORR formed an Integration Working Group to review and provide limited analysis of the process of integration into local communities. The workgroup defined integration as a "dynamic, two-way process in which newcomers and the receiving communities intentionally work together, based on a shared commitment to acceptance and justice, to create a secure, welcoming, vibrant and cohesive society" (ORR, 2007, p.15). This study will use the workgroups definition of integration.

Newcomers integrate better into their new community when reaching their employment potential. Many have criticized ORR for not prioritizing training or re-certification programs stating, "lack of support for credential transfer and recognition can hold back highly educated refugees from obtaining jobs that commensurate with their skills" (Capps, et al., 2015, p. 21). To better support the integration process, relocation communities need to "develop an initiative to support professional recertification and credentialing for qualified individuals" (ORR, 2007, p. 51). Despite the claims and

criticisms, ORR has not produced any follow up data on the recognition of refugee credentials nor identified best practices for relocation agencies and influential bodies like higher education institutions.

Re-credentialing is the transfer of qualifications from one country to another. According to Campbell (2018) "non-recognition of foreign credentials denies the legal right of refugees to practice liberal professions as enshrined in Article 19 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention) and its Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1967 Refugee Protocol)" (p. 142). The European Commission's Charter for Liberal Professions describe liberal professions as occupations that are "of a marked intellectual character, require a high level of qualifications…are subject to clear and strict professional regulation and always involve a large measure of independence in the accomplishment of the professional activities" (Campbell, 2018, p. 152). The legal obligation under Article 19 of the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol impacts employers, education institutions, state-level licensing authorities, and private, non-governmental credential evaluation entities to provide transparent and equitable practices when it comes to refugees being able to practice their liberal profession.

The lack of clear and consistent credential recognition processes underserves the refugee and the community itself. In 2016, a collaborative study was done on the untapped talent of immigrants in the United States by the Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy, and World Education Services, claiming that "in the 2009-2013 period, roughly 25 percent of all immigrants with college degrees were either unemployed or in low-skilled jobs" (Batalova et al., 2016, p. 22). While this Migration

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Policy study focused on immigrants and did not delineate refugee data, the college educated immigrant numbers cited in the report reflect data similar to that provided by WRAPS. Under-employed or unemployed immigrants did not access nearly $40 billion in earnings because their educational credentials or experiences were not recognized by their new community. This situation could have resulted in the loss of more than $3 billion in additional state and local taxes and $7.2 billion in additional federal tax payments. The Migrant Policy Institute report also claimed that highly skilled immigrants struggled to find employment at appropriate level because of a lack of English proficiency, social capital, or state and federal policies that did not provide the ability for economic mobility and success.

Currently, when refugees enter a community, a small but long-term impact of new human capital in GDP growth can be seen. The economic bearings and impact of migration is described as "migrants play an important role in addressing Europe's alarming demographic trends, and- depending on their skills and willingness to work- improve the ratio of active workers to non-active persons (e.g. pensioners), whilst also contributing to innovation, entrepreneurship and GDP growth" (Karakas, 2015, p.3). While the current net effect is small, the contributions of human capital tend to counteract the impact of population increase on capital. The initial rate of employment rises for refugees the first five years and many reach their ceiling after a decade (Brucker et al., 2016). This is because skills do not match jobs (UNESCO, 2018). "In Germany, four years after their arrival to the country, migrants with fully recognized qualifications were around 45 percentage points more likely to be employed and earned hourly wages around 40% higher than immigrants without recognized qualifications" (Brucker et al., 2016,

p.1). Recognizing qualifications has a positive financial impact on a person's livelihood and the community.

For many, degrees may not transfer directly to the U.S. labor market because employers and industries may not be familiar with the country's degree content, credentials, or credibility. In the U.S., state legislatures and professional licensing boards have the authorities to regulate professions, and this includes recognizing foreign qualifications (Campbell, 2018). For most states, professional licensing boards administer statutory guidelines and monitor quality. According to Campbell (2018), "the majority of refugee professionals will be required to take additional courses and exams to undergo a practical learning experience (e.g., an internship) to successfully transfer their qualifications and skills to the United States" (p. 149). This additional work is put back on the student in time and money.

In 2018, UNESCO published Policy Paper 37 titled *What a Waste: Ensure Migrants and Refugees' Qualifications and Prior Learning are Recognized* showed a strong underutilization of talent with populations whose education was obtained outside of Europe or North America. The policy paper revealed that 30% of those who gained their degree outside of Europe and Northern America worked in high-skill occupations and only 15% reported having their level of education match their jobs. When compared to immigrants who studied in the host country, or natives, 70-75% reported their education level matched their job, appropriate to their skills, education, experience, and professional status. Studies have shown that refugees of all educational levels are overrepresented in low-skilled jobs, such as meatpacking, retail, and assembly-line factory work (Campbell, 2018). For many refugees and other immigrants living in the

U.S. and holding a non-U.S. or European post-secondary degree, low-skilled employment ends up being all too common of a reality.

As refugees strive for sustainable livelihoods, those who can retain their educational assets from home to host community are able to attain self-reliance at a quicker pace (De Vriese 2006; UNHCR, 2014). Studies have consistently listed language acquisition, finances, recognition of qualifications and unfamiliarity with the systems and processes as barriers to higher education (Bosher & Rowekamp, 1998; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014; Hannah, 1999; Morrice, 2013; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Refugee students who engage with systems to recognizing their educational credentials and for those who seek to fill their educational deficiencies find themselves navigating complicated processes. A lack of an established system not only influences a person's ability to access existing capital but their perception of self and their ability to have a sustainable livelihood.

Refugees' Habitus in Higher Education

For many refugees, losing their educational credentials and, thus, professional capacity can lead to an immediate increase in social and financial vulnerability with minimal safety net provided in their host country. Refugee status is not a predictor of educational attainment, rather past, present, and expected social and economic experiences are (Preston, 1990). The perceived experiences influence a refugee's perception of self and the world.

Identity is about the process of being and becoming. The concept of identity can range from individual's core self to group identification processes. To define identity production, this study will use the translocational positionality which "incorporates

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structures that frame people's live and the agency these same individuals possess within given spaces" (Mozetic, 2018, p. 234). This definition allows for multifaceted identity-formation while depicting underlying regularities. Agencies, like college and universities, are at important to the categorization process because they can identify and categories professional credentials and bring credibility to a person's identity.

Habitus is the embodiment of cultural capital that a person possesses and is ingrained in ones' habits, skills, and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1996). These dispositions are restructured by the persons interaction with the social world (Morrice, 2013). Social reality is structured through fields. A field, such as education, is interdependent on several different social agents playing the game. Participating in the game can change a person's position and is inherently competitive. According to Bourdieu, habitus makes the participants accept the necessity of the game, recognize its rationale, and participate in its continuation. Social, economic, and cultural conditions influence the degree of stability of habitus. Refugee habitus is:

> generally disparaged and from which it is difficult to generate a sense of self respect and dignity. Consequently, for refugees in higher education it can remain the 'elephant in the room', imposing a deep shadow on their lives, their decision-making, and their ability to engage with higher education, and yet it remains unacknowledged and recognized in policy and practice. (Morrice, 2013, p.666)

These emotional dimensions have a place in the dialogue when discussing educational mobility. The relocation from one social space to another and the loss of professional status may leave refugees feeling shame or embarrassment about their new identity. Refugees are not deficient in capital but are located in a field which fails to

legitimize their existing capital (Morrice, 2013). González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) pushed back against Bourdieu's approach on deficiency of capital and highlighted the need to focus on "funds of knowledge," a belief that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (p. ix-x). Building on refugee's existing human capital can establish the foundation upon which other types of capital can be developed.

The concept of transnational positionality attempts to capture peoples identities in terms of social locations (Mozetic, 2018). The integration of refugees into a local community is a complex process and imposes demands on both the individual and host community. "Refugees are strongly perceived to be passive recipients of help, and their contributions to the host societies often go unnoticed" (Nibbs, 2014, p. 17). Communities are unaware of the complexity and diversity of refugees. For many refugees, their social positioning and social position point to the intersection of structure and agency (Memetic, 2018). Recognizing educational qualifications requires varying levels of strategies that include sequencing, substitution, clustering, trade-offs, and/or trends (Scoones, 1998). These strategies not only shape their experiences but their identity in the new space. For highly skilled refugees, many find themselves in contradictory social positions where they belong to an esteemed position while being connected to the category of "refugee", a less favorable social position (Mozetic, 2018).

Unverifiable Documents in Higher Education

There are many different student factors that influence the success of transfer students at colleges and universities. These challenges include, but are not limited to, students having difficulties making connections with other students and faculty members

(Townsend & Wilson 2006), limited access to information about how to navigate the new institution (Bensimon & Dowd 2009, Townsend & Wilson, 2006) or finding access to institutional agents to help navigate the new setting (Standton-Salazar, 2001). Looking into the process of encountering transfer pathways for refugee students can reveal unique experiences and bring insights about the very systems and processes that were created to ensure quality in education.

Refugees arrive at their host country with a lot of uncertainty. For some, accessing official educational documents is simply not possible. Unverifiable documents are mainly due to institutions being shut down or in an area of conflict where contacting the institution may put the student or their family at risk (Ullrich et al., 2016). For refugee students, requesting a transcript to be evaluated by a credentialing organization is not as simple as it sounds.

World Education Service (WES) (2018) is a nonprofit credentialing organization that facilitates the process of recognizing international education qualifications in the United States and Canada. WES recognized the problem of unverifiable documents and in 2016, a pilot project was initiated in Canada to better understand the feasibility of a reliable process of assessing the educational credentials of refugee students whose home institutions were unresponsive or refused to issue official education and work documents. Highlights from the study concluded that in order for there to be shared success, agreements with agencies and organizations, such as colleges, universities, and professional licensing boards needed to be developed. In the past, effective practices included conditional registration to speed up access to the labor market, mutual recognition agreements between countries, and developed global qualifications that meet

legal practice requirements in various countries (Hawthorne, 2013). WES has not yet

developed a non-verifiable document policy, but this has not stopped them from

emphasizing the need for organizations to develop one for refugees and others who find

themselves unable to retrieve academic documents. Researchers and higher education

administrators looking for guidance in providing academic recognition from unverifiable

documents can look to Europe for a better sense of possible solutions and policies.

Norway is a country that has enacted a practice of evaluating education credentials of

refugees. Norway is a country of 4.5 million inhabitants, of which nearly 100,000 are

refugees; approximately 15 percent of whom claim to have some form of higher

education (Egner, 2015). In 2014, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in

Education (NOKUT) worked with Oslo University College and Narvik University

College on a pilot project to assess the procedure for comparing and recognizing the

higher education of refugees with engineering degrees. Some refugee students received

recognition of the equivalent of a three-year Norwegian bachelor's degrees, some were

recognized as having completed one or two years of higher education, and some did not

receive any recognition of higher education. Those who did not receive full recognition

were advised on further educational possibilities. The pilot project required support from

administrators and academic staff to compare the refugee student's education with that of

the Norwegian system. While the number of eligible refugees was small, "NOKUT and

the Ministry of Education and Research have advised Norwegian higher education

institutions to implement the procedure, and information and application forms are

available on NOKUT's website" (Egner, 2015, p. 24). As a result of this project and other

similar work, Norway has established a "toolkit for the recognition of refugees'

qualifications involving several principles, tools and approaches institutions should use to evaluate insufficiently documented qualifications, based on the 2017 Lisbon Convention Recommendation" (Policy Paper 37, 2018, p. 6). Similar efforts can be seen in Sweden (Government Offices of Sweden, 2016) and Germany (UNHCR, 2015). Despite having strained personnel, Oslo University College and Narvik University College were able to develop resources and improve processes for perspective refugee students. These efforts highlight instances of systems self-evaluating in order to improve the educational mobility of refugee students.

Educational mobility of refugee students can be sustained by developing equitable system that alleviate barriers. Under-resourced systems and underdeveloped quality assurance policies are noted as major challenges (Sumption, 2013). Challenges associated with interrupted periods of education and/or work due to an inability to access official documents did not stop organizations like Oslo University College from creating processes that recognize the educational attainment of refugee students. Current studies suggest that the immediate needs of refugee students tend to overshadow their efforts and leave many of these refugees underutilizing their skills (Stevenson & Willott, 2007, Shakya, et al., 2010). Immediate needs like family responsibilities, systemic and information barriers, non-recognition of foreign education, linguistics, and financial barriers are factors influencing a refugee's ability to have their education recognized (Shakya, et al., 2010). While refugee students indicated high educational aspirations; poverty and a lack of knowledge about the systems of the host country led many to underestimate their abilities (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). For refugee students whose human capital was neither mobile nor accepted, access to higher education was the next

best option (Morrice, 2013). The need to adapt to a contemporary mode is necessary and pressing for refugees and communities in which they live in.

Conceptual Framework

A framework will be used to better understand the decision-making process for refugee students looking to have their foreign academic credentials recognized by a U.S. college or university. This section will begin by discussing the human development approach and its influence on the framework. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework will be discussed in depth by looking at its principals of self-sufficiency and as well as the frameworks limitations. The section will conclude by discussing future work of the framework and its need for a participatory approach to a new vulnerable audience.

Human Development Approach

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework is a model that was largely influenced by the human development approach (Morse, & McNamara, 2013). The theory of *Human Development Approach* was developed by Mahbub Ul Haq and is anchored in the richness of human life and on human wellbeing. The theory regards humans as having complex socioeconomic needs and are able to create and improve their living conditions in order to live in accordance to their needs and interest (United Nationals Development Programme, 2020). A person that can access and utilize their assets in a community can improve their wellbeing. Wellbeing can have a wider definition than just material concerns of food or income. Wellbeing can mean self-esteem and power (Chambers, 1989) or safety and adjustment to cultural expectations (McBrien, 2005). Developed strategies for wellbeing is more than actions for a desired goal (Bourdieu,1996), it is about how people feel about their social space (Morrice, 2013). These feelings help

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people anticipate future challenges and empower them to respond appropriately. This study focuses on refugee students and their wellbeing.

This study will describe refugee students' decision making through the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework focuses on enhancing human capabilities through resiliency. A person who can adapt and cope under stress is resilient. Individuals who are unable to cope with temporary adjustments or adapt to longer changes are unlikely to achieve sustainable livelihoods (Davies, 1996). To understand a person's resilience, an interpretation of past experiences is needed. The variation in their decision making may speak to resource available and the risks associated with alternative options (Scoones, 1998).

The major concepts of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework involve a vulnerable demographic, and their ability to access and utilize their assets based on institutional structures and processes. This study regards refugee students as the vulnerable population (Campbell, 2018, Longley & Maxwell, 2003). Refugee students finds themselves being uprooted from their home country and relocating to another and are left to navigate new spaces with they are unfamiliar. U.S. colleges and universities are the transforming structures and processes, and outcomes will be referred to as refugee students having their foreign education credits recognized. All these sub-concepts and their relevancy will be discussed below.

Self-Sufficiency through Sustainable Livelihoods

When the United States Refugee Act of 1980 passed, the primary goal for the program was to "provide for the effective resettlement of refugees and... to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible" (p. 112). The Office of Refugee

Resettlement (ORR) (2017) considers self-sufficiency to have been achieved if the total family earnings of refugees enable the family to support itself without receiving cash assistance (45. C.F.R. § 400.2). Because of the need for swift employment, it "makes it difficult to provide services that may increase refugees' incomes, such as helping them obtain credentials to practice their professions in the U.S." (Government Accountability Office, 2012). In contrast, Europe's refugee integration focuses on housing, education, and healthcare (Valenta, 2010 cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014). ORR's focus on immediate employment comes at the expense of jobs that are better matched with a refugee's education and experience. The goal of rapid self-sufficiency leaves refugees underutilizing their human capital in the host community.

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework is based on a person's perceived forms of capital and the combination of various strategies used to get such capital formally recognized within a new home community. The principles of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework focus on being people-centered, responsive, and participatory, multi-level, sustainable and dynamic (Department for International Development, 1999). Sustainable livelihood is defined as

> Capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain, or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base. (Chambers & Conway, 1992, p. 5)

A primary focus of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework is on resilience and how well a person can adapt and cope under stress.

The sustainable livelihood model dates to as early as the 1920s when refugee settlements were occurring in Greece and Bulgaria (Easton-Calabria, 2014). Pre-World War II efforts focused on a participatory approach, meaning, refugees themselves supported and advocated for their self-reliance. Modernization after the 1950s influenced sustainable livelihood's ability to have a greater influence because developmental discourse and policy was advanced by professional economists rather than field-based administrators. After World War II, a change to "large-scale foreign-led development projects meant that settlement was no longer funded or co-led by refugees but by organizations and institutions" (Easton-Calabria, 2014, p.21). Ultimately, this approach revealed a lack of leadership expertise as well as a lack of displaced community involvement.

Scoones (2009) described '*sustainable livelihood*' coming to the global stage in the early 1990s; however, the fundamental ideas have been around for years. Several studies included an integrated framework that merged sustainable livelihood with systems perspective of problems. Early work can be seen at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in modern day Zambia (Scoones, 2009). This research looked at changing rural systems and identified challenges community members faced. The approach was remarked as being "integrative, locally-embedded, cross-sectoral and informed by a deep field engagement and commitment to action" (Scoones, 2009, p. 2). India's 1970s Green Revolution and Nigeria's Silent Violence provided depth to the framework by examining at the diverse impact on farm production and household accumulation as well as the contested patterns of livelihood change. These studies reinforced the principles of sustainable livelihood as having complex realities to macro-structural issues while utilizing local-level fieldwork.

Following the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janerio, *sustainability* became part of the standard lexicon because of concerns associated with livelihoods under stress while highlighting the local populations' strategies and adaption to such shocks. The environmental and developmental movement in the 1980s and 1990s "threw up in particular concerns about linking a focus on poverty reduction and development with longer-term environment shocks and stresses" (Scoones 1998, p. 3). Scoones (2009) argued that environmental issues on a global level have been given a new lens by discussing livelihoods at a local level, "the sustainable development agenda combine concerns with livelihoods and the priorities of local people … In cross-disciplinary academic research, these issues have in turn been explored in studies of socio-ecological systems, resilience and sustainability science" (p. 4). In the early 2000s, Cannon, Twigg, and Rowell (2003) Longley and Maxwell (2003) expanded the sustainable livelihood approach to migration by focusing on complex emergencies, disasters, and conflict through sustainable livelihoods. These wide-ranging studies provided diverse perspectives and insight into livelihoods that interact with economic, political, and environmental processes.

As shown in Figure 2.1, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework is a holistic way of capturing the complexity of livelihoods. The key parts to the framework include assets, strategies, and outcomes.

Figure 2.1 Sustainable Livelihood Framework

Figure 2.1.

Sustainable Livelihood Framework

Note. Department for International Development is a British government department responsible for promoting development and the reduction of poverty. The framework summarizes the main components of and influences on livelihoods. Reprinted from Sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets (p.1) by DFID, 2001.
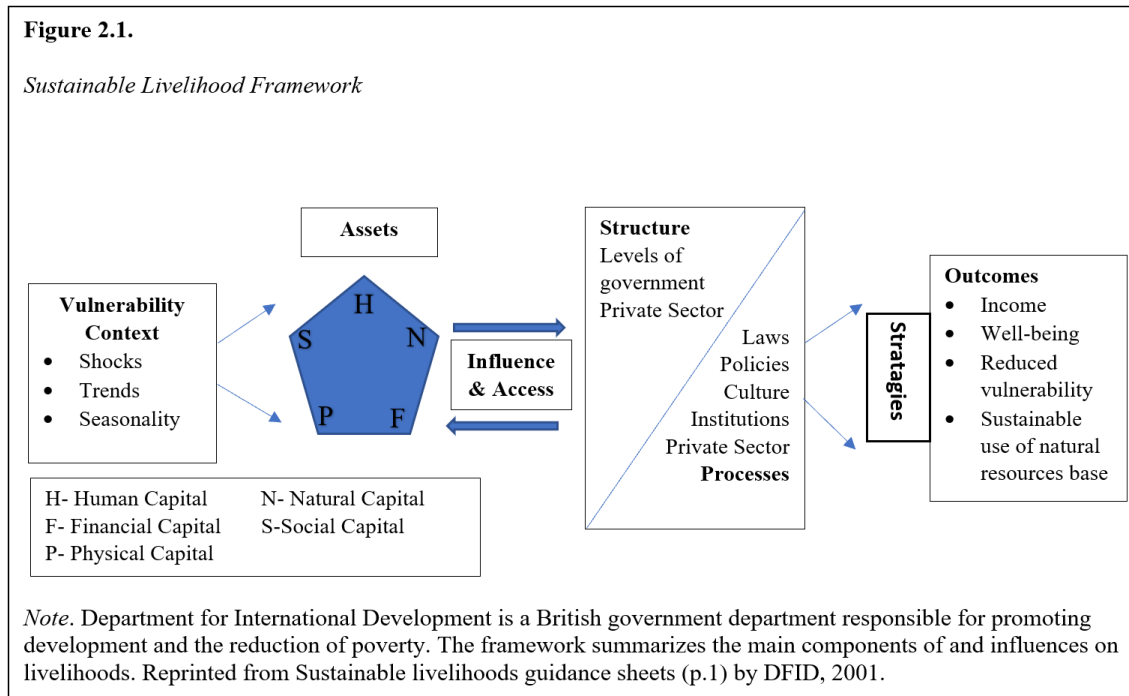
A refugee student's ability to access assets is the ability to use resources or services to obtain information or income. The ability to achieve a sustainable livelihood is dependent upon the material and social, both tangible, and intangible, assets people possess (Scoones 1998). Tangible assets are resources such as cash savings or precious metals (Chambers and Conway,1992), while intangible assets are 'claims' based on combinations of rights, social conventions, and power (Scoones, 1988).

> Assets should not be understood only as thing that allow survival, adaption, and poverty alleviation; they are also the basis of agents' power to act to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use of transformation of resources. (Beggington (1999), cited in de Haan & Zoomers, 2005: p. 32)

Livelihood assets go beyond basic needs; rather they are seen as giving meaning in a person's world.

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework describes institution's rules, whether they be formal or informal, as being subjected to different interpretations by different students and the contention over practices, rules, and norms or behavior are regularly challenged when navigating these systems. Institutions will be referred to as any "regularized practices (or patterns of behavior) structured by rules and norms of society which have persistent and widespread use" (Scoones, 1998, p. 12). Institutions influence the way a student goes about navigating and accessing desired outcomes.

Outcomes of strategies is more than actions for a desired goal (Bourdieu,1996), it is about how students feel about their new social space. When confronting systems, the following strategies may be considered

resources may be accumulated so that reserves and buffers are created for times when stresses and shocks are felt; activities associated with different livelihood strategies may be spread over space or over time…; the mix of activities may be changed to reduce the covariance among different sources of stress or shock; risk pooling options may be employed through various forms of insurance or consumption smoothing, so the effects of a shock or stress are ameliorated; and, finally, the overall resilience of the system may be enhanced such that the impacts of stresses and shocks are less dramatically felt. (Scoones, 1988, p.10)

Traditionally, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework describes livelihood outcomes as the creation of working days, poverty reduction and well-being, and

capabilities. According to Scoones (1998) "unravelling the connections between such complex and dynamic processes and the outcomes of different strategy combinations is therefore a key part of any investigation of sustainable livelihoods" (p.9). Those who are unable to cope with temporary adjustments or adapt to longer changes are unlikely to achieve sustainable livelihoods (Davies, 1996).

Limitations of Sustainable Livelihood

Research has been able to expand the term 'sustainable livelihood' by providing principles and analyzing approaches. There are still inconsistencies within communities that host refugees regarding what exactly a sustainable livelihood looks like. "Evidence base is weak in terms of how livelihood programs impact the wellbeing, self-reliance, and durable solutions" (Jacobson & Fratzke, 2016, p. 28). Hill (2004) questioned whether interventions were relevant in the promotion of sustainable livelihoods. Horst (2006) warned of the pitfalls of vague livelihoods,

> vulnerable groups cannot be easily captured in fixed categories and are often the most difficult to reach both in academic research and by policy makers…livelihood research runs the risk of being strongly located in a fixed place and time, whereas peoples use of resources and engagement in activities often crosses boundaries and changes over time. (p.4)

Livelihood has relevancy only when the outcome is an expressed goal. In the cases of long-term benefits, sustainable livelihood was due to "special skills or training that the individual/household had gained before displacement-showing that transferable human assets are a determinant of successful coping with displacement" (Hill, 2004, p. 20). Critics have argued that research needs to provide specific and measurable outcomes

of livelihoods. Improvements need to include better program assessment and studies that track progress, impact, and livelihood outcomes.

It is no secret the sustainable livelihood has had its fair share of criticisms. Scoones (2009) identified four failures, all revolving around the lack of engagement "with processes of economic globalization, debates about politics and governance, challenges of environmental sustainability and fundamental transformation shifts in rural economies" (p.12). Micro-scale projects face cynical criticisms for being naïve in localism and idealistic in analysis. With the new aid modalities of direct budgeting, critics argued macro-economic global-scale questions are needed, not micro-scale project-based approaches. Sustainable livelihood was criticized for a lack of attention to those concerned with politics and power and its impact on one's livelihood. The "lack of rigorous attempts to deal with long-term secular change in environmental conditions" which reinforces the notion that the framework is "ignoring the big picture: fiddling while Rome burned" (Scoones, p.12). Cross-scale perspectives are needed. Scoones responded to these criticisms by calling for new research to have "a more central place for considerations of knowledge, power, values and political change" (p. 191). The way to address these concerns is by re-energizing the framework with current vulnerable populations. One opportunity to address these criticisms is by studying refugee students in higher education.

Future Work of Sustainable Livelihood

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework has value because of its locally embedded context, people-oriented perspective, and place-based analysis. To expand on perspectives, questions about knowledge, scale, dynamics, and politics should be

considered. In order to have a participatory approach to issues, research needs to set up an exchange of knowledge between higher education institutions and refugee students themselves.

New knowledge on the educational mobility of refugee students' is needed to better recognize which knowledge is negotiated and used. The politics of livelihoods asks the upfront question of who gains and who loses and why it is necessary to understand the processes of "marginalization, dispossession, accumulation and differentiation" (Scoones, 2009, p. 17). Sustainable livelihood looks at the processes of production and exchange, while at the same time understanding marginalization and opportunity. Scale brings the global and local view and intimately intertwines the perspectives for a greater analysis of the "networks, linkages, connections, flows and chains across scales, but remain firmly rooted in place and context" (Scoones, 2009, p. 18). Research will need to be adaptive, flexible, and open to diverse thoughts.

Summary and Analysis

The established systems at degree granting institutions, be they formal or informal, are the center of influence when recognizing foreign education credentials. Recognition of ones' higher education assets are either reinforced or prohibited based on such systems. This phenomenological study looks at the lived experiences of refugee students as they pursue recognition of their foreign educational qualifications by an U.S. higher education institution in their host community. National and global literature was used to build on the frameworks approach and its contextual relevance. The insights on the strategies used by refugees and their outcomes can help higher education institutions reflect on their own systems and prioritize efforts in development and or reform.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will explain the methods used in carrying out this study. The research plan, including the methodology, study participants, procedures, analysis method, and validity and reliability are primary components of this chapter. The earlier chapters describe the participants, refugees, and their integration process into a host community. The most impactful way to integrate refugees and have them become self-sufficient is by having their educational qualifications recognized or providing them access to higher education. This study will describe the lived experiences of refugee students as they engaged in the process to have their foreign education credentials recognized by a U.S. college or university.

Most refugee students find themselves being uprooted from one location to another and are left to repeatedly navigate spaces with which they are unfamiliar. This study used the Sustainable Livelihood Framework to understand how vulnerable populations access assets in a new community. To understand a person's decision-making strategies, an evaluation of past experiences is needed (Scoones, 1998). By engaging with refugee students as key actors, the research will describe perceived decision-making strategies and their outcomes within the system of higher education.

General Perspective

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework is appropriate for this study because of its people-centered and participatory approach, its rounded analysis, and its emphasis on the significance of partnerships (De Vriese, 2006). The Sustainable Livelihood Framework gives the researcher the flexibility needed to explore local means for maintaining and sustaining life. In this research, refugee students described perceived underlying causes

of formal or informal institutional barriers that constrain and shape their behavior by identifying strong and weak adaptive capacity. The researcher describes similar themes and differences between the groups of people and their strategies.

The goal of this study is to explore a phenomenon by relying on the perception of a participant's lived experiences. A qualitative approach was been selected as it is a way to understand a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological research seeks to understand individual perspectives with the aim of describing the universal essence of such experiences (Slavin, 2007). Phenomenological analysis involves four stages: intuiting, bracketing, analyzing, and describing (Streubert et al., 2003). Intuiting involves thinking through the data for accurate interpretation. Bracketing required the researcher to remain neutral despite their opinions of the phenomenon and analyzing required the researcher to compare descriptions in order to identify recurring themes and interrelationships. The final step involves describing distinct, critical elements of the phenomenon.

This research is an interpretation of reality, which can be used to understand the human condition (Slavin, 2007). To understand the lived experiences of participants, in-depth study of those perspectives is required. These in-depth interviews will capture the "nuanced and positioned nature of these refugee-professionals' perceptions, feelings, and understanding and provide a close-up experience this little-explored group has lived" (Mozetic, 2018, p. 240). Based on the participants perception of experiences, this research identified patterns and commonalities to describe the essence of the phenomenon. Mediated interpretation of the human experience is explained here: "to understand behavior, we need to understand the process by which people interpret and

define their environment" (Slavin, 2007, p. 149). The research focused on the phenomenology of essence by identifying common themes and establishing patterns of relationships shared by the phenomena (Streubert et al., 2003). An analysis of activities done by refugee students will acknowledge that there are different pathways to a desired result.

The researcher will depend on refugees being able to describe the rationale behind their decision-making strategies. This study required the participants to be able to be aware of and to articulate their experience. Refugee students and their decision-making requires them to combine or sequence various forms of capital in order to achieve their desired goal. The variation in responses by refugee students spoke to the resources available and the risks associated with alternative options. The primary limitation of this approach is an inability to generalize findings to a broader population (Slavin, 2007). The researcher avoided describing the phenomenon prematurely, rather the researcher focused on critical elements of essence common to the lived experience described by participants.

Research Questions

Primary research questions for this study include:

RQ1: How do refugees in the Rocky Mountain Region with international higher education credentials perceive their experience with institutional systems when attempting to have these credentials recognized?

RQ2: How do refugee students perceive their experience with colleges and universities when attempting to have their credentials recognized in the United States?

RQ3: What assets and decision-making strategies do refugee students use when attempting to practice their profession in the U.S.?

RQ4: When engaging with systems, what resilience mechanisms do refugees utilize to practice their profession in the U.S.?

Research Context

The research site for this study took place in three communities that host a refugee resettlement agency in the Rocky Mountain Region (Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Montana). The first research site is in a rural setting that has a population estimate of 50,000 residents and a metro population of approximately 106,000. The resettlement agency has operated since 1980. The area has one community college, three public university extension centers, and two private universities. The second resettlement community is a small city with a population estimate of 220,000 residents and a metro population of nearly 750,000 people. A resettlement agency has operated in the area since 1975. The area boasts two community college, one public university, two university outreach centers, two law schools, three private colleges, and five for-profit colleges. The third location is a small city with an estimated population of 200,500 people, the city is the core of the metropolitan area which has a population of 1.2 million people. The area has been resettling refugees since 1994. There are three public universities, two private universities, 18 for-profit colleges, and one community college. The participants will be given pseudonyms and the research activities will extend over a 3-month period.

Research Participants

The researcher worked with established connections, local refugee centers, higher education institutions, and relevant nonprofit organizations to recruit participants. The

researcher interviewed participants who have entered the country under a refugee visa and are willing to speak on their experiences. The participants are refugee students in the Rocky Mountain Region (Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Montana) who have actively engaged with a college or university that has the capacity to recognize and award credits related to foreign post-secondary study. A minimum of 12 participants were selected to provide a variety of perspectives. To provide context on the participants, demographic information was collected without compromising their identity. Demographic information includes a participant's sex, age range, degree type and level, country of education, community size of relocation, year entered the US, and to what degree their credentials were recognized: full, partial, or none. This demographic information combined with interview questions added a closer examination of assets and strategies used by the participants.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

Interviews are the primary source of data collection for this study. Interviews are a basic mode of inquiry and are most consistent with people's abilities to make meaning through language (Seidman, 2019). The goal is to "understand a person's experience from their points of view" (Schutz, 1967, p.20). The questions were developed by the researcher and are framed after the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. To test the validity and reliability of the questions, the research facilitated two pilot interviews. These interviews served to evaluate questions and their relevancy. One interview took place in person and the other took place virtually. As a result of doing the pilot interviews, the methods used to collect and analyze data were modified and a preliminary list of codes was developed. More details are provided in the data analysis section below.

Phenomenological theory focuses on people exploring the meaning of experiences in the context of their lives (Seidman, 2019). The researcher adopted Shuman's three-interview series in theory but did not interview participants three separate times. The interviews began by focusing on the participant's life history by telling the researcher about their past lives, prior to their relocation the United States. The second part of the interview asked participants to reconstruct the details of the experience to practice their profession in the United States. This allowed participants to "reconstruct their thoughts, feelings, perception and actions, most of which they take for granted during their experience of the day" (Seidman, 2019, p. 22). The third part asked participants to reflect on the meaning of that experience.

The most important technique to phenomenological studies is listening (Seidman, 2019). The researcher attempted to listen on three levels; first, listen to what the participant is saying to ensure the researcher understands the substance of what they are hearing. The second level is listening for inner voice as opposed to the guardian public voice. The researcher's experience as a refugee will be used to key-off words and encourage participants to expand their thoughts without prompting defensive responses. Lastly, the researcher will listen while remaining aware of the process and substance (Seidman, 2019). This will allow the researcher to come back to subjects when the timing is right. The interview will be marked by respect, interest, attention, and good manners such as pronouncing their name correctly.

The following techniques were used when conducting interviews: mixture of open-ended and close-ended questions, tracking, clarification, and reflective summaries. Open-ended questions provided participants the opportunity to respond in their own

words and express their feelings. Close-ended questions provided the researcher simple yes or no answers. Tracking required the researcher to closely follow the content and meaning of verbal and non-verbal conversation by encouraging participants to elaborate on experiences. Clarifying techniques aided the researcher when questions were misunderstood. Finally, reflective summary will call for "the interviewers repeat in their own words, the ideas, opinions and feelings of interviewees correctly" (De Vos, 2002, p.294). All these techniques were used at various levels by the researcher.

The researcher has an interview protocol sheet (*Appendix A*) and a contact summary sheet *(Appendix B)* to summarize time-limited data. *Appendix B* shows the contact sheet as a simple form that focuses on primary concepts, questions, and issues. This worksheet will aid in identifying and developing themes as it pertains to expressed lived experiences.

Procedures Used

Interviews conducted were in accordance with Institutional Review Board Standards and with approval from the Idaho State University. Interviews were set up at times that are convenient to the participants. Prior to the start of the interview, each participant will sign an informed consent form, as shown in *Appendix C.* The interviews were held digitally via a software like Microsoft Zoom or over telephone. Each interview will last approximately 45 to 75 minutes. Participants, associated people, and locations associated with specific events were given pseudonyms and any identifying markers were removed from the reported data. Each virtual interview had the following components: (1) meeting was set up as private, (2) a link with an 8-key secure password was sent to the participant, (3) researcher turned on waiting rooms and locked meeting room once

connection was established and (4) recordings were directly saved to computer and then promptly transferred to secure storage and immediately deleted from the computer. The researcher: (1) thanked the participant for time and willingness to participate, (2) reminded participants about their agreement, (3) informed participants about Zoom's encryption policy, (4) explained the interview structure and that probing questions may occur based off their answers and (5) asked permission to record the interview. The researcher did not transfer files over Zoom, nor ask any identifying information. The video recordings were converted into transcribed text. Original videos were deleted.

The interviews had in-depth questions that asked for detailed context of what was happening and what participants felt related to those events. This strategy allowed the researcher to probe in various ways to help the interviewee flesh out the questions. At times, the person overlooked the prompt (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.37). According to De Vos (2002), probing is needed to get to the core of the phenomenon. When responses were uncertain upon the review of notes, a follow up phone or email correspondence was used to ask questions for a second time, in a different manner. As patterns emerge, the researcher re-interviewed some participants to clarify understanding of experiences.

All paper documents were kept in a locked office. The notes of each interview were collected and stored on a password protected computer. Once the interviews were transcribed and coded, raw materials such as notes and recordings were discarded. The research stored and documented step by step analytical display. This included chronological documentation of data collection and analysis work.

Data Analysis

A thematic narrative analysis was used to interpret the data. A narrative is a story "with a clear sequential order, that connect events in meaningful way for a definite audience" (Frost, 2011, p.93). Rather than having fragmented categories and units, the researcher looked at interviews as analytical units. Creating profiles allowed the researcher to share what they have learned from the interviews.

Narratives are storied chronological events and experiences told in first person that are part of the larger whole; this researcher will refer to them as "biographical sketches". This type of analysis allowed for common thematic elements while considering time and place and will help generate knowledge based on understanding and comparing experiences of individuals (Bell & Walkover, 2021). Refugee students' re-interpretation of their experiences formed the basic text for analysis and interpretations.

The biographical sketch described their unique experiences while being concise and, following a similar chronological format and will be approximately 350 words. Biographical sketches followed the three-interview series model and focused on life history, details of lived experiences and reflection on meaning. Once the individual sketches are complete, this led the researcher to identify common and unique experiences amongst the group that assisted in analyzing thematic connections.

To focus more on what is said, instead of how it is said, the researcher will use the thematic model of narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). The researcher transcribed the text and analyze the data through coding. The researcher synthesized interview data into units of meaning and general patterns (Baker, et al. 1992), and labeled and grouped the

units and patters in accordance with the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. This effort required breaking down the text into smaller units of meaning.

All transcribed interviews will be entered in MAXQDA. The software helped data searches be rigorous, systematic, and comprehensive (Bloor & Wood, 2006). The computer-assisted qualitative analysis software helps examine the data to form emerging themes. The software was used to help tag codes and the researcher scrutinized data and developed sub-categories of codes. This process allowed for "indexing, modification and elaboration of data into a tree-like structure where the branches represent progressively more fine-grained analysis" (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 35). MAXQDA was used to perform textual search, which is extracting a particular string of characters and retrieving all relevant data with the words and phrases. In addition, the researcher used index searches to test the robustness of the coding and sought to identify patterns or themes in the data (Bloor & Wood, 2006). For example, the researcher retrieved data coded as assets, human capital, college department, but not include licensing policies. Running various index searchers helped to identify and describe themes of the code held within it. The software helped organize and retrieve data, and the researcher undertook the analytic process, by exploring the meaning of data.

Initially, the information was organized by individual to allow for comparison between participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The relationship between variables was shown by reading across the row of research questions. This strategy give "the analyst a thumbnail profile of each informant and provides an initial test of the relationship between responses to the different questions" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.129). Further data was analyzed, and more general conceptual themes will be displayed. To note

thematic concepts, relations between variables were moved towards explanation and required data to be reduced into smaller units. The researcher reduced the data and identified the general variables underlying many specifics, as well as displaying the patterns and themes.

Codes will be structured to key off conceptual variables of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. To have educational credentials recognized, refugee students may require the combination of human capital (knowledge and skills) with social capital (networks established in the host community), while in other situations, economic capital (access to funds) may be more significant. The coding process was based off conditions, interactions among actors, strategies and tactics, and outcomes. The relational structure included codes that are conceptually inclusive as well as differentiated instances (Bogden & Biklen, 1992). Coded chunks will be reduced to labels, quotations, and short summary phrases. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) "labels and ratings set up comparisons between informants…quotations supply some grounded meaning for the material…summary phrases explain or qualify a rating, usually where there are no quotations" (p.129). Preliminary codes included vulnerability, assets, influence, access, process, outcomes, and strategies (Scoones, 1998). Examples of subcodes include licensed profession, goals, institutional departments, network, and well-being. A second level of sub coding is developed to provide specific details such as who and what.

Table 1 (below) has been incorporated into the text rather than displaying it on a separate page.

Table 3.1. Codes based on Sustainable Livelihood Framework

Codes	Subcodes Level 1	Subcodes Level 2
Assets	Human Capital	credentials/degree, skills/experience/knowledge
	Natural Capital	land
	Physical Capital	technology of communication, transportation
	Financial Capital	income, cash, saving, debt/credit
	Social Capital	associations, affiliations, colleague, friend, family
Vulnerability Context	Conflict	
	Refugee	
	Language	
	Time	
Structures and Processes	Refugee Center	
	English Language Program	
	3rd Part Evaluation Agency	
	Nonprofit Resource Agency	
	Rules/Laws/License Policies	
	College Departments	Major Program Department, Admissions, Registrars, Advising, International Office
Strategies	Sequencing	

	Substitution	
	Clustering	
	Access	
	Trade-Offs	
	Trends	
Outcomes	Well-being and Capabilities	self-esteem, security, happiness, stress, reduced vulnerability, exclusion, power
	Poverty Reduction	
	Creation of Working Days	
	Sustainability	stability/sustained base, avoidance, repartitioning, resistance, tolerance

MAXQDA was used to reduce, display, and draw themes from interviews. The software helped with more complex tasks, such as organizing the database and linking relevant segments of text. As a result of using the software, thematic conceptual matrices were developed to group segments into themes and assisted the researcher in a more focused analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) reinforce that "just naming or classifying what is out there is usually not enough. We need to understand the patterns, the recurrences, the plausible whys" (p. 69). The researcher acknowledges that field site interviews come with leads, themes, and at times, contradictions, and the researcher's analysis will reflect such experiences.

Validity and Reliability

  The researcher entered the United States as a child under the refugee visa program. Because of this personal background, the researcher may have biases on the population and life experiences. The background does give the researcher insights about the population, integration process, and community resources. The researcher does not have any personal experience with the process of recognizing foreign credentials and does not have preexisting notions about the experience. The researcher has worked in U.S. higher education for the last decade and has strong background knowledge on systems and processes. The researcher's experience in taking graduate academic coursework in education will help in discussing the phenomenon. The academic experiences will help the researcher be able to successfully transcribe, code, analyze and synthesize data to establish confirmability to ensure minimal researcher bias.

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Summary

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  This chapter explained the phenomenological methods used to study refugee students attempting to have their educational credits recognized by a college or university. Using a conceptually ordered display, a thematic conceptual matrix, the research emphasized well-defined variables and their interactions. The efforts of this work lead to making comparisons, noting relationships between variables, and creating theoretical coherence. The following chapter presents the results obtained from such efforts.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study examined individual's experiences of attempting to have their international credentials recognized by a US college or university. Chapter I provided the overview of the study. Chapter II was a broad review of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework and contextual literature associated with the study; topics included, higher education transfer and awarding of academic credits and refugee students. Chapter III provided the methods in which the topic was examined. The chapter discussed the rationale for the Sustainable Livelihood Framework as well as the phenomenological approach. The chapter included discussion of research questions, participant selection, instruments used in data collection, procedures, data analysis, as well as validity and reliability.

Chapter IV will begin with biographical sketches of each individual. The sketches are based on Seidman's three-part interview model. The sketches begin by discussing the participants assets from their home country, specifically their higher education background and work experience. The sketches will transition to a discussion of their entry into the United States and their perceived understanding of existing options to practice their profession. The sketches will conclude with the participant's reflection on the outcomes of their experiences. Following these sketches, the researcher will discuss similarities and differences amongst the participants. Using the Sustainable Livelihood Framework as a guide, an in-depth examination will occur over what factors restrict or enhance livelihood opportunities.

General Background

All participants were given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. All participants in the study were over the age of 18 years old, held a higher education degree from their home country, and entered the United States as a refugee. One participant is an asylum seeker, and their status as refugee is yet to be confirmed. All participants in this study were in Rocky Mountain Region (Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Montana). All participants engaged with a college or university in some capacity. The sample included a total of twelve participants, six (6) were male and six (6) were female. Participant's country of origin are as follows: Azerbaijan (1), Democratic Republic of Congo (2), Iran (1), Iraq (4), Libya (1), Turkey (1), and Ukraine (2). All participants self-reported as having a higher education or special training and the degrees ranged from accounting (1), business/economics (2), education (2), engineering (2), geology/geophysics (1), physician (3), and welding (1). One (1) participant was in their 20's, two (2) participants were in their 30's, five (5) participants were in their 40's, and three (3) participants were in their 50's, and one (1) participant was in their 60's. Three (3) participants received no recognition of their foreign credentials, eight (8) received partial recognition, and one (1) received full recognition.

Biographical Sketches

This section includes profiles on each participant as well as the researcher. Biographical sketches are approximately 350 words and follow Seidman's three-part interview format.

Profile Description "Ivan"

Ivan has an MS degree in Electromechanical Engineering from the National Aviation University located in Kyiv, Ukraine. This degree meets his personal needs and is highly regarded in the Ukraine. As the first person in his family to attend college on an academic merit scholarship and more than 300 miles from home, Ivan relied on faculty and staff to help navigate the university system. For 12 years following the completion of his degree, he worked in various positions ranging from engine control systems to quality control.

In 2016, due to political and religious unrest, Ivan and his family relocated to the US. Prior to arriving to the US, Ivan obtained all of their academic records from the Ukraine and sought help from a nonprofit agency specializing in placing foreign talent in careers in the US. The agency helped Ivan develop cover letters, a resume, and hone their interview skills, which Ivan considered incredibly valuable and helpful. Ivan found work as a robotics technician shortly thereafter.

As an engineer, Ivan is curious about systems. During his lunch break one day, Ivan visited a nearby community college to assess his academic options in the US. At first, the system was difficult to navigate, and Ivan was told that he needed to have his credentials evaluated by the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services, Inc. (NACES). This evaluation, he was told, was necessary to be a licensed professional engineer in the US and might require additional coursework and examinations. Ivan felt his outlook was dubious. After 6 months, he received his evaluation from NACES, which indicated he needed to take one additional course to finish his Bachelor of Science in Engineering.

Shortly after his experience at the community college, Ivan applied for a job in electrical engineering. Ivan perceived his prospective employer as significantly more interested in his professional knowledge than his credentials and was offered a job. The work requirements kept him busy, and the additional science course has become less of a priority. Currently, Ivan does not perceive that taking the course would be essential or beneficiary to his job advancement but plans to complete the course in the future.

Profile Description "Nadiya"

Nadiya has a Master of Arts in English Literature from Zaporizhian National University, Ukraine. Feeling societal pressure to attend college, Nadiya originally enrolled in a vocational school near her home where she pursued a degree in Elementary Education. As a result of her parents' experiences with the educational system and her own excellent academic record, navigating the university system was simple and affordable.

After completing her credentialing, Nadiya taught English, pursued and received an advanced degree, and began interpreting in churches in the region. After five years, she left the teaching profession due to low wages and worked in various management and administrative roles prior to relocating to the US with her family in 2009.

After a few months of settling in, Nadiya began inquiring about the process of having her credentials evaluated. The resettlement agency she used provided few resources and discouraged this. Nadiya later spoke to the international advisor at a local community college, who provided several options, including connecting with World Education Services (WES). The initial process of having her credentials evaluated was costly and time-consuming and took over eight years to complete.

Unable to receive federal finance assistance, Nadiya held off on her studies until she was able to secure financial stability. After being offered a job at the college, she decided to pursue business. Knowing that a change of major would require additional coursework, Nadiya embraced the opportunity to learn in the American school system and enrolled in several classes. Shortly thereafter, she found the content to be rudimentary and attempted to waive the general education requirements and instead began to work with WES to pursue further evaluation. Upon completion, Nadiya engaged in a degree audit. The response was mixed, and she opted to instead take the courses necessary to complete her degree. After 12 years in the United States of American, Nadiya was able to complete an associate's degree in Business and WES recognized her foreign degree as the equivalent of a master's degree. Nadiya feels financially and socially stable but the stigma of being a political and religious refugee lingers.

Profile Description "Jean"

Jean is from the Democratic Republic of Congo and received a bachelor's degree in education in 1977. As a first-generation student, Jean is used to blazing a new path for his family. Though he had both financial and emotional support, Jean had to find self-reliance early on due to the extreme distance between his home and family and his college.

Several years after he completed his degree, he relocated to Tanzania for nearly 15 years. During this relocation, Jean actively collaborated with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Children's Fund and helped found an elementary school at a refugee camp. While in this camp, Jean proctored national exams

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for Congolese children and ensured they kept up with their studies while simultaneously developing a teacher training program and serving as an evaluator.

In 2013, Jean relocated to the US with the help of a resettlement agency, who referred him to a local nonprofit specializing in placing foreign talent in careers in the US. The nonprofit connected Jean to a local school district, where he is currently employed and focused on tutoring, translation, and interpretation. He also serves as a sometimes-social worker, helping the school with Congolese families.

Prior to this employment, Jean sought help from a local university to understand his academic options. An international student advisor encouraged him to study at the university; the university recommended he use World Education Service to evaluate his existing academic credentials. This evaluation was extremely difficult due to conflicts between WES, the university, and educational representatives from the Democratic Republic of Congo. This disconnect left Jean unable to complete the academic evaluation. More pressing family care needs prompted him to forego further educational pursuits and Jean returned to work at a public school district. While his work remains relevant to his credentials, his skills and talents remain undermatched.

Profile Description "Ahmed"

In 2011, Ahmed received his general physician's degree from Alfateh University in Tripoli, Libya. Coming from a family that prioritized academic attainment, he was committed to pursuing an advanced degree. He practiced medicine for over a year before fleeing to a refugee camp in Tunisia, where he assisted medical staff in various ways but was limited by the language barrier. In 2013, he and his family relocated to the US.

Looking to thrive in his new environment, Ahmed began the process to get his credentials evaluated and recognized. He submitted his credentials directly to the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG). He was approved to take exams and apply for residency but could not take on the financial burden of prep courses and studied alone. The process took over six months and left him discouraged and depressed about the disconnect between academic knowledge and practical application. To narrow his educational gaps before his second exam, Ahmed turned to a local community college and enrolled in a physician's assistant program. The program did not accept the ECFMG evaluation and required evaluation by the World Education Service (WES). The process was not complicated, but it was time consuming and required three semesters of coursework prior to being able to apply to the program. This was also financially burdensome due to his lack of access to federal financial aid.

The time spent in the physician's assistant program was academically frustrating for Ahmed, who became a peer tutor. Today, he is not a practicing physician and earns his primary income through financial investing. While he may be financially secure, he is unfulfilled professionally but committed to the challenge of reaching his goal of practicing as a physician in the US. He believes this pursuit will ultimately offer him the opportunity to help others and be happy himself.

Profile Description "Ali"

Ali is from Iraq and has a bachelor's degree in accounting. He comes from an educated family and navigating college was relatively easy. He did not incur any debt due to government sponsorship of his education. For Ali, education represents not only financial stability but social mobility, particularly when considering marriage.

Prior to his relocation, Ali worked in business for over 10 years, working with the US Embassy in Baghdad to support private businesses. His cooperation with the US government left him vulnerable and, eventually, targeted by a terrorist group. He fled to nearby Syria and eventually arrived in the United States in 2008.

Looking to continue working in business, Ali worked with multiple agencies, including a refugee center, the Department of Labor, nonprofits, and a community college. He found limited success and has mixed feelings about his experience navigating his relocation. He started with English courses at the community college and, during his time there, was referred to a nonprofit that helps place refugees in careers in the US. Ali was unimpressed with their services, their lack of engagement, and their lack of a network within the community, but still sought their help with becoming a CPA.

To become a CPA, Ali needed to prove 150 college credit hours, pay a testing fee, and pass a licensing exam. The process seemed clear, and he opted to use World Education Services (WES) to evaluate his credits. They noted missing credits and referred him to the local community college to fill those gaps. His experience was frustrating, particularly given the language barrier. He worked with the department chair to enroll in more challenging classes and successfully passed, but later questioned what he was doing at the college. He questioned the disconnect between his skills, education, and the courses he was taking, and walked away from the community college.

During this time, Ali still needed to provide for his family and found jobs in manufacturing and volunteered as an interpreter. Through these positions, he was hired by agency that does case management and peer support services and eventually applied

and was offered an accounting job. After 12 years, he finally had a job relevant to his original profession.

Profile Description "Isra"

Isra is from the cosmopolitan capital of Ankara, Turkey. Her family has a long history of educational attainment and both her parents and her siblings have degrees. She received a scholarship to attend a high school based on the American school system and focused on the arts. With the help and guidance of the faculty, she accepted a scholarship to Bennington College in Vermont in 1995. In 1999, she received her Bachelor of Arts in theater.

Upon her return to Turkey, she found herself copywriting for an international news department and advertising agency. Wanting something more, Isra enrolled at Istanbul Bilgi University to study Visual Communication and Design. She had immediate difficulties transferring Bennington's gradeless policy to Turkey's higher education system but, through her network, was able to enroll and eventually graduate in 2003. While studying, she accepted a position with the theater department and continued to pursue and receive a PhD in Theater Criticism and Dramaturgy from Istanbul University in 2009. She has since published numerous academic articles and presented her work at conferences and other professional events.

In 2016, Isra, alongside thousands of other academics, was targeted by the Turkish government. Following a failed coup, the government turned its attention to dismissing thousands of academics from public universities. Academics of all levels were questioned, detained, and their passports were confiscated. Isra, with the help of her family, sought help from nonprofits who work with displaced scholars by partnering with

academic systems in other countries, like the US. Isra applied to IIE Scholar Rescue Fund

and was relocated to the US via the asylum pathway and began working for her alma

mater, Bennington College. During this time, IIE's reputation helped her evade having

her credentials questioned and she was able to work within her field within months of

arriving to the US.

The IIE program lasts one year with the possibility of extension. After three years,

Isra had to seek out other work in the United States. She eventually accepted a teaching

job at a community college and, to her surprise, her credentials were not questioned.

Profile Description "Pierre"

Pierre received a degree in economics in the Democratic Republic of Congo. His

college degree was a family investment. Upon graduation, he worked in government

banking, and he was sent for continuing education in France, Italy, and Belgium. He

worked for eight years before relocating to a refugee camp in Cameroon in 1998. In

2000, he entered the United States.

He arrived in the US with little to no English. Thinking this was his only barrier,

he was optimistic he could work in the US once his communication improved but quickly

learned that was not the case. The refugee center informed him that his professional

background was of limited use in the US and, if he wanted any type of success, he would

have to take English courses. He did and passed multiple language levels. After

completing these courses, he reached out to a local community college for guidance on

his next step. He was encouraged to take the GED; the community college did not advise

him that his credits could be evaluated. He had to "start at zero."

While studying for the GED, he worked in manufacturing and transportation. After he earned his GED, he was offered a job at a national bank. He quickly realized the responsibilities of a bank teller were far more basic than he anticipated, and that the salary was unsustainable, so he ultimately declined the position. Unsure of his next move, he enrolled in professional truck driving school on the advice of his GED teacher.

While working for a national trucking company, he began volunteering at a refugee center. In the last 10 years, Pierre has worked at three different refugee centers across the US. His goal is to ease the burden of newly arrived refugees by helping them to understand credit, taxes, and how to restart their life with hope. Pierre is cognizant of the tradeoff between saving money and investing in education and feels that, for some older refugees, going back to school is not realistic or worthwhile.

In 2019, the Democratic Republic of Congo elected a new president, Felix Tshisekedi, and a call for political and ideological exiles to come home was made. After living abroad for over 20 years, Pierre is excited about the possibility of returning home, but he is cautious. Pierre is ultimately torn between staying in the US and returning home to start a business and reunite with his family.

Profile Description "Zahra"

Zahra graduated with a master's degree in geology and geophysics from Azerbaijan State University. Her expertise is in the prognosis and exploration of mineral deposits, and she worked at a small geological state regional office. While working, she received additional training in program engineering. When she escaped from Baku to Moscow in 1987, her training was helpful in landing a job and securing income for her family. A widow, Zahra and her two children arrived in the United States in 1994.

Zahra did not see finding work in her profession as an option in the small rural community. Being a widow, the immediate need to care for her children took precedence. Her inital profession requires a high academic vocabulary, and her limited English was a hinderance. Lastly, the profession was nonexistent in the rural community. She had to part ways with her old identity and start with what was available.

A friend connected Zahra to English language classes offered at the local community college. After completing her language courses, she enrolled in a Business Computer Application with Desktop Publishing program at the local community college. Zahra never had her education credentials evaluated because she did not know it was an option. She believed her only option was to start from the beginning, and the belief was never challenged.

Zahra believed an American education would reaffirm existing skills. The familiarity of the field made her hopeful for reclaiming an identity she once had and a restoration of a social status she once held for her children. While working in the computer department at a casino an hour away, she worked to receive a certificate in network design.

The combination of networking, technical programming, and her background in publishing led her to take a position as the director of community learners at the same college she was a student at. In 2021, Zahra retired from the college after 20 years of services. With no regrets, she feels strongly that it is up to the college to do outreach to refugees.

Profile Description "Amir" and "Ezra"

Amir and Ezra are married and were physicians in Iraq. Amir was a radiologist and Ezra was a pediatrician. Education was a strong family value for both participants. Ezra and Amir worked and studied in the western region of Iraq, the most difficult and dangerous during the Fallujah battles. After a friend was kidnapped and murdered and personal threats were made to Amir about Ezra, the two fled to Jordan. There, they lived in the city of Amman and practiced medicine. Amir went from working as a radiologist to working as an emergency room doctor and Ezra went from working as a pediatrician to working as an OBGYN. Due to the state's policies, the two could not obtain residency. They could move back to Iraq or apply for refugee status. They entered the United States in 2009.

Upon their arrival, the refugee center disregarded their professions and encouraged Amir to take a job as a shepherd at a goat farm and Ezra to cook at an assisted living facility. Through a friend, Amir learned about an interpreting job at a local hospital. This position was of great interest because the two could learn about the American medical system, be introduced to physicians, and visit clinics. He was able to land his first relevant job in the medical field and started the 12-year journey necessary to reclaim their profession.

Ezra and Amir learned that many American physicians could not give advice because they did not know the process for international doctors. Not being able to find answers, the two sought guidance from friends who lived in other states with existing systems and processes. In 2014, they formed their own social network of international medical doctors living in the area with the goal to help, guide, and provide resources.

Within weeks, the group doubled in size. Some individuals choose to reclaim their professions while others opted to enroll in programs like surgical technician, registered nursing, and physician assistant.

To be a physician, they must have their credentials evaluated, take exams, and obtain residency. Amir and Ezra perceived the first exam, which is focused on general competencies of medical science, as a difficult first step to entry. To be competitive for a residency position, they need relevant experiences and letters of recommendation from practitioners in the field. For American physicians, this cooperation is typically coordinated by the medical school they are attending. For refugee doctors who are not in medical school, they need to do this on their own. This step stifled them until they made a connection with a retired internal medicine doctor, researcher, and USMLE National Boards' question writer who was looking to help. With his vast network, he provided opportunities for Amir and Ezra, and others, to intern.

Amir and Ezra sought help from universities to get back to working in the medical profession but found little success. Those who were to go down the physician assistant route, the first barrier to entry is having to take prerequisite courses. Amir and Ezra selected this route and had their credentials evaluated. The American Board of Medical Specialists evaluated and recognized their credentials, but the Physician Assistant Program at the college refused to accept their equivalency, leaving Amir and Ezra discouraged.

Currently, Ezra has left her position as a Clinical Researcher to focus on her exams and applying for residency. Amir recently took a position as a Senior Manager for Clinical Performance and is supporting his wife's decision to focus on her studies.

According to Amir and Ezra, the missing piece necessary for international doctors and refugees is the attention and support of medical schools and universities.

Profile Description "Noor"

Noor's education had always been international. After a year of college in Dubai, Noor moved back to her home country of Iraq. There, she studied software engineering at Al Mansour University College, a private university. During this time, Noor heavily depended on her family for support; her father financed her studies, she lived with her grandfather, and her uncles drove her to and from school because of safety concerns. Upon graduation, she did not work in software engineering. Instead, she wrote daily financial updates for the Minister of Finance and worked as an interpreter for the US Embassy in Baghdad while also working as a project coordinator for the US Agency of International Development.

In 2013, Noor, her husband, and two kids arrived in the United States. Her first outreach to a higher education institution was a community college, where she began her studies in network engineering. The degree was a certificate, and only required a high school diploma. The college never asked for her college credentials, only an entrance exam, which she passed. She soon learned the difference between a diploma and a certificate. With an unexpected pregnancy and the disappointment of learning about the credential type, Noor walked away from the program.

Through a friend, she learned about a university affiliated program that connects refugees and other immigrants to higher education and employment resources. Her credentials qualified her to apply to a master's program. Within a few months, she would receive an unexpected opportunity: work part-time for the agency that she sought services

from. After two rejected applications to a master's degree in software engineering, she found a program more suited to her professional career, International Affairs and Global Enterprise. To be admitted, the graduate department reviewed her transcripts, letters of recommendation, and resume. Because of her professional background, the department waived the TOEFL and internship with an international agency. Her part-time employment with the university qualified her for scholarship assistance. She graduated in 2020. Noor calls herself lucky and is aware that others have not had the same success. Her work with the university affiliated program and major program departments left her frustrated, unmotivated, and fearful it would disappear.

Profile Description "Izad"

Izad's work experience is in welding. Originally from Iran, Izad relocated to Turkey in 2013 after completing his military service. During his time in Turkey, he explored the outdoors and did various jobs until he propositioned his employer to sponsor his education in welding. There, he received an international certificate in welding and practiced the profession until he relocated to the United States in 2017.

Discouraged by the refugee center, Izad did not pursue welding. Using his new social network and a love for the outdoors, Izad went from working at a hotel to a rock-climbing gym. In 2018, an ice climbing accident forced Izad to reconsider his employment. A friend informed Izad about a welding program at the local community college. After a Google search, he connected with the welding instructor.

The welding instructor reviewed his certificate and asked for a demonstration of skills. The welding instructor recognized his skills and encouraged Izad to enroll in one of the shorter trainings. The cost varied according to the length of time. Izad's education

was gradual due to financial constraints. He first enrolled in a 1-week training program. From there, he was able to secure funding from the refugee center to pay for a month-long training. The training did not require prerequisites nor language tests. Izad worked closely with the instructor, who eventually connected him with his current employer. Feeling restricted by his age, Izad has not enrolled in the college's technical certificate or an associate degree. As his English skills improve, so does his ability to express his needs. Izad is satisfied with his ability to practice welding in the United States and believes the instructor played a significant role.

Researcher

I was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A conflict emerged as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia dissolved. Prior to this conflict, my mother was a 23-year-old homemaker, and my father was a 28-year-old delivery driver. Just a child during the war, my family and I fled our hometown in 1993 after years of unemployment, gunfire, and intimidation by military and police. In 1996, my family was relocated to a rural community in the United States.

My mother's first job was housekeeping at a local retirement home and her father worked at a manufacturing company making trailers. My brother and I would go through the American school system. In high school, I took dual credit courses and shortly after enrolled at a local community college. In 2007, I received an associate degree in secondary education and history. I transferred to a university and received a B.A. in secondary education and, history with a minor in political science in 2009. I enrolled in a master's program for adult and organizational learning and leadership and graduated

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summa cum laude in 2011. In the fall of 2013, I enrolled in an education leadership program, with a concentration on higher education administration.

I taught middle school history before making my employment transition to a community college. I first worked in admissions and recruited in-state students as well as advised international students. During this time, I would teach dual-credit history and leadership courses. Currently, I teach in the Education Department at the community college.

Professionally, I helped to form an American Association for Women in Community Colleges chapter on campus and became the chapter's first president in 2015. In 2016, I helped to lead a campus wide initiative to create the college's food pantry. I teach and mentor for a Summer Bridge, a program that helps minority, low-income, and first-generation students transition from high school or GED to college level courses. I serve as the chairperson of the local city historic preservation commission. I have presented at various local, regional, and national conferences and the audience has ranged from educators to community members.

In 2017, the community in which the researcher lives was in an uproar over the refugee resettlement program. The local refugee center endured months of anti-immigrant hostility. That spring, a local community college hosted a large town-hall style meeting that drew over 1,000 participants with the goal of addressing various questions and rumors about the program. The evening showed how little community members knew about the population, the resettlement process, or their value to the community. The event served as a springboard for selecting this topic.

General Reactions

My background as a refugee helped tremendously with the recruitment and interview process. There was a reluctancy from people to share their experiences in an online video recorded forum. My connections with relevant agencies and community members played a significant role in recruiting participants. My personal and academic background knowledge on the refugee experience and higher education allowed for the interviews to be fluid and gave me the ability to probe when needed.

Thematic Narrative Analysis

This section will discuss the themes that emerged from the interviews. Each research question will be stated, followed by a discussion of theme and subthemes. Theme's will be supported by participant quotes. When considering the format for the findings, I purposefully chose to present each question followed by themes. The order of the research questions follows the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, and it will allow me to tell multiple experiences in a chronological order. Formatting the findings in such a manner allowed me to describe a person's progression through each stage. The format describes the lived experiences and their essence and uniqueness. Addressing each question at a time allows for me to present connections between entities, people, assets, strategies, and outcomes.

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework is structured to tell a full story from assets to outcomes. The questions and their order shed light on larger concepts when refugees engage with the various institutional systems and processes to recognize their foreign academic credentials. Although the focus is on higher education, refugees engage with refugee centers, third-party evaluation organizations and nonprofit agencies at the same

time as colleges or universities. Due to a refugee's interplay between these various

organizations, it is best to present questions which help to provide a holistic analysis of

the experience and its various stages.

All interviews were transcribed and entered in MAXQDA software. Data was

coded using the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. Primary codes include assets,

vulnerability context, structure and processes, strategies, and outcomes. The full list of

subcodes can be viewed in the data analysis section of Chapter III. In total 37,656 words

were logged, and 873 codes were assigned across 12 interviews. Demographic variables

were collected: sex, age range, degree type and level, country of education, relocation

size of community, year entered United States, and to what degree were their credentials

were recognized (full, partial, none).

To emphasize important passages, I first color coded the text. This allowed me to

identify and later mark them according to themes. To ensure consistency amongst the

labeling, the Sustainable Livelihood Framework was used as a basis for the code types.

The codes followed the same order. I explored the frequency of words and terms used by

participants as well as co-occurrences. This helped to eliminate the risk of overlooking an

important point or reference.

MAXQDA software can develop visual representations of themes. The software

allowed the researcher to view data connections in a comprehensible way. A code matrix

browser was used to display the frequencies of the codes per unit of analysis. The codes

formed the rows while the individual interview formed the columns. The larger a square,

the more occurrences of the search terms of the respective code were found in the

analyzed interview. I also used the code relations browser to help analyze relationships

between codes. A table was used to show how many interview segments any two codes were attached to. Instead of frequency, this matrix identified co-occurrences. Codes formed the column and the rows. Symbols indicated how many segments were coded, and the larger the symbol, the more segments there were.

Below you will see model displays of most frequently used codes based on the Sustainable Livelihood Framework amongst all participants. To make the coded segments accessible, I used a single-case model. The single-case model represents the coded themes and their respective frequencies in a schematic diagram. The various elements are connected and the line thickness between the codes symbolize the number of segments available for each code. The thicker the line, the more segments are available with the code. More figures will be displayed below.

Figure 4.1 Single Case Model
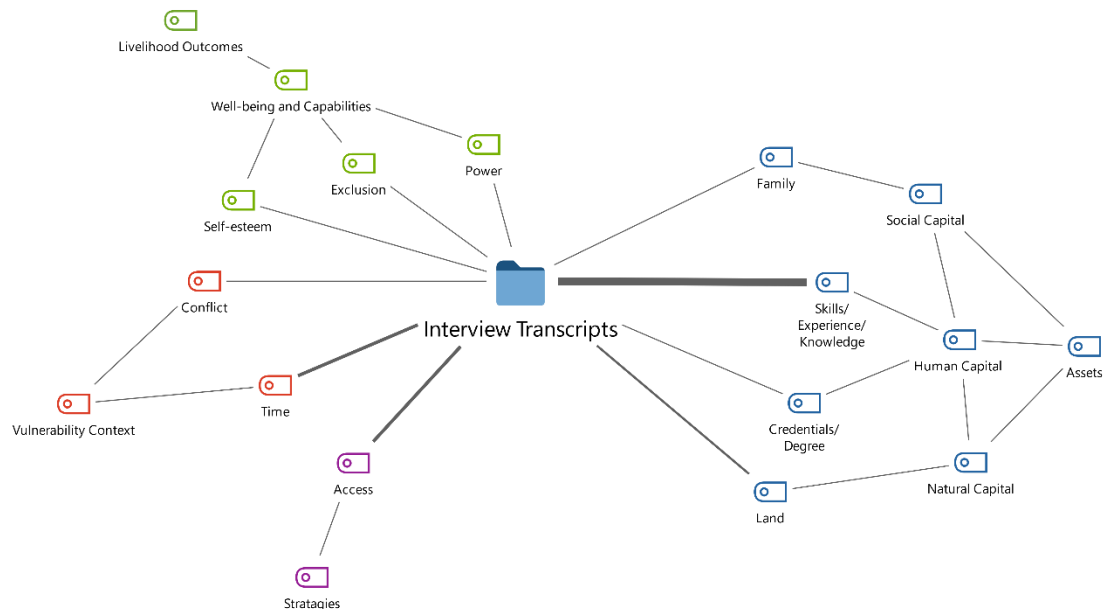
Below, the research question will be stated, and themes and subthemes will be discussed. The order of the questions helps to provide a holistic view of the many different experiences. The questions describe common and unique experiences amongst the participants.

Perceived Experiences of Well-being and Capabilities

 R.Q. #1: How do refugees in the Rocky Mountain Region with international higher education credentials perceive their experience with institutional systems when attempting to have these credentials recognized?

This research considers Rocky Mountain Region as the following states: Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Montana. Institutional systems are referred to as being structures and processes that influences a person's ability to access livelihood resources (Scoones, 1998). There are many entities, beyond higher education, refugee students engage with before, during and after the process to recognized academic credentials. Figure 4.2 demonstrates a visual map of all relevant structures and processes.

*Figure 4.2 Structures and processes*
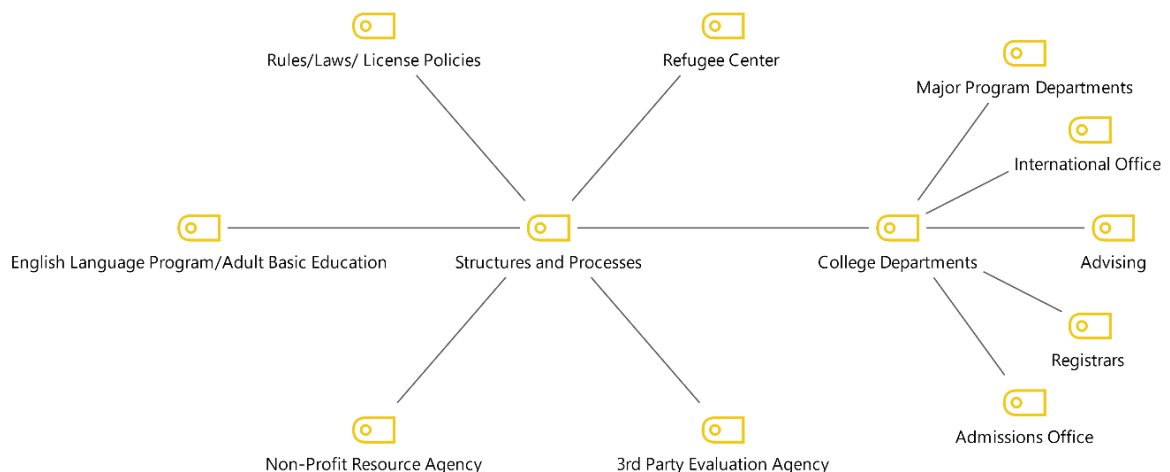
When reducing data, some institutions become more prominent than others. Experiences with structures and processes were perceived as being both positive and negative. The details below addressed primary institutions of interaction and their influence on refugee students. Departments specific to higher education will be discussed later in the chapter.

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework was used to assess the outcomes of assets and activities for a means of living. The word sustainability means the resilience mechanisms used by people to obtain a stable livelihood. The word livelihood links concerns over employment with broader issues such as well-being and capability (Scoones, 1998). RQ1 looks at the interaction of refugees and organizations, and their livelihood outcomes regarding well-being and capability. The question is not concerned about food intake or income, but rather on intrinsic values of self-esteem, security, happiness, stress, vulnerability, power, or exclusion (Scoones, 1998). RQ4 will address themes that pertain to sustainability.

The process to recognize foreign credentials involves more than the college. During the recognition process, there are many entities a refugee student engages with before and after their interaction with a college. Of all organizations, refugees interacted most frequently with refugee centers and major program departments at colleges. They perceived their experience with these organizations to be mostly negative. Refugees perceived to have both positive and negative experiences regarding rules, laws, and licensing policies. Refugees perceived to have positive experiences with nonprofit resource agencies whose mission is to help skilled immigrants reclaim their professional careers in the United States. The details of these perceptions will be discussed below.

Well-being is determined by how a person feels about their new social space. When engaging in the process to recognize foreign credentials, refugees described negative effects on their self-esteem, a feeling of exclusion, and feeling powerless. To be powerless is to have a lack of influence and to be "subject to the power of others, they are easy to ignore or exploit" (Chambers, 1995, p.190). Social exclusion is "the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live" (European Foundation, 1995, pg.4). Self-esteem is an individual's evaluation of their own self-worth. Refugee students described negative effects on their well-being when interacting with refugee centers or major program departments at colleges and universities.

Figure 4.3 Influential structures and processes on well-being and capabilities
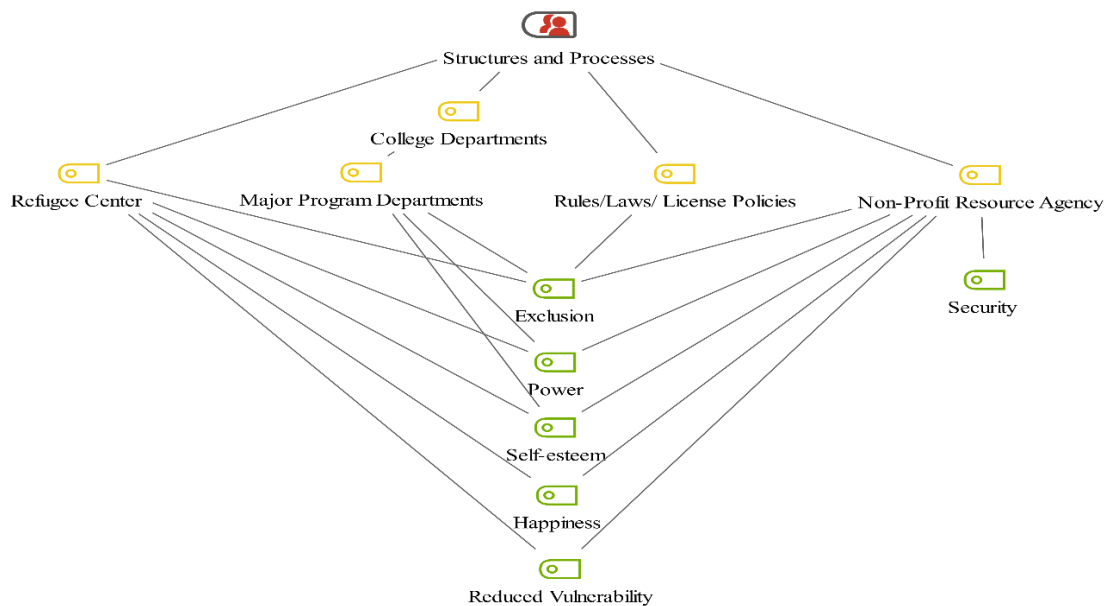
Holistic Differences

In this section, a few general differences will be discussed at the holistic level. First, refugees' year of migration ranged over a 20-year span. Over the decades,

participants expressed similar experiences when engaging with higher education institutions and refugee centers. The largest difference amongst the group was a person's ability to access non-profit agencies. Those who entered the US in the mid-1990s and early 2000s generally went through the process alone. Refugees expressed difficulties navigating the system and felt isolated and doubtful of themselves. On the other side, those who entered the US in the late 2000's viewed non-profit agencies to be the most valuable resource. The agencies helped refugees understand the process, identify appropriate entities involved, and connect them with other people in similar circumstances. Being able to work with nonprofit agencies made a significant impact on person's perceived experience.

A refugee's field of education greatly influenced their experience. Participants who were required to pass an exam to practice the profession expressed a greater understanding of the process. However, if their educational evaluation came back as being partially recognized and the person had to pass certain courses to qualify for the exam, enrolling in a college course became the largest barrier to practicing the profession. Although experiences differed across majors, enrolling in courses in the health science field served to be the most challenging.

Lastly, perceived differences can be seen depending on a refugee's home country of origin. The two participants from the Democratic Republic of Congo were both advised to start their education over. Records were either not evaluated or came back as no recognition. Participants from all other regions came back as partially recognized. Refugees who arrived from the former Soviet Union did not cite experiencing bias as often as those from middle eastern nations, such as Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Participants from the middle east commonly expressed feeling of dismissal from people or institutions. Refugees made this interpretation because of conversations they had with people from various university departments and refugee centers.

Below I breakdown the discussion further by looking at each entity and perceived experiences and outcomes. Within these sections, similarities and differences will be discussed amongst the individuals. This will allow the reader to focus on one institution at a time and avoid generalizations about the experience.

Refugee Center: Exclusion and Self-Esteem.

For most participants, the refugee center is the entity that introduces them to community resources. Those who inquired with a refugee center about their ability to practice their profession in the United States were met with dismissal and discouragement. "They [refugee center] told me whatever you have back home, it doesn't mean anything here" (Pierre). Nadiya echoed similar remarks and was disappointed with the refugee center's reaction when she expressed a desire to pursue her education:

> Unfortunately, we were told in refugee center that we didn't have come here to study, we came here to work. And in one hand. I agree, because we had to make money, we had to pay bills, we had to establish some foundation for our life. But from another, I wish we were told that you can try and maybe start with one class. Give us some hope to have better future, like, to see that we can have career. (Nadiya)

When Izad, a welder, asked the refugee center about the ability to practice the profession in the United States, they questioned his ability to do the job because he did not know the imperial system of measurement. He recalls the center telling him, "You

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can't do that work here. You don't know how to measure in inches. You don't know how to use the tape measure". While he may not know the measurement system, Izad knew that he was "not stupid. Give me a few days, I will learn". The request was denied, and he was pressured to take a job cleaning at a local hotel.

Refugees describe having mixed feelings about the refugee center's expectation to say yes to any job offer. For many, their self-esteem was tied to their professional identity. Ivan, a former engineer, felt conflicted:

> They told us how we should behave ourselves or conduct oneself and the main thing was any job they suggest you should agree. Even if we had trainings and some exams. If they offer a job to mow grass, okay. Clean house, the answer was yes. I agree with any job and that's normally correct. But I wanted something more… My motivation was to find a job where I can apply my knowledge. (Ivan)

Ivan and others described feeling their skills being devalued by the refugee center when told to take any job, regardless of their academic background and work history.

Refugees that relocate to a new community feel a loss of language, family, friends, culture, and now career. The refugee center was perceived as being of little help. To reclaim that part of their identity, people need to understand existing structures and processes to practice their profession in the United States. A refugee's first line of inquiry with the refugee center is often one of dismissal. This has a lasting impression on a refugee's perception of self-worth. Most refugees claimed to have received guidance and encouragement from family, friends, and new acquaintances.

For Ali, his initial interaction with the refugee center left an impression that he could not shake off. "They think we all are hungry, starving. When we came, I am wearing nice clothes, my wife is wearing diamonds in her ears. They look at that like we are aliens. I think our appearance threw them off" (Ali). Peoples bias about what a refugee ought to look like would continue to influence Ali's experience. After a few months, refugees like Ali distanced themselves from the center.

At times, refugees expressed going rogue, and hid their educational pursuits from the relocation agency.

> I went to free English classes at the refugee center. For some reason, the refugee center did not want us to go to college site to learn English. So, I kind of quietly went to college free classes on evenings. (Zahra)

For those who wanted to reclaim their profession, friends and family played a significant part in providing information about local community resources. Most learned about a college or university program from friend. Ezra, a former physician from Iraq, relied on friends to understand the process to become a physician in the United States. She explained, "we start connecting with some of those friends and asking questions. How do you apply? What is needed? We start getting some guidance of what to do" (Ezra). With little to no help from the center, she and others relied on newly developed social circles to help educate themselves about structures and processes. For refugees, the first barrier to credential recognition is access to information. With little to no guidance from the refugee center, refugees rely on newly developed social circles to access relevant information in order to practice their profession.

Rules and Policies: Stress, Power, and Exclusion.

The path to inquiry depends on the profession. Rules and policies are interpreted as established practices that allow a person to be admitted into a program or be eligible to take a licensure exam. For careers that require a licensing exam, refugees started at the licensing board. For careers that do not have a licensure exam, like economics, many started their inquiry at the college level. A nonprofit resource agency was key in providing refugees with information on the sequencing of events that needed to occur to practice the profession. For example, Ivan worked with an agency to understand the process to become a licensed engineer:

> I didn't know that this system exists. She told me and I found some information on the Internet. She helped me to apply for the next step… When I connected to NACES, they gave me a roadmap. What should I do? What documents they need from my university? (Ivan)

To practice his profession, his education transcripts must be evaluated, meet the credit threshold to take the exam, and he must successfully pass the exam. "I tried to understand how does the system work. Not only small piece of the system, the entire system. And this is what I put in my efforts to achieve" (Ivan). With the help of the agency, he was able to understand the process in a short time and connect to relevant organizations.

Refugees that inquired on their own, without the help of an agency, took months to fully understand the system. For Ahmed, a former physician, the process came at a shock:

> I don't want to give a chance for anyone to say you're rejected because of paperwork… The first shock was the challenge. How big the challenge. I heard stories of people get divorced because their family can't handle it. (Ahmed)

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When engaging with systems on their own, the experience negatively affected their well-being and refugees expressed feelings of stress, powerlessness, and a sense of exclusion.

The pathway to practice a profession was not as clear for jobs that did not require a licensure exam. Many began their journey at the college. When arriving to a community college, Ali indicated the college employees were unsure of what to do. "They sent my information to advising center. They did not know what to do. They said, we don't know what to do, you are the first one". After shuffling Ali from the registrar's office to the advising office to the international office, he eventually was instructed to take an entrance exam to be placed in entry level courses. The interaction left Ali skeptical about their ability to advise him for the future.

Ivan, an engineer, worked with a nonprofit agency to understand the process to practice his profession. After a third-party agency evaluated his credentials, he received partial recognition. He needed to take one science course to be eligible to take the engineer exam. When he turned to a local community college to help fill the education gap, a similar experience of not knowing what to do occurred:

> I came to them with my papers and ask who could help me…I drive around the
> building knocking on one door, asked, can you help me? No, it's not here. The
> next building, the next building…Finally, a lady came and said, okay, I know this.
> (Ivan)

Ivan was informed to apply the community college online and enroll in a science course in the summer term. It is clear when college staff do not know what to do, many refugees

are shuffled from office to office. The experience is stressful and leads to a feeling of exclusion.

Noor, a former engineer, did not understand degree terminology. While she did not probe the advisor to make sure she understood the terminology, the advising staff did not check to ensure she understood it either.

> I went and studied network engineering, which is related to my bachelor's degree with Cisco routers. I discovered that it was a certificate, it wasn't a degree. I was very disappointed when I found out that it's a certificate because I didn't understand the system at that time. I read the word engineering, so I thought, we'll it's a degree. (Noor)

Noor expressed feeling powerless because of a lack of understanding of common terminology. She blamed herself for the misunderstanding, and it came at the cost of time and money. She eventually postponed her education because of a baby on the way and later enrolled in a master's program that was more suited to her work experience.

The first interaction when inquiring about career opportunities in the US has a lasting impression on refugees. Nadiya reflects on her intake process with an advising center, "that's the worst, their attitude…Don't make me feel like an idiot that I don't know. Just help me". For refugees, a clear structured process that is based on rules, policies and laws is acceptable. Most of their education from their home country came from a rigid system that required high exam scores and stringent course sequencing. Refugees expressed a feeling of happiness when a pathway was presented before them. When the process is ambiguous, that is when a sense of exclusion and powerlessness is

expressed by refugee students. College staff shuffling the student from one department to another leaves a lasting impression of skepticism. Exclusion is primarily expressed when a system at the college is either underdeveloped or nonexistent.

Major Program Departments: Exclusion, Power, and Self-Esteem.

Students who had to take a licensure exam in order to practice their profession evaluated their credentials based on the recommendations of the licensing office. For those whose profession did not require a licensure exam, the college recommended the appropriate evaluation agency. When deficiencies were identified, the refugee would turn to the major program department to full the education gaps. Refugee students perceived major program departments at colleges and universities as the most influential entity during their process. Other college departments will be discussed in further detail when addressing RQ2.

Most college departments did not evaluate the credentials themselves; a third-party evaluation agency did the assessing. In this research, 8 out of 12 participants had their credentials evaluated by a third-party agency, 2 were evaluated by the department and 2 were never informed of the process. Those who received partial or no credit recognition worked with the college to understand their next step. The ability for a person to enroll in a course is dependent on course level, major program policies and a refugee's ability to access finances. Some courses were open to enrollment while others required admissions into the major program before being able to take courses. In some cases, students were asked to take prerequisites before being able to apply to the program and then eventually take the necessary courses that would meet their education deficiencies. Some refugees were never told about the ability to evaluate their credentials and were

instructed to take a placement exam. Based on their entrance scores, they were to enroll in 100 and 200 level courses, and some were asked to take remedial courses.

Major courses that did not require admissions into the program, but rather a declaration, found themselves placed in levels they perceived to be basic. Many attempted to work with department chairs to substitute, waive, or place them in higher level courses. The results of their efforts varied. For Ali, he worked with the Math Department Chair to place him in a course more suited to his skills:

> They [advising] put me in a lower math than what I needed. I asked, what's going on here? This is too basic for me. Advising told me that I cannot take calculus, it is hard. They encouraged me to take lower class because of my English. I did not like this. I spoke with Math Department Chair and I convinced him to take calculus, I passed. (Ali)

Some refugees reviewed their options and current environment and decided to declare a new major. The declaration of a new major lead the college staff to do a degree audit. They college used the results of the third-party evaluation when doing the audit. Based on the results, refugees were informed which courses they need to take for their major of study. After Nadiya's degree audit and taking a few courses, she began to think the 100 and 200 level courses were too simple. She attempted to work with department chairs to waive courses. Some departments were open to waiving or substitute courses, while others were not. When attempting to waive a course, a perceived small request by a science department chair becomes a large obstacle:

> I had to go to department chairs to substitute some courses. He wanted syllabus with course description, outcomes, everything, I'm like 'are you kidding me? I

don't know who is doing this at the college and it's in Ukraine. Nothing will be

done, forget about it. I'll just take the course. He wasn't helpful. (Nadiya)

The request required a level of social capital in her home country and financial

capital to pay for translating documents and people's time. It would have taken her

months to comply with the request. Nadiya made a trade-off; she opted to enroll in the

course versus attempting to get the correct documentation. The department chair took

little time to understand Nadiya's position, her past experiences, and the difficulty of the

request. Her relevant work experience may have qualified her to receive credit for prior

learning. This option was never presented nor pursued with the student.

Students discussed the feeling of exclusion when denied admissions into a

program. Noor's job was to help refugees get admitted into a master's program at a

university. The process left her skeptical and questions the departments admissions

practices:

Not even one person got admitted from the last two years. There's something

wrong. Denials are happening too much, and my job is to advocate for those

students. Me and my program director are trying a lot, we're meeting the

admission office, we're meeting with people. The system is not changing. (Noor)

This experience led to Noor questioning if major program departments had biases

towards students with international credentials. When denials by departments were

occurring, little guidance was given to refugees as to the types of improvements they

needed to make to be a stronger candidate for next year's round of application. As they

are new to the country, the refugee's social network is developing, and the lack of social

capital can influence their ability to make professional connections. They may be

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unaware of opportunities in the community that would make them a more competitive

candidate for the program. According to Noor, many are left in the dark as to the kinds of

improvements they can make.

Major program departments that have admission requirements prior to course

enrollment influenced a person's ability to move forward. Many of the health science

professions required admissions into the program before being able to take a course. The

physicians in this study decided to make a trade-off and enroll in a physician assistant

program. All three physicians in this study were told to take prerequisites, which left

them feeling excluded and powerless. Ahmed, a former physician, felt the trade-off made

him vulnerable in the new social space:

> I decide to enroll in a lower program, Physician Assistant, to get prepared for
>
> medical exam and to build relationships. My roadblock was credential evaluation.
>
> I must take prerequisite ions that are required for the program…I did not try very
>
> hard during this time. I am very confused because my credentials held up to take
>
> the physician exams, but the credits were not good enough for lesser program that
>
> was at the college.

During this time, his self-esteem was negatively influenced. He was to take 3 semesters

of prerequisites with zero financial assistance from the college. This equated to lost time

and a financial burden.

Amir and Ezra expressed similar sentiments of exclusion when considering if they

should make trade-offs with their profession:

> The shock to us was that they don't even recognize our whole education, they
>
> wanted us [university]to get some of those classes, like biochemistry and math. I

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was like, are you kidding me? I mean, you have a body that recognize the Medical

School, ECF. How are you a PA school and you don't recognize that? You want

the biology score. I have my credentials from Baghdad University, they said no,

we wanted to from US accredited school. (Ezra)

The students questioned how they were able to qualify to take the US medical

licensure, but their credentials could not qualify them to a degree they perceived to be

less rigorous. This and other experiences Amir and Ezra had with colleges made them

wonder if there were biases towards them and the education they received abroad.

Once admitted into a program, faculty have a positive influence on a refugee's

perception of self-worth. When Noor was skeptical of her abilities, a faculty member

played a pivotal role in her self-esteem, "he actually raised my self-esteem and told me,

you can do this because you care about education". Nadiya echoed similar remarks, "she

was always giving me a tons of confidence boost, encouragement, saying 'no, you are a

professional. You can do this. You have skills" … I will remember this all my life".

Positive self-esteem can be seen once in an academic program. Prior to admission,

negative experiences are frequently cited by refugee students.

Nonprofit Agency: Reduced Vulnerability, Security, and Happiness.

To some degree, each of the three communities in this research had access to a

nonprofit agency whose mission is to assist refugees and other immigrants to reclaim

their professional careers. Knowing this service exists is important because most of the

colleges in this study did not have resources or systems set up to assist students who have

international credentials. While all colleges had someone working with international

students, the concerns of the refugee population and their access to resources is much different. College employees were often unaware of what a person needed to do to practice the profession and gave limited advice. Refugees expressed reduced vulnerability as well as an increase in happiness when engaging with nonprofit agencies:

> It was the most amazing experience ever. I've seen about 20 or more people like me from different countries with degrees and they want to continue their higher education. I was like 'what's going on?' There are people like me. I thought I'm the only one. It was nice. (Noor)

The nonprofit agencies are an important organization that help refugees feel a level of security before, during and after the academic credential recognition process. The nonprofit agencies brought people in similar circumstances together and made the refugee participants feel as if they were not alone and there were people like them that they could relate to. In addition, resources set up to help them understand the pathway to career recognition served to be beneficial because colleges and universities had underdeveloped or nonexistent information. Many refugees liked having resources at one place:

> I can't remember anyone else helping me so much. They prepare the foundational ground. The biggest value that everything was in one place. Then they have good educational program and online classes. Many, many things that gather in one place. Just start familiarizing with process. (Ivan)

Thanks to the nonprofit agency, Ivan understood the process to become an engineer. As a result, he was able to express clear goals to the college and saved time by knowing how to navigate the process.

Isra worked with the IIE Scholars Rescue Fund. The nonprofit agency is set up to help academics at risk. The agency evaluates credentials of academics and helps relocate refugees or asylum seekers in jobs that are relevant to their profession.

> What they wanted was for me to apply to them, like a job application. I submitted my diplomas, writing examples, state of purpose, and had an interview over Skype. I went through the whole entire application process. It just works very fast, because they know about your situation... They go through your credentials and if they accept you, it sends the country a message that you are actually eligible. (Isra)

As a result of this agency, Isra was able to escape persecution and was placed in a job that resembled her career in Turkey. This cooperation was beneficial to the college that hosted her because they were able to get an expert in the field and the agency paid for half of her salary. This saved the college money and provided opportunities for campus dialogue about global events.

Distance to resources also matters. Refugees who lived in a community where the nonprofit agency operated remotely perceived the service in a less favorable light, "I feel they ignored people here. I feel like they only want to get successful stories on the website… Nobody will help us. Ask them the last time they've been down here" (Ali). Being able to regularly access the nonprofit agency and connect with other educated refugees in person is important to one's well-being.

For some, a nonprofit agency did not exist when they were in the process to recognize their education credentials. They expressed a longing for such services, "I wish

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there was somebody or some company to help me to go through the process or even financial assistance. Or even refugees, it would be amazing to get inspiration" (Nadiya). When working with a nonprofit agency, most refugees expressed reduced vulnerability and a sense of security and happiness. The nonprofit agencies helped refugees understand the process and how to advocate their needs while working with a college or licensing agency. These experiences have a positive effect on their self-esteem.

Influential System and Processes Specific to Higher Education

RQ2: How do refugee students perceive their experience with colleges and universities when attempting to have their credentials recognized in the United States?

A negative effect on self-esteem and a feeling of exclusion are commonly expressed amongst refugee students who engaged with college systems and processes. Happiness is expressed by refugees when a system is clear to understand. Refugee students convey a feeling of power when cooperation is present with major program departments and faculty.

Admissions and International Office

The starting point of inquiry at a college campus is the admissions office. Based on refugee experiences, many are referred to the international office. The office typically works with F1 or J1 Visa holders. Refugees are on a green card which allows people to apply for permanent residency after one year. Many are referred to the international office because they are familiar with international documents. The international office connects refugee students to a credential agency to evaluate their academic credentials.

Colleges typically recommended the agency; refugees do not typically have a choice as to which agency will evaluate their credentials. The participants in this study most frequently used World Education Services (WES) or National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NCES) to evaluate their credentials. The international office was the connecting point for refugees and agency. For many, the office provided emotional support to refugees:

> He was very nice and kind and he said if I need anything just reach out to him. He has connection with the representative from WES. I don't think he was able to help me that much, it was a structured process that depended on me. And we're getting my papers in order before I can submit to WES. He was very comforting and kind of person to give me like support, maybe even emotional more than anything else. (Nadiya)

Similar instances of happiness are described by other refugees. There were two instances where a refugee's documents were reviewed by a program department: a student who applied to a graduate program and a student who applied to receive training in welding. The experiences were satisfactory to the refugees. The students worked with faculty to evaluate credentials and experiences and students were placed in courses they perceived to be appropriate to their background and professional knowledge.

When sending documents to be evaluated, refugees needed financial and social assets. Nadiya discussed the stress of relocation and having her credentials evaluated at the same time, "soon as you land here, it's like your feet are running. You don't take time to breathe and be like wait a minute, what am I doing"? Nadiya and others expressed

feeling a tremendous amount of stress during the process. Time was perceived as an asset, and the more time spent engaging in the process, the more vulnerable they felt.

The process to evaluate and award credential recognition ranged from three months to eight years. To retrieve documents from their home country, refugees had to have a strong social connection. Refugees relied on family and friends from their home country to access their academic records. For some, the process took longer than expected because they did not have the financial means to pay the fees. In some cases, the refugee would pay the person back home for their time spend navigating the systems on their behalf.

In some cases, the first barrier to entry was the evaluation document. Ali experienced a legal transcription issue with his paperwork that were beyond the scope of his influence. During a time when Democratic Republic of Congo was experiencing a shift in political systems, the ruling party rejected all colonized names. During this time, Christian and Muslim names were removed from documentation and people had to take their ancestorial indigenous name. Over the decades, political systems changed and so did documentation. This change showed to be a challenge when evaluating credentials in the United States:

> It was kind of a change in the country. People who went to school in the older
>
> system and the people who went to school in the new system, they had two
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> different names appearing on their school award. And of course, we, who had
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> those traditional names, we had to go back to our Christian names…I'm
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> suspecting that maybe one of the reasons why they couldn't understand those

differences of names. Why I use these names and then here I'm using another set of names. (Jean)

The student did not challenge the results of the third-party evaluation. Jean did not have another agency attempt to evaluate his credentials. With no recognition, his option was to start over. For others, when their credentials were evaluated by a third-party agency and the results came back that they would receive partial or no recognition, the person worked with the registrar's office and advising office to understand their options and their next steps.

Advising and Registrar's Office

A refugee's decision-making depends on the result of such an evaluation; results were either full recognition, partial recognition, or no recognition. Students who received full recognition would either register to take the licensure exam or apply to a graduate school. Recognition is not always clear. In this study, the credentials of three physicians qualified them to take the medical licensing examination but did not qualify them to enroll in a physician assistant program at a college. Ahmed recalls the emotional and financial strain he felt when he was told to take prerequisites:

> I went to school for three semesters to take prerequisites. No financial assistance provided by the college. I paid all of it myself. I probably spent $8-10,000 dollars on prerequisites. It was frustrating because I already knew the content… I was depressed and sad…All of it added more time and money. (Ahmed)

Ahmed and the other physicians had conflicting end results. In one instance, they were eligible to take an exam but not eligible to enroll in a major program at a college.

Students who needed to take a licensure exam and had partial recognition worked with the advising center to enroll in courses they were missing. Ivan, an engineer, needed to enroll in one science course to meet the credit threshold to take the professional engineer exam. Based on the proximity to his work, he sought assistance from a local community college, "I found the college on the internet, the closest to my job…I had a lunch break, about 15 or maybe 10 minutes for my workplace, and I came there" (Ivan). While the intake process was shaky, he eventually got the answers to his questions. Ivan did not enroll because of his work and family commitments, and at the time, he did not perceive the class as a necessity to practice his profession.

After Nadiya, a former teacher, had her credentials evaluated, she decided to enroll in business program at a local community college. Nadiya knew a change of major would require her to take courses. She perceived the value of an American education as an asset and motivator:

> I wanted something from America, maybe because I was told all the time that my education means nothing. I was thinking, this lists that I have my masters, but at least I have something here… I also thought it will make my education Ukraine more legit… it's shows that I'm learning, I'm ambitious, I'm still developing. (Nadiya)

Nadiya worked with the registrar's office to do a degree audit for her newly declared major. Students who engaged with the registrar's office understood the amount of staff time spent doing the degree audit, "they had a lot of work to do. She did not delay the process" (Ahmed). Nadiya echoed similar remarks, "she helped in everything she could do, she would tell me what she can transfer and what can be done". After the audit,

refugees engaged with the major program representative, such as a department chair, faculty, or staff member. Happiness was expressed by refugee students when a system was presented before them. Refugees expressed happiness when they perceived a sense of cooperation from the college staff.

Jean found out his teaching credentials would not be recognized and to reclaim his career, he must start over. While he received encouragement, it was not an option. His age and financial responsibilities to care for his family influenced his decision to not enroll in a program. He reflects on the conversation, "that lady was encouraging me to start over. I can't. I'm fixing food for kids, fetching, living for them, everything. The kids are very tiny by this time, it was not really possible" (Jean). The former teacher made a trade-off and focused on immediate needs to care for his family.

When a staff member from an advising center did not know how to interpret their credentials, refugees expressed a feeling of exclusion and powerlessness. In some cases, refugees perceived the staff as not considerate of their background and did not take the time to explain the structure and rational as to why certain courses were required. For Nadiya, the advising appointment was a frustrating one:

> I was very overwhelmed. I didn't understand the educational structure in America. I didn't understand why they required me to take these credits and this English class. I left the advising office feeling not needed… You don't know where to go and not always employees are helpful. I guess friendly enough or approachable. Sometimes it feels like they do me a favor. I owe them for helping me doing their job. (Nadiya)

Depending on the student's needs, the advising center recommended they either enroll in prerequisites, major program courses, or take English language courses. The advising staff played a critical role in a refugee's self-esteem by helping them understand why they needed to take certain courses. This understanding helped to empower refugee students and their future decision-making strategies.

English Language

In this study, struggles with language can be demonstrated in two ways, the necessity for translating the documents needed for credentialing, and a person's ability to speak English. When focusing on language as it pertains to credential evaluation process, people had to get their documents translated before submitting them to a third-party evaluation agency. Ivan and Nadiya are from Ukraine and had to hire an agency to translate their documents into English prior to the evaluation. They not only paid agencies to translate, but friends and family who took time out of their day to travel to various sites to obtaining the documents. This process took months and years to complete.

Another barrier for refugee students can be their ability to speak and communicate in English. Nadiya had a degree in English literature but recognized her limitations upon her arrival to the United States, "My English wasn't the greatest, I couldn't really speak English. We focused on reading, writing, and translating everything. But not speaking". She understood the technical side of translation but didn't have a solid grasp on the conversational aspect of the language. It took her years to grasp the language and to feel confident enough to approach the college and eventually enroll in classes. Zahra believes her old profession, geophysics, requires a strong set of vocabulary skills. Learning

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English was a task she believed to be too difficult to achieve in America. As a result of her self-evaluation of her language ability, she enrolled in a new major program and started over.

Ezra, a physician, recognized the limits of not just language acquisition but also an accent. She reflects on a friend's experience who had received assistance from a program department at a university: "immigrants will have accents and the program hired a language coach to help them with their accents. Because one of the barriers is the language. They helped him with his accent with training and he was able to succeed" (Ezra). Language acquisition and working on ones' accent influenced a person's self-esteem and when a program assisted refugees with this issue, it received a lot of praise from others as being realistic, timely and helpful.

Not all refugees were advised to take English language courses. For those that did, they expressed a reduced vulnerability but with mixed results of satisfaction with the course experience. After Ali took a placement exam, the advising center "told me that they cannot talk to me because of my accent. They told me to take ESL, apply for financial aid, and study. I did not have a good experience with ESL" (Ali). In Ali's case, he did not report a good experience because the content appeared simple and basic. He was anticipating the language course to be more fitting with his profession and so teach the usage of relevant terms. Upon completion of language courses, refugees either went back to the advising center or turned to the major program department for guidance.

Major Program Departments

When engaging with major program department, refugees frequently described a feeling of exclusion, powerlessness, and reduced vulnerability. Refugees connected with

major program departments through the advising center or because of rules, laws, and policies that were established by a college or licensing board. After academic credentials are evaluated, major program departments have a great deal of influence on what a refugee student can do and their decision-making strategies moving forward. Ten out of the twelve major program departments in this study did not evaluate credits themselves. All departments accepted the result of the third-party evaluation agency and advised students based on the results.

When engaging with major program departments, refugees primarily depended on their human and financial capital. A refugee's existing human capital, such as their degree type, influenced what major programs they engage with on campus. If the program was not available, refugees looked for majors similar to their work history. A lack of financial stability by refugees influenced their ability to enroll in a program or take prerequisites to qualify to be able to enroll in their program. Most refugee students described as receiving little to no financial assistance from the college. They had to fund the perceived missing gaps in education.

For some refugees, not being able to enroll in a program was the largest and most significant barrier. Ezra discussed the difficult predicament they found themselves trying to get placed in a residency position:

> They [the program] wanted a letter of recommendation from a program or physician that you practice with in America to be submitted with your application… That was a problem for us. It was kind of like the egg and the chicken story. For you to have the letter of recommendation, you need to practice,

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in order for you to practice, you need the letter of recommendation… difficult to

break the cycle. (Ezra)

Ezra and other physicians found themselves in a loop and not being able to get out. To be

a competitive candidate, they must have a robust resume. However, they lacked human

capital from the United States and a strong social network to connect them with relevant

work and education opportunities to build that robust resume.

The former physicians sought an equitable solution to their dilemma. The

physicians perceived themselves as "not your regular students that comes from high

school, we have a strong background. We practice, we can excel in those. We prove that

and again the answer was no" (Ezra). They approached the colleges and proposed

solutions like enrolling in the last year of medical school. This would allow them to have

US credentials and would be included in a larger pool for residency. It was denied. They

inquired with colleges about fast-track programs in relevant fields such as physician

assistant or nursing programs. No such program existed in the state. These interactions

left them feeling a sense of exclusion whenever they engaged with major programs:

It's like you hit throughout the blocks here and there, that it feels like the lack of

courage of trying the new thing. The easiest answer is no, because there's a lot of

details into the process, a lot of bureaucracy so again the easiest answer was

always no. (Amir)

Any suggestions they proposed were declined by major programs at the college. Their

suggestions were based on the experiences their friends described in their residency

period.

The physician in this study perceived major program departments as being resistant to try something new and described a feeling of dismissal. This was not the experience for all participants. Some refugee students described feeling empowered when there was cooperation with department chairs and faculty. Nadiya worked with department chairs to substitute courses, which helped her to graduate sooner and save money. Izad, a welder, worked closely with faculty to evaluate his skills. After an assessment, the faculty member gave Izad options for training lengths: one-week, one-month, three- months, or one- year. Based on his financial ability, Izad first enrolled in the one-week program before securing funds to enroll in a longer program.

Noor felt empowered when the graduate program recognized her legitimate past experiences and waived prerequisites and major program entry requirements:

When you apply, one of the prerequisites is learning another language and an internship with an organization. Those requirements were waived for me. I didn't have to do it because they counted my work with the US Embassy as an internship. TOFEL scores were required, but they waived it because I worked with American agencies. (Noor)

Noor was able to apply her work experience to waive program requirements, which saved her time and money.

A refugee's age, perceived stage in life, and time dedicated to education all play a large part in their feeling of vulnerability. Some perceived not being able to give up on the field of study because of the time they had already committed: "I am influenced by my investment in time. It is 15 years of my life. I cannot walk away now" (Ahmed). For others, their age and family influenced their motivation whether to start over in their

education or stop altogether. A trade-off is made. "I have family, my kids. Whenever I add anything, I have to subtract from their time. I don't want to lose my kids. Trading time you cannot get back" (Ivan). For some, immediate needs overshadowed their decision to continue. Some considered their current age and years to retirement and the numbers did not add up to them. The debt they would have to incur did not outweigh income gained. For some, their goal shifted to their children being able to access and afford college. The experience that refugees have with major programs cannot be neatly summed up. A refugee's decision-making process is influenced by the major program requirements, age of student, time to completion, immediate family needs, age to retirement and finances.

**Strategies Used to Recognize Livelihood Assets**

RQ3: What assets and decision-making strategies do refugee students use when attempting to practice their profession in the U.S.?

This research question focuses on a person's decision-making strategies based their ability to access various capital. Livelihood strategies are dependent "on the basic material and social, tangible and intangible assets that people have in their possession (Scoones, 1998, p. 7). The sustainable framework identifies capital as being natural, economic, human, social, or physical. While there are many forms of capital, this study is coded according to the Sustainable Livelihood Framework usage of capital. When attempting to have their academic credentials recognized, the most frequent asset refugee students used was their human capital, followed by their social and financial.

To create livelihoods, people must combine capital that they have access to and control over. Scoones (1998) identified the following strategies when accessing capital;

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sequencing, substation, clustering, access, trade-offs, and trends. The terms and their definition will be discussed as themes. When navigating systems that recognize international academic credentials, all participants discussed access and a majority discussed making trade-offs. The strategy least discussed is substitution. A person's livelihood is ongoing and is comprised in complex ways with varying activities. The themes below describe decision-making strategies and the type of capital refugees used when navigating systems around the process of transfer and awarding of academic credits. Figure 4.4. highlights the most frequently cited capital and strategies by refugees.

Figure 4.4. Frequently used assets and strategies
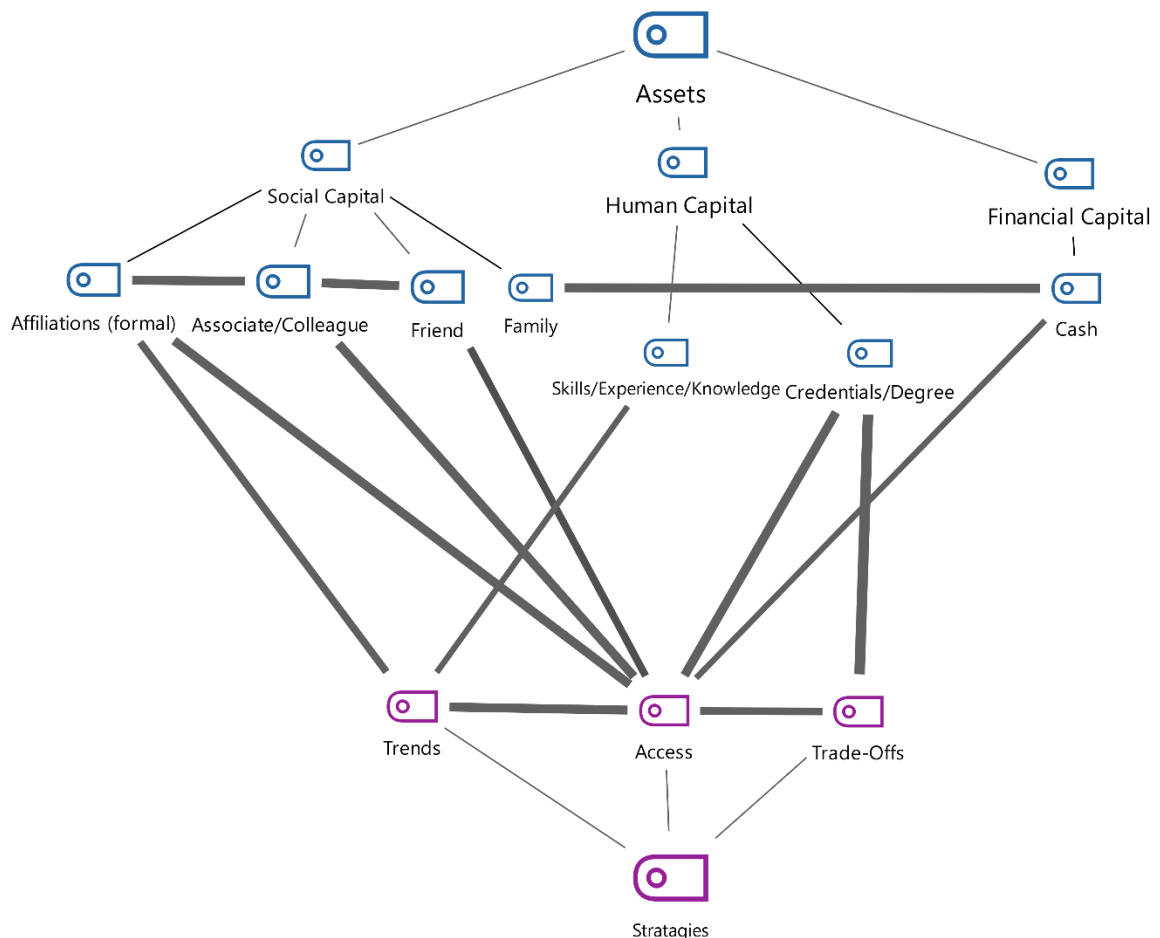
Access

All refugees discussed the topic of access, specifically when working with the refugee center, college departments, and nonprofit resource agency. The term aims to understand if different people have different access to resources depending on power and institutional arrangements and organization issues (Scoones, 1998). Access to information was commonly cited issue and for many it started at the refugee center. As indicated in the previous research question, refugees perceived the center as unwilling and unsupportive in providing adequate information about educational and credential recognition options:

> Help by bringing them [refugees] into college. Because for refugees, how will the information get to them? What is available? I was informed only by my friend. The official department try to prevent you from getting education. Refugee Center would tell you that you cannot go to college, you came here not to study, you came here to work. (Zahra)

This sentiment is commonly expressed by participants. The initial point of contact, the refugee center, is not helpful with the inquiry stage. This creates the first barrier to credential recognition. Those who bypass the center, receive information from their social network, including, a friends, colleagues, or formal associations.

Once a refugee arrives on a college campus, the process to recognize credentials requires them to work with various departments. Refugees commonly worked with major program departments, advising, international office, registrars, and admissions. Most colleges instruct students to get their credentials evaluated by a third-party agency. Most

participants indicated that they did not have choice in the selection of third-party evaluation agency:

> WES was accepted by colleges and that was good. It's a bit pricier than anything else, but at least I can go back and get my documents. I paid extra for storing my report. Seems like a double-edged sword; it was expensive, but if you do need to access it for other colleges, its better. (Nadiya)

The decision-making strategies of these refugees were influenced by the perceived value that the third-party findings have in the future. Most indicated the process as being time consuming and requiring a level of social capital from their home country.

> They [Iraq] don't do well with distance communication, they need someone in person to request credentials, so it has to be either your brother, dad, sister or a first degree relative. I don't have a first degree relative there, but I have my cousins… I had to get paperwork that says he is able to sign on my behalf for receiving the credentials. I had to go to LA to do this. The Iraqi Council is where I had to sign a paper saying that I authorize my cousin to get my college credentials. (Noor)

To obtain original documents, most participants described relying on social relationships from their home country. For some, access to finances was the challenge:

> It was hard in the beginning, because of money…It was very expensive in America to translate all the pages, because they need diploma for high school, college, and the university. I'm like 'okay, cannot do this now'. We were focused on just working and making family. (Nadiya)

Once financial security is established, refugees will return to their goal of having their international credentials evaluated. For some, the results of the evaluation became the barrier to entry. For Jean, a former teacher, he was unable to proceed any further in the process because WES was unable to verify his documents:

> I sent WES all the paperwork. They send letters but I don't know, they dropped me. They didn't accept it. Every time I try to open my account, they say 'no we're still waiting for another confirmation letter'. When I asked the people back in my country, they said 'we've never received any request from them'. It was sort of hacking between those two. (Jean)

Jean's credentials evaluation was ultimately denied, and he did not pursue an evaluation by another agency. Jean began to make trade-offs. He perceived his age and immediate family need as the most pressing issues to address and so starting over was not an option. He worked with a nonprofit agency to connect him to relevant work.

Isra had her credentials validated by IEE Scholar's Rescue Fund. Their reputation solidified her academic and work credentials. The agencies network provided her access to full-time employment with a partnering higher education institution. Isra was not asked to have her credentials evaluated by any other entity. She expressed feeling fortunate and believes her experience is not common.

Trade-Offs

The strategy of making a trade-off differs among individuals as they often have access to different resources (Scoones, 1998). In terms of success, trade-offs can have positive and negative implications on a person's livelihood. Those whose evaluations

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came back as no recognition or partial recognition had to make trade-offs; they would need to start over in a similar or new program, take courses to fill gaps, or focus on joining the workforce however they can. For refugees who were unable to access a program they studied back in their home country, they had to make trade-offs by enrolling in another. For Zahra, the physical place of their relocation made an impact on her academic pursuit:

> After you go through this experience with losing your identity, you kind of start all over. But why not start with what is available. But in some way, it's familiar, because you know how to learn. I could not be geophysics, but I knew how to learn and that was very important. (Zahra)

Zahra didn't see many career options as a geophysicist in her new community. She made a trade-off and pursued what was available to her in the new community. After two failed attempts to enroll in an engineer program, Noor discovered other options:

> I ended up getting into a program, International Affairs and Global enterprise, since I worked for the US Embassy. I had a second language which is required by that department, and it is required that you work with an international organizations or embassy, so it was mostly diplomatic. I really loved the idea that your work could be counted as something… I was like oh my God, this is a bit me, maybe I apply. I did and was accepted. (Noor).

After Noor learned about this program, she made a trade-off and applied as it was more relevant to her work experience. Zahra and Noor expressed feeling satisfied with their decision to switch majors. In their eyes, the trade-off had a positive result.

Some participants were unwilling to make a tradeoff to enroll in a different

program. When Ezra and Amir discovered they needed to do prerequisites for a physician

assistant program, they contemplated their choices: "If I'm going to study for biology,

might as well study and finish my exams" (Ezra). They were unwilling to make a trade-

off to another program because it still required time and money. They continued with

their original plans to be physicians.

For some, they made a trade-off to invest in their kids' education rather than their

own. After Jean's credentials were not recognized, he reflects, "I think that I'm done

now. I'm trying to prepare the future generation" (Jean). Pierre, a refugee himself,

echoed similar sentiments and recalls a conversation he had with a refugee from Iraq:

> He had a PhD; he was a teacher at university. When he came here, they ask him to
>
> go back to school. He told me, I'm smart enough, but if I work full time, we're
>
> going to make money. We're going to support our children and save money for
>
> them to go to school… I could struggle with the scholarship, asking to pay for
>
> books and everything. But right now, I have money in my checking account…
>
> That money, we could pay for my school but then I won't have money in the
>
> bank. You will only have a paper. (Pierre)

Pierre and Jean's experiences reinforce the value of investing time and energy in

the future generation. The value of the trade-off is dependent on the perspective of the

individual. Some refugees were unwilling to make trade-offs and stayed on track. Others

choose enrolling in another program. Some believed their time was up and that it best

served their family to invest in their children's education. The perceived positive or negative value of the trade-off depended on the person and their family needs.

Sequencing and Clustering

When engaging in the process of having their international credentials recognized, many refugees talked about their decision-making strategies in the form of sequence of events, a starting point. Similarly, a clustering strategy considers a person's ability to access resources and asks if accessing one resources means you will have access to another (Scoones, 1998). Social capital plays a significant role in strategies that require sequencing and clustering. During the inquiry stage, having a strong social network is a significant asset. Friends and colleagues typically informed the participant of a college, nonprofit agency, or licensure process. When inquiring about the path to be a physician, Ahmed received the most beneficial information from a "friend in California. I knew him from Medical School when he was in Tripoli. He helped with materials and to prepare" (Ahmed).

For many refugees, their social connections go beyond the United States. Social capital influences a person's ability to navigate networks in both their home country and their relocation community.

> I had to work with my sister in Ukraine and the girls that it went to the College in Ukraine with, and interpreting agency… I needed to give release for my sister to represent me on my behalf. It had to be notarized and then she had to collect all the documents and regions. I mailed her old my original… she translated them, and the agency had to go to the Ministry of Education to verify that my degrees

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are real and not fake…All these requirements were the hardest, toughest part.

(Nadiya)

When refugees were asked to reflect on their experience to recognize credentials, participants framed their language as the steps they needed to take to practice their profession. Some needed to have their qualifications examined because they wanted to be eligible to take a licensure exam. Some wanted to understand their educational equivalency in the United States and others wanted to be admitted into a program at a local college. Sequencing did not always look the same, it largely depended on the results of the evaluation and the end goal. Those who received full recognition would either take a licensure exam or apply for further education. Those who had partial recognition would continue their education at a public college or stop all together. For those who received no recognition, they had the choice of either starting over or opting out of the process. Refugees relied on nonprofit agencies to help them develop a sequencing strategy. Advising centers and major program departments at colleges helped to sequence courses.

Clustering, accessing one resource to obtain another, heavily depends on the third-party evaluation agency. Depending on the results of the evaluation, the student would be labeled as eligible or ineligible. Licensing boards and college programs labeled a person eligible or ineligible and influenced a person's ability to cluster resources. Ivan had his credentials evaluated to be eligible to take the engineering exam:

The highest evaluation they could give me is a bachelor's degree, but I was missing three hours of biology or chemistry. That was the result. My goal is to get a professional engineer certificate, but before that, I need to finish my education

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to get all credentials recognized in the United States. I'm missing three hours, three credit. (Ivan)

Ivan's next step was to connect with a college and pass the necessary course to be eligible to take the exam. While he was ineligible to register for the engineer exam, he could enroll in a college class to meet the threshold. He expressed optimism regarding the experience.

Noor helps fellow refugees apply to graduate programs. Her outlook was not as positive; the experiences of others the she witnessed left her feeling frustrated with the admissions process:

Why they get denied. We asked the admissions office why; they would reply by saying the competition was really high. The question is: what do you want from them to do more? How do we enhance his or her application to meet your requirements and expectations? They [refugees] want to come back and compete in a better and higher demand with the high competition, but they [program admissions office] don't give any answers. They respond with, maybe go into more classes, get higher grade, GPA. (Noor)

The people she worked with were not able to access the program. As a result, they were unsure of how to cluster or sequence activities to achieve their desired goal.

The ability to cluster as also heavily influenced by a refugee's ability to access finances. A refugee's financial stability influenced when they would evaluate credentials, when to take a licensure exam, or enroll in courses. Financial stability influenced Ahmed's ability to prep and take a licensure exam, "I did not have the ability or finances to take courses to study for test. I had debts from relocation, I needed to pay them off"

(Ahmed). His financial standing influenced his ability to cluster his resources. Nadiya

talked about her inability to access financial aid. This made her unable to cluster

resources and as a result the education process stalled: "I was not qualified because I

have master's from Ukraine. For whatever reason, I was not able to get FAFSA. That is

why I postponed going back to college" (Nadiya). Financial responsibility to care for

family takes precedence over evaluating credentials, taking licensure exams, or enrolling

in a program at a college or university. If a refugee was able to secure finances, their

pursuit to recognize credentials often continued.

The outcome of credential evaluation and policies established by colleges or

licensing boards influence a person's ability to sequence and cluster capital. The

individuals studied relied on developed and existing social capital in their decision-

making.

Substitution

The least common strategy used by refugees in this study was substitution.

Substitution means a person is trading one capital for another (Scoones, 1998). The only

instance that substitution strategies were used by students is when they changed majors or

worked with major programs to waive prerequisites, substitute prerequisites, or be placed

in a higher-level course. This experience came with mixed results. When Amir and Ezra

approached programs to substitute resources or program length, they were consistently

told no.

> We suggested to them [university program] if we can instead of attending the
>
> whole six years, they sponsor the last year, only the last year of medical schools,

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because we already did all Medical School. That way we can have the exam and

we will have a certificate from American Medical School. American system that

matches their standard…And then graduate from the program and then follow the

American route… That way we can easily get into a residency… We are not your

ordinary student that comes from high school, we have a strong background. We

practice, we can excel… The answer was no. (Amir)

Amir and Ezra have not found a college that is willing to make substitutions

regarding program length. Instances of pre-request courses or admission requirements

being waived were largely controlled by the third-party evaluation agency and major

programs.

Strategies and combinations of assets are part of the on-going experience of

reclaiming their livelihoods. The combinations of capitals are dependent on what is

available and how the person perceived its value. During the inquiry stage, refugees

focused on strategies that provided access. During the credential recognition process, a

majority attempted to sequence and cluster their assets and began to make trade-offs.

Clustering of social, financial, and human capital was necessary after the results of the

evaluation was presented. The strategy least used is substitution, revealing that one type

of resource is an essential precursor for gaining another.

Response Mechanisms Used to Reduce One's Vulnerability

RQ4: When engaging with systems, what resilience mechanisms do refugees utilize to

practice their profession in the U.S.?

This question looked to understand the resilience mechanisms used by refugee

students to reclaim their livelihoods. Resilience is a focal point in the Sustainable

Livelihood Framework. Sustainability of livelihood is dependent on the resilience

mechanisms a person utilizes during their time of vulnerability. For many, these

mechanisms are similar to one used during their time of crisis. There are different types

of response mechanisms when dealing with various shocks and stresses: avoidance,

repartitioning, resistance, and tolerance (Payne & Lipton, 1994). Avoidance indicates

developing a response that would evade the risk. For example, the stress of reduced

wages might cause a person to avoid the stress by learning a new skill or moving to

another location. Repartitioning is directing threats towards less vulnerable timeframes or

issues. An example would be spending less money on nonfood items to shift financial

strain. Resistance is developing characteristics to ward off the threat, for example,

neutralize the threat by purchasing cheaper food. Tolerance is accepting some damage as

acceptable. What is acceptable is dependent on the person and their value systems. This

section provides context to Figure 4.5 and the mechanisms refugee students used when

engaging with systems.

Figure 4.5 Resilience mechanisms used by refugees when engaging with systems to

recognize academic credentials
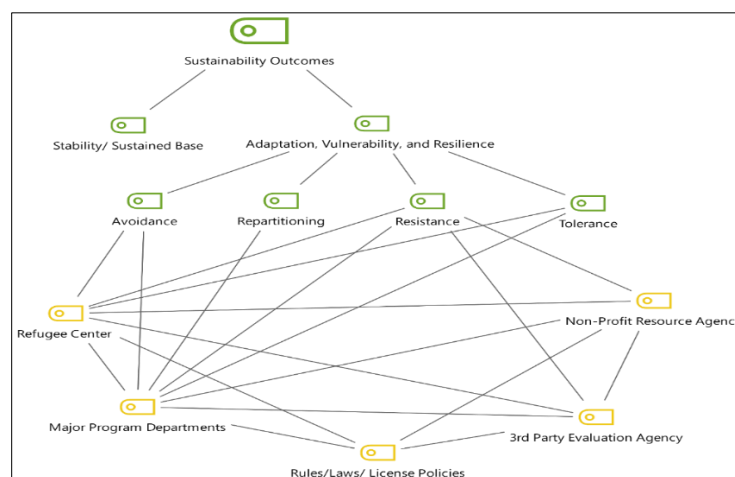
Avoidance

Avoidance means to evade a risk. For refugee students, the risk is not being able to practice their profession and as a result, not be able to utilize their skillset and contribute to the workforce at greater levels. The refugee center did little to help Amir and Ezra avoid the shock of relocation and reduce their vulnerability when it came to practicing their profession. When Amir and Ezra, former physicians, found out from a friend they could do more relevant work by translating at hospitals, they turned to the center to help validate their knowledge and experiences:

> The only people that we had any interaction, since we got United States, was the [refugee] agency. We requested letter of recommendation, just to prove our ethics. They refuse to give us even that letter they said, 'oh no, go represent yourself. We cannot provide you that'. When my husband requested to find a job, any job, in the hospital they called us two days later and they said 'how about a janitor?'

Ezra and Amir did not receive assistance from the refugee center to evade their threat of brain waste. From that experience, they, and others, avoided guidance from the center.

For some, avoidance is a mindset. When she started her education over, Zara expressed this: "I didn't expect anybody to accept me for what I think I am. I had to earn it. That's my approach to everything; earn and improve" (Zahra). To avoid rejection, she built a mindset of having to prove herself worthy to the new community. Some refugees had to let go of a degree title they once held and work toward something more relevant. Noor went from having a degree in software engineer to a degree in international affairs and global enterprise. "I discovered that here in the United States, they count work

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experience towards a degree". The change in major was due to her wanting to avoid being underemployment, and she eventually graduated with a master's degree.

Repartitioning

When beginning the process of credential recognition, refuges typically waited until they were settled after their relocation so as to make that effort during less vulnerable times. For Nadiya and others, evaluating credentials upon her arrival was not feasible because of a lack of financial stability. When she was able to secure employment at the college, she then actively pursued the process:

> I think it helped that I worked for the college for a few years already. I knew the system and new people, they knew me… I think I was privileged to work for the college, it made the process way easier for me. I think ordinary students will have hard times to go through this. (Nadiya)

Her strategy to repartition was the consideration of time, finances, and social connections. Some anticipated the challenge and prepared their education documents prior to their arrival:

> I had good job, I like my motherland. I didn't want to leave, but when war began, we saw that it's getting worse and worse and we decided to leave for America. When I was preparing for my travel, I prepared my education, my diploma, and some other papers from my university. (Ivan)

While Ivan was able to reduce his vulnerability before his arrival, others had to improvise once they had relocated to the United States. Ahmed believes his perspective on time evolved and made a difference in his decision-making so that the outcomes that were sustainable:

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When I limited my goal with time, I found the challenges getting bigger and

bigger and bigger. I have to take care of myself. What are the needs I need…I

spent all time just studying…People maybe when they talk to me like they don't

find acceptance because I spent all my time between books. Once I developed

financial independence, I could go after other avenues. (Ahmed)

Repartitioning strategies occur before and after relocation. Financial security, social

connections and time were necessary assets for refugees when pursuing strategies to have

stable livelihoods.

Resistance

The most frequently cited strategy used by refugee students to sustain their

livelihood is resistance. The term refers to a person's ability to develop characteristics to

ward off threats (Payne & Lipton, 1994). Nonprofit agencies helped refugees build

resistance strategies. The agencies did this by describing the process required to reclaim

their professions as well as connecting them with college programs, credit evaluation

agencies, and networks in the community. The work on the nonprofits helped refugees

build up their knowledge base. This helped them to find work that was better suited to

their education and work experience. They were able to resist the pressure to take work

that would lead to their underemployment. To neutralize his threat, Ivan worked with a

nonprofit agency to better understand the process to take a licensure exam as well as the

employment system in the United States.

We started our cooperation with some trainings. That was a lot of different things.

I didn't think about preparation for interview or cover letter. I didn't know about

this process because my work experience was pretty small. I didn't change jobs

frequently and it's not what we did in Ukraine. (Ivan)

Thanks to the agency's guidance, Ivan was able to resist the trap of working in a job that

was not suited to his education or work skills. The agency helped him to build a

knowledge base and empowered him to advocate for himself and his skillset. In addition,

he prepared his academic documents prior to his arrival to the United States. That effort

helped tremendously with his ability to resistance the shock and vulnerability of his

relocation.

Ezra and Amir's strategy was to reach out to multiple academic programs in the

region to see what alternative programs exist. When they approached programs, they

attempted to be strategic by citing programs they had heard of in other states:

Some of the states, they have a lack of certain field, like nurses, for example.

What they did is create expedited path. So, physicians abroad, they went into six

or eight months or even one year, they graduate them as registered nurses. Some

of us are willing to do that. You are back to practice in the medical field as a

nurse, you will be more stable to do further study. Or you can choose it as a

career…They said no. (Ezra)

While this attempt was not fruitful in their area, Ezra and Amir's decision to share their

desires, ideas, and concerns led to them building a social and professional network. They

advocated for themselves and resisted the urge to stay in a job that was not suited to their

skillset. This particular resistance mechanism led them to be invited to speak on their

experience at a conference. At that conference, they connected with a professional in the

field. With his desire to help and his connections in the medical field, he opened

opportunities for Ezra, Amir, and others to fill their educational gaps. In the case of Ezra and Amir, their persistence helped build strong resistance mechanisms. During their time in Iraq and Jordan, they used the same strategy to develop and maintain their livelihoods.

To offset their vulnerability during their time of relocation, many will use mechanisms familiar to them. The chosen mechanisms for resistance are dependent on a person's ability to ward off a threat. For many refugees, the threat is the possibility of being placed in work that is underutilizing their skills. To resist this threat, a person must be able to access available nonprofit resource agencies in the area. These agencies help to empower by educating refugees on systems and processes. In addition, a refugee's willingness to express their needs and advocate for their skillsets helps them be able to persist with their resistance of brain waste.

Tolerance

Tolerance means to accept some level of damage to the circumstances around you. When Jean did not receive any type of recognition from WES, starting over at a university was not an option for him and his family. He turned to the nonprofit agency to connect him to relevant work. While he is currently underemployed, he recognizes his opportunity:

I could call them colleagues or classmates from Africa. The ones that are here or in other states and we don't have these opportunity. So they do not have what I've got here, which means I was privileged to be in a state where these opportunities were offered to me rather than being home or working in an unprofessional business. I'm at least doing something that resembles to what I've done at home. But as I tell you, my colleagues are doing something completely different,

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working at Walmart as an associate. Maybe doing some other business, which

don't even really relate to what they've done. In a way, satisfied more than

elsewhere. It's you want to call, better than nothing. (Jean)

For Jean, tolerance meant accepting the results of his evaluation and looking for

other options. Pierre was in a similar position when he was told to take an entrance exam

and enroll in basic courses. He tolerated the perception his education was not equivalent

to the United States and went forward making decisions based on that viewpoint.

Tolerance and time available are frequently intertwined. Ali had to take additional

courses at the community college to be eligible to take the CPA exam. After some time,

he questioned what he was doing, "when am I supposed to start working? I'm sitting in

class, they are 18 years old. It was weird. After one year and half, I asked myself why I

was there. I lost a lot of time" (Ali). In this case, Ali had a level of tolerance, but only for

a period of time. After his credentials were not fully accepted, he began to pursue other

options.

Strategies used by refugees to recognize international academic credentials were

also dependent on what sort of access they had. Depending on what was available,

refugees would begin to make trade-offs, sequence their steps, cluster their resources, and

at times substitute their careers for other forms of assets. Refugees frequently discussed

their inability to access a major program at a college. Depending on the results of the

third-party evaluation, many would begin to make trade-offs. This includes stopping the

process altogether, changing majors, or taking courses to fill gaps to qualify to take a

licensure exam to practice the profession. When reflecting on their lived experiences,

students described the events in a sequence and the resources they had to cluster during

the process. Refugees commonly clustered their human, social, and financial capital to reclaim their academic credentials. When engaging with higher education, the least common strategy was substitution. When substitution did occur, like waiving pre-requests or substitute existing courses, refugee expressed a feeling of power and a reduction in vulnerability. The least common strategy received the largest amount of praise when it was made available to them.

To maintain their livelihoods, many refugees relied on strategies they were familiar with, ones they had used in the past. When attempting to reduce their vulnerability in a new space, many refugee's relied on adaptation and resilience mechanisms to cope with the stress of relocation and reclaiming their academic credentials. To build a strong sustainable livelihood base for themselves and their family, refugees used a combination of mechanisms that had served them in the past, the resources available in the area, and their ability to resist the label of 'ineligible'.

Conclusion

Data was rigorously analyzed with the assistance of MAXQDA software. The program software is commonly used for qualitative analysis. The chapter began with biographical sketches of the participants. Following the sketches, each research questions was presented followed by themes and subthemes. This format allowed for numerous experiences to be told without losing sight of the main objective. This chapter provided the context as to who refugee students engage with and how these entities influence their ability to access various assets. The linear format of the questions allowed for the reader to understand decision-making strategies when engaging with various systems as well as the mechanism used to help absorb shocks during this vulnerable time.

When having their international academic credits recognized, refugees must engage with many entities during the process. Many people begin their inquiry at the refugee center and end up at the doors of a higher education institution. Upon their arrival at a college or university, many people face higher education systems that are undeveloped or underdeveloped or unprepared. As a result, refugee students are shuffled between departments within the college: admissions, registrars, advising, international office, English language programs and finally, the major program department. Refugees frequently expressed negative experiences with major program departments. This negative outlook is largely due to having to take prerequisites to learn content they believed they already knew or them not being able to enroll in the program at all. As a result of these interactions, many refugees expressed feelings of exclusion, powerlessness, and lowered self-esteem. The entities with which refugees had the most positive experiences during the recognition process were nonprofit agencies. The agencies' work focused on providing access to information and as well as connecting people to other highly educated refugees and immigrants in similar circumstances. As a result of the agencies' guidance and the building of a larger social network, many refugees expressed a reduced vulnerability and increased security and happiness.

Regarding their experiences within higher education, refugees' commonly expressed reluctancy from the colleges. Many colleges took away their own responsibility to evaluate their learning by having a third-party evaluation agency do the work. For some refugees, a conversation to evaluate their education from their home country was never offered by the college staff. In these instances, refugees were encouraged to take a placement exam, enroll in English language programs, and simply

start over. Refugees that were informed of the process of third-party evaluation would spend years navigating the system and needed financial capital to pay for English transcription and evaluation. In addition, refugee students often needed to maintain a strong social network from their home country to meet the requirement of academic evaluation. They heavily relied on family, friends, and colleagues from their home country to navigate systems on their behalf and without a strong social network in their new community, many lacked the knowledge of how to even begin the process. Refugees who received partial recognition were ultimately limited by what was available in their resettlement community. For some, a change of major was necessary and for others, years of prerequisite courses were needed before they could enroll in a program to fill their education gaps. Without financial assistance from the college, many had to run a cost analysis and consider their long-term benefits. Some considered their age and years to retirement and chose to focus on saving money for their children's higher education. Others continued with the process; because of the number of years they had already invested in the field they felt as though they could not turn back.

To reduce their sense of vulnerability during this time, refugees relied on mechanisms familiar to them to maintain sustainability. When dealing with new shocks and stresses, strategies commonly used included avoidance, repartitioning, resistance, and/or tolerance. Refugees could not avoid the shock of their relocation and the requirements to recognize their academic credentials. To reclaim a part of their professional identity, they had to engage in the process. Some sought out colleges and creative approaches to address their perceived barriers but were faced with rejection. Others anticipated the challenge and planned by collecting the academic documents prior

to their relocation. For those who could not plan, they relied on methods such as repartitioning and resistance. Repartitioning meant waiting to act in less vulnerable times. For refugee students, this method required patience and time to build their financial capital. The expense of relocation and immediate needs overshadowed their academic aspirations. Those who chose a familiar strategy from their past, resistance, saw success when they worked alongside nonprofit agencies in the community. The agencies helped them resist the threat of underemployment by having them understand their options and making connections in the community. In cases where academic credentials were not recognized, tolerance was a common mechanism. The results of the third-party evaluation were not challenged by these refugees. At the beginning, the strategy commonly results in a feeling of defeat, but after some time, is often seen as the best decision based on the circumstances and environment.

The findings in this chapter add to the literatures of higher education, transfer and award of foreign academic credits, refugee students and the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. Participants gave context of the strategies used when attempting to have their foreign academic credentials recognized. Refugees thrive when a system is clear, and the process is not ambiguous. In considering the themes discussed, colleges and universities must reflect on their processes, or a lack of a process, when engaging with vulnerable students who have foreign credentials. The next chapter will discuss findings and its relevance to current literature. The chapter will wrap by discussing recommendations for future work.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe refugee student experiences when attempting to have their international credentials recognized in the United States. This chapter discusses major findings as related to the literature on transferring and awarding of foreign academic credits, refugee students, and their decision-making strategies when working within systems to obtain a livelihood that is sustainable. The research considers the broad topic of what is gained and what is lost as a result of engaging in the process to recognize international academic credits.

This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do refugees in the Rocky Mountain Region with international higher education credentials perceive their experience with institutional systems when attempting to have these credentials recognized?

RQ2: How do refugee students perceive their experience with colleges and universities when attempting to have their credentials recognized in the United States?

RQ3: What assets and decision-making strategies do refugee students use when attempting to practice their profession in the U.S.?

RQ4: When engaging with systems, what resilience mechanisms do refugees utilize to practice their profession in the U.S.?

To the end of answering these research questions, 12 participants were recruited from various community agencies located in the Rocky Mountain region of the U.S. Prior to the interview, candidates were screened for the following criteria: 18 years of age or

older, entered the U.S. as a refugee, self-attested to having an international higher

education credentials, and engaging with a college or university in some capacity. One

participant entered the country through the asylum process. The participant claims to

have refugee-like circumstances and is seeking international protection from the United

States, but the status has yet to be determined by the government. Each interview lasted

anywhere from 45 to 75 minutes and was held via Zoom video conference call to adhere

to the 2020 Covid-19 social distancing protocols in place. The researcher adapted

Seidman's three-interview method into a single interview format that included elements

of each the three individual interviews. After transcription, data was entered into

MAXQDA software and analyzed using the Sustainable Livelihood Framework. After an

examination of the interviews, common themes and unique contrasts were identified. The

chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, areas for future

research, and a summary.

Discussion

This section discusses the themes presented in Chapter IV and helps to

contextualize the lived experiences of refugee students. The themes discussed below are a

representation of common experiences amongst the participants who engaged with

college and universities to have international education credentials recognized. I will

discuss the findings and how they relate to the body of literature from Chapter II, as well

as discuss steps that administrators can take to support refugee students. Each theme is

described in detail in the following sections.

Accessing Information

The participants in this study began describing their lived experiences in a linear fashion: life prior to relocation and life after. As educated refugees looking to reclaim their profession and professional status in the United States, this process was difficult to navigate. Government refugee agencies were discouraging, and colleges and universities were unsure how to evaluate credentials and determine their equivalency in the United States. In Chapter II, Network of Information Centers (ENIC) and the National Academic Recognition Information Centers (NARIC) (ENIC-NARIC) were discussed. The ENIC-NARIC is a system of information resource centers all throughout Europe created to help individuals understand educational mobility and degree equivalency. In the U.S., no such network exists. The lack of standardized information leaves refugees to navigate the process on their own for an extended period. While participants engaged with third-party evaluation agencies, their mission is different from these information resource centers, and they operate regionally and independently. In this study, refugee students also sought help from nonprofit agencies who specialized in placing foreign talent in careers. Services are limited regionally and are dependent on staff's familiarity with the specific occupation, professional networks, and state policies. Refugees who attempted to understand the U.S. education system and terminology alone frequently described feeling overwhelmed, discouraged, and disappointed.

Once at college, refugee students described having a difficult time navigating the system and identifying an institutional agent that could help (Standton-Salazar, 2001). Refugee's perceived the college staff as not being familiar with the process to recognize foreign credentials and took their advice with skepticism. During the information

gathering process, many refugee students are shuffled between the institution's

international office, registrar, advising, English language programs and major program

departments. Despite information silos and the process being unclear, refugees navigated

the system and eventually identified a pathway to recognition. The process to recognize

education credentials involves many entities beyond the colleges and universities.

Institutions such as the refugee center, third-party evaluation agencies, and nonprofit

organizations are all involved in the process to recognized foreign credentials. This work

focused on the role of higher education, but the relative entities listed above are described

when an intersecting point occurs between the two entities.

Colleges and universities receive little to no guidance from regional accreditation

agencies like Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) on what to

do with foreign credentials. If a system to recognize international credentials was set up

by a college, it was done at their own discretion with little guidance from accrediting

bodies or state agencies. Students with international credits are not as common as in-state

transfer students from public institutions (Government Accountability Office, 2017).

While encountering a person with international credentials is not as common today, in the

next three decades, the United States will see a significant rise in students within those

demographics (Batalova & Fix, 2021). Currently, staff and administrators are often not

familiar with international credits or the refugee population and their unique challenges.

Equitable processes may not exist on college campuses because little time and resources

have been dedicated to addressing on how best to transfer and award international credits

from one institution to another.

Feeling of Exclusion and Power

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework is concerned with more than just material possessions, it also focusses on a person's wellbeing and how they feel in their new social space (Morrice, 2013; Scoones, 1988). Participants in this study expressed a feeling of happiness once a clear process was presented to them. Colleges; however, did not have clear well-defined steps and guidelines for applicants who must engaged in the process. Most refugees perceived their college to lack transparency. Participants were instructed by the college to have their credentials evaluated by a third-party agency, and an overwhelming majority came back with only partial recognition of those credentials. As a result of the assessment, refugees expressed a feeling of exclusion because they were ineligible to take a licensure exam or enroll in a major program course (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014). Refugees did not challenge the results of the evaluation and did not seek another entity to evaluate their academic credentials.

When refugees sought assistance from a college or university to fulfill their educational gaps, they faced financial hurdles and more time added to complete their goal. Individuals who enrolled in a major program expressed frustration when forced to take prerequisite coursework. This frustration was due to added time and cost of attendance. When refugee students looked to substitute for or waive a prerequisite, cooperation with department chairs and faculty played a significant role. Refugees expressed a feeling of power when they perceived college staff as open to cooperation.

For some refugees, a feeling of exclusion begins as soon as their credentials were not recognized. Ullrich et al., (2016) explain that people are unable to access official documents because of unresponsive institutions or fear of retaliation to their family

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members back home. This was not the case for participants in this study. One participant was unable to verify his credentials due to factors outside of his control. Because of political ideologies, the government in his home country made drastic changes to the documentation system over the decades. These changes resulted in people having different names published on their official documents. As a result, the third-party evaluation agencies were unable to confirm his identity and recognize his credentials. Since his credentials were not recognized, the college gave him two options: start over or quit. Flexible processes should be encouraged, and autonomy must be given to departments and their faculty when issues like these occur. When documents are difficult to obtain for reasons outside of someone's control, departments should consider alternative methods, like a background paper. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) created a toolkit of best practices when working with individuals in similar situations that is in accordance with the Lisbon Convention Recommendation. NOKUT's toolkit can help colleges develop policy and promote the implementation of effective recognition procedures for refugees and other people in refugee-like situations, including those who do not have official documents of their educational background. Colleges with underdeveloped or undeveloped systems should review the document to make appropriate adjustments to their college's policies and procedures.

Decisions Based on Trade-off's and Access

Refugees describe a lack of information on how to access assessment opportunities. Upon their arrival to the United States, none were told about assessment opportunities by their refugee center. When refugees did inquire, they were met with

indifference, discouraging them from seeking assessment of their foreign qualifications. Refugees consistently cited new social capital as a necessary resource when attempting to reclaim their former profession in the United States. In addition, participants had to maintain a level of social capital from their home country to access formal documents. Many relied on family, former classmates, and colleagues to help them with the documentation process and to act on their behalf. Friends and family members in the United States encouraged inquiry and informed them of community resources, such as programs offered at local colleges, nonprofit agencies and English language programs.

Nonprofit agencies, not colleges, played a vital role in providing guidance on how to reclaim a profession in the United States. From there, access depended on institutional arrangements. Depending on staff and resource availability, some colleges made themselves available for inquiry before, during, and after the assessment process. Depending on the assessment results, trade-offs were being made by participants. When a refugee applied to a major program and was not accepted, they had to make a trade-off and enroll in another or focus on employment and immediate needs to care for family (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Employees at the college who take time to examine a person's work skills and experiences can better advise refugee students of their options. Employees may direct them to enroll in more suitable majors and provide information on relevant resource on campus, such as childcare and scholarships. Some major programs waived requirements and gave credits for prior learning. When a refugee student's professional and educational experiences were recognized, it saved them time and money.

Access to financial capital greatly influences a person's decision-making strategies. Refugee students did not receive any type of financial assistance to undergo the evaluation process. At times, people's immediate needs to care for family (Shakya, et al., 2010) and their own age overshadowed educational aspirations. For students who stopped pursuing efforts to reclaim their education, there was often a subsequent mismatch between their skills and abilities and their job (Campbell, 2018; UNESCO, 2018).

Developed Resilience Mechanisms in Times of Vulnerability

Resiliency is a person's ability to adapt and cope under stress. Those who are unable to cope are unlikely to achieve livelihoods that are sustainable (Davies, 1996). An established resilience mechanism is a behavior a person enacts when they perceive themselves to be in a vulnerable position. The stress of relocation and attempting to reclaim capital can bring about familiar coping mechanisms. When dealing with shocks and stresses, people may evade the risk, direct the threat to less vulnerable times in their life, develop characteristics to ward off the threat, or develop a level of tolerance to their circumstances (Payne & Lipton, 1994). All of these coping mechanisms were evident in the participants of this study.

Response to stress was dependent on the physical location and the level of community resources accessible to the participants. Refugees' most common form of coping mechanism is resistance. They modeled the behavior when they worked with departments to waive or substitute courses or program requirements. Working with nonprofit agencies helped refugees resist the pressure to take work that did not reflect their skills or experiences. Organizations with flexible systems received the most amount

of praise and highest satisfaction from refugee students. When they could not ward off the threat of insufficient credentials, compromises were made.

When credentials were not fully recognized, refugees did not question the results and accepted the outcome of the third-party evaluation agency. Some prepared for the threat of missing documents or long-drawn-out processes by preparing documents prior to their arrival in the U.S. For others, the ability to control and plan was not feasible. Some evaded the threat by changing majors. Others worked with nonprofit agencies to find relevant work, despite them being underemployed for their skills and experiences. During a refugee's time of vulnerability in the United States, they relied on familiar behaviors they had used in their past.

Connecting Findings to Sustainable Livelihood Framework

Chapter II described the primary framework for analysis, the sustainable livelihood model. This section will discuss how the model fits with data from this study. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework has been weaved throughout this research to provide a holistic view of the complexity of refugee experiences related to evaluation and recognition of non-US educational attainment. Chapter II focused on describing the framework, its value, and limitations. The research questions were framed around the theory and naturally, the analysis followed in suit. Because of the qualitative nature of the research, the work is on livelihood outcomes and focused on a refugee's perception of well-being and capabilities. An analysis of valued capital and strategies used by refugees when engaging with systems is just as important as outcomes.

The framework highlights the various capital and connections a vulnerable person needs in order to obtain a livelihood that is sustainable. A sustainable livelihood means a

person is able to withstand shocks and stress in their current and future environment. The reporting in Chapter IV reaffirmed this notion by describing participants and their experiences with refugee centers, third-party evaluation agencies, nonprofit resource agencies, and colleges and universities. These entities work in conjunction and all have an influence on a refugee's ability to practice their profession in the US. When engaging with organizations and their systems, refugees use decision-making strategies that are familiar to them. These strategies are ones that they used in their home country and during their time of conflict.

Implications for Practice

This section will present implications for practice and is intended to inform and benefit higher education institutions, licensing entities, and refugee resettlement communities.

Higher Education

In Chapter II, the Degree Qualifications Profile was discussed. The framework describes what students should know and be able to do at the associate, bachelors, and master's degree level. Colleges that are looking to take back ownership of the evaluation process should adopt this or other similar frameworks. These changes could be beneficial to all students because it will describe what they are able to do at various degree levels. In addition, these changes can help staff evaluate foreign credentials on their own. Administrators can form workgroups to review the framework and compare them to their existing processes. Through a self-audit, changes and additions to language and practice may be implemented at schools. Colleges can reference the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) toolkit if they wish to establish principals,

tools, and approaches when recognizing refugees' qualifications. This is particularly beneficial for students whose credentials were not recognized by the third-party evaluation agency. Modified systems can better serve more students by saving them time and money.

There is a lack of financial assistance to help refugees reclaim their professional identity. Students who claim to have a higher education degree from their home country are not eligible for federal financial assistance. If their credentials are not fully recognized, they may be eligible to receive loans and work study positions but not Pell Grant assistance. As soon as refugees enter the US, there are financial burdens placed upon them. First, they must repay the debt of their relocation. Second, they are attempting to gain wealth and possessions such as a vehicle, which adds to their debt burden. Participants indicated they are not ready to take on additional debt. The lack of financial assistance from the college or university requires students to postpone their educational aspirations or stop all together. School foundation offices and alumni departments should develop accounts where people could donate funds to support this population. The association can develop campaigns to garner more support from the community, especially the workforce sector.

Higher Education and Licensing Entities

In August of 2020, California passed bill AB 2113 with a supermajority vote. Under this bill, refugees, asylees and special immigrant visa holders will be able to expedite professional licensure under the Department of Consumer Affairs, allowing them to pursue relevant careers and obtain a sustainable livelihood. The Department of Consumer Affairs consist of 37 boards and 250 professions ranging from nurses and

accountants to physicians. Candidates will still have to meet the minimum qualifications before being issued a license. This process is similar to active-duty military members who have been honorably discharged from the Armed Forces and their family members must go through for licensure. States should keep an eye on what transpires as a result of this bill. Similar legislation should be considered by the states in the Rocky Mountain Region. States that recognize existing knowledge can help retain a skilled workforce, which is vital to a healthy and stable economy (Rietig, 2016; Sumption, 2013). Policy makers should keep in mind the speed of professional reinstatement, as for every wasted month and year that goes by, a person's ability to be self-sufficient and contribute to their new community at larger levels is delayed.

This research suggests a disconnect between licensing exams and college programs. Typically, colleges and universities work towards having their students be eligible to take a licensure exam. The physicians in this study were eligible to take the U.S. medical licensing exam but when attempting to enroll in a physician assistant program, they were asked to take prerequisites. The disconnect became a barrier to access. Taking prerequisites takes time and money from an already vulnerable population. Major program departments should evaluate their admissions practices and requirements. In addition, departments could adopt credit for prior learning policies and practices to eliminate barriers to entry. To fill gaps in a refugee's education, major programs could develop expedited programs or leave an enrollment seat available for non-majors. This would allow for content acquisition, development of professional language skills and building of a social network in their new community.

College and university leaders in the Rocky Mountain Region can develop pilot programs for professions in high need, such as those in health care, and identify challenges and possible solutions in the current licensing system. A pilot program may serve as a road map for other professions. Colleges and universities can lead on this topic by serving a population that is commonly overlooked but growing. This effort can help meet current and future workforce needs of their respected state.

Higher Education and Non-Profits/3rd Party Evaluation Agencies

In this study, participants often expressed their education from abroad as being devalued on the college campus. Processes can be improved, but a change in campus culture must follow. Colleges and universities can work towards changing their campus culture by hiring more people with foreign credentials. Colleges and universities should partner with entities like IIE Scholar Rescue Fund and Scholars at Risk to host fellows. These fellowships can protect scholars, provide opportunities to influence campus culture, educate students about world events, hire talented individuals, and save money by only paying half of the salary costs of the faculty.

Having the ability to choose goes a long way for refugee students. Colleges and universities should review why they recommend specific third-party evaluation agencies to students with international credentials and if they can partner with others or do it themselves. Most participant evaluation results came back as partial. Refugees did not question the validity of the results of the evaluation. They did not have another third-party entity evaluate their credentials; they accepted the first assessment as final. Participants described having a positive experience when they worked closely with faculty and department chairs to evaluate and fill their educational gaps.

A nonprofit resources agency played a vital role in providing valuable information about the U.S. education system to refugee students. Most participants described a lack of support from the relocation center and the intake process at colleges and universities as being less than desirable. Refugees describe the intake process at the college as being underdeveloped and necessitating shuffling between departments (Sumption, 2013). The participants in this study suggest that colleges and universities expand their outreach and work with nonprofit agencies to provide relevant and timely information about their process to recognize foreign credentials and the available options once the results are in. In this study, some refugees were not told that the option to evaluate their foreign credentials existed. Training staff on the topic and population will ensure refugees and other vulnerable populations have a similar experience.

Word of mouth travels quickly within the refugee community, and positive experiences will be discussed. A positive reputation could encourage more students to engage with the college, and in return, will provide to be mutually beneficial for the student and university. A mutually beneficial relationship will provide refugees with an understanding of the education system and colleges with students who have a history of success in attaining their academic goals. Coming from a rigid and difficult education system, refugees already have the necessary skills to be successful at a college or university.

Limitations

Phenomenological qualitative research can be biased, time consuming, and findings can lack credibility and reliability (Creswell, 2014). The lens of this study is from the viewpoint of a refugee. The researcher is a refugee and the topic is closely

related to her background experience. This knowledge and experience can be both positive and negative. In Chapter 4, the researcher included a biographical sketch of herself to provide context to the reader to address potential biases. Understanding the relocation process and norms from an academic and personal perspective allowed the researcher to probe during the interview process. To decrease the possibility of influence on participant responses, the researcher framed questions and findings around the Sustainable Livelihood Framework and Seidman's three-part interview model. Most questions were framed as open-ended to give refugees the ability to express their lived experiences freely.

Research participants took longer to secure because of COVID-19 regulations. As a result, interviews were done in a video format. At times, the video format caused participants to opt out and the format may have caused participants to be apprehensive with answering questions and sharing intimate details. With over 37, 656 words and 873 codes assigned across 12 interviews, a copious amount of data had to be analyzed. At times, individual circumstances could not be generalized.

This study did not require participants to have entered the country within a specific date range. As a result, experiences span over 20 years. The ability to express past experiences may not be as clear to some participants. Cited differences amongst individuals may be due to changing times. To minimize this limitation, the researcher analyzed the data according to each institution. Focusing on one entity at a time allowed me to describe experiences that were similar and different throughout time without over generalizing the process.

Lastly, credibility and reliability required the findings to be based on critical investigation (Creswell, 2014). The researcher presented the interview data and communicated what that data reveals about the study. The aim was to provide information, not to form a theory or prove a hypothesis. This may be viewed as a minor limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

This data, while rich and robust, does rely on participants' experiences and may obscure or leave out relevant policy information that participants may simply not be aware of. Future research should work to include that policy information into the interview protocol or as part of the analysis. A comparison of income before and after educational recognition may provide details as to the amounts of tax revenues that state and federal governments forgo because of failed systems and processes. The participants in this study all reside in conservative states which have had majority Republican leadership in all branches of government since the conception of the U.S. refugee program. Replicating this research in other regions or political climates may strengthen efforts to restitute refugees. Refugees identified communities they perceived as having existing systems that recognized foreign credentials. Studies that examine experiences in regions with robust systems, such as New York and California, may yield a larger understanding of the diversity of experiences.

The original size of the study was 16 participants, and the researcher was able to interview 12 participants. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the researcher's ability to recruit more participants was hindered. The researcher planned to recruit at locations where services were provided, such as language courses and nonprofit agencies. Because of the

pandemic guidelines, the services participants typically received were either postponed or directed virtually. Because of these factors, the sample size is smaller than intended.

Refugee status is not depended on a specific location, or where the conflict that was fled is located in the world. While this study had diverse participants, it lacked any representation of resettled refugees from East Asia, specifically Burma. In the early 2000s, Burmese refugees made up the largest refugee group resettled, ranging from 17 to 23 percent of total refugees admitted into the United States (Refugee Processing Center). The researcher was unable to interview a person from the area. Future work should focus on this region as well as the predicted wave of future refugees coming from sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

In the last five years, the U.S. refugee program has had its lowest number of admissions since the start of the program and the two years following the 9/11 attack. The U.S. Refugee Admission Program has admitted less people in the last four years than in fiscal year 2016 (Refugee Processing Center). The low admission numbers and a lack of representation of refugees from East Asia may generalize the experiences.

In this study, two participants did not receive any type of recognition for their foreign credentials and they both resettled from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The change in legal documentation by their home country made it difficult for a third-party agency to verify documents. Studies could examine nations in Africa and their history of anti-colonization legislation, specifically in the educational system, and its implication on people once they have resettled in the United States. In the next two decades, the United Nations predicts large numbers of refugees coming from this area. If today's research

focused on this area, they will be ablet to identify barriers sooner and colleges can work towards developing systems that are equitable to this future student population.

The bias participants experienced or felt should be further analyzed. Middle eastern refugees more commonly expressed sentiments of bias by people and institutions than any other group in this study. In 2021, President Biden withdrew all troops from Afghanistan. During this time, tens of thousands of Afghans were evacuated by the US. Many of these individuals worked with the U.S. government or military during the conflict. Resettlement agencies are getting ready to receive many of them. We know refugees will arrive with varied levels of education. There is a lot of opportunity to further analyze if people or institutions have a bias towards this demographic.

To provide a holistic view, studies can involve employees from organizations that work with refugees. This could range from employees at the refugee center, third-party evaluation agencies, nonprofit resource agencies, and departments within colleges. The departments within colleges and universities: such as advising, international office, major program departments and registrar's office, can provide insights about why procedures are used and develop resolutions that would address barriers.

Conclusion

Refugees who enter the United States are usually fleeing war and persecution and are seeking harbor in a new country. The first years are difficult because refugees are overcoming trauma and adjusting to a new community while they navigate linguistic and cultural obstacles. Pressure to find employment quickly forces many refugees to take jobs that do not align with their experiences or education. Refugees who are educated and

looking to reclaim their career are faced with processes that require significant time, money, and social connections.

This phenomenological study focused on the lived experiences of refugee students as they attempt to have their higher education recognized in the United States. The study provided a detailed background on 12 individuals and their unique experiences with colleges and universities. The exploration led to identifying other relevant organizations who are intertwined with the process. Colleges and universities are not the only entity a refugee student engages with when looking to have their credentials recognized. Universities do not operate independently, rather, they heavily rely on third-party evaluation agencies and nonprofit entities. Nonprofit agencies educate and help refugees identify a pathway to the workforce and third-party evaluation agencies assess equivalency. Organizations like the refugee center and English language programs have a role in in the early stages of inquiry. This inquiry goes beyond just information and may influence a refugee's well-being and their perception of self-worth.

Refugee students perceive existing systems to be exclusionary and leave them feeling powerless in their new social space (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014). During the recognition process, refugees are navigating spaces where social capital is required both in their new community and the homes they left behind. New friends introduce them to resources, and old friends and family members help access foreign documents.

Financial capital influences a person's ability to act. Immediate needs to integrate and secure a stable life overshadow educational aspirations, be it to evaluate credits or take courses to fill gaps. With little to no financial assistance from colleges or refugee centers, many begin to make trade-offs. Some reflect on their age and years to complete

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the goal and opt out of the process. They take a job that is underutilizing their talent. Others spend years taking prerequisites and seeking alternative studies that somewhat resemble their old identity. Timelines and self-esteem are influenced based on access to funds and programs.

On the surface, the resettlement process looks different than when a person is surviving war, but when you look deeper, similar behaviors are used to cope with the stress. To reduce their vulnerability, refugees rely on resilience mechanisms from the past. Refugees behaviors to sustain a livelihood range from avoidance, resistance, repartitioning and accepting a level of tolerance. Refugees make evaluations based on available resources and along the way they make trade-offs. Most are not looking to restart their education; they are seeking help from a college or university to fill their gaps or qualify to take a licensure exam or enroll in another program.

This dissertation focused on credential recognition from the perspective of refugees as they engage with higher education institutions. The aim of this research is to bring attention to a topic that many administrators may not be familiar with. Administrators might have a difficult time advocating resources to a group they perceive as rare on campus. People with international credentials are more present in communities than one would expect. In the next coming decades, employers will look to immigrant-origin populations with higher education to replace their retiring workforce (Batalova & Fix, 2021). Employers will naturally look to their local colleges to help them understand equivalency. This problem serves as an opportunity for colleges and universities to be a part of the solution. Higher education institutions can help fill workforce needs by establishing clear processes that describe learning and their equivalencies. Colleges must

act now to establish systems that will help fill the gaps in education, especially with an estimated 140 million climate-driven migrants in the next three decades (Rigaud, et al., 2018).

As higher education seeks to innovate, serve more people, and create new revenue streams, they should look to a population that is, as of now, overlooked. Community members with international credentials are present but rarely discussed. College and universities can either prepare for a surge of community members with international credentials or fail to respond by simply ignoring them.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Part 1. Interview Questions

Background and Introductions

1. Assets [questions regarding demographic data and educational background]

    o   Year of Birth, country of birth

    o   Where did you study (country/school name) and when did you attend
        university? Major?

    o   What was the motivation for you degree?

    o   How far was the university from your home?

    o   How many of your classmates attended university?

    o   How did you pay for university?

    o   How much time do you remember spending navigating the college system?

    o   Who provided you with the information you needed to enroll and eventually
        graduate?

    o   Do any other members of your household have a college/university degree? If
        so, who and what kind of degree?

    o   How long and in what ways did you practice your profession prior to your
        relocation?

2. Vulnerability Context [questions regarding transition from refugee camp to U.S.]

    o   Were you in a refugee camp? Where and when?

    o   In what ways did you practice your profession during your relocation to the
        U.S., if it all? (i.e refugee camp). Did you have a gap in practicing your
        profession? If so, how long would you say the gap was?

- Year entered the U.S.

Reconstruction

3. Influence [questions regarding access to information]

- What is your motivation for getting your academic achievements recognized in the U.S.?

- Take me though the process of what you need to do to practice your profession in the U.S.

- Are you a part of any peer-group/networks/formal organizations that help with the process? If so, who are they and how are they helping you?

4. Access [questions regarding college and university systems and process]

- When you reached out to the college, what goal were you trying to accomplish?

- Who did you work with? How did they advise you?

- Did you have to have your educational documents evaluated by the college or by a third-party agency?

  - Tell me about the process. How much time do you think you spent navigating the system?

- After you had your credentials evaluated by the college, what happened next?

- How did you feel about working with the college?

5. Outcomes [questions regarding perceived results of efforts]

- Where are you now in the journey? What is next for you?

- What resources did you rely on most when achieving your academic goals?

- How did you perceive American higher education before you started, and how if at all did those perceptions changed?
- Overall, how did you feel about your interaction with the U.S. college system?

Reflection

6. Strategies [questions regarding tactics]

   - What combination of actions did you feel made the biggest impact on achieving your academic goals?
   - Did you feel like you had to make compromises, if who, what was it?

7. Open Ended:

   - Is there anything that I did not ask, but you think this is important to discuss?

Part II. Demographic data

Age
Gender
Country of education
Degree type and level
Year entered the US
Community size of relocation
Credential Recognition: Full, Partial, None

Scoones, 1998, Seidman, 2019

Appendix B: Contact Summary Form

Contact Type:
Visit _____   Site: _____
Zoom _____   Contact Date: _____
In-Person _____   Today's Date: _____

1. What were the main issues or themes that struck you in this contact?
2. Summarize the information you got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions you had for this contact.

Question	Information
Assets: Demographic Data Educational Background	
Vulnerability Context: Shocks	
Influence: Information Gathering	
Access to Higher Education: Goal Perceived experience Options Presented	
Outcome: Results Future Efforts	
Strategies: Decision making	

3. Anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating, or important in this contact?

4. If another contact needed, what are the remaining target questions?

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Dear [*insert name*],

My name is Samra Culum I am a student from the College of Education at Idaho State University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about the educational mobility of highly educated refugees. The purpose of this interview is to gain insights about the interaction between refugee students and colleges and universities. You are eligible to be in this study because you have been identified as a highly educated refugee.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed about your experiences to recognize your education credentials in the U.S. I would like to video record the interview using Microsoft Zoom and then I will use the information to identify common and unique experiences when engaging with colleges and universities.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. There is no reward for participating or consequence for not participating.

If you would like to participate or have any questions about the study, please contact me at 208-404-3919 or 208-732-6223, email: sculum@csi.edu or culusamr@isu.edu. Or you may fill out a contact form by clicking here.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Samra Culum

Appendix D: Consent Form

Dear Participant:

I am inviting you to participate in research that focuses on the educational mobility of highly educated refugees. The purpose of this interview is to gain insights about the interaction between refugee students and colleges and universities. The interview protocol will ask questions about your perceived experiences when attempting to have your foreign academic credentials recognized by a U.S. college or university.

It is our hope that information from this interview process will contribute to a better understanding of a refugee student's decision-making strategies when looking to practice their profession in the U.S.

The study procedures will take place in a private digital platform like Microsoft Zoom Meeting. A link with a 9-key secure password will be sent to the participant. The interview will last up to seventy-five (75) minutes, and the study will last through the spring semester of 2021. The interviews will be recorded, the recordings will be transcribed, and the originals will be deleted. The transcriptions will be kept on a password-protected computer, inside a locked office.

Your name will not be collected or appear anywhere, and pseudonyms will be created to disguise any identifying details. Each individual's transcription data will be made available to the individual member to check for accuracy. The risks involve a breach of confidentiality.

Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. There is no reward for participating or consequence for not participating.

For further information regarding this research please contact Samra Culum at (208) 732-6223, email: sculum@csi.edu or culusamr@isu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Idaho State University Institutional Review Board at (208) 282-2179.

After signing this letter, keep one copy for your records and return the other one. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Please indicate your agreement to participate by signing below.

I am 18 years or older and have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate.

Signature: _____

Name: _____ (Please Print)

Date: _____

Appendix E: Recruitment Flyer

Appendix F: Resource List

Name of Organization	Contact Information
College of Southern Idaho: International Office	208-732-6383
College of Southern Idaho: English Language Acquisition	208-732-6534
College of Southern Idaho: Refugee Center	208-736-2166
Boise State University: International Student Services	208-426-3652
Idaho Office of Refugees	208-336-4222
Global Talent Idaho	208-947-4250
English Language Center of Cache Valley	435-750-6534
Utah Refugee Services Office	801-703-4845
University of Utah: New American Academic Network	801-972-3596
Utah Valley Refugees	801-850-6013