The Quest for Refugee Higher Education in Ethiopia: The Case of Self-financing Eritreans

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Abstract: This study examines the challenges of Eritrean refugees attending their tertiary education in selected private medical colleges in Ethiopia, and the support schemes available to help them cope with their problems. The research involves a sample of 40 randomly selected refugee students and uses focus group discussion and interview as principal methods of data collection. The findings reveal that Eritrean refugee students in Ethiopia face a variety of challenges identified as academic, linguistic, emotional/psychological and sociocultural. Although there are some forms of support offered at governmental level, the institutional level of support is found to be deficient in many respects. Hence, further improvements in facilitating refugee higher education in Ethiopia are posited.

Keywords: refugee education; higher education for refugees; Eritrean refugees; challenges of refugee education; private higher education

Background and context

Eritrea was part of Ethiopia before it became a separate country after a bitter three decades of military struggle that ended in 1991. Despite popular wishes for an ideal state of prosperity and peace, the country took a completely different course after its independence. Triggered by various challenges such as forced military conscription, political repression, and overall lack of freedom, Eritreans have been forced to leave their country and be exposed to the horrible experiences of kidnapping, torture, ransom and death on their way to refugee destinations (Roseberg and Tronvoll, 2017; Connel, 2016). Eritrea is now identified as one of the largest per capita producers of asylum seekers in the world (Roseberg and Tronvoll, 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015). Ethiopia, which borders Eritrea, currently hosts 889,400 refugees – the largest in Africa

– and ranks ninth among refugee-hosting countries worldwide; Eritrean refugees accounting for 164,600 or 19 percent of the total (UNHCR, 2018a: 18).

As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Convention, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and many other international legal instruments on the protection of refugees' rights, Ethiopia is obliged to provide the necessary support to refugees. Over the past decade, Ethiopia – in collaboration with international organisations like the UNHCR
– has embarked on different schemes to help refugees cope with their situation both in the refugee camps and outside. Eritrean refugees are the most favoured group in terms of the new schemes that are available to refugees; however, this has not always been perceived positively by the refugees themselves who consider it to be politically motivated and temporary (Mena, 2017).

As a result of the Out-of-Camp Scheme, which Ethiopia adopted in 2010, refugees live outside refugee camps. This has created an opportunity for self-sponsored Eritrean refugees to attend local private higher education institutions (PHEIs). The refugee students cover their own course fees, mainly through financial assistance that they obtain from family members who reside abroad, often in Europe and North America. While most refugee students are attending their first degrees, a few are doing Masters' programmes.

Self-financed refugee higher education is a new development in Ethiopian higher education, and perhaps also globally. Nonetheless, it should be expected that the new opportunities created to satiate the educational aspirations of Eritrean refugees could be met with a litany of barriers and challenges. This study seeks to examine the rarely studied challenges of self-financing Eritrean refugees seeking to attend Ethiopian higher education institutions (HEIs) and the support schemes available to them at national and institutional levels.

Refugee higher education: review of related literature

Historically, education for refugees has received little attention as more efforts have been directed towards life-saving interventions pertaining to food, water, shelter and health (Crea, 2016; Gladwell et al., 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Compared to the improving situations in addressing demands at the lower levels, higher education for refugees still remains a very

low global priority; only one percent of refugees access this opportunity, which even occurs long after their displacement has become protracted (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2019; Al-Hawamdeh and El-Ghali, 2017; Gladwell et al., 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Shakyia et al., 2015).

The growing demand for refugee higher education is driven by its various benefits and potentials. Higher education can play a significant role in overcoming the feelings of hopelessness, depression and low self-esteem; it paves the way for learning new skills and acquiring better qualifications and jobs that can help refugees support their lives, self-development, and stability that would help them compete later in life (Ramsay and Baker, 2019; UNESCO, 2019; Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016; Gladwell et al., 2016;). In addition to empowering refugee communities, higher education serves as a strong incentive to complete studies at primary and secondary level (Gladwell et al., 2016); it is an important tool for developing the human and social capital needed for future reconstruction and economic development in countries of origin (Gladwell et al., 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2015). The provision of higher education to refugees is further regarded as an indispensable element in the overall goals of the global education movement due to its significant contribution to equity promotion and social, economic and gender equality (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Shakya et al., 2015).

Higher education provided for refugees also assists in safeguarding them from negative life experiences by offering the sense of hope for the future and mitigating the risk of being drawn into violence and/or sectarian ideologies (Gladwell et al., 2016; Soudien et al., 2012). In doing so, higher education can serve as a viable tool for building the social basis for lasting and sustainable peace and for post-conflict reconstruction (Stevenson and Baker, 2018; IIE, 2016; Gladwell et al., 2016).

In spite of the benefits in improving the life and future of refugees, their higher education provision is fraught with various challenges and obstacles that can encompass policy and institutional or operational levels. For example, the policies of host countries related to legal and practical frameworks, the job status of refugees, funding, system coordination, etc. can either facilitate or hinder refugee higher education. Issues such as the treatment of refugees as foreign students, enrolment quotas that give priority to nationals and matriculation restrictions that serve to limit enrolment by certain refugee groups could determine whether refugees would be able to

have access to education in the host country (Crea, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Refugee students can also encounter a multitude of academic and school-related challenges that can hamper their success. Challenges such as the medium of instruction used, integration of refugees into local institutions, the need for modifying the curriculum or learning outcomes, having proper documents and credentials, differing institutional requirements, tuition fees and teacher preparation can hinder the opportunities and academic progress of refugee students (Al-Hawamdeh and El-Ghali, 2017; IIE, 2016). The academic success of refugee students can also be affected by their past experiences. Refugee students can experience trauma, psychological stress, identity crisis, economic problems and social complexities that require special treatment as these experiences can impede their ability to learn (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; McBrien, 2005).

Refugee access to higher education in Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) hosts 6.3 million refugees making the region the seat of one third of the world's refugee population (UNESCO, 2019; UNHCR, 2018a). As a result of the improved attention given to refugee higher education, a variety of globally and locally supported schemes are being initiated to help refugees attain their educational aspirations. Gladwell and others (2016) classify the available forms of support to refugees seeking higher education into five major types: learning centres opened for refugees in refugee camps or host communities; host-country scholarship programmes; international scholarship programmes; international online learning platforms; and information-sharing platforms. Improved access to higher education is one of the outcomes of such initiatives but the rate is still far below the existing demand. For example, applications for internationally available scholarships for refugees are so competitive that they exceed available places by a ratio of 100:1 (Gladwell et al., 2016).

In Africa, where there are wide variations in terms of policies adopted towards refugees, there have been encouraging initiatives made by some countries. The UNESCO 2019 Report, for instance, recognises countries such as Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda for their positive initiatives in supporting refugee education (UNESCO, 2019). On the other hand, there are countries like South Africa with policies and practices that discourage access to refugee higher education (Kavuru, 2017).

Africa is increasingly becoming a beneficiary of a variety of new initiatives available to refugees. The main initiative is the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund (DAFI), which has been run by the UNHCR since 1992 (UNHCR, 2018b). The UNHCR's DAFI Scholarship has been the most popular initiative implemented in 41 countries worldwide, the top countries being Chad, Ethiopia, Iran, Jordan, Kenya, Pakistan, Uganda and Yemen. In fact, SSA is the biggest recipient of the DAFI scholarship programme with 2732 (41%) of the total opportunities provided in 2017 (UNHCR, 2018b). This share is mainly divided among Ethiopia (729 students), Uganda (438) and Kenya (370). Among the 729 DAFI scholars currently attending university education in Ethiopia, Eritreans rank fourth with 63 students after Somalia (388 students), Sudan (169) and South Sudan (88). In addition to this major scheme of higher education scholarship for refugees in many countries, new initiatives pertaining to host country scholarships appear to be on the rise.

Having ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol, Ethiopia is one of the countries in Africa that follows an open-door policy and a relatively favourable protection environment for refugees (OECD, [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development] 2017). Through its signatory commitment to the UNHCR's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, Ethiopia has pledged to improve the education, livelihoods, documentation, social services, local integration, work permits, and out-of-camp living of refugees (OECD, 2017).

One important scheme created for refugees in Ethiopia is the provision of free scholarship opportunities by the UNHCR and the Ethiopian Government in the past decade. Free university scholarships provided for refugees of Eritrean origin at the various Ethiopian public universities have so far enabled more than 1,500 Eritrean refugees to pursue their studies across the country, though this is far below the actual demand for such opportunities (UNHCR 2018b).

Another related scheme, mentioned earlier, is the Out-of-Camp Scheme, which allows refugees to live and move freely across the country if they can demonstrate a means of support outside the refugee camps (Connel, 2016). Ethiopia's 'out-of-camp' policy has benefited a multitude of refugees, particularly Eritrean refugees around 17,345 of whom live in its capital city, Addis Ababa, as a result. Many of these refugees pursue their education relying on the remittance they receive from their compatriots who have settled outside their country.

Diaspora remittances and funding for refugee higher education

The literature on remittances to and from refugees remains scarce owing to the limited attention the subject has so far drawn from researchers (Vargas-Silva, 2016). This is further compounded by the lack of research on motives of remittance and the meagre available work on African diaspora giving back (Plasterer, 2011; Copeland-Corson, 2007).

The limited work available suggests that the transfer of resources from refugees to their families and communities in their country of origin is a common phenomenon that has escalated over the past few decades (Johnson, 2007). Support provided in this form is 'an expression of strong transnational social bonds and of the wish to improve the lives of those left behind' (De Haas, 2010: 22). This feeling is more pronounced in Africa where most cultures espouse the value of interdependence and mutual responsibility for others (Copeland-Carson, 2007; Johnson, 2007).

According to Vargas-Silva (2016), the motives for remittance of money can be dictated by altruism, self-interest, insurance and loan payment. The altruistic motive, which is more pertinent to this study, is about settled migrants sending money to their relatives with the purpose of improving their well-being (Vargas-Silva, 2016), although the major share of monies remitted back from refugees is for personal use and investment (Johnson, 2007). Mobilisation of money in support of education is one of the mechanisms in which solidarity and allegiance to fellow migrants is expressed (Plasterer, 2011). Experiences from Somalia, for instance, show that migrant remittances are used for development purposes including education (Copeland-Carson, 2007) and as mechanisms of rebuilding Somalia anew (Plasterer, 2011). The situation in Eritrea is quite similar.

Eritrea has a large number of migrants who have moved to the Middle East, Europe and North America since the 1970s (Tewolde, 2005). The Eritrean economy is significantly dependent on remittance from these migrants which is nearly one third of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Kifle, 2007). Tewolde's (2005) findings suggest that the average migrant in Eritrea remits around USD 300–400 per year, and the Eritrean refugees' contribution through remittances back to their fellow citizens is mainly aimed at women empowerment, the building of schools and the improvement of health care. Among more than 20,000 Eritreans who are assumed to live in Addis Ababa,

more than 97 per cent live through the remittances they receive from abroad (Mena, 2017).

Against the above background, this study examines the experiences and challenges of self-financing Eritrean refugees attending their higher education in Ethiopia.

Objectives and research questions

This study sought to investigate the challenges Eritrean refugee students face while attending private medical colleges in Ethiopia and the support they are provided. The research questions addressed are thus:

1) What are the challenges of self-financing Eritrean refugees in attending HEIs in Ethiopia?
2) What are the policies and support schemes (if any) put in place to mitigate the challenges of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopian HEIs?

Research methodology

This study uses a qualitative research methodology. Focus group discussion and interview were chosen as principal data collection tools to gauge the various experiences and challenges of the Eritrean refugee students.

The study participants were Eritrean refugees who lived out of refugee camps and attending their college education at two private colleges in Addis Ababa: Africa and MedcoBio Medical colleges. The choice for medical colleges was made based on an earlier scoping exercise, which indicated that most self-sponsored Eritrean refugees prefer to study medical subjects due to the anticipation that such programmes will earn them better job opportunities in the countries where they would like to settle at the end.

The two colleges were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study. Out of the 200 refugee students who attended the colleges, 40 (20%) were chosen for focus group discussion (FGD) using a simple random sampling technique. The other participants were an Education Officer and Head of the Programme Implementation and Coordination Office at the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) in Ethiopia, which has the responsibility of handling refugee affairs including facilitating their higher education enrolment. The FGD and interview sessions were conducted after securing the necessary permissions and consent from the respective institutions and individual participants. Study participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their responses.

The FGDs were conducted in four sessions, involving ten volunteer refugee students during each session. The discussions focused on the challenges the Eritrean refugee students faced, what impacted their academic career, and the strategies used by the ARRA and institutions to integrate refugee students into the Ethiopian higher education system.

Interviews were also conducted with ten volunteer Eritrean refugee students who were selected for their willingness to participate in the study. The Education Officer and Head of the Program Implementation and Coordination Office at the ARRA were similarly interviewed to gauge the challenges the refugee students faced and the ARRA strategies (if any) to integrate the refugee students into the Ethiopian higher education system.

Both the FGD and interviews were audiotaped, recorded and transcribed. After the transcription and coding of the records, draft transcriptions were sent to the interviewees in order to ascertain the reliability of the data. Data were later categorised into common themes and meaningful analytical categories using content analysis as a major analytical tool.

Major findings of the study

The challenges refugees face can vary depending on the context in which they find themselves; the findings of this particular study are more representative of challenges in the context of 'countries of first asylum' as contrasted with 'countries of resettlement' (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). The data analyses about the Eritrean refugees suggest that their challenges could fall into three major categories: academic, emotional/psychological and sociocultural.

Academic challenges

The Eritrean refugee students acknowledged the tremendous opportunity they are given to pursue their tertiary education as self-sponsored students in Ethiopia. They also justified their choice of medical studies for its value in resettlement situations when the opportunity arises. This deliberate choice appears to corroborate with choices in DAFI scholarships worldwide and those in Ethiopia. According to UNESCO (2018b) the most globally popular programmes were identified as medical and health-related sciences (19%), commercial and business administration (18%), engineering (14%), social and behavioural sciences (12%), and humanities (8%). In a similar vein, among the 729 DAFI scholars in Ethiopia, 196 students followed medical science and health-related subjects, then commercial and business

administration (150), social and behavioural science (106), engineering (72), and natural science (44) (UNESCO, 2018b).

The research subjects noted that despite following programmes of their own choice, their academic pursuits are hindered by a variety of challenges that impede their progress. They identified lack of academic support, poor academic skills, disrupted schooling, poor participation, lack of proficiency in Amharic, difference in school ethos and separation from family as their major academic challenges.

Although most Eritrean refugee students follow their studies through the financial assistance of their relatives abroad, particularly from those in Europe and North America, they also noted that family separation itself detracts their attention from fully concentrating on their studies, leading to depression and failure in some cases. In addition, the refugee students cited disrupted schooling as one obstacle that affects their academic career. Most of them noted that they were in refugee camps in Ethiopia for two to three years before joining the private medical colleges; an academic gap that they said affected them from attending their classes smoothly. One of the Eritrean refugee students described the situation as:

> 'I stayed in Adi-Harush refugee camp for three years. Later, I came to Addis Ababa because my brother who lives in the USA promised to send me two hundred dollars monthly, and cover my college fees. At the college, things became so difficult for me because I could not sit and learn for hours patiently, and could not be motivated to read because I understood nothing. I think this has happened because I was away from school for some years.'

Lack of academic skills and different school ethos were also identified as part of the learning challenges the Eritrean refugee students encountered. The refugee students identified their deficiency in academic skills as note-taking, reading strategies, study skills, time management, programming, and lack of support from the ARRA office or the colleges on these particular areas of assistance. They further contended that the academic environment in Ethiopia is a bit different and has its own impact. In Eritrea, they were obligated to go to Sawa – a military training centre – during their last year of high school. While undergoing compulsory and basic military training at Sawa; they are treated as military trainees. After passing the matriculation examination, they join colleges where they need to refresh their military skills under the supervision of military personnel. Timetables are set for the students that specify when to go to the library, for how long they should stay there, when

to have their meal, and when to study. In the new environment where this kind of military demand and dependence on orders coming from higher officials does not exist, the refugee students found it difficult to cope with their personal programmes and activities independently.

Linguistic challenges

Concurrent with studies in other contexts (e.g. Jungblut et al., 2018), this study identified language barrier as one of the most prominent challenges faced by Eritrean refugees. The refugee students mentioned their lack of proficiency both in Amharic – the official working language of Ethiopia – and that of English - the medium of instruction at tertiary level - as an academic challenge. Amharic is widely used in the institutions despite the fact that English was stipulated to be a medium of instruction in Ethiopia (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2009). Refugee students asserted that their teachers' frequent use of Amharic to explain concepts in class made the task of understanding lessons daunting due to their deficiency in the language. Class participation was another learning-related challenge as refugee students will always have a problem when the teachers switch to Amharic to facilitate the communication. Furthermore, discussing academic issues like grades and asking for clarification of unclear concepts or questions outside the classroom was performed entirely in Amharic, which again hindered the refugee students from expressing their dissatisfaction about grades or putting forward their queries.

Among all these academic challenges, the refugee students mentioned quite frequently lack of Amharic proficiency and different school ethos, thus indicating the level of importance they attached to these specific problems. The learning challenges identified as lack of academic support, separation from family, disrupted schooling, lack of academic skills and fear of class participation were in line with the findings of Kanu (2008).

Emotional/Psychological challenges

The refugee students also identified emotional/psychological problems, which included traumatic experiences of crossing the Eritrea–Ethiopia border illegally. The refugee students described their various unpleasant experiences while illegally crossing the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the negative effects they are facing as a result of their bad experiences. They recounted stories about people travelling with them who were killed and captured by the Eritrean security forces while crossing the border to Ethiopia. They talked about their experiences of watching women and children being

killed by the Eritrean security forces, as they have a 'shoot and kill' policy that applies to anyone who attempts to escape to Ethiopia. Some also reported horrible experiences of seeing people being eaten by wild animals in the jungle.

A few of the refugee students also disclosed their experiences of being caught by bandits in the Sahara Desert while trying to cross to Egypt from Sudan. During their stay at an unidentified detention centre, they had traumatic experiences and memories of being tortured, including witnessing women being raped. After paying a ransom of USD 20,000, they were set free and managed to reach Egypt. Unfortunately, they were caught by the Egyptian security forces and were deported to Ethiopia at their own request.

The refugee students also explained that they did not receive any therapy or psychiatric treatment after their arrival in Ethiopia and hence suffered from psychological stress, which interfered with their learning progress. They asserted that their psychological stress is sometimes a source of exclusion and isolation from the college community, even though their interaction with other refugee students was relatively warm; their situation appears to indicate a gap in the support system of the colleges in addressing the bigger needs of integrating the Eritrean refugee students into the new environment.

Furthermore, the refugee students also noted that their failure to possess their original academic credentials had contributed to their psychological stress. Most of them were unable to do this for two reasons. Firstly, they were victims of the policy in Eritrea that bars school certificates or university diplomas from being issued to any citizen without presenting evidence of completion of national service or exemption from this requirement. Secondly, even for those who had a college diploma, colleges and universities in Ethiopia require authentication from the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA). This again appears to have contributed to the psychological stress and low self-esteem of the Eritrean refugee students who questioned the relevance of going to schools in Eritrea. The ARRA's intervention and assistance eventually resolved these problems.

The refugee students also described their uncertain future as the other source of emotional/psychological stress. They stated that they do not plan to settle in Ethiopia and anticipate the UNHCR or their family members will assist them to move to other affluent nations. In fact, resettlement is regarded as the only viable solution for most refugees in Ethiopia as local integration and voluntary repatriation to countries of origin remain elusive goals (UNHCR, 2016a). However, as the resettlement process arranged by the

UNHCR appears to be precarious and lengthy, very few of the refugee students put much hope on it. Refugee students admitted that they even plan to use the financial assistance they get from family members living abroad to pay smugglers to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea through a perilous journey. Moreover, they explained that they feel a sense of guilt for not having done so already, a thought that contributes to their psychological stress and interferes in their academic pursuit.

Sociocultural challenges

To most of the refugee students, the use of Amharic has not only created a substantial communication barrier, but also become a source of sociocultural challenges by creating unnecessary misunderstanding when they try to mingle with others. Being deficient in using it appropriately, they are sometimes considered rude, domineering and impolite by their classmates and teachers. On the positive side, they expressed the advantages of having similar cultural practices and sharing the same religion that make them feel at home. When they compare the differences between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt, they said the latter two countries have distinct cultural values, religion and costumes that caused more difficulties during the time they stayed there.

Refugee aspirations after graduation

Little is known about the fate of Eritrean refugees who have graduated from Ethiopian higher institutions of learning. However, it can be safely assumed that their training cannot be used for employment purposes within Ethiopia as the Ethiopian refugee law (FDRE, 2004) does not permit local employment for refugees. Given the political situation in Eritrea has hardly improved, most Eritrean refugees do not intend to return there. In fact, the Eritrean refugees said they plan to use their training when they hopefully resettle in countries in the West. Wherever they may be, they see their higher education as a major tool that can at a later date help to improve theirs and their families' situation. The refugee students also noted that their choice of medical programmes over other social science subjects was dictated by the anticipation that the field can have better employment prospect in places where they wish to resettle.

Government support to Eritrean refugee students

The Ethiopian Government accommodates the various needs of its large refugee groups through a division called the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA). By virtue of the power it is given from the government, the ARRA serves as the UNHCR's main counterpart and

implementing partner in Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2016b). According to the information obtained from its website, the ARRA's mandates for coordinating refugee programmes and activities extend to:

- o serve as a key government agency and representative on all matters of refugees and asylum seekers
- o conduct refugee status determination exercises and decide on refugee status
- o establish refugee camps and manage the overall coordination of camp activities
- o provide physical protection and maintain the well-being of all people of concern
- o provide and coordinate basic and social service delivery to refugees o coordinate country-level refugee assistance programmes
- o assist and facilitate NGO partners and other stakeholder interventions in the discharge of their activities
- o facilitate and undertake repatriation movements when the causes of refugee displacement are solved.

The Ethiopian refugee law (FDRE, 2004) provides little room for the types of help Eritrean refugees are currently being accorded as it treats them as foreigners. It only caters for basic protection and social services. However, this has not prevented the Ethiopian Government from creating various beneficial opportunities for the refugees. Aside from issuing identity cards to those who are allowed to live legally in Ethiopia, the ARRA assists in various activities that would help integrate the Eritrean refugee students into the higher education system.

According to the Head of Programme Implementation and Coordination and Education Officer at the ARRA, the self-sponsored Eritrean refugee students require various types of assistance from the ARRA to follow their studies at Ethiopian HEIs. The ARRA provides special assistance to students who are unable to produce their authentic educational records by arranging placement exams. Based on their results, the ARRA sends a letter of cooperation to the HEIs where the refugee students prefer to study. As a matter of practice, tertiary education in Ethiopia is accessed by refugees under the same conditions as Ethiopian nationals (UNHCR, 2018b). According to the interview with the Education Officer, the ARRA further urges the colleges to treat the refugee students like other Ethiopians, to charge school fees in

local currency rather than in dollars, so that the refugee students do not develop any sense of isolation or segregation.

The ARRA arranges orientation sessions for the Eritrean refugee students before they start their studies. These focus on the Ethiopian education system, its grading system, and the kind of communication refugee students should maintain with their classmates, teachers and college administrators. The ARRA further coordinates and assists in specific issues that the refugee students might face such as departmental change, grading, etc.

Institutional support

The capacities of institutions where refugees are studying can play a significant part in enhancing the academic progress of refugee students (Al-Hawamdehand El-Ghali, 2017). Although the Eritrean refugee students acknowledged the role of institutional support towards alleviating their challenges and enhancing their success, they still found their institutions deficient in many respects. Particular areas of need, such as the provision of tutorials, guidance and counselling services, as well as teacher empathy, were raised as possible interventions that could have contributed to the success of the refugees but were inadvertently missing. According to the refugee students, their respective institutions made no special arrangements to accommodate their particular needs. Whatever happened within their institutions reflected plans set for local students. This may not be surprising as Ethiopian PHEIs are mainly populated by nationals and have little knowledge, capacity and readiness to cater to such special needs.

The lack of understanding and support from teachers at the sample PHEIs were to be expected in an environment where institutions have no policies and preparations to accommodate such distinct needs (Stevenson and Baker, 2018). The private institutions may even have limitations in terms of distinguishing refugees and locals due to their similarity and as a result have little knowledge of their background and needs. The situation is also indicative of the huge gap that can exist between government policies that promote refugee interests and institutional policies and practices that are most often characterised by passive roles (Jungblut et al., 2018).

Discussion and conclusions

This study helped identify the various challenges that self-financing Eritrean refugee students face while attending Ethiopian PHEIs. Their major academic challenges were identified as lack of academic support, lack of

academic skills, disrupted schooling, fear of classroom participation, poor language proficiency, different school ethos and separation from family. Their most frequently mentioned challenges were poor language proficiency and different school ethos. They also reported emotional/psychological challenges that are driven by traumatic immigration experiences, failure of securing a bright future and the sense of low self-esteem that the refugee students have developed. The sociocultural challenges did not seem to be major challenges to the refugee students, but their poor use of Amharic has created a communication barrier with their classmates, teachers and college administrators. On a positive note, they described themselves as lucky for being in Ethiopia as Eritrea and Ethiopia share more or less common values, norms and customs.

The study is a clear indication of the individual efforts of refugees to improve their status and future through higher education regardless of the absence of the most common forms of assistance offered by international organisations like the UNHCR and national governments. Their decision to pursue their higher education despite the various challenges that they face is also a testimony to the level of determination that the Eritrean refugees have developed to improve their current situation. Refugee students' motivations and choices of their particular subjects of study are further suggestive of their future orientation as their preferences appear to be affected by the broader goals about their onward migration. However, more research needs to be done to determine whether such aspirations are later met and the skills and educational qualifications of refugees are recognised on resettlement.

As noted earlier, most of the refugees are attending their education with financial help provided by their family members who are settled abroad. This again shows the level of cooperative efforts among the refugee students and their relatives in view of the challenges faced and potential opportunities.

Notwithstanding the possible existence of other accompanying motives like politics (Mena, 2017) and people-to-people interaction that drive current level of engagements, the role of the Ethiopian Government in providing humanitarian assistance and creating better opportunities for Eritrean refugees cannot be overemphasised. Schemes such as out-of-camp living and providing educational opportunities are immense challenges to a country like Ethiopia that has its own burgeoning youth population demanding similar benefits. The ARRA's assistance in issuing letters to the colleges to treat the refugee students like other Ethiopian students, arranging a placement examination and an orientation session to integrate the refugee students into

the colleges, and enabling them to be effective communicators with their classmates, teachers and college administrators imply remarkable components of support provided to refugees at the national level despite the absence of regulatory frameworks that support these actions. Ethiopia's commitment to higher education for refugees can showcase what can be done to alleviate not only a growing global humanitarian crisis, but also the needs of refugees seeking higher education in the context of countries that have meagre resources. That may also explain why Ethiopia has recently become a chosen transit destination by refugees and acclaimed for what it is doing to address the needs of the refugee population (UNESCO, 2019; Connel, 2016).

Undoubtedly, these efforts go a long way in terms of integrating the Eritrean refugee students into the Ethiopian higher education system compared to countries where such opportunities are lacking. Despite the positive developments in addressing refugee needs in Ethiopia, there are still many areas that need further improvements. The study has ascertained that the pedagogical implications of providing higher education to refugees demand not only creating opportunities but also providing various forms of academic and non-academic support to help them realise their aspirations (Gebreiyosus, 2018). Hence, the need for augmenting government and institutional support in areas where there are still observable deficiencies is strongly felt. For instance, the ARRA should become involved in not only arranging cultural awareness sessions, but also facilitating more academic support to the refugee students so that they can achieve better in their college studies. Where possible, the ARRA should also play a pivotal role in identifying the Eritrean refugee students who need therapy and psychiatric treatment and offering the necessary assistance to help them overcome their challenges as such assistance is critical to their success (Arega, 2017; Nakash et al., 2014; Rutter 1999).

There is still much more to be done at an institutional level in terms of assisting refugee students. Activities such as arranging tutorial classes, offering guidance and counselling, and raising awareness about their communication barriers are important tasks that can enhance refugee students' academic success and help them overcome their academic, emotional/psychological and sociocultural challenges. Teachers at HEIs need orientation about the background and treatment of refugee students and their use of classroom language; these will greatly assist in integrating refugee students into the local context.

This study was conducted against the backdrop of little available research addressing the various dimensions of refugee higher education in general and that of self-financing refugees in particular, both of which are new and evolving phenomena in the Ethiopian context. Although exploratory in nature, the study is significant in providing empirical data about Eritrean refugee students in order to understand their challenges and facilitate their study at Ethiopian institutions of higher learning. Notwithstanding its policy and institutional implications, the relative absence of similar studies into the various aspects of refugee education in general, and higher education in particular, strongly warrant future research in the area.

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