

A Higher Degree of Engagement: Canada's Colleges and Universities Respond to the Refugee Crisis

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2/21/2017

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As reported in June 2016, UNHCR estimates that 65.3 million persons were forcibly displaced, 21 million of whom were refugees. Such staggering numbers are unprecedented. Here, we explore the response of Canadian universities and colleges to the crisis in ways that are fulfilling their role as actors for social public good. In addition to offering courses and conducting research that delve into global forced displacement issues across a variety of disciplines, the response of Canadian higher education institutions can be organized broadly into three types of activities. One, they have intensified involvement with refugee sponsorship and scholarships. Two, they have provided advocacy and legal assistance for sponsors and refugees. Three, institutions have organized and participated in forums to share and discuss ideas and engage with other actors to identify needs, effective practices and innovative interventions.

Increase in Refugee Sponsorship and Scholarships

WUSC Student Refugee Program

Since 1978, [World University of Canada's Student Refugee Program](#) (SRP) has been facilitating durable solutions for refugee youth around the world, in partnership with the higher education community in Canada. To date, the SRP has resettled over 1,600 student refugees from diverse backgrounds through the SRP in the Government of Canada's [Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program](#). Upon arrival, these students are provided with the opportunity to complete their higher education at the sponsoring postsecondary institutions. Volunteer groups on campus, which are in most cases student-led, offer the social and financial support required for the resettled students to begin the path to integration and citizenship in Canada.

In response to the growing refugee crisis, WUSC has received substantial support to increase the SRP across the country, with additional commitments from new and existing sponsoring institutions. In September 2016, WUSC issued a call to action with support of [Universities Canada](#) and [Colleges and Institutes Canada](#) to senior administrators of postsecondary institutions and WUSC sponsoring groups across the country. This call to action urged sponsoring institutions to increase their contributions to the SRP. The response was quick and significant, doubling the number of placements from 84 to 160 for 2016. Twenty-eight campuses increased their number of placements, and 11 campuses began sponsoring – including a number of colleges and CEGEPs.

These increases were made possible due to a combination of additional funding: presidential scholarships (such as at University of Alberta), crowdfunding and commitments by the President's office to match funds raised by the campus community (such as at Carleton University), increased student levies that are designated to support refugee higher education through referendums (McGill University, University of Prince Edward Island and others), allocation of scholarships to the SRP, and increased waivers granted by institutions (such as at York University).

Beyond those who contributed to the crisis through the SRP, there are a number of additional institutions, particularly colleges, which developed new scholarships and campus-based initiatives targeted at recently arrived Syrian refugees such as Concordia University, Seneca College, Algonquin College, Georgian College, St. Thomas University, and Université de Montréal.

Lifeline Syria

In the city of Toronto, three universities: University of Toronto, York University, and OCAD University joined the Ryerson University-led [Lifeline Syria Challenge](#), to offer a response to the growing humanitarian crisis in Syria. This network of Toronto-based universities has a goal to facilitate the sponsorship of over 300 Syrian refugees across Canada, through the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees program. Teams of volunteers, including students, staff, faculty, alumni and community members are motivated to raise funds and commit their time to support the refugee families upon arrival. This initiative has enabled students on campus to offer their skills and knowledge to help facilitate the integration of these resettled families by developing an online portal to share information and delivering workshops for families on relevant topics. A number of additional initiatives at these institutions have taken shape, providing opportunities to engage more of the Canadian public in the welcoming of former refugees, on their pathway to integration in their new communities.

Scholars at Risk

Founded in 2000, [Scholars at Risk](#) (SAR) supports repressed intellectuals, mainly through organizing visiting faculty placements, while educating and advocating for academic freedoms. [The Canadian section of Scholars at Risk](#) was launched in 2012 with 15 participating Canadian institutions, including University of Toronto, University of Winnipeg, and McGill University.

Realizing the enormous need generated by the refugee crisis, [University of Toronto's Massey College](#) recently expanded its SAR to include bursaries for students at risk. Designated for undergraduate and graduate students with refugee status in Canada, the goal is to give 100 bursaries of \$10,000 over 10 years. With a current focus on Syrian students, U of T has committed \$500,000 to match fundraising donation dollars.

Legal Advice, Advocacy and Assisting Communities

The University of Ottawa-based [Refugee Hub](#) has a number of refugee law and policy initiatives. From teaching refugee law studies to advocating for migrants' rights, the Hub also has specific programs dedicated to supporting Canadians sponsor refugees through its Refugee Sponsorship Support Program. Lawyers and law students act as guides to help sponsoring groups through the sponsorship process. The Refugee Hub plays a significant role in advocating for refugees' rights through volunteer members of its Refugee Law Research Team, a team that has supported the development of a number of key Supreme Court briefings.

Recently, following the initial U.S. executive order barring Syrian refugees indefinitely and other refugees for 120 days (since halted and halt upheld by the 9th Circuit Court), all 22 law schools across Canada conducted a [research-a-thon](#) to challenge the [Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement](#). Law students and faculty argue, along with the [Canadian Council for Refugees](#), that the Agreement should be suspended.

Engaging in Critical Discussions

Forums provide space for critical analyses of issues surrounding the crisis and opportunities for institutions to engage with policy actors and private partners and to sow seeds for collaborative action on promising initiatives. While it is not possible to mention all meetings, the following examples provide an overview of their breadth.

In June 2016, WUSC invited the higher education community to participate in a roundtable, which aimed to bring together the collective strength of this network in Canada to share good practices, identify opportunities for collaboration and explore opportunities for coordinated responses in the future. Three central calls to action were issued as a result of this roundtable: invest in education for refugees, particularly at the tertiary level, improve education processes to ensure greater collaboration and scale, and further establish Canadian leadership on the global stage.

There are intensifying interests and discussions on distance higher education. In the fall of 2016, along with other

stakeholders, Canadian higher education institutions participated in a conference on online higher education. With York University and University of British Columbia's involvement in the Borderless Higher Education Project (BHER) in Kenya, and University of Ottawa (with the American University of Beirut) starting a new 16-month program on [community mobilization](#), Canadian institutions are increasingly involved with digital and blended higher education learning opportunities for refugees.

In February 2016, the Canadian Council for Refugees and Amnesty International provided sessions, hosted by Osgoode Law School, on refugee rights and advocacy training through their joint [Refugees Welcome Here!](#) campaign. In addition, in October 2016, York University served as the host for Universities Canada's [Mindshare: Re-imagining Refuge](#) symposium, which aimed to promote fresh thinking to better respond to the crisis.

Conclusion

The higher education community in Canada is setting the stage for postsecondary institutions globally to increase their support to refugee students. For instance, other governments (such as Ireland, Japan, Australia, USA, Netherlands, Poland, and Italy) and higher education communities have begun exploring WUSC's SRP to see how it can be introduced within their national contexts to provide educational pathways for refugees.

However, there is still much more work to be done. Now, more than ever, Canadian colleges and universities have an important role in advocating for and assisting forced migrants, alongside their communities, not just within but also beyond the nation's borders.

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