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Differential Pathways to Higher Education: A Social Justice Analysis of International Students from the Global South and Refugees in Germany

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the differential experiences of international students from the Global South and refugees accessing higher education in Germany through Fraser's (2008) tri-dimensional framework of social justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation. While both groups share overlapping challenges in navigating German higher education, existing research has largely treated them separately, creating gaps in understanding their comparative experiences and support needs. Using a conceptual qualitative research design informed by theory synthesis, the study finds that Global South students face economic barriers and cultural misrecognition despite educational legitimacy, while refugees encounter compounded obstacles, including legal uncertainties and recognition deficits, even with targeted support programs. Both experience compound injustice, intersecting economic, cultural, and political exclusion. The analysis reveals that current support systems operate on homogenizing principles, failing to reflect the intersectional realities of these students. Institutional reform grounded in social justice is urgently needed to foster genuinely inclusive educational environments.*

Keywords: Germany, Global South, Higher Education Access, International Students, Refugee Student, Social Justice.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, access to higher education (HE) among diverse immigrant populations has received growing scholarly attention (Pekşen & Leişytė, 2021). Among these groups, international students, particularly those from the Global South and refugees, represent two increasingly significant yet underexplored populations within the context of host countries such as Germany (Auschner & Jiang, 2025; Bilecen et al., 2024; Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Grüttner et al., 2018; Masud, 2020; Schneider, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Unangst, 2019). While extensive literature has documented the academic, social, and psychological challenges that international students face when adapting to new educational environments (Hernández López, 2020; Kercher, 2019; Menzies et al., 2015; Schartner, 2014; Schartner & Cho, 2017; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang et al., 2015), a growing but still limited body of research has begun to analyze the unique barriers encountered by refugees, especially in accessing higher education (Grüttner et al., 2018; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Despite sharing the common experience of navigating new academic systems in foreign countries, international students and refugees are often studied in isolation, with limited attention to how their challenges may overlap in important ways.

A key dimension that emerges across both populations is stress as a central factor in their adaptation to academic life. For international students, especially those from the Global South, stress stems from linguistic difficulties, cultural dissonance, academic expectations, and financial insecurity (Abu Kadra et al. 2025; Apolinarski & Brandt, 2018; Hernández López, 2020; Kercher, 2019; Tan Wen-Xuan et al., 2025). In contrast, refugees experience additional and often more profound layers of stress due to forced displacement, trauma, legal precarity, and sociopolitical exclusion (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). This distinction reflects an important difference in migration circumstances. International students are often described as migrating voluntarily in pursuit of educational opportunities (Berry, 1997). However, such mobility cannot be reduced to individual choice alone. Decisions to study abroad are frequently shaped by intersecting social, cultural, economic, and political pressures (Bastia & Skeldon, 2020; Thies & Falk, 2023). In contrast, refugee students are typically compelled to flee conditions of instability or conflict and are resettled through state or international protection frameworks (Crea, 2016). While the distinction between voluntary and forced migration remains analytically useful, it must therefore be understood as a continuum rather than a rigid dichotomy. This differentiation nonetheless underpins divergent experiences of access, inclusion, and support within higher education systems.

Given these complex dynamics, Germany offers a compelling context for this investigation. Between 2014 and 2024, Germany experienced a growth of 74% in the number of higher education international students. As of the end of 2024, this figure is approximately 380,000, representing 13% of all students in German higher education

institutions (Kercher et al., 2025). Alongside this growth, Germany has also seen a significant rise in its refugee population over the past decade (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018; Giesselmann et al., 2024; Gurer, 2019), making it a major host country for both populations. National policies, historical legacies, and institutional practices greatly influence refugee pathways to higher education, underscoring the need for more nuanced country-specific analyses (Grüttner et al., 2018; Ratzmann & Bauer, 2020; Unangst, 2019). Regarding national policy, the DAAD's Integra and Welcome programs — funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) — exemplify how state-level initiatives shape refugee access through qualification recognition, preparatory course provision, and labor market transition support (Streitwieser & Unangst, 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2019). At the institutional level, Unangst (2019) highlights the University of Bayreuth as a case in which targeted support structures have been developed specifically for students with a refugee background. Historical legacies, meanwhile, exert an equally important influence: Ratzmann and Bauer (2020) demonstrate that Germany's longstanding reluctance to define itself as a country of immigration has left a lasting imprint on how institutions conceptualize and operationalize refugee integration. However, despite these policy developments, Grüttner et al. (2018) note that research on refugee access to higher education in Germany remains in its infancy and tends to overlook the ways in which refugee students' experiences may align with, or differ from, those of international students.

Critical to understanding these populations is recognizing that neither group is homogeneous (Molla, 2021; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). Although refugee students are technically international students, their lived realities differ not only from those of students from the Global North but also from those of voluntary migrant students from the Global South. International students from the Global South face distinct challenges compared to their Global North counterparts, including financial constraints, systemic racism, and limited social capital (Apolinarski & Brandt, 2018; Kercher, 2019; Mendes, 2022). Similarly, refugee students differ not only from other migrants but also among themselves, shaped by unique personal histories and the varied legal and educational frameworks of host countries (Ferede, 2010). These considerations underscore Ramsay and Baker's (2019) emphasis on the need to examine the "particular kinds of support that respond to those specificities" (p. 15).

The convergence of experiences between international students from the Global South and refugees provides both theoretical and empirical justification for a comparative approach. Recent scholarship indicates that international students from the Global South encounter significantly different adaptation challenges compared to their Global North counterparts (Aggarwal et al., 2025; Mendes, 2022), including structural inequalities, economic limitations, and systemic barriers that bring their experiences closer to those of refugee students (Apolinarski & Brandt, 2018; Bilecen et al., 2024; Kercher, 2019; Masud, 2020). Furthermore, Ramsay and Baker (2019) and Naidoo et al. (2015) argue that refugee students constitute a distinct and highly diverse population whose educational needs are inadequately captured when treated as a homogeneous category.

However, the literature on higher education access and integration has predominantly examined international students and refugee populations as separate entities, failing to capture the nuanced similarities and differences in their educational trajectories. This fragmented approach has resulted in a significant gap in understanding how structural, institutional, and experiential factors differentially impact these two distinct yet potentially

overlapping populations within the German higher education system. Consequently, the present study addresses this critical gap by adopting a comparative lens that positions international students from the Global South and refugees as two distinct populations whose experiences, while shaped by different migration motivations, may reveal both commonalities and divergences in their pathways to higher education access and integration in Germany.

Accordingly, this conceptual paper addresses the following research question: How do international students from the Global South and refugee students experience differential pathways to higher education access and integration in Germany, and what are the implications for developing inclusive and socially just institutional support structures? The methodological approach underpinning this inquiry is elaborated in the following section.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In a conceptual paper, the literature review serves as an essential means rather than an end (Jaakkola, 2020). This section therefore establishes the conceptual foundations of the study by defining how international students, refugees, and higher education are conceptualized for the purposes of this research. International students are typically defined as individuals who leave their home country and cross an international border to study in another country (OECD, 2023; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). However, this category is often treated as a homogenous group (Liu & Winder, 2014; Schulte & Choudaha, 2014). Important differences exist between international students from the Global North and those from the Global South (Mendes, 2022). Students from the Global South often face more significant challenges related to language proficiency, cultural adjustment, access to financial resources, and systemic inequalities, all of which can affect their academic integration and success (Aggarwal et al., 2025; Apolinarski & Brandt, 2018; Kercher, 2019). These disparities are rooted in historical, cultural, and structural imbalances that afford greater mobility and privilege to Global North students, whose transitions tend to be better supported institutionally and socially (Mendes, 2022; Sit, 2024).

Moving beyond voluntary migration, refugee students, although they may also be considered international students, constitute a distinct group with fundamentally different circumstances. According to the UNHCR (n.d.a), a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee their country due to persecution, war, or violence and is granted supplementary protection measures. This study employs the term refugee as an umbrella category to refer more broadly to individuals who have fled their countries and seek international protection. This choice reflects the terminology adopted in the analyzed literature, which often includes asylum seekers whose legal status has not yet been determined (UNHCR, n.d.b). However, neither the literature nor its analysis differentiates between specific types of refugees based on the legal grounds for asylum (e.g., those fleeing armed conflict versus those seeking asylum for political persecution). This approach mirrors the reality of the analyzed scholarship, where most studies reference refugees by country of origin rather than by specific asylum motivations (Grüttner et al., 2018; Gurer, 2019; Schneider, 2018; Streitwieser, 2018). While country-of-origin data suggest that much research focuses on refugees from conflict-affected regions—particularly Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan—the heterogeneity within refugee populations means that individual circumstances vary considerably. In the German context,

asylum applications are predominantly granted on humanitarian, political, or conflict-related grounds, with most refugees coming from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan as of 2024, although protection rates vary significantly by country of origin (Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis], 2023, 2025). The absence of consistent categorization in the existing research limits our ability to draw distinctions based on the specific legal grounds or motivations for asylum. Consequently, while this analysis treats refugees as a population, findings may not generalize to specific subgroups differentiated by their legal grounds for asylum or motivations for displacement.

Despite the umbrella categorization used in this study, it is important to acknowledge that refugees in higher education face distinct challenges compared to voluntary migrant students, including interrupted education, trauma, legal uncertainties, and limited access to documentation or credential recognition (Ferede, 2010; Naidoo et al., 2015). Further distinctions within refugee populations emerge based on legal status and settlement context. Refugees in resettlement situations have obtained recognized legal status and been relocated to host countries with permanent integration as the intended outcome, while those in protracted situations, where more than 25,000 individuals from the same country have remained in exile for over five years, often experience heightened vulnerability. These groups encounter substantially different educational experiences shaped by the specific institutional frameworks, immigration policies, and support systems of host countries, which vary considerably even among Global North nations (Ferede, 2010; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). However, as noted above, the absence of consistent application of these distinctions in existing scholarship limits the extent to which this study can analyze refugee students through these more granular categories.

Given these diverse experiences and challenges, the institutional context within which these student populations seek integration is equally important to consider. Higher education refers to the stage of learning that occurs after secondary school, typically involving universities, colleges, and other institutions that offer advanced degrees and specialized training (UNESCO, n.d.). Beyond its academic and professional value, higher education is a critical domain for fostering inclusion, social mobility, and long-term integration — particularly for populations navigating structural inequalities, such as international students from the Global South and refugees (UNESCO, 2025).

Specifically, in the German context, the access of refugee students to higher education is a relatively recent area of academic inquiry. Grüttner et al. (2018) argue that while international students in Germany have been the subject of long-standing research, the specific needs and trajectories of refugee students remain underexplored. Moreover, refugee students tend to face more complex and multilayered barriers compared to other international students—such as navigating bureaucratic hurdles, coping with trauma, and adjusting to unfamiliar academic systems (Grüttner et al., 2018).

This review reveals that both international students from the Global South and refugee students share overlapping yet distinct barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. However, the literature often siloed by migrant status or policy classification fails to provide an integrated understanding. Thus, this paper aims to bridge this gap by comparing the two groups within a single analytical framework and contributing to more inclusive and targeted educational policies and support structures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in social justice theory in higher education (Burke & Lumb, 2025). Social justice theory provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how structural, institutional, and experiential factors create differential impacts on international students from the Global South and refugees within the German higher education system (Yildirim et al., 2021). This study draws on Fraser's (2008) tridimensional conceptualization of social justice, which encompasses economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation, offering an adequate framework for analyzing the multifaceted challenges faced by migrant populations in educational contexts.

When applied to the German higher education context, this framework requires ensuring equitable access to financial resources, employment opportunities, and academic support (redistribution), acknowledging diverse student experiences, validating cultural knowledge, and challenging institutional biases (recognition), and creating meaningful opportunities for student participation in institutional governance and decision-making processes (representation) (Bozalek et al., 2020; McIntyre, 2020). Notably, this theoretical approach recognizes that educational justice extends beyond formal equality of opportunity to incorporate the creation of conditions that enable full participation and successful academic development for all student populations, aware that identical treatment may perpetuate preexisting structural disadvantages (Lingard & Keddie, 2013).

Building on this understanding, the theory allows for a nuanced understanding of how international students from the Global South and refugees may face similar barriers related to economic redistribution (financial support, access to resources) and cultural recognition (validation of prior learning and cultural baggage, linguistic support) while experiencing different challenges in political representation (institutional voice, policy influence) based on their distinct legal statuses and migration trajectories. Ultimately, this framework assists the study in moving beyond descriptive accounts of access challenges to critically examine how institutional practices either advance or hinder social justice outcomes for these populations.

METHODOLOGY

The overarching research question that drove this study is as follows: How do international students from the Global South and refugee students experience differential pathways to higher education access and integration in Germany, and what are the implications for developing more inclusive, socially just institutional support structures? This question encompasses the experiential, structural, and practical dimensions of higher education access while maintaining focus on the implications for institutional policy and practice grounded in social justice principles.

To address this complex research question, this study employs a conceptual qualitative research design informed by theory synthesis methodology (Jaakkola, 2020). This methodological approach is particularly well suited for examining complex, underexplored phenomena (Jabareen, 2009) situated at the intersection of migration studies, higher education policy, and social justice theory. This approach aligns with the principles of

social justice-oriented qualitative inquiry, which positions research as a vehicle for examining structural inequities and giving analytical weight to the experiences of marginalized populations (Johnson & Parry, 2022). The methodological contribution of this research is therefore twofold. First, it addresses the critical gap in existing scholarship: the fragmented treatment of international students from the Global South and refugee students in German higher education, populations that have been predominantly studied in isolation despite sharing potentially overlapping experiences and challenges. Second, the theory synthesis approach enables the identification of shared patterns across different studies while fostering theoretical coherence in a cross-disciplinary context (Jaakkola, 2020), thereby reconceptualizing familiar issues and revealing deeper relationships between the educational experiences of voluntary and forced migrants in higher education systems.

The literature identification process employed a systematic approach beginning with an exploratory search using Google Scholar to map the existing research landscape, combining keywords including "international students," "refugee students," and "Germany". This preliminary analysis revealed the necessity of refining the focus toward international students from the Global South rather than treating international students as a homogeneous group. Subsequently, refined searches utilized the ScienceDirect database with Boolean operators, employing combinations of "refugee students," "international students," "Global South," "higher education," and "Germany." The temporal focus emphasized studies published within the last decade (2014-2024) to ensure contemporary relevance, while backward citation tracking supplemented the systematic search by incorporating seminal works essential for theoretical grounding.

Building on this literature base, the analytical framework employed a deductive thematic approach guided by Fraser's (2008) tridimensional framework of social justice, examining patterns of redistribution, recognition, and representation across the selected literature. This analytical strategy was structured around two intersecting dimensions: migration status (refugee versus international student) and geographic origin (Global South versus Global North), facilitating transversal reading of internationalization literature while revealing how these intersecting identities shape differential experiences within German higher education. Importantly, the theory synthesis process involved several iterative stages that moved beyond simple comparison to examine how findings from separate research streams could generate theoretical insights, identifying points of convergence and divergence between the two populations' experiences while maintaining sensitivity to the distinct contexts of voluntary and forced migration.

In terms of methodological rigor, the study's validity rests on the systematic approach to the literature selection, the explicit theoretical framework that enhances transparency and transferability, and the use of established thematic analysis procedures (Boyatzis, 1998; Saldaña, 2016) that ensure theoretical coherence. Finally, despite not involving human participants, ethical considerations included accurate representation of authors' work, appropriate citation practices, and careful attention to avoiding misrepresentation of vulnerable populations' experiences, conducted with sensitivity to the potential for research to either reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes about international and refugee students.

FINDINGS

Divergent Pathways to Higher Education - Understanding Motivational Frameworks Through Fraser's Lens

The pursuit of higher education among international students from the Global South and refugee students in Germany reveals fundamentally different motivational frameworks that reflect broader issues of redistribution, recognition, and representation within Fraser's (2008) conceptualization of social justice. While both groups demonstrate exceptional resilience and educational aspirations, their underlying motivations illuminate distinct relationships with agency, choice, and structural positioning within the German higher education system.

The distinction between voluntary mobility and forced displacement forms the foundation of these divergent educational motivations. International students from the Global South typically engage in deliberate, strategic educational migration driven by aspirations for professional advancement (Berry, 1997), social mobility, and the acquisition of globally competitive qualifications. Their motivations align with what Fraser (2008) identifies as redistribution concerns seeking to improve their economic positioning through educational credentials that promise enhanced labor market opportunities. Research by Apolinarski and Brandt (2018) reveals that students from low-income countries are particularly motivated by Germany's reputation for technological advancement and favorable economic conditions, positioning education as a pathway to economic redistribution, a similar perspective to what Auschner and Jiang (2025) observed for the specific case of Chinese students in Germany. Several studies confirm that international students demonstrate high levels of motivation and resilience in pursuing their educational goals (Borodina, 2022; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Wright & Schartner, 2013).

In stark contrast, refugee students' educational pursuits emerge from forced displacement and the imperative to reconstruct disrupted lives. Bemak and Chung (2017) emphasize that refugees – particularly those fleeing armed conflict or violence – migrate "because of massive destruction and devastation in their communities" under traumatic conditions that preclude educational planning (p. 299). Their motivations transcend economic considerations to involve recognition needs—specifically, the restoration of dignity, professional identity, and social standing that displacement has compromised. This distinction reveals how forced migration fundamentally alters the relationship between education and social justice, positioning higher education not merely as advancement but as recovery and survival. Détourbe and Goastellec (2018) argue that refugees represent a unique category within higher education access debates because they sit at the intersection of domestic and international education policies, making their marginal status tie their motivations to pursue higher education more deeply to survival, recovery, and systemic inequality rather than solely to personal or economic advancement.

Fraser's (2008) recognition dimension becomes particularly salient when examining how refugee students navigate scepticism regarding their educational legitimacy. Schneider's (2018, p. 468) research captures this institutional bias through Dana's reflection, distinguishing between "people who truly came here to study" and "us refugees", revealing how refugee students' educational aspirations are often viewed through lenses of

suspicion rather than recognition. This represents a fundamental misrecognition that undermines their educational agency and positions them as less legitimate participants in higher education. International students from the Global South, while facing their own recognition challenges, operate within frameworks that acknowledge their educational intent. However, they encounter different forms of misrecognition related to their geographic origin and perceived academic preparation. Grüttner et al. (2018) document how higher education practitioners express admiration for refugee students' motivation while simultaneously questioning their preparedness, revealing complex dynamics of conditional recognition that affect both groups differently. International students may face cultural, linguistic, administrative, or academic adjustment challenges (Hernández López, 2020), yet they are typically better supported by structures designed to accommodate voluntary mobility.

Both demonstrate what scholars describe as transformational forms of resilience (Bemak & Chung, 2021; Schneider, 2018), which emerges as a defining characteristic of their educational journeys, yet this resilience manifests differently across their distinct migration experiences. International students exercise educational agency within planned mobility frameworks, navigating challenges of cultural adaptation, academic pressure, and visa uncertainties while maintaining relative control over their educational trajectories. Their resilience reflects adaptive capacity within chosen circumstances. Refugee students, conversely, exhibit resilience that transcends survival to encompass reconstruction and transformation. Their educational pursuits represent acts of resistance against displacement's dehumanizing effects, embodying what Fraser (2008) conceptualizes as struggles for recognition and representation. This resilience operates within constraints of legal uncertainty, trauma recovery – particularly acute for those displaced by conflict or violence – and institutional barriers (Schneider, 2018; Unangst, 2019) that were not designed to accommodate their specific vulnerabilities.

Structural Inequalities and the Redistribution of Educational Opportunities

Fraser's (2008) redistribution dimension provides a critical lens for analyzing how structural factors create differential access to higher education resources, support systems, and opportunities for international students from the Global South and refugee students in Germany. These structural inequalities manifest through bureaucratic processes, legal frameworks, and institutional practices that systematically advantage certain groups while marginalizing others.

Legal status and bureaucratic barriers form the foundation of structural inequality within the German higher education system. The system's bureaucratic complexity affects all international applicants, but legal status creates fundamentally different experiences of these processes. International students navigate credential recognition procedures that, while challenging, operate within frameworks designed for voluntary mobility. Détourbe and Goastellec (2018) and Gurer (2019) describe how asylum seekers endure lengthy legal processes lasting six months to two years, during which they face work restrictions, limited social benefits, and constant uncertainty about their legal status. During this period, asylum seekers live under legal restrictions, such as not being able to work or access government-funded student benefits, and only have basic social benefits guaranteed, such as food, housing, heating, clothing, healthcare, and personal hygiene (Streitwieser et al., 2018).

Additionally, they may be subjected to relocations between different accommodations, which makes it difficult to build ties and continue preparations (Gurer, 2019). This preeducational phase creates what can be understood as a redistribution deficit—systematic exclusion from resources and opportunities that voluntary migrants can access.

The economic dimensions of higher education access reveal stark inequalities in terms of redistribution between these groups. International students from the Global South rely on multiple income sources, including family support, employment, and scholarships, but face regulatory restrictions that limit their working hours based on residence permit conditions (Apolinarski & Brandt, 2018). Students from high-income countries, particularly EU members, encounter fewer restrictions due to their privileged legal status, illustrating how legal frameworks create economic hierarchies. These structural inequalities become particularly evident when examining visa requirements. Thies and Falk (2023) highlight the difference between international students coming from EU countries and those from third countries regarding residence status: while EU students can permanently reside in Germany, third-country students must apply for a student visa, which requires proof of health insurance and a blocked account with necessary funds for the period of a year—a sum of 11,904 euros as of 2025 (Auswärtiges Amt, 2025). Applying Fraser's redistributive lens to this structural distinction, we argue that this requirement functions not merely as an administrative procedure but as an active gatekeeping mechanism that disproportionately affects students from the Global South, effectively institutionalizing the economic hierarchies outlined above and positioning financial capacity as a prerequisite for academic participation.

Refugee students experience more severe economic precarity. Schneider (2018) highlights how seemingly minor costs such as administrative fees or public transportation can constitute significant barriers to both access and completion of higher education. Despite government implementation of social benefits for individuals with refugee backgrounds, available resources frequently prove inadequate to cover all expenses, failing to mitigate the cumulative impact of financial precariousness.

The recognition of prior learning and educational credentials reveals complex dynamics of educational redistribution. International students undergo systematic evaluation processes that, while potentially discriminatory based on country of origin, operate within established frameworks for credential recognition. The recognition process varies according to the region of origin and the type of diploma to be recognized, with students from Asia, Africa, and the Americas tending to face more requirements such as assessment tests, especially when their countries are not signatories to the Lisbon Convention (Apolinarski & Brandt, 2018). However, refugee students, especially those fleeing armed conflict zones, face additional barriers, as they often lack original documents lost during displacement, complicating recognition processes and creating additional hurdles to educational access (Streitwieser et al., 2018). This documentation crisis represents more than an administrative inconvenience—it constitutes a fundamental challenge to educational recognition that affects refugee students' ability to demonstrate their educational capital. The inability to validate prior learning creates cascading effects that position refugee students as educational beginners regardless of their actual qualifications, representing a form of systematic misrecognition that undermines their educational agency.

Access to employment and internships, crucial for social integration, reveals additional structural inequalities in representation. Unangst (2019) documents how internships, while serving as bridges between higher education and employment, remain inaccessible to students from marginalized backgrounds due to financial precariousness and lack of social capital. This creates what Fraser (2008) identifies as representation deficits—systematic exclusion from networks and opportunities that facilitate social and economic integration. The cumulative effect of these structural barriers reveals how the German higher education system, despite policies promoting inclusivity, maintains redistributive inequalities that systematically disadvantage both groups while affecting them differently. International students from the Global South face geographic and economic discrimination within frameworks that acknowledge their educational legitimacy, while refugee students encounter compounded barriers that question both their educational intent and their capacity for academic success. It is important to acknowledge the existence of specific initiatives designed to support refugee students in Germany, such as programs such as 'Integra', 'Welcome', the Studienkollegs, and free access to uni-assist, which are supported by the BMBF and the DAAD and encompass language support, academic preparation, unification of application processes, and in select circumstances, financial assistance (Streitwieser et al., 2018; Unangst, 2019). However, despite their pertinence, these measures are neither widely accessible nor sufficient to overcome the structural barriers encountered by aspiring students from undermined backgrounds.

Toward Inclusive Support Systems - Reimagining Higher Education Through Social Justice Principles

The analysis of international students from the Global South and refugee students' experiences in German higher education reveals the inadequacy of current support systems and the urgent need for approaches grounded in Fraser's (2008) tridimensional framework of social justice. Effective support systems must address redistribution, recognition, and representation simultaneously to create genuinely inclusive educational environments.

The failure of one-size-fits-all approaches highlights the urgent need for differentiated support and recognition systems. Current higher education support systems in Germany operate on homogenizing principles that fail to acknowledge the diverse needs of international and refugee students. Grüttner et al. (2018) and Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2019) document how institutions develop standardized support mechanisms that prioritize administrative efficiency over responsiveness to heterogeneous student experiences, while Molla (2021) demonstrates how this model emphasizes academic incorporation and bureaucratic procedures while overlooking the differentiated social, emotional, and institutional support that these students require. Auschner and Jiang (2025) find that even when students are willing to participate in support activities provided by the university, many end up quitting due to language and cultural barriers. This approach represents a fundamental misrecognition of student diversity that creates barriers to meaningful educational participation. For instance, international students are frequently grouped into a single broad category (Delgado-Romero & Sanabria, 2007) despite diversity in language proficiency, financial stability, visa status, cultural distance, and prior educational experiences. Furthermore, Lomer (2017) critically analyses how policy discourses treat

international students as a monolithic group and reduce them to economic units, failing to consider their diverse motivations, needs, challenges, and complex trajectories.

Deepening this homogenization critique, the classification of all non-German students as "international students" obscures crucial differences between voluntary and forced migrants, creating what Fraser (2008) would identify as recognition deficits. Unangst (2019) argues that refugee students are frequently treated as an undifferentiated group with little recognition of significant diversity within this population regarding national origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and political beliefs. Similarly, students from the Global South are often subsumed under broad categories such as "other" (Urban et al., 2010), rendering their specific experiences invisible in higher education policy and practice. This classificatory approach silently assumes that all international students have the same conditions of access to the higher education system, dismissing the uniqueness and complexity of each group's admission pathway, as well as the intricate web of privilege connecting them (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018).

In response to these recognition deficits, effective support systems must embrace differentiated, intersectional, and trauma-informed approaches that acknowledge the complex realities of student experiences. The literature consistently highlights the need for support systems that are not only administratively efficient but also emotionally responsive and culturally aware (Auschner & Jiang, 2025; Bemak & Chung, 2017; Ferede, 2010; Molla, 2021; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). This necessitates moving beyond generic "international student services" toward embedded, holistic models of care that include multilingual counseling, culturally diverse staff, and targeted academic mentoring (Bemak & Chung, 2017; Naidoo et al., 2015; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). For refugee students specifically, navigating multiple axes of marginalization—legal, social, economic, and linguistic—requires deeply intersectional approaches that recognize their complex positioning within German society, including culturally responsive counseling and trauma-informed services, especially for those displaced by armed conflict or violence (Gurer, 2019). Meanwhile, international students from the Global South encounter different but related challenges, including racial microaggressions, social isolation, economic precarity, and limited integration with host students (Maringe & Sing, 2014; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019; Urban et al., 2010). Crucially, recognition-based support acknowledges that these students bring valuable knowledge and perspectives that enrich educational environments rather than viewing them solely as recipients of institutional aid.

Despite these documented needs, these forms of care remain largely absent from German universities, which maintain heavily bureaucratic and predominantly Eurocentric cultural orientations (Unangst, 2019). As research demonstrates, racialization significantly shapes both groups' experiences, with Ferede (2010) highlighting its influence on refugee students' peer interactions and faculty perceptions, while Brown and Jones (2013) found that international students from developing countries experience structural disadvantage and lower social capital compared to peers from the Global North. Consequently, institutional cultures that prioritize assimilation rather than genuine integration create additional psychological stress for both groups (Berry, 1997), contradicting Leask's (2009) argument that support should foster mutual engagement that values diverse epistemologies and life.

Beyond material and psychosocial support, the potential for universities to serve as transformative spaces for representation and identity reconstruction becomes crucial when considering Fraser's (2008) representation dimension. For refugee students, particularly those whose displacement involved trauma from conflict or persecution, education represents a means to rebuild disrupted lives and assert agency against systemic exclusion, with Grüttner et al. (2018) explaining that universities can serve as "identity-safe spaces" when they enable students to reclaim their narratives, build peer communities, and find purpose after displacement. Similarly, international students from the Global South require social belonging and identity affirmation within educational environments, as Yildirim et al. (2021) find that sense of belonging is a key aspect of international students' well-being and academic adaptation in Germany. Montgomery and McDowell (2009) further argue that intercultural learning environments, enabling students to share knowledge and perspectives, contribute to global citizenship and cross-cultural empathy. However, both groups often remain marginalized within these spaces due to linguistic, racial, or economic differences, and exclusionary institutional cultures can exacerbate feelings of alienation, undermining education's transformative potential (Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

Fundamentally, recognizing universities as sites for identity reconstruction requires paradigmatic shifts from viewing refugee and international students merely as academic recipients to embracing them as cocreators of knowledge and culture. This includes promoting inclusive curricula reflecting diverse histories and epistemologies, offering opportunities for student leadership, and cultivating spaces for critical dialog and peer solidarity (Grüttner et al., 2018; Streitwieser et al., 2018).

DISCUSSION

The differential treatment of international students from the Global South and refugees in German higher education represents more than administrative variation. It reveals how contemporary educational systems may perpetuate structural inequalities through seemingly neutral procedures. When examined through Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional framework of social justice, these differences emerge as systematic manifestations of inequity that demand critical analysis and fundamental institutional reform.

The economic dimension of justice reveals troubling inconsistencies in how German institutions approach educational equity. While refugees receive targeted financial support through specialized programs such as Integra as of December 2023 (DAAD, n.d.b), international students from the Global South face substantial economic barriers despite the existence of some dedicated scholarships (DAAD, n.d.c), as access to institutional funding remains significantly more limited for this population. This analysis reveals that this disparity cannot be explained solely through legal distinctions between student categories but rather reflects deeper inconsistencies in how German institutions conceptualize educational equity. The research identifies that the provision of financial support appears to be driven more by humanitarian considerations for refugees than by coherent principles of distributive justice that would recognize the shared economic vulnerabilities of both populations. We argue that this selective application of economic support constitutes what can be conceptualized as structural discrimination, where origin-based and status-based

distinctions create systematic disadvantages for students whose academic potential and financial need may be equivalent to those receiving support.

Moving beyond economic considerations, this analysis of Fraser's dimension of recognition reveals equally problematic patterns in how German institutions value and integrate the educational and cultural experiences of both populations. International students from the Global South experience what this research characterizes as cultural invisibility, where their prior knowledge and perspectives are systematically undervalued within Eurocentric curricular frameworks (Mendes, 2022). This study finds that credential recognition processes exemplify what Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized as symbolic violence—the imposition of culturally specific criteria presented as universal and objective standards. In contrast, refugees may experience heightened visibility understood as institutional attention that generates specific support but within frameworks that emphasize deficits rather than capabilities. While specialized programs such as Integra provide valuable support, this research reveals that they may inadvertently create what can be termed protected marginalization, which is the access to resources within conceptual frameworks that can be overprotective and limiting. The comparative analysis demonstrates how this differential recognition pattern reveals how institutions can simultaneously acknowledge the needs of specific populations while failing to recognize their full academic and cultural contributions.

Compounding these redistribution and recognition deficits, this analysis of the dimension of political representation exposes fundamental limitations in how both populations participate in institutional governance and decision-making processes. This research reveals that while refugees may access specific representational spaces through dedicated programs, international students from the Global South frequently lack effective mechanisms for institutional representation. Furthermore, it identifies that this disparity in representational opportunities reflects broader patterns in how German universities conceptualize student participation and institutional responsibility toward diverse populations. Our analysis suggests that the absence of meaningful representational mechanisms for international students from the Global South indicates that institutions may not fully recognize the specific needs and potential contributions of this population, effectively excluding their voices from decisions that directly affect their educational experiences.

The comparative analysis of these two populations reveals a critical insight: the path toward systemic transformation requires integrating redistribution, recognition, and representation in comprehensive approaches to support rather than addressing these dimensions in isolation. This research contends that effective support systems must simultaneously ensure equitable access to financial resources and academic support, acknowledge diverse student experiences while challenging institutional biases, and create meaningful opportunities for student participation in institutional governance. Such an integrated approach recognizes that social justice in higher education cannot be achieved through piecemeal interventions but requires comprehensive transformation of institutional cultures, policies, and practices. German higher education institutions must move beyond assimilationist models toward genuine integration that values diversity as a source of institutional strength. The experiences of international students from the Global South and refugee students reveal both the limitations of current support systems and the possibilities for transformation, demonstrating the potential for universities to serve as sites of social

justice when institutional structures align with principles of equitable redistribution, meaningful recognition, and authentic representation.

CONCLUSION

The intersection of Fraser's (2008) three dimensions creates what can be understood as compound injustice, where economic barriers, cultural misrecognition, and political exclusion reinforce each other to create systematic disadvantages. The findings demonstrate that these injustices are not merely additive but multiplicative, creating experiences of marginalization that exceed the sum of individual barriers. International students from the Global South must simultaneously navigate economic exclusion, cultural devaluation, and political invisibility, while refugees, despite receiving targeted support, face their own complex intersections of protection and limitation.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these experiences of compound injustice occur within distinct frameworks of relative privilege that fundamentally shape educational access and outcomes. While both populations face significant structural barriers, international students maintain the privilege of voluntary mobility, planned educational trajectories, and institutional recognition of their educational intent. These are advantages that refugees cannot access due to the involuntary nature of their displacement. This differential positioning reflects broader global inequalities that extend beyond individual institutional contexts, requiring acknowledgment that even within marginalized populations, hierarchies of privilege operate to create varied experiences of educational justice.

Recognition of these privilege differentials is essential for developing nuanced approaches to educational equity that address the specific vulnerabilities and advantages inherent in different migratory contexts. Concretely, universities must move beyond treating international students as a homogeneous category and implement differentiated support systems that reflect the distinct needs of students from the Global South and those with refugee backgrounds. This requires culturally responsive admission processes that recognize diverse educational pathways, multilingual support services that extend beyond language instruction to include academic mentoring and psychological counseling, and participatory governance structures that include student voices in policy development. At the governmental level, funding mechanisms must shift from humanitarian-based support to equity-driven frameworks that address the shared economic needs of marginalized student populations. This includes expanding scholarship eligibility beyond refugee-specific programs, removing structural barriers to employment and internships, and establishing credential recognition processes that acknowledge displaced students' interrupted educational trajectories. Ultimately, both institutional and governmental actors must adopt intersectional approaches that prevent the reproduction of structural inequalities, moving from standardized protocols toward adaptive, context-sensitive solutions informed by the lived experiences of the populations they serve.

Consequently, the observed differences between these groups represent manifestations of structural inequities that require systematic attention and comprehensive institutional reform rather than mere administrative adjustments. German higher education institutions possess the opportunity to develop innovative models of educational justice that could

serve as benchmarks for other Global North institutions confronting similar challenges. However, this requires genuine institutional commitment to equity principles and fundamental reconsideration of how educational institutions conceptualize and operationalize justice in their practices and procedures.

Limitations of the study

This study faces several methodological limitations that constrain its findings. As a conceptual qualitative research study, it relies on theory synthesis rather than primary empirical data, which means it lacks the direct voices and lived experiences of international and refugee students themselves. While this approach enables systematic analysis of patterns across diverse contexts documented in the literature, future empirical research incorporating student perspectives through interviews or ethnographic methods would provide essential complementary insights and validate the theoretical relationships identified in this study.

Additionally, the reliance on literature limits results to available research quality, while the predominance of English-language sources may exclude important German scholarship and reduce cultural diversity in perspectives. The focus on recent literature, although ensuring contemporary relevance, potentially overlooks both historical patterns that could inform the current understanding of systemic inequities in German higher education and emerging developments, such as the influx of Ukrainian refugees into Germany since 2022 and their access to higher education, which may add another dimension to the analysis of refugee student experiences. Furthermore, the deductive approach using Fraser's framework, while theoretically grounded, may have prevented unexpected themes from emerging. These constraints suggest that future research should incorporate multilingual sources, employ inductive methodologies, and most importantly, center the first-person perspectives of international and refugee students through interviews and ethnographic field observations. Such approaches, as Johnson and Parry (2022) outline, position qualitative inquiry as a vehicle not only for understanding marginalized experiences but also for advancing structural and institutional transformation, thereby informing intersectional practical interventions aimed at enhancing inclusive educational environments.

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