“Numerous university members are approaching us with ideas.”

Inse Böhmig and Jochen Ley talk about how the university supports refugees and refugee initiatives.

Not a day goes by without images from the refugee crisis appearing in the media. “It looks much, much worse.” He is speaking from personal experience. Over the past few years, many of his field trips have led him to camps throughout Europe. “There is a powerful hallucination, which the 36-year-old is currently engaged in writing.

The late intensive work of the refugee situation means that his research is also receiving more public attention as an increasing number of refugees are being taken care of in their home countries or nearby. Böhmig believes this is the wrong approach. “Refugee camps are no solution to this problem; in fact, they tend to create a new set of problems.” He says that many of the people in these camps are not fleeing from war or violence; they are unable to find work, are not integrated into the host society and are often threatened, blackmailed or forced by the local militia. Camps put many aspects of life on hold. However, especially political debates about the refugee crisis attach great importance to these camps. Handy a round of talks goes by without them being mentioned as a measure to solve the flight and forced migration crisis. For the researcher Böhmig, this makes it even more crucial to have a platform that allows him to share his point of view: the German Refugee Research Network.

The network was set up in 2013 as an initiative of the research-university. Around 30,000 euros from various disciplines from universities, foundations or other research institutions are now involved. They intend to network in order to discuss the results of their research with each other, however, they also invite the public to contact them for information. They want to get interested citizens or journalists interested in the current research on forced migration.

Over the past few months, interest in the network has grown considerably. “We are receiving an increasing number of messages from students and researchers from politicians and journalists or also from government agencies.” However, the network cannot supply all the immediate answers. Establishing scientifically sound results often takes years of research, although post research results can frequently also offer information that is extremely useful for the current debate.

The website features a blog, for example, co-edited by Joel Glasman. The “Refugee Research Against Myths”, for instance, contrasts claims frequently bandied about in the course of the current refugee crisis with actual research results. These highlight the human rights situation, or examine claims regarding capacity limits. The researchers organise the network themselves and finance it with private means. There are different working groups, for example on gender issues or on democracy and flight. Glasman heads the Africa working group, which numbers around ten forced migration researchers with this research focus. The expertise of these interdisciplinary networks is extremely helpful for exploring complex current problems outside the established boundaries of science. The Africa expert has been granted funding for his habilitation project by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) until the end of 2017. “That has mainly been possible because I was released from my teaching obligations in 2014 within the scope of HU’s ‘Creating Opportunities’ project, which allowed me to go on a field trip to Cameroon,” says Glasman. “With these results, I then applied to the DFG.”

The German Refugee Research Network plans to hold its first conference in October 2016. The funding for this meeting in Deutschnick is not yet fully in place. Forced migration research simply needs to attract much more attention and support.

Mr. Böhmig, you are on the key person to talk to regarding HU’s Refugee Welcome initiatives; can you give me some examples of when you should be contacted?

Böhmig: Well, the current situation is a new challenge for universities in this dimension; it is not the first time that we have to think about how to help students in a legally charged issue for those concerned. On behalf of the President’s Consulting Office, the International Strategy Office is therefore consolidating the support offered for refugees in order to develop these further across all departments – in close cooperation with the many other respectively committed university colleagues. My job is to collect and prepare information, to establish links between the actors, to develop solutions, and to help to raise third-party funding. Many of the university members are approaching me with own initiatives or with projects that they would like to help them to source financing, for example, and to look into how to get into other initiatives. Sometimes, there are also special emergency situations – again, we try to provide all the help we can in these situations.

HU is the first of Berlin’s universities to make it possible for refugees to sit-in on lectures, and to offer special drop-in advice sessions at regular intervals. Can you tell me about some of these initiatives over the past year?

Böhmig: Precisely because of the accommodation facilities for refugees in Adlershof, we are in close proximity to the HU campus, the university has decided to offer the drop-in sessions for refugees at the Adlershof campus as well. We are in contact with the accommodation facilities, and there are volunteer initiatives working on finding places where we can meet with the refugees to make it possible for us to offer additional support to them beyond university-related issues. This help ranges from supplying everyday necessities at short notice to arranging regular activities, like those organized by the Department of Educational Studies, for instance: since 2014, the staff is helping refugees housed in the former Berliner Airport Hotel with official paperwork or accompany them to appointments, help the children with their homework, advise the refugees on their accommodation, and visit museums with them, for example.

What response have you had to the occasional student/after, which subject are the most popular?

Ley: Currently, refugees have enrolled as students for the winter semester. They attend one or several lectures, which also include two special social science seminars offered by the Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research. The laboratory is additionally offered to English and Arabic speaking students. The scheme allows refugees to gain access to the university in order to study with other students, and to interact with fellow students and with the lectures. In particular, the economics-related subjects, as well as history, psychology, mathematics and English and American studies.

Is the university going to expand its offer for refugees this year and how?

Böhmig: HU sees itself as a university that is characterised by diversity, internationality and a cosmopolitan attitude; we are therefore going to continue to push ahead with the cross-linking and expansion of our initiatives for refugees – not least also in order to demonstrate the meaning of a cultural turn of welcome. The funding just recently granted by the Berlin Senate will allow HU to hold intensive German language courses for refugees, and to set up a mentoring programme. Other important issues are helping fellow researchers who were forced to migrate, and supporting student initiatives, not least also the Refugee Law Clinic. However, that is of course, by no means all that can be done, because in the long term, the number of refugees working amid this city looks set to increase even more. We will therefore continue to constantly expand our respective activities in the future.

The interview was conducted by Ilijan Nikolic.

Inse Böhmig (l) is a member of the International Strategy Office staff, Jochen Ley (r) heads the Student Service Centre. Photo: Martin Bickel, Matthias Brüll

The German Refugee Research Network (WestNetz Flüchtlingsforschung) www.euroethno.hu-berlin.de/
Refugees Welcome to HU – meet, advise, educate

How Humboldtsians are supporting refugees and integration

Several HU academics, students and staff members are involved in various projects related to the refugee crisis, both professionally and on a voluntary basis. Their goals are not only to produce scholarly research and proposal solutions, but also to support refugees in their daily lives and to help them become integrated into society. We will introduce some of them, and their projects, as well as refugees who are attending courses at HU as part of a guest student programme for refugees.

**Video series:**

**“A human for 100 seconds”**

Martin Meier, head of the video studio and video archive at the Department of Music and Media Studies

“100 Sekunden Mensch” (A human for 100 seconds) is the title of the video series that Martin Meier started this winter semester with the members of a film and editing seminar. The 23 bachelor’s students have the task of filming interviews with refugees in teams of two and editing them to a length of precisely 1 minute and 40 seconds. A documentary filmmaker and an interpreter are supporting them. The aim is to reveal interesting details about the interviewees. They could be memories of the exodus, impressions of Berlin or recollections of home: whatever the person would most like to talk about in front of the camera. ‘We are supporting them. The person would most like to talk about in front of the camera. We are mobilizing the largest numbers of people if we support their refugees. We mobilize the largest numbers of people if we support their…. We mobilize the largest numbers of people if….”

**Orientation event ‘Studying and academic life in Berlin’**

Prof. Martin Heger, Professor of criminal law at HU and academic life in Berlin

The orientation event ‘Studying and academic life in Berlin’ was initiated by Prof. Gökce Yurdakul and also involves academics from the HU’s Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research (BIM) and the Department of European Ethnology. ‘Many of the dissertations and theses deal with asylum policy in Germany and Europe, but not exclusively,’ said the student who is publishing the e-book ‘They also look at Morocco, Senegal and Syria. The book will provide a global, trans-national view of the socio-political events relating to issues of exodus and expulsion.’

**Facilitating participation in cultural activities in Berlin**

Primary school pedagogy helps children living in refugee accommodation in Adlershof

In the summer of 2014, around 400 refugees were moved into the former Berlin-Britz airport hotel in Adlershof near Campus Adlershof. They came from many different countries, and include around 80 children. Sabine Erbstößer has volunteered at the facilities right from the beginning. ‘The Department for Education Studies tutor for special general science teaching projects says that the mood at the facilities is by no means tense, anonymous or even hostile; as some media reports about refugee facilities will have you believe.’ In the contrary, the refugee children interact as if they were family, all of them speak at least some German, albeit to different degrees, adds Erbstößer; ‘it’s different amongst the adults, of course; the various nationalities and languages do lead to detachment.’

However, what do Erbstößer’s voluntary activities actually look like in practical terms? The primary school pedagogy units the facilities once a week, mainly to look after the children. She helps them with their homework and visits museums with them, raising the money for the public transport tickets that are needed for these visits via donations. She also helps the adults to fill in formal forms they need to take with them to official appointments, for instance.

**E-book about students’ final dissertations**

Aleksandra Lakic, Master’s student at the Department of Social Sciences

‘As a political journalist, I had to flee from the Iranian territory of Kurdistan. I’ve been in Germany for three years. My escape was illegal and took seven months. It’s important not to make things more difficult at the borders for people fleeing their homelands. There should be safer options. I want to work as a journalist in Germany in the long run, so I need to improve my German quickly. Although I can’t study here officially yet. I’m attending a seminar for refugees at the HU in Farsi and English. Regular students at the HU are also participating. It’s great because it leads to plenty of exchange.’

**“There are many useful initiatives to get involved”**

Perdigue Lang, Graduate of the Euromasters programme

‘In my master’s dissertation, I looked at why many refugees consciously apply for asylum in Germany and not other EU countries. After that, I decided to get involved with refugee work. I regularly help out at LeGesLo in Moabit and in the refugee hostel at Tempelhöfer Feld. Sometimes I work in the kitchen; sometimes I distribute items or answer questions about life here. I meet interesting people. I’ve already made a few friends. Many of them suffer because they will be not allowed to work for a long time and they seek contact with people from Berlin. There are many useful initiatives and opportunities to get involved – schedules in the refugee hostels that you can sign up to as a helper (even as a one-off), buddy schemes, an invitation to dinner at your house. These are encounters that enrich both sides.’

**“To leave everything behind you have to be in a dire situation”**

Jelena Jovicic, Social Sciences graduate

‘In my master’s dissertation I looked at how refugees from Serbia, a “safe” country of origin, fare when they apply for asylum in Germany. They find it difficult because they are excluded by the administrative system. However, you don’t have the decision to leave your home country overnight. It’s a lengthy and painful process. To leave everything behind and launch yourself into the unknown, you have to be in a dire situation. For me the idea of solidarity to all encompassing; you can’t just apply to certain groups. I myself am Serbian. In 1993 my family and I fled the NATO airstrike. I can empathise with the situation of refugees from Syria and other war zones. I know that every refugee’s experience is unique. But one thing is clear: People who are looking for protection here are people like you and me.’

**“I want to work as a journalist again”**

Mohan Kakarshak is attending a seminar for refugees

‘As a political journalist, I had to flee from the Iranian territory of Kurdistan. I’ve been in Germany for three years. My escape was illegal and took seven months. It’s important not to make things more difficult at the borders for people fleeing their homelands. There should be safer options. I want to work as a journalist in Germany in the long run, so I need to improve my German quickly. Although I can’t study here officially yet. I’m attending a seminar for refugees at the HU in Farsi and English. Regular students at the HU are also participating. It’s great because it leads to plenty of exchange.’

[Photo: Matthias Heyde]

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[Image 323x348 to 566x480]

**Special**

[Image 609x466 to 852x615]