



The Core Responsibilities of a University in the Context of the Refugee Situation in Germany

The following text is a translation of an article published in December 2017 in a German CSR magazine (CSR Magazin 4/2017: 39-41). It describes a specially developed program for the integration of refugees into Berlin's Beuth University. With this program, the university takes on responsibility for meeting a social challenge with its given means and capabilities. The concept is based on norms and a model of core responsibilities.

This model of core responsibilities of organizations focuses on the interplay of an organization's core business, core impact and core values. It has to account for its actions within the framework of social demands and discourses. The background is formed on the basis of considerations of systems theory (Luhmann, Maturana) and structure theory (Giddens, Foucault) as well as questions of responsibility towards the other (Levinas). Due to the practical nature of the translated text, explicit references to sources are not included in the translation.

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Exercising the Core Responsibilities of a University in the Context of the Refugee Situation in Germany and Establishing This on a Sustainable Basis

How the Beuth University of Applied Sciences Berlin has systematically accepted a broad societal challenge with its "Refugees Welcome" project and thereby implemented best-practice policies.

Matthias Schmidt

When Germany faced a very large influx of refugees in 2015, numerous images of people spread through the media who wished to become involved and help out. At the same time, Chancellor Angela Merkel's claim "We can do it!" was an appeal and challenge directed at many people to take action and do something to make the arrival for refugees more bearable and to contribute to a successful integration into our society. Accordingly, members of the Beuth University felt the impulse to help out. However, what could they do?

The "Refugees Welcome" project group, formed in October 2015, has developed a special four-step program that systematically prepares refugees for admission to a degree program who would like to enroll. For the project management of the program the question is decisive that it determines what are the norms and strategies of a university's core responsibilities. Oriented accordingly, the available resources can effectively be dovetailed and employed efficiently. Thus, indiscriminate distribution of resources through well-intentioned but isolated activities can be avoided and a conceptually framed commitment to refugees can be established and anchored in an effective organizational manner. Because over the course of time, the motivation for such spontaneous willingness to help as like at the beginning of the great flood of refugees fades very quickly and a grueling

everyday routine sets in. Not least because this viable conception of norms and strategies is likely to be due to the interest of national and international researchers and filmmakers who regard the "Refugees Welcome" project as best practice and thereby wish to highlight it.

Organize the right search processes

The management of the "Refugees Welcome" project – as is required as a whole by modern, future-oriented organizational development and corporate management – is based on systemic, dynamic and frequently not necessarily existing change processes, for which project management proactively has to find answers.

A firm goal and the belief in a predictable future do not provide an adequate basis for dealing with the challenges at hand. Responsible management and corresponding organizational or project development are more likely to arise from situations that come about accidentally than to develop out of traditional planning, even if there is ready demand for it. Planning horizons of five, ten or more years are more an expression of a mental and motivational management of standstill than of responsible leadership and development. Rather, responsible management must if anything be based on open search processes which, however, do not originate from arbitrariness or pure whim but are based on fundamental concepts of moral values – concepts of fundamentally right and wrong actions in the context of the societal challenges at hand, without falling victim to persuasions of ideology. The model of core responsibility can provide a dynamic reference framework for this challenge.

Referring to the core responsibilities

The core responsibilities of an organization can be understood as the interaction of the core business, core values and core impact of an organization; this interplay must be in balance with intensely and controversially discussed social issues. The refugee situation is one such topic. It challenges the university and unabashedly asks the question, "What are you doing about it? What contributions are you making to overcome this challenge?" In other words, the refugee situation puts the university "in question" and demands "responsibility".

This results in a normative aspiration; however, it remains open at first what the response should be. For even preventing refugees willing to study from studying would be a possible answer – an answer that should be received quite positively in circles with a certain political slant. How the response turns out and how concrete responsibility is taken depends a lot on the attitude and values of the parties involved.

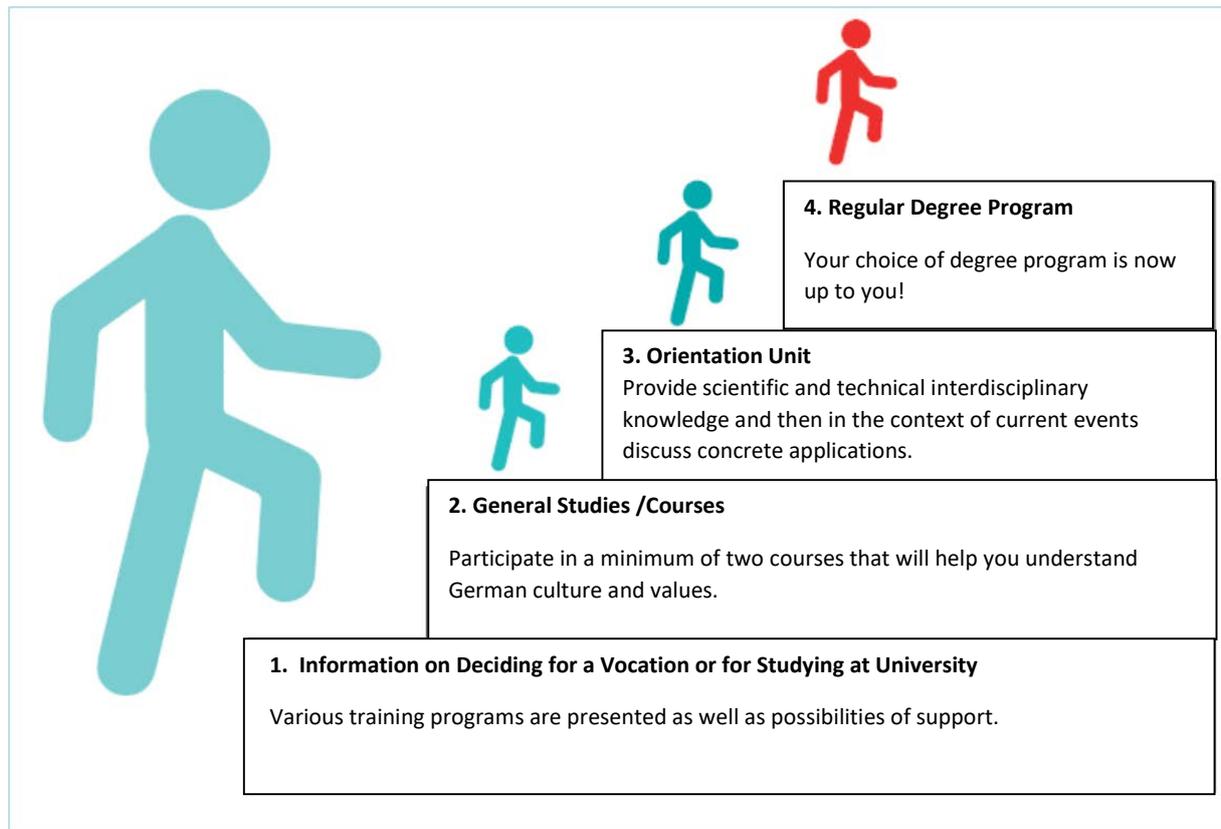
Focusing on the core business

The project "Refugees Welcome" is characterized by an affirmative morale and stands by its commitment to core values such as diversity, openness and integration. On the basis of this ethical foundation, a specific and effective concept could be developed with a view to the core business of the university in which the responsibility of the university finds an active expression in the refugee situation.

It is obvious that the immediate mission of a university is to teach students and conduct research. Beuth University's core competencies in these matters are primarily found in their focus on engineering and the natural sciences. From this derives the immediate aim to qualify newcomers for admission who would like to study and enable them to successfully complete an appropriate degree program (see the chart below, Step 4). In addition, there is another, indirect aim which represents an important core perspective of the project: to effectively qualify the participants for the German and European labor market and to make them fundamentally capable, after possible later return to their home countries, of building up the required infrastructure there.

An orientation unit specially designed for the program participants (see the chart below, Step 3) takes this intention into account by providing scientific and technical interdisciplinary knowledge as well as concrete applications of possible specialist studies in the context of topical subjects such as sustainability, climate change, ecological building and construction etc. On language courses, however, we renounce from the beginning. Instead, the project team is working closely with language schools that have their core competencies as well as their core business in this area. In other words, it is also an integral part of the program that the participants can be provided language certificates within a scheduled timeframe in order for them to be able to start up their

studies as smoothly as possible. This saves the participants almost nine months of valuable time; an effect which represents another overall social gain beyond the integration acquired through studying itself.



Picture: The 4-step program of the Refugees Welcome Project

Comprehensively prepare and empower participants

At the same time, we also hope to deal with socially relevant aspects and critical reflections on living, studying and working in Germany in order to prepare the newcomers for their role in society and the working world that are still foreign to them here. These matters are covered in special preparatory modules which are organized as *General Studies* courses (see the chart below, Step 2). In such modules core competences of the Business Administration and Social Sciences Department (Department I) are trained and implemented through project management based on norms and strategies. The scientific and technical orientation module is thus supported on a socio-scientific basis leading to a holistic preparation of the participants and enabling them not only to study successfully, but to enjoy a successful career and lead a successful life in Germany.

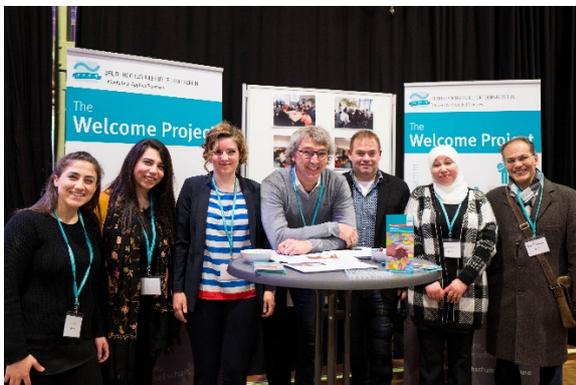
Admission to a degree program entails not only technical but also administrative requirements. The formal application for admission is a challenge even for native students. For the newcomers there is the uncertainty whether all the necessary documents are available and whether these documents even entitle them to study at a German university. Here, the Study Administration Office conducts a detailed preliminary examination with the program participants and then provides them consultation (see the chart below, Step 1). Thus, it assumes an important function in the development of the career path of the refugees and for the effective and efficient realization of the integration program. In the framework of the preparatory program the participants can already take exams which can be counted as credits in their later degree program This added-value and time-saving feature of the preparatory program is quite special, often only later gaining recognition as such.

Offering a sense of homeland

The “Refugees Welcome” program, located centrally in Berlin on the main Beuth campus, amounts to more than a mere formal and substantive preparation for one’s proper studies. In the words of the participants, they feel that this program offers them some sense of homeland: The program provides them a physical location as a point of reference and a status of belonging to the university. Both gained perceptions are very important in themselves. Since many enrolled students themselves have a migration background, the Beuth university as a whole has a wealth of experience and competencies at all levels for promoting an integrative environment. It is particularly the design of the program that student mentors accompany the participants from the outset and, in addition to the content offered by the mentors by carrying out social activities in Berlin, a comprehensive and meaningful framework is created for experiencing integration and the reciprocal taking of responsibility. For more than two years now, 25 selected refugees potentially capable of studying, accompanied by just as many mentors, have been guided through the program each semester and well prepared for studying in a degree program. This number of participants corresponds to the usual maximum course size for a professional school conceived for educating students in small groups. The experiences and insights of all participants are critically reflected upon regularly and lead to a continuous learning process as the project develops over time, thereby embracing the inherent potential strategy for transdisciplinary internationalization.

The responsibilities of a university do not end at its own gate, neither with the enrollment of students nor with its administrative duties. As an academic educational institution, the university is a significant and powerful player who must account for its actions in the complex structure of social challenges. With a normative and strategic view of its core responsibilities and innovative approaches to finding solutions, a university at the same time challenges other players in turn to reflect on their own core responsibilities. The scope and limits of the university’s responsibilities must thereby continually be adjusted in order to correspond well with their core business, their core impact and core values on the one hand, and on the other hand with social demands and unreasonable expectations.

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<https://projekt.beuth-hochschule.de/welcome/>
(Video with english and arabic subtitles)

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Foto page 1: Campus of Berlin’s Beuth University. With more than 14.000 students one of the largest universities of applied sciences in Germany. www.beuth-hochschule.de