Dr Ratna Ghosh

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Shifting aspirations: Young Syrian refugees’ experience in Canada

Research Objectives
Ratna Ghosh investigates the experiences of young adult Syrian refugees in Quebec’s adult education system.

References

Detail

Bio
Ratna Ghosh is a Distinguished James McGill Professor and Sir WC Macdonald Professor of Education, and former dean of Education at McGill University in Canada. She has been awarded the Orders of Canada, Quebec, and Montreal for her work on education and equity for women and minority groups.

Collaborators
Domenique Sherab, Arianne Maraj, Milagros Moya Calderon.

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FRQSC - Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture.

Personal Response

Could you tell us more about refugees in Quebec having to learn French?

The only French speaking territory in Canada (and North America), Quebec is very concerned about the endangered position of French. The Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, a period of intense social and political change, was largely aimed at modernising the province and asserting the position of French language and culture. Quebec has progressively and aggressively taken strict measures to preserve its language. All children (with a few exceptions) are required to be educated in French which is also the language of work. ‘Welcoming classes’ for schools and Francisation courses for adults focus on language learning to facilitate integration into a francophone Quebec society.
Canada has an impressive record of welcoming migrants, including resettling more than 74,000 Syrians between 2015 and 2020. However, new research warns there is a gap between policy and practice: the country welcomes refugees, but it risks paying a high price if the education system fails to help them integrate into society.

A first of its kind, the study looks at the experience of young adult Syrian refugees in the province of Quebec. Led by Ratna Ghosh from Montreal’s McGill University – one of Canada’s leading educationalists and an expert in multicultural education – it focuses on refugees’ education, which many see as the route to building new lives.

In Quebec, refugees aged up to 16 can enrol in school and progress through the traditional education system to gain qualifications for higher education or employment. Yet refugees aged over 16 – the age at which compulsory schooling ends – have to enrol in adult education, which has different objectives and is designed around the needs of adults who want to upskill or had previously dropped out of school.

Dr Ghosh’s study shows how adult education offers neither the teaching and educational resources, nor the support services and learning environment that refugees require. This matters not only to refugees, who may leave education because it fails to meet their aspirations, but also to the state, which spends considerable resources on their education.

A particular feature of refugees’ experience in French-speaking Quebec is that most students must first learn French in order to attend class.

POWER AND RACISM
Dr Ghosh’s findings are based on interviews with refugees and adult education practitioners. Researchers set out to capture people’s experience and identify ways of improving refugees’ education. They also wanted to identify strategies and resources to help educators working with refugees, and make recommendations for policymakers to ensure refugees are integrated into society.

The research is grounded in two academic theories: migration theory, which considers refugees’ agency, aspirations, and capabilities as drivers of human mobility and social change; and critical race theory, which looks at the relationship between power and racism, on the understanding that race shapes individuals’ economic prospects as well as national policies.

HOPES DASHED
The study finds that, before fleeing Syria, interviewees were ambitious and some hoped to study for professions such as law or medicine. Many settled in Canada after years of disruption and little schooling, as they transited from one temporary asylum country to another. Despite still having aspirations when they started adult education in Quebec, refugees soon became frustrated because they had to learn in a different language and in a different way.

In Syria, education is teacher-led and pupils learn by rote, but in Canada adult education is self-directed. Students learn at their own pace, and study individual modules, which they must pass one at a time. As a result, refugees reported finding Quebec’s adult education system difficult, not least because it took a long time to gain the qualifications they required.

Students also found it hard to meet family expectations and said that their parents underestimated the challenges they faced. They felt that friends who had stayed in Syria or resettled elsewhere progressed faster, and this affected their self-esteem. Because of this, some migrants lowered their career ambitions, and others quit education altogether in order to find employment to help their families.

Many interviewees hoped that education would allow them to socialise with other students and in this way integrate into the
74,000 – the number of Syrian refugees who settled in Canada between 2015 and 2020

‘Although welcoming refugees is a policy of the Canadian government, refugee ‘integration’ largely falls to provincial governments in Canada’s decentralised system.’

‘Being a refugee does not mean being weak, vulnerable or incapable. On the contrary, these young adult refugees aspire to a good life and a good future and fight for it.’

‘Rather than resettlement offering an opportunity [for refugees] to realise their aspirations, they experience ongoing disruption, simply because of their age and the fact they are immigrants.’

‘Canada has become a global leader in resettling refugees, enhanced by the Trudeau administration efforts in 2015.’

‘Notwithstanding the disruption to their lives, these refugee young adults cultivate life goals along their transcontinental journey through geographical space and time, influenced by social, economic, and political conditions but nonetheless guided by subjective aspirations.’

‘While education is widely accepted as an important basis for successful integration, entering school at an advanced age can create a sense of anxiety and hopelessness.’

‘It is a cultural imperative for Syrian youth to start post-secondary education at a certain age and start working as soon as possible.’

‘One of the key objectives of Canada’s resettlement programme for refugees is social and economic integration.’

‘The primary issue with adult education in Quebec is that the system treats the student population as a homogeneous group, as adults who can learn on their own. While going at one’s own pace is very advantageous to many adults, it does not answer the needs of refugee students, most of whom are used to lecture methods of teaching and need direction to complete their studies.’

‘Young adult refugees have been welcomed by the Government but largely forgotten by policies and integration programmes in resettlement contexts.’

‘Syrian refugees don’t have the capacity to be working in an individualised structure. They want more support and prefer to work together.’

‘Despite being physically present in Canada, the impact of the conflict in Syria remains for many.’

‘Syrian refugee young adults continue to experience disruption to their education in their lives, post resettlement in Canada.’

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refugees working full-time as well as studying, leaving them too tired to learn.

Practitioners were particularly concerned by the psychological problems associated with students’ migration journeys. They found that many were unwilling to admit to trauma, though it was evident through their reactions to things like sudden noises. Educators said they were not trained to support students, and one reported that, in addition to concern for students’ psychological wellbeing, they were worried about whether their families could afford food.

Job insecurity for staff and lack of funding were additional problems. Interviewees said the adult education sector was already the ‘poor relation’ of Canada’s education system, and offered neither the educational resources nor the support services young refugees require. The study describes refugees as ‘a marginalised population trying to fit into an adult education system that is itself marginalised.’

**LOST GENERATION**
The researchers find that Quebec’s adult education system fails refugees from non-Western cultures who have not finished secondary school and are unfamiliar with self-directed learning. The refugees interviewed had agency, ability, and aspirations, but faced structural barriers to gaining qualifications, despite needing these for higher education and even minimum wage jobs.

Dr Ghosh warns that, without intervention, young adult refugees risk becoming a ‘lost generation’. This matters for both refugees and the state. Failure to provide the right education left students feeling anxious and hopeless, wasted valuable resources, and threatened refugees’ integration into wider society.

**POLICY AND PRACTICE**
One of the study’s recommendations is that government departments should collaborate to help refugees navigate adult education. It also suggests greater attention should be paid to refugees’ mental health, and that more support should be given to help with self-directed learning.

Other proposals include providing opportunities for students to discuss their experience and meet socially, including opportunities to practise French by meeting people in the local community. Above all, more funding should be provided to ensure refugees receive social justice, as well as equal and equitable access to lifelong education.

Without changes to the system, Dr Ghosh warns that there will continue to be a gap between Canada’s policy in welcoming refugees and its practice in providing the education they need to build new lives and integrate into society.

Dr Ghosh explains, ‘The problem for many young refugees in Quebec is that they have aged out of the school system and been placed in adult education. This fails to meet their needs because it is designed for those who have dropped out of education and are looking for a second chance.’

Dr Ghosh adds, ‘Many immigrants are intelligent and motivated to do well. They should be considered as an asset, but there is a clash between their culture at home and the culture they experience in class. Adult education doesn’t consider refugees’ backgrounds. What is needed is a curriculum that is specifically related to refugees’ needs.’