

Challenges of Attending Private Higher Education for African Refugees: The Case of Eritrean Refugee Medical College Students in

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Abstract

Nowadays, global movement and migration among African youth, which are the major concern and crisis to the international community, has become an apparent practice. The refugees are forced to leave their place of origin in fear of persecution due to their religious affiliation, political view or tribe (UNHCR, 2016). It is humanistic for the young refugees to go to school, as it has been explicitly pinpointed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26 and Convention of the Rights of the Child, Article 28. That is why the government of Ethiopia in collaboration with UNHCR has been making higher education for Eritrean refugees accessible at various levels such as at first and second degree levels. Currently, there are about 1704 Eritrean refugee students in Ethiopia, out of whom 60 are at Master's level and the rest are doing their first degree. Also, there are 200 Eritrean refugee students doing their degree in private medical colleges in Ethiopia. The study deals with the challenges the Eritrean refugee students face while studying at MEDCO Bio and Africa Medial Colleges. Focus Group Discussion and interview instruments were employed to collect reliable data from 40 Eritrean refugee students, Head, Program Implementation and Coordination, and Education Officer at Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs office (ARRA). The findings showed that Eritrean refugee students faced challenges at MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical colleges, which could be categorized as Academic, Emotional/Psychological and Socio-cultural Challenges. Also arranging orientation session and placement examinations are the strategies employed by ARRA office to integrate Eritrean refugee students into higher education system in Ethiopia. The study suggested that there should be an improvement at micro system, i.e. the two Medial Colleges should organize a support system to help the Eritrean refugee students overcome their challenges and become successful in their academic career.

Key words: Refugees, Higher Education

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, one of the most global issues that draw the mass public attention is the unprecedented human migration, which takes place with some expectations in the minds of the refugees to reach their destiny. One of the expectations is believed to be an access to wider educational opportunities. Eritrean refugees use Ethiopia not as their final destination, but as a transitional place to the developed countries like Europe, USA etc. Nevertheless, during their stay in Ethiopia, they are given the opportunity to pursue their education, particularly their university education. Eritrean Refugee students have cultural, ethnic and religious similarities with Ethiopian students, though majority of the Eritrean students are troubled to use Amharic for communication purposes. Pursing

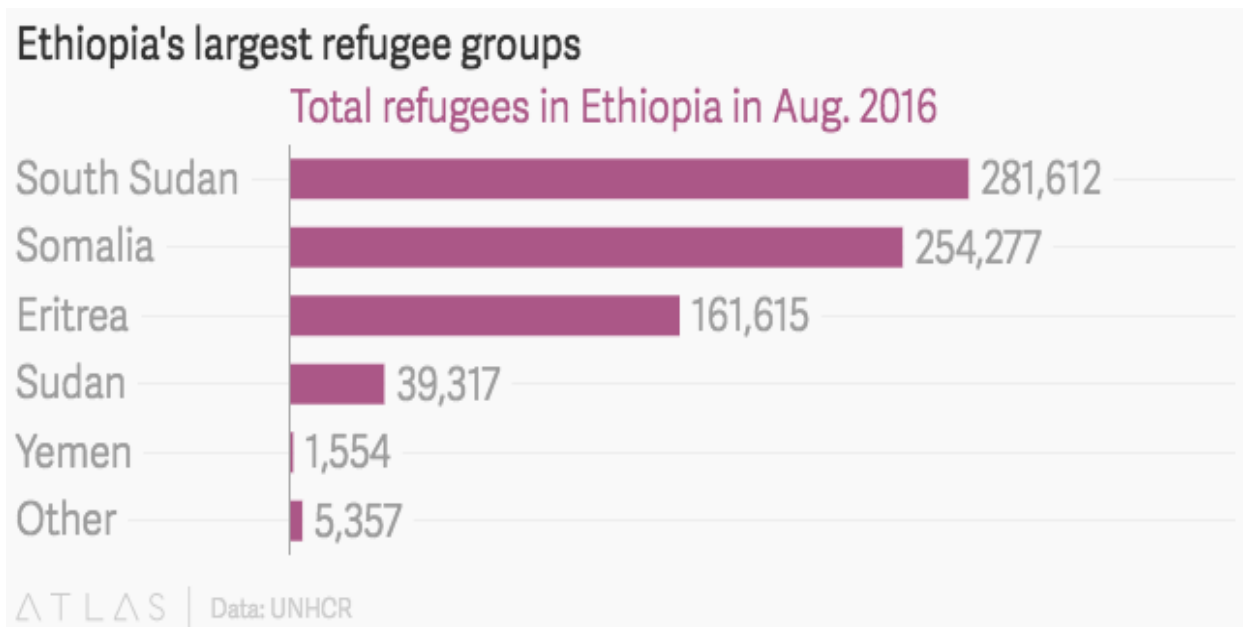
a higher education may prepare the refugees for better jobs and to get qualifications to compete not only locally but also internationally. Gladwell et al (2016) state that “future employment prospects are a significant consideration for students engaging in higher education, with the most important factors being level of accreditation and local and international recognition of the available qualification”. Moreover, higher education enables refugees to overcome the feelings of hopelessness, depression and sense of low self-esteem, and paves a way for the refugees to learn new skills to lead their lives, and assists them to possess self-development, self-security and stability (Sherb and Kirk, 2016). The other advantage of education for refugees is that it protects and keeps them secured from any kind of conflict or conspiracy. For instance, their awareness on sexual harassment, consequence of having free sex, kidnapping and forced conscription could grow up through college or university education (Soudien et al, 2012). The study deals with the challenges the Eritrean refugee students encounter and the strategies ARRA uses to integrate them into higher education system in Ethiopia.

Rationale of the Study HCR’s (2016) report shows that Ethiopia is hosting the largest number of refugees in Africa, 743,732 coming from different African countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen and others (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Refugee Groups

Source: Quartz Africa Weekly Brief

Out of these refugees, there are students who go to school based on their level. For example,



Eritrean refugee university students, who are funded by the government of Ethiopia and UNHCR, go to various public universities in the country. Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (henceforth ARRA) reports that there are about 1704 Eritrean refugee university students in Ethiopia, out of whom 60 are at Master’s level and the rest are doing their first degree. In a similar

vein, there are Eritrean refugee students who go to a private higher education institution as self-sponsored students. Majority of these students go to private medical colleges. At this spot, it is believed that these students are highly likely to resettle or join their family members in the developed countries like USA, Europe etc. Accordingly, they are advised that they can get a job easily in these developed countries as a nurse or medical professional. The study focuses on Eritrean refugee students who go to MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical Colleges. The educational background of the Eritrean refugee students is discussed below before scrutinizing the challenges they face while studying at the Medical Colleges.

Eritrean refugee students are believed to have had unpleasant schooling experience in Eritrea in many ways. In the first place, the majority of these students went to a military training called Sawa to attend their 12th grade studies right after they complete their 11th grade studies. At Sawa, the schooling place where these students attend their 12th grade, they were also treated as military trainees. Secondly, these refugee students were severely affected by the political and military situation in Eritrea.

Moreover, due to the loss of their father and brother at a border dispute with Ethiopia, these students are in psychological traumas which hamper them from proper concentration on their education. Most importantly, they lost hope in Eritrea after the closure of the University of Asmara in September 2006 which is the only university in Eritrea. This happening hugely made students not to dwell on their future dreams. Asmara University was replaced with different colleges and institutes, which could not repair the refugee students' hope due to the heavy military presence there. After their arrival here in Ethiopia, they were required to stay in the refugee camps such as Shimelba, Maiayni, Adi-Harush, Hintsatsetc, where they did not have an opportunity to continue their education, and this created disrupted schooling, which affected their psychological and cognitive skills (Kanu, 2008). While psychological skills mean perceiving things negatively and encountering difficulties to adjust and integrate into a new educational system and environment, poor cognitive skills refer to low literacy and being a slow learner, and hence going back to school once again, after interrupted schooling and unpleasant educational experiences, may take them more than ten years to act as normal students psychologically and cognitively (Thomas and Collier, 1997 cited by Kanu, 2008). The study intends to explore the challenges Eritrean refugee students face at MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical Colleges in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and the strategies employed by ARRA to integrate these refugee students into Ethiopian higher education system.

Theoretical Framework

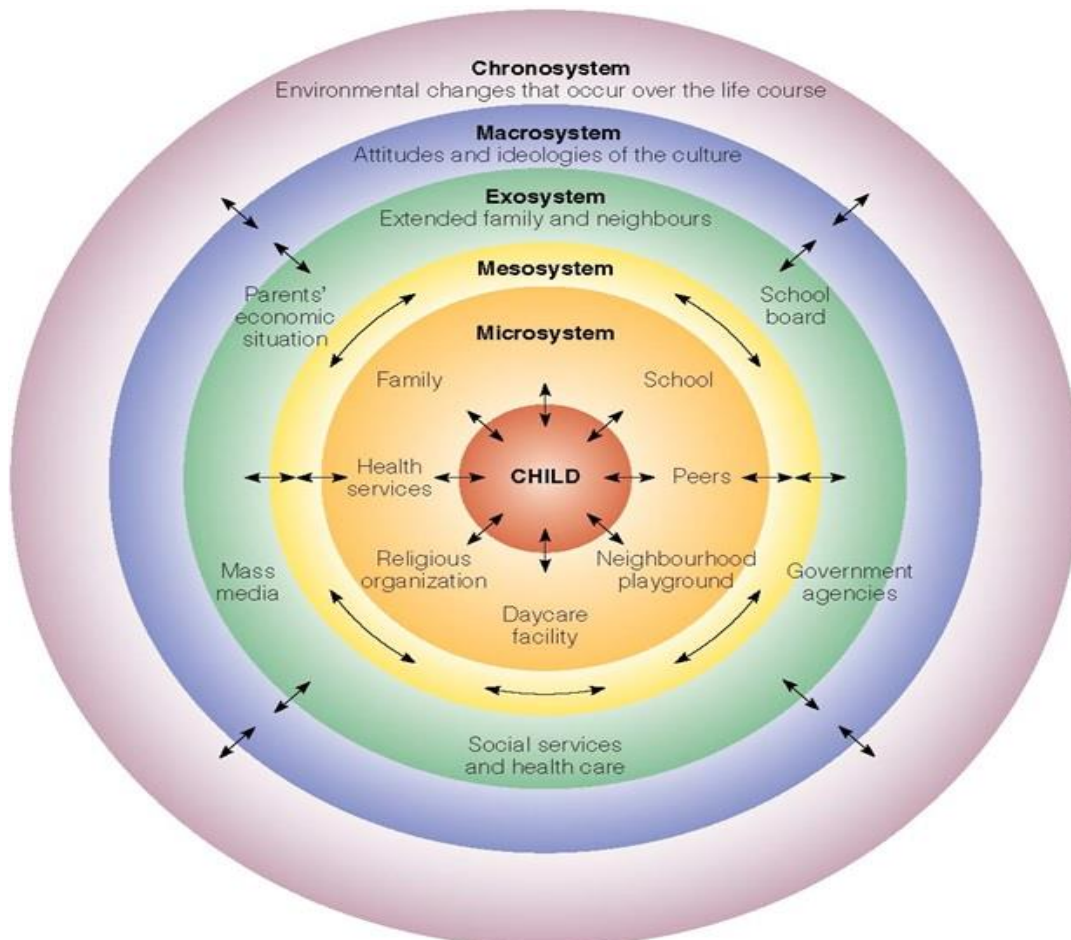
The study employed Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological theory of human development to address the research questions. The theory encapsulates that human development is witnessed when an individual exhibits a tremendous development in terms of biology, behavior, cognitive and emotion. In other words, the development of an individual is not only the outcome and

accumulation of the development characteristics mentioned above, but also the atmosphere and context in which he/she resides.

According to the theory, an individual's environment is described as a system with six 'nested structures', where the individual's linkage with himself/herself is figured out. The six 'nested structures' are the following.

1. *Individual* (shows the individual's interaction with himself/herself)
2. *Microsystem* (explains the individual's interaction with the ones that are close to him/her like family, school, teachers, home etc.)
3. *Mesosystem* (refers to the situation in which more than two micro-system settings come together, for instance the relationship between home and school)
4. *Exosystem* (impacts the individual's development, though the individual's role is none, for instance, the college's policy)
5. *Macrosystem* (refers to the environment that affects the individual's development, though the environment is far from the individual, for instance, political views, cultural ideologies, educational policies etc.)
6. *Chronosystem*(shows an individual's development that takes place over the course of life time)

Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bio-Ecological Theory of Human Development



Thus, these six ‘nested structures’ impact an individual while going through personal development. The bottom line is that the responses of the individual to the ‘nested structures’ vary on the basis of the individual’s bio-psychological development and his/her own unique characteristics. It may be concluded that the relationship between an individual and environment determines not only the pace but also the efficiency of personal development and learning.

Rutter (1999) as cited by Kanu (2008) stipulates that an individual’s robust development takes place when the individual exhibits psycho-social resilience, which is realized due to two major components: personal and social resources. The former refers to the qualities of a person’s character like demonstrating self-understanding, showing the ability to pass a litmus test for maturity. Also it includes showing a great self-confidence in dealing with difficult times and situations that are full of stress and pressure, and later managing oneself to get out of it, whereas the latter refers to the individual’s social interaction like having positive and robust connection with family members, friends, colleagues etc.

Research Questions

The study attempted to address the following research questions.

1. What are the challenges the Eritrean refugee students face while studying at MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical Colleges?
2. What strategies are employed by the ARRA office to integrate the Eritrean refugee students at MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical Colleges into Ethiopian higher education system?

Objectives of the Study

- A. The general objective of the study is to explore the challenges Eritrean refugee students face while attending private Medical Colleges in Ethiopia.
- B. The specific objectives are:
 - to explore the strategies employed by the ARRA office in integrating the Eritrean refugee students at MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical Colleges into Ethiopian higher education system and;
 - to investigate the challenges the Eritrean refugee students face at MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical Colleges in Ethiopia.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study which explores the strategies used by ARRA to integrate Eritrean refugee students into higher education system in Ethiopia, and the challenges the Eritrean refugee students face while pursuing their Medical College education. The participants of the study, the instruments used to collect data and data analysis procedure are discussed below.

Participants

The participants of the study are Eritrean refugee students doing their college education in private Medical Colleges in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The colleges are Africa and MEDCO Bio Medical Colleges, which were selected on convenience sampling. Out of 200 refugee students, 40 were selected using simple random sampling technique. Moreover, these refugees have lived in Ethiopia for more than a year. The other participants are Education Officer and Head, Program Implementation and Coordination at Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) in Ethiopia, who have close connection with refugee students in Ethiopia, and issue a letter of cooperation to the refugees who want to pursue their higher education either in private or public higher education institutions.

Instruments

The following research instruments were employed to collect reliable data.

Focus Group Discussion

In order to address the research questions, focus group discussion was conducted in four sessions, accommodating ten refugee students in each session, and the discussions were audio recorded. The discussions focused on the challenges the Eritrean refugee students faced at Africa and MEDCO Bio Medical Colleges, and if these impacted their academic carrier. Also the strategies ARRA employs to integrate these refugee students into Ethiopian higher education system were part of the discussion.

Interview

In order to triangulate the data collected through focus group discussion, an interview was conducted with ten of the Eritrean refugee students about the challenges they faced at Africa and MEDCO Bio Medical Colleges. The ten refugee students were selected upon their willingness. Moreover, the Education Officer and Head, Program Implementation and Coordination at ARRA were part of the interview to discuss the challenges the refugee students faced and the strategies they employed to integrate the refugee students into higher education system.

Data Analysis

After the transcription and coding, the recorded data were categorized into meaningful analytical codes based on the theoretical framework. Later, themes and categories were identified and analyzed. In order to check the reliability and credibility of the data, the draft research findings were sent to the interviewed respondents.

3. Findings and Discussion

The data collected suggest that the challenges Eritrean refugee students at MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical Colleges faced could fall into three categories, which are Academic, Emotional/Psychological and Socio-cultural challenges, as deliberated below. Also, placement

examination and arranging orientation session are the strategies employed by the ARRA to integrate the Eritrean refugee students into Ethiopian higher education system.

Academic Challenges

The Eritrean refugee students stated that they have academic challenges at their college studies here in Ethiopia. The challenges they described are summarized below, though they do not seem to deny the tremendous opportunity given to them to pursue their college education as self-sponsored students. The major academic challenges are:

- Lack of academic support
- Lack of academic skills
- Disrupted schooling
- Fear of class participation
- Lack of proficiency in Amharic
- Different school ethos
- Separation from family

According to the interviewed students, the challenges expressed are seven. The students explained that no academic support was arranged for them either by the Medical Colleges or by the ARRA office, though the latter offers them various kinds of assistance like issuing letters of cooperation to the Medical Colleges so that they get a placement, notifying the colleges to treat these refugee students like any other Ethiopian college students, to charge the refugee students in Birr rather than in Dollars for their school fees, and to let them change departments if they feel like doing so, so that the refugee students do not feel any sense of isolation or segregation, according to the interview with the Education Officer at ARRA.

The other challenge these refugee students faced is separation from family. They stipulated that the family separation destructs their attention to fully concentrate on their studies, and at times, they are in deep depression to attend classes or do any kind of reading, and hence they fail some courses as a result. Nevertheless, majority of these refugee students are studying at the Medical Colleges due to the financial assistance of their family members who live in abroad, particularly in Europe and North America.

In addition, disrupted schooling and lack of Amharic proficiency were found to be an obstacle for the Eritrean refugee students to pursue their academic career. These students stayed in the refugee camps in Ethiopia for two to three years before joining the Medical Colleges, an academic gap which hampered them from attending their classes smooth. One of the Eritrean refugee students described it in the following manner:

I stayed in Adi-Harush refugee camp for three years. Later, I came to Addis Ababa because my brother who lives in the USA promised to send me two hundred Dollars monthly, and cover my college fees. At the college, things became so difficult for me because I could not sit and learn for hours patiently,

and could not be motivated to read because I understood nothing. I think this has happened because I was away from school for some years.

Besides, the refugee students mentioned their lack of Amharic proficiency as an academic challenge. They asserted that their teachers used Amharic quite frequently to explain concepts to the students, but the explanation was confusion for the refugee students due to deficiency in the language. Furthermore, discussing academic issues like grade and asking for clarification of unclear concepts or insights outside the classroom was entirely in Amharic, which restricted the refugee students to express their dissatisfaction about the grades or ask questions.

Moreover, lack of academic skills and different school ethos were part of the learning challenges for the Eritrean refugee students. They lacked academic skills like note-taking, reading strategies, study skills, time management, programming etc. and could not get a support either from the ARRA office or the colleges to develop these skills. Furthermore, the academic environment in Ethiopia was a bit different for these refugees. In Eritrea, after completing their 11th grade studies, they are obliged to go to Sawa, a military training center, and complete not only their 12th grade studies but also basic military training. In the center, they are not treated like students, rather like military trainees.

After passing the matriculation examination, they join colleges, where there is a heavy military presence, and do military exercise early in the morning under the supervision of military personnel to refresh their military skills. At times, the military personnel set a timetable for the students when to go to the library, for how long they should stay there, when to have their meal, when to study etc. This kind of military situation does not exist in the Medical Colleges in Ethiopia, and found it difficult to cope up with their personal programs and activities independently, since they are not accustomed to it.

In addition, participating in class was a learning challenge to the refugee students because they feared that for some reasons, if the teacher did not understand and switched to Amharic to ask for clarification, they wouldn't do so in Amharic, and hence this inhibited them from participating in class actively.

To sum up, the Eritrean refugee students faced seven academic challenges as discussed above, out of which Lack of Amharic proficiency and Different School Ethos were mentioned quite frequently by the refugee students. The learning challenges such as Lack of academic support, Separation from family, Disrupted schooling, Lack of academic skills and Fear of class participation, identified in the study, were in line with the findings of Kanu (2008).

Emotional/Psychological Challenges

The refugee students propounded emotional/psychological challenges, which included traumatic experiences of crossing the Ethio-Eritrea border illegally, ensuring one's safety, dreaming of having secured future and feeling low self-esteem.

The refugee students encountered unpleasant experiences while crossing the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia illegally. They recounted their stories that they witnessed people, travelling with them, getting killed, and captured by the Eritrean security forces while crossing the border to Ethiopia. Worst of all, they saw women and children being killed by the Eritrean security forces, as they have a “shoot and kill” policy to anyone who attempts to escape to Ethiopia, considered to be an enemy. Also they expressed a horrible memory, in their minds, of seeing people being eaten by wild animals in the jungle.

On top of that, some of these refugee students were caught by the Bedawin, a group of bandits, in the Sahara desert, while trying to cross to Egypt from Sudan. During their stay at the unidentified detention center, they had traumatic experiences and memories of being tortured by the Bedawin, witnessing women being raped by the same people in front of their eyes. After paying a ransom of Dollars 20, 000, they were set free and managed to reach Egypt. Unluckily, they were caught by the Egyptian security forces, and were deported to Ethiopia as per their request.

After their arrival in Ethiopia, these refugee students explained that they did not receive any therapy or psychiatric treatment, and hence they became victims of psychological stress which interfered into their learning situation. Thus, there should be an improvement in the mesosystem to assist these refugee students psychologically. Moreover, they asserted that their psychological stress led them to be excluded and isolated from the college community, though their interaction with other refugee students was warm, a situation which appears to indicate a gap in the micro system of the colleges, that they did not seem to have worked to integrate them into the college community.

Furthermore, the refugee students encapsulated that a failure to possess their original school certificate or college diploma contributed to their psychological stress. Majority of them were unable to attach their original diploma at a time of registration at the Medical Colleges due to a couple of reasons. In the first place, they were victims of the policy in Eritrea which stipulates that no school certificate or university diploma is issued to any citizen without presenting an evidence of national service completion or exemption. Secondly, even if they have a college diploma, it does not seem to be accepted by the colleges and universities in Ethiopia unless authenticated by the Higher Education Relevance and Quality (HERQA). Unfortunately, HERQA does not appear to authenticate a college diploma from Eritrea, other than University of Asmara (researcher’s observation) and none of them went to the university. This appears to be the cause for these refugee students to develop a low self-esteem, and think that it was wastage to go to the colleges in Eritrea, which may have contributed to the refugee students’ psychological stress.

Moreover, the refugee students described their failure of securing bright future as the other source of emotional/psychological challenge. These students stated that they do not think of continuing to live in Ethiopia, and anticipate either the UNHCR or their family members to assist them to resettle in the developed countries. Resettlement process arranged by the UNHCR appears to be complicated and long, and none of these students put much hope on it. However, they stipulated that their dreams could come true with the a huge financial assistance from family members who

live in the developed countries, and may use the finance to pay to smugglers to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean sea, which is a perilous journey. On top of that they explained that they feel a sense of guilt for not trying to cross it until this time, and this thought interferes into their learning situation, and brings about psychological stress. Thus, a significant support program should be arranged at the micro system structure to change these refugee students' attitudes and perceptions.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

With regards to the socio-cultural challenges, the refugee students asserted that the use of Amharic puts them in a communication barrier because when they use it, it sounds rude and order; at times, they are considered to be impolite and poor communicators by their classmates and teachers. On the other hand, they expressed the similar cultural practice between Eritrea and Ethiopia. For instance, sharing the same religion, foods like Enjera, and sharing the same cultural values like leaving your seat for elders in a bus etc., and feel like they are at home. When they compare Ethiopia with Sudan and Egypt, the latter countries practice distinct cultural values. For instance, their religion is different, as majority of the population are Muslims, and the dressing style in the countries is unique, in which men are supposed to wear *Jelebia*, men Muslims' dress and women are obliged to wear *Abaya*, a long black dress which covers the whole body and hair scarf.

ARRA's Strategies to Integrate Eritrean Refugee Students into Ethiopian Higher Education System

ARRA is in charge of handling refugee-related issues by protecting the rights of the refugees and issuing ID card so that the refugees live legally in Ethiopia.

According to the Head, Program Implementation and Coordination and Education Officer at ARRA, these self-sponsored students should get a letter of cooperation from the ARRA to join the colleges, as the students do not have a diploma or certificate at hand, and if they have, the diploma should be authenticated by the HERQA, which is not an easy process. Nevertheless, ARRA arranges a placement examination for all students who want to study at colleges, and based on their results, a letter of cooperation is sent to the private Medical Colleges these refugee students prefer to study. Also the cooperation letter urges the colleges to charge the refugee students in Birr, rather than in Dollars, and treat them like other Ethiopian students.

On top of that, ARRA arranges an orientation session to the Eritrean refugee students before they start their studies; the orientation focuses on the education system in Ethiopia, grading system, and the kind of communication they should maintain with their classmates, teachers and college administrators. Furthermore, ARRA entertains refugee students' cases in relation to grading or departmental change, which seems to be a great assistance to the refugee students. Thus, the strategies they employ are arranging a placement examination and orientation session, which may indicate that the refugee students are sent to colleges to study with background information about the Ethiopian education system.

4. Conclusions

The Eritrean refugee students propounded seven academic challenges they encountered while studying at Africa and MEDCO Bio Medical Colleges. The seven challenges are Lack of academic support, Lack of academic skills, Disrupted schooling, Fear of class participation, Lack of proficiency in Amharic, Different school ethos and Separation from family. The most frequently mentioned challenges by the refugee students were Lack of proficiency in Amharic and Different school ethos. The refugee students suggested that teachers at the two Medical Colleges should stop switching to Amharic while explaining concepts, and should be aware of the composition of their students, that there are students who cannot speak and understand Amharic.

Emotional/Psychological challenges were reported by the Eritrean refugee students, which occur due to traumatic immigration experiences, failure of securing bright future and feeling a sense of low self-esteem. ARRA should play a pivotal role in identifying the Eritrean refugee students who need therapy and psychiatric treatment, and should offer the necessary medical assistance to help them overcome their challenges and become successful at their academic career.

The socio-cultural challenge did not seem to be a major challenge to the refugee students, though their poor use of Amharic created a communication barrier with their classmates, teachers and college administrators. In fact, they described themselves as lucky ones to be in Ethiopia, as both Eritrea and Ethiopia share more or less common values, norms and customs. Besides, arranging an orientation session and administrating placement examinations were described as strategies employed by ARRA to integrate the Eritrean refugee students into Ethiopian higher education system.

It is recommended that ARRA arranges not only a cultural awareness session but also academic support to the refugee students so that they can be high achievers in their college studies.

5. Implications

The data imply that ARRA's assistance to Eritrean refugee students is decisive in many ways, like issuing letters to the colleges to treat the refugee students like other Ethiopian students, arranging a placement examination and an orientation session to integrate the refugee students into the colleges, and enabling them to be effective communicators with their classmates, teachers and college administrators. This appears to imply a remarkable progress of assisting refugees at exosystem. Nevertheless, it seems that not much has been done at the micro system level; the Medical Colleges should assist refugees by arranging a tutorial class, offering guidance and counseling, and by raising awareness about their communication barriers, which may, at the end of the day, enhance the refugee students' academic success by overcoming their Academic, Emotional/Psychological and Socio-Cultural challenges.

The other implication of the study is that the teachers at the Medical Colleges should be given an orientation with the way they should treat the refugee students. For instance, the language barrier could be an obstacle for the refugee students to cope up with their studies, and under such

circumstances, the teachers should exercise maximum patience and give the refugee students an extra time to bring about the refugee students to the right academic track.

The study is significant in providing empirical data about Eritrean refugee students not only to the ARRA, but also to the educators, MEDCO Bio and Africa Medical Colleges. The data include the academic and emotional challenges the Eritrean refugee students faced, the strategies employed by the ARRA to integrate them into Ethiopian higher education system, and what should be done to make them successful academically both at the micro system and exosystem levels. In the future, a comparative study is suggested to be conducted to identify the academic challenges Eritrean refugee self-sponsored and government sponsored students encounter to get a full picture of the academic challenges. The current study has considered only 40 Eritrean refugee students out of 200, and taking a larger population would present different findings.

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