

**Being a Refugee Student in Higher Education: Exploring the Challenges and  
Coping Strategies**

*A Case Study of Mekelle University, Ethiopia*

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**Master of Philosophy in Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

Globally, refugees are one of the most marginalized groups of society. They are forced to flee their country of origin because of violence, war and persecution. Higher education for refugees can play vital role in facilitating their integration into host countries. In reintegration stage, higher education for refugees can help refugees to be active in rebuilding their home country. This study examines the challenges encountered by refugees in their learning experience at Mekelle University. The experiences linked with learning were analyzed using two theories; socio-cultural theory of learning and coping strategies. In order to address the specific research question the study employed a qualitative research approach. This research is a case study and hence, in-depth interview, key- informant interview and document analyses were employed to collect data. In order to explore the background of refugee students the study examined their journey from refugee camp to higher education institutions. The study highlights that limited access to higher education, absence of documentation and lack of information as entry barriers to higher education. Refugee student at Mekelle University encountered a number of challenges in their learning experience. The challenges can be summarized as language, cultural, academic, and financial challenges. Refugee's learning experience reveals that language as the main challenge. Language intertwined with cultural challenge, discrimination and isolation were examined as challenges for refugees. Unfamiliarity with pedagogical related activities also identified as one of the challenges. The study also explored the financial challenges encountered by refugees. These challenges were examined from socio-cultural theory of learning. The research also examines how refugee students overcome the mentioned challenges. And the mechanisms were examined in light of coping theories. To overcome the challenges refugee students employed both problem-focused and emotion-based coping mechanism.



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## **Lists of Abbreviations**

ARRA	Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs
CEADW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights the Child
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
ICESCR	International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
MOE	Ministry of Education
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.1. Introduction**

A number of reports from the United Nations (UN) indicated that millions of forced migrants currently are trapped in protracted refugee situations and placed in long-term encampments (UNHCR 2018). Many of these refugees in different parts of the world experienced limited access to higher education in spite of interest in pursuing post-secondary education. Higher education for refugees has its own long terms benefits at individual and societal level. Refugees can, for example, have a role in solving conflicts and post conflict reconstruction by promoting socio-economic development of their own country.

Nevertheless, in most Africa countries, refugees have a limited access to adequate education at all levels. Some countries focused on ensuring access to primary education. According to UNHCR (2017) report, Ethiopia is among the few African countries which granted higher education scholarships for refugees from other, that is, Horn African countries, such as Eritrea, South Sudan and the Republic of Somalia. Until 2017 more than 2000 refugees enrolled in Ethiopian higher education institutions. Around 75% of the cost was covered by the Ethiopian government (MOE 2017).

On the other hand, studies disclosed that access to education can play an important role in facilitating integration in their host country for refugees by providing skills that, amongst other things, increase social capital (Taylor and Sidhu 2012; Wright and Plasterer 2010). As a result, for many international donors and humanitarian agents education is now becoming the main pillar of their activities (Zeus 2011). Nevertheless, while much has been written about the need for primary education, there is less focus on the analyses of ensuring higher education for (qualified) refugees and their experiences' in higher education institutions. And hence, considering the increasing average length of refugee displacement globally, there is an urgent need for this type of research.

Research conducted in different countries reveals that the refugees reported gratitude for the experience but uncertainty about their future, and widely different contextual challenges in

achieving their educational goals (Wright and Plasterer 2010; Gateley 2015). Higher education may constitute a psycho-social intervention as much as an educational program. For a number of factors refugee students who are completely new when it comes to their host country's higher education system might face various challenges. Hence, such unique dynamics requests the need for systematic thinking and exploring the experiences of those unique groups. Accordingly, the main focal point of this study is exploring some of the challenges faced by refugees in higher education institutions and hence, data was collected from South Sudan, Eritrean and Somalian refugees who are student at Mekelle University, Ethiopia. And thus, emphasis has been given to information which targets refugees' perspectives (experience) in their host university and examines the extent to which refugees believe the learning environment is suitable in achieving their educational goals. In exploring the challenges faced by refugees attempts have been made to explore their own personal experience in addressing the challenges.

## **1.2. Background and Context**

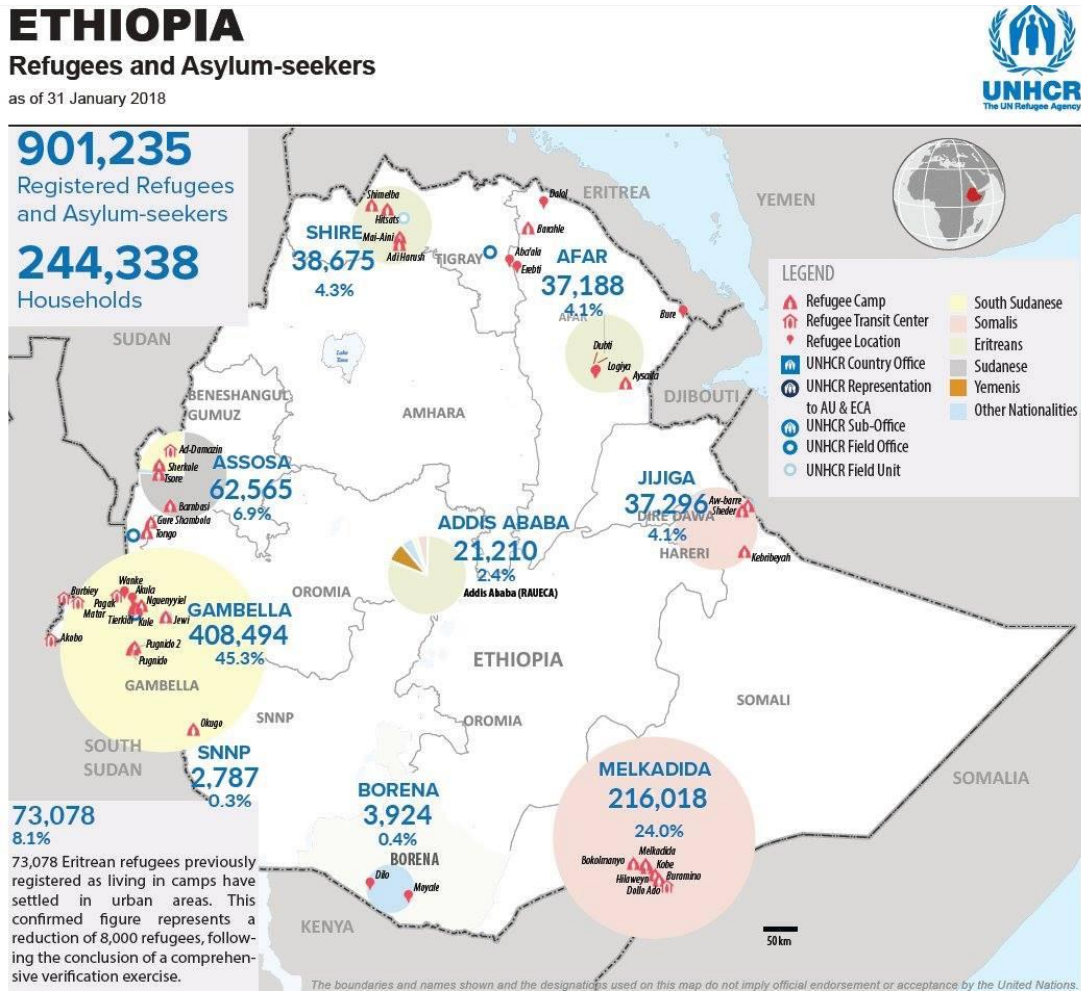
### **1.2.1. Refugees: Context and Status**

Because of drought, regional conflict and conflict within states, there are a high number of refugees in the horn of Africa (UNHCR 2017). Violent internal and political turmoil and the conflict among the nations of the horn of Africa contributed to the violence. Much of this violence has been fueled by poor governance, corruption, and economic mismanagement. Borders throughout the region remain in dispute, and small arms are available in abundance, further contributing to regional and localized insecurity (*ibd*). To make the situation even worse several domestic and international terrorist groups operate in the Horn of Africa. Such conflicts have had a huge cost on the security and development of the region.

Ethiopia is signatory to the 1951 UN refugee convention and its 1967 protocol, and is also a signatory to the refugee convention endorsed in 1969 by the then OAU. According to the Ethiopian constitution (FDRE 1995), international law ratified by Ethiopian government is part and parcel of Ethiopian law. Accordingly, the Ethiopian government has the duty to enforce the 1951 UN refugee conventions and related international treaties. On the other hand, due to its location, Ethiopia cannot escape the aftermath of an instable volatile region and hence, continues to receive refugees from neighboring countries.



Figure 1. Refugees in Ethiopia



Source: UNHCR 2018

As indicated in figure 1, Ethiopia is a major transit hub for migrants and asylum seekers out of the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia is the home of refugees from Eritrea, South Sudan, Somalia and recently Yemen. People from these countries transit via Ethiopia in an attempt to reach Europe through Sudan, Egypt and Libya (Danish Refugee Council 2017). According to a report of the Danish Refugee Council (2017), Ethiopia is one of the big refugee hosting nations in the world and the largest refugee hosting country in Africa. Interestingly, the government maintains an open border for refugees seeking protection in the country. In general, Ethiopia provides protection to refugees from 19 countries, including Eritreans, South Sudanese, Somalis, Sudanese and Yemenis (UNHCR 2017).

As most of the refugees were either denied access or didn't have the opportunity to go schools while in their home countries, the policy has allowed refugees to enroll in Ethiopian schools, enabling them to gain basic skills and knowledge. More recently, free university scholarships provided by the Ethiopian government have enabled many to pursue a dream they have long sought (MOE 2017). The government also facilitates the provision of skills and vocational training to refugees.

### **1.2.2. Ethiopia: Refugees in the Horn of Africa**

The horn of Africa includes countries Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya. It is one of the most complex regions in the world. In the last ten years, the number of refugees in the horn of Africa increased dramatically. Among the main factors for such humanitarian crisis were natural disasters (drought and famine), violent domestic mayhem and conflict between countries of the horn of Africa. In addition to that poverty, economic crisis, corruption and poor governance contribute to the humanitarian crisis (Ayana et al. 2016). As a result, it caused many of the largest refugee influx in the history of humanitarian operation. A report indicated that in the last decade 13.3 million people were affected (UNCHR 2018)<sup>1</sup>.

Somalia is a very well-known area in terms of humanitarian crisis; human trafficking, famine, terrorism and piracy. The turning point in the history of Somalia was the collapse of the authoritarian Siad Barre regime in 1991(Harper 2012). The post Siad Barre Somalia was characterized by drought, famine, civil war and terrorism (Dersso 2009).<sup>2</sup> Because of the unchanging trend of refugee flows thousands of Somalia were arriving at the refugee camps of Ethiopia. The report of from United Nations indicated that the total number of Somali refugees in Ethiopia as of March 2017 reaches 246,742 (UNHCR 2017). Similarly, a number of people have fled to Arab countries via Yemen.

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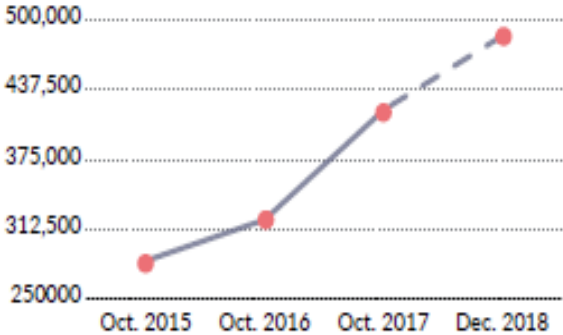
<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia is one of the biggest refugee hosting nations in world and the largest refugee hosting country in Africa; at the end of September 2017, it hosted a total of 883,546 refugees (UNHCR 2018). The refugees are primarily from Somalia, Eritrea, South Sudan and Sudan.

<sup>2</sup> With the help of African countries and international community attempts have been made to establish Somalia's internationally recognized Transitional Federal Government in 2004. However, the transitional government fails to provide basic social services and security.

Coming to South Sudan, one of the initial causes of the humanitarian crisis in the new nation was the rumors emerged that Riek Machar conspired to remove Salva Kiir (Macharia et al. 2017). Both leaders are representing the two largest ethnic groups of South Sudan i.e. Nuer and Dinka respectively. So the tensions escalated from political difference towards ethnic tension and resulted with civil war. As expected the conflict affects the social institutions that help to further extend the crisis.<sup>3</sup>

The report from UNHCR (2018) shows that as of October 2017, there are around 2.5 million South Sudan refugees hosted in different countries: Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Central Africa, Sudan and Central Africa Republic. Thus, the new nation remains one of the fastest growing refugee situations in the continent. The latest report of UNHCR (2018) showed that as of October 2017, around 419,000 South Sudan refugees were hosted in Ethiopia.

Figure. 2 South Sudan Refugee Population Trend (to Ethiopia)



Source: UNHCR (2018)

As hosting state the Ethiopian government developed a very comprehensive protection for south Sudan refugees. The priority area of supporting refugees were identified by Ethiopian government; primarily enhancing the educational quality via expanding access to classroom, curricular and instructional materials and enhancing teacher certification . In terms of enrollment 5,400 secondary school-aged refugee children enrolled in school (UNHCR 2017).

<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to end the civil war in South Sudan peace agreement was signed in 2015 by actors involved in the conflict. However, the enforcement was very slow and both parties violate the ceasefire agreement. This causes more displacements in and outside the new nation of horn of Africa (Macharia et al. 2017).

The third nation, Eritrea is one of the young nations in the horn Africa. Eritrean people gained their independence in 1991. Unfortunately, after the liberation the dream to make Eritrea a democratic country failed. Post 1991 Eritrea totally changed, the government became among the most authoritarian countries in the world (Berhane and Tyyska 2017).<sup>4</sup>

The nature of the government coupled with the forceful military service is causing an ever-growing number of people fleeing their home country (White 2005; Berhane and Tyyska 2017). A report from the United Nations (2017) also disclosed that militarization of society and deepening economic stagnation were the major causes of humanitarian crisis in Eritrea. As a result, thousands of Eritreans felt insecure, since January 2017, 18,000 refugees from Eritrea arrived in Ethiopia.

### **1.2.3. Ethiopia: Education in Emergency Response Strategy**

The Ethiopian education system follows the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle of primary, 1st and 2nd cycles of secondary or 4-4-2-2 cycles of general education. After the fall of the socialist regime in 1991 Ethiopia has performed relatively well in expanding education. However, the issue of quality education remains as a challenge (Saint 2004). The enrollment of students at primary, secondary and tertiary education has improved significantly.

As it has been discussed, Ethiopia has the highest number of refugees in Africa and hence, it creates more pressure on the Ethiopian education system. One of recognized purposes of education in a crisis situation is its contribution in restoring hope and dignity of victims of crisis. To this end, the Ethiopian government developed a strategy called “Education in Emergency Response Strategy”. According to the strategy the main objective of education in emergency response strategy is:

“To ensure that school age children continue to get access to safe and quality education in emergency situation. The strategy also aims at strengthening capacity of the education system and communities to deliver a timely and evidence-based education response. It will ensure strong

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<sup>4</sup> The restrictive economic policies and political suppression have led thousands of people to emigrate. The Eritrean government fought a war with Sudan, Djibouti and Yemen. In 1998 a war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia which cost a number of lives on both sides.

partnership at national, regional and local level through its sub-national cluster coordination mechanisms in order to reach set targets” (Education in Emergency Response Strategy 2017:6)

From the above objective of the strategic plan one can understand that the main emphasis of the strategy is providing education for children and thus, it explicitly excludes tertiary level education for refugees. The strategy has three main principles. Firstly, continuity and alignment; according to this principle “the education in emergency Strategy aims to uphold the values of professionalism, decentralization, integration, transparency, and accountability promised by the Ethiopia education system” (Education in Emergency Response Strategy 2017:7) Secondly, harmonization; the strategy stated that “through information sharing, management and analysis, works to mitigate duplication and in so doing, build holistic interventions for the greatest number of children” (*ibid*). Thirdly evidence; the strategy “recognizes the importance of building an evidence-based strategy and keeping implementation informed by consistent review” (*ibid*).

#### **1.2.4. Refugee and Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions: Mekelle University**

It is clear that right to education is a basic human right. It was first recognized by soft law Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Apart from relating education to human rights, most international organizations engaged in the development agenda linked education with poverty reduction, economic growth and sustainable development. Likewise, binding treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) stated that it is not allowed to discriminate access to education based on any kind of background or nationality.<sup>5</sup>

According to the report of the Ethiopian government, currently they are enforcing a multi-faceted approach to support refugees (Ethiopian Ministry of Education 2017). The United Nation policy primarily focused on “out-of-camp” policy to support around 10% of the total refugee population (UNCHR 2017). In light of this, the government of Ethiopia in its Education in Emergency Response Strategy Plan as well as Growth and Transformation plan II seeks to provide equitable growth and development by expanding demand driven basic socio-economic services and access to economic infrastructure in refugee hosting areas.

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<sup>5</sup> Most conventions that recognize refugees’ right to education were ratified by Ethiopia and hence, they are part and parcel of domestic law.

As per the report from the Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA 2017), until 2017 around 1500 Eritrean refugees benefited from university scholarship offered by Ethiopian government. Until 2010 Ethiopian government provided scholarship primarily for refugees from Eritrea yet, the program was opened for refugees from South Sudan and Somalia. As a result, till 2017 2,386 refugees joined Ethiopian higher institutions. Moreover, around 450 refugees from South Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia were given permission to study at Ethiopian university at the end of 2017 (MOE 2017).

For the first time in 2010, 140 Eritrean refugees joined Ethiopian government owned higher education institution (Mekelle University). This is due to the change of government policy towards “out-of-camp” policy, which allows refugees to live out of refugee camps. Mekelle University is one of the fastest growing universities in Ethiopia, with a mission of teaching, research and consultancy. Mekelle University established in 1991, in the capital city of Tigray Regional State, Mekelle. The current enrollment capacity of the university is 30,000-34,000 students. Mekelle University offers programs leading to officially recognized higher education degree such as doctorate degrees, masters degrees and bachelor degrees.

### **1.2.5. Refugee and Higher Education: From Human Rights Perspective**

*“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights [...]”*

Access to higher education is a human right enshrined in various international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26.2). Moreover, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights clearly stated refugees’ right to education. The convention was ratified by Ethiopia. Article 13 of the treaty recognizes the right of everyone to education: “Education must be accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable groups, in law and fact, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds” (ICESCR General Comment no. 13, 1999: 3). One interesting issue here is the implication of “All” in the treaty. According to ICESCR General comment no. 20 2009 “All” implies “To everyone including non-nationals, such as refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, migrant workers and victims of international trafficking, regardless of legal status and documentation”.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child also recognizes refugees’ right to education. This convention is also ratified by Ethiopia. This human rights instrument imposes responsibility on

nations to provide education progressively and to give equal chance for everyone (Article 28 of CRC). Likewise, article 2 of the treaty imposes an obligation on its members to respect and ensure the rights stated in the convention within their jurisdictions. Hence, it applies to other country citizens who come under the State's jurisdictions while trying to enter the country's territory and thus, refugees have the right to education irrespective their nationality. Likewise, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations, 1979) called for no discrimination in educational provision for men and women. The most interesting human rights instrument in relation to refugee education is the Convention against Discrimination in Education. This instrument stands against any kind discrimination and focuses on removing all the obstacles to education including barriers related to funding and administrative policies. The convention was adopted by UNESCO in 1960.

To conclude, the above conventions and declarations confirm that the right to education is a basic human right entitled to everyone including refugees. For a number of scholars the access to education is linked with poverty reduction, holding promises of stability, economic growth, and better lives for children, families and communities (Wedgwood 2007; Tarabini 2010).

### **1.3. Statement of the Problem**

Different studies indicated that the last two decades have seen a tremendous increase in research and progress in policy and practice on refugee and emergency education (Zeus 2011; Karam et al 2017). In addition to food, shelter and health care, education in general and primary education in particular is now seen as one of the major pillars of humanitarian aid for refugees. Accordingly, the international donors together with the Ethiopian government have constructed primary schools around the refugee camps for refugees of different countries. However, both the donors and the government give less emphasis to the enrollment of refugees in higher education. At the same time, there is dearth of research that analyses the issue of higher education and refugees from a long term perspective.

In different areas because of the practical constraints such as the lack of funding, political constraints related to host country policies or simply the belief that higher education is not part of humanitarian relief provided in refugee situations, less emphasis has been given to access to

higher education for refugees (Feldman 2007; Karam et al 2017). It also seems that studies that specifically focus on refugees' higher education participation tend to be few, and small scale (Corrigan 2005; Zeus 2011). In developing countries like Ethiopia, access to higher education for refugees is a topic only marginally researched and rarely supported as the policy focus is more geared towards primary and secondary education. As noted previously, access to tertiary education for east African refugees is supported via scholarships in Ethiopia, their host country.

Thus, access to higher education is one of the challenges for African refugees. In addition, when refugees get a scholarship and join higher education they might face different challenges. Research conducted in some countries reveals that the unfamiliarity with the new environment was one of the main issues (Houghton and Morrice 2008; Morrice 2011). Others identified the knowledge about academic cultural practice as a critical issue for refugees who joined universities (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009; Benzie 2010). In this regard, exploring the experience of refugees will contribute to identifying some of the main challenges refugee students face within higher education institutions, which might vary from one refugee student to another.

In general, the experience of refugees entering higher education in low-income countries is largely absent in the academic literature. In some studies attention has been given to the experience of children and adult refugees in primary as well as secondary education (Kirk and Cassidy 2007; Russell 2005). In other studies the focus is on the experience of international students (Adams 2007; Moore and Constantine 2005).

This study explores the learning experience of a small group of refugees from South Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia who enrolled at Mekelle University. Recognizing that refugees may have had different educational experiences from what most Ethiopian students would consider a "normal" education, this study addresses the educational aspirations, concerns and context represented in this distinct student body of refugee students. Thus, this research aims at exploring the learning experiences and challenges faced by refugee students in their host institution in Ethiopia.



#### **1.4. Research Purpose and Questions**

The main purpose of this study is to explore refugee students' learning experience and coping strategies. In order to achieve the objective of this study, the following research questions have been formulated:

- How do refugees characterize the main challenges related to their learning intentions and experiences at Mekelle University?

This question has been addressed through exploring the learning experience of refugee students. Considering the socio-cultural theory of learning, attempts have been made to explore the refugee journey from refugee camp to higher education student briefly. Most importantly, challenges related to learning experiences in the host university were examined.

- How do the refugees cope with the challenges related to their learning experiences at Mekelle University?

This research question is related with the first research question. While the first one focuses on examining the challenges related to refugee students' learning experience, this part explores how the challenges solved or refugees coping strategy. In exploring their coping strategies emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies were employed as analytical framework.

#### **1.5. Significance and Rationale**

Refugees may face different challenges. Firstly, they are in need of help and support from the host community, host state and donors. Secondly, when they enroll in a university they might face challenges in the new environment. Thus, the issue of refugees' experiences requires special attention. The research will provide an insight on the experience of those vulnerable groups. On the other hand, little attention has been given to the experience of refugees in higher education. Most research focuses on the experience of international students.

Focusing on the experience of refugees widens our understanding and gives better information about the complicated experience of the targeted group. Hence, the study generates a basis for accommodating diversity within the higher education institutions as well as develops an insight

to the coping strategies of refugee students. In addition, the research may encourage other potential researchers to conduct additional studies on this specific issue.

## **1.6. Organization of the Thesis**

The thesis is divided into five chapters: Chapter one provides general background such as introduction, statements of the problem, objectives and research questions. Issues related to background of the research also presented. The second chapter deals with review of related literature and the main analytical framework of the researcher. Chapter three describes the methodology employed in this research. Selection of research participants, methods and practical experiences are presented. Chapter four presents and discusses the finding of the research. Finally, chapter five presents the conclusions of the study and suggestions for further research.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review and Analytical Framework**

#### **2.1. Defining Refugees**

Legally, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees provides the definition of who is refugee. This convention is ratified by Ethiopian government and hence, it is part and parcel of the law of the land. This convention reflects fundamental human values on which global consensus exists. It also, regulates the treatment of refugees in any part of the world. According to article 1 of this legal convention a refugee is someone:

Who has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her Race, Religion, Nationality, Membership in a particular social group, or Political opinion; is outside his/her country of origin; and is unable or unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.

The above treaty was basically enacted to protect European refugees after World War II; however, another document (1967 Protocol) expanded the scope of the treaties as the crisis and displacement spread around the world. In addition, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has developed guidelines on the interpretation of the term refugees. It is important to note the difference between refugee and asylum seeker.<sup>6</sup>

#### **2.2. Refugee and Higher Education: Approaches and Benefits**

It is clear that refugees have a different background than regular international students. According to OECD (2006:1), the term international students refer to “students who cross border for a specific purpose of study”. Studies on international students indicated that when an international student decides to study abroad the benefits are immense (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Lillyman and Bennett 2014). International students gain a new and exciting chance to mix with students from different country, which increase their level of confidence and responsibility

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<sup>6</sup> As stated in different human rights instruments asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not been yet decided. On the other hand, refugees are initially asylum seekers.

in learning (Lillyman and Bennett 2014). In contrast, refugee students are individuals who are outside of their country because of certain reasons: persecuted because of their political opinion, or their membership of a specific social or religious group, their nationality or race.

In addition to the legal/right based-approach to refugee education, exploring how various international organizations as well as nations view refugees' right to education is an important aspect. Also there are some inconsistencies on perspectives, e.g. Dagne et al. (2012) argued that there are three approaches that guide the field of refugee's education: The first one is the humanitarian approach. This perspective views education as one component of rapid response, providing immediate protection to refugees and saving them from human rights abuses (Dagne et al. 2012).<sup>7</sup>

Second is the human rights approach, which emphasizes education as a human right to be realized and cultivated through education in any situation. This approach defines education as an "enabling right," providing "skills that people need to reach their full potential and to exercise their other rights, such as the right to life and health" (Dagne et al. 2012). Education can only fulfill this promise if it is of high quality, meaning that it is available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable. According to some scholars, this approach to education is consistent with the fundamental mandate of the UNHCR but does not align with current practice, particularly in relation to quality (Giulianotti 2004; Dagne et al. 2012). The third one is the developmental approach. This approach recognizes education of refugees as a long-term investment for society.<sup>8</sup> It also recognizes lack of quality of education as holding back development potential.

Apart from the legal approach, less emphasis has been given to refugee education, data from UNHCR (2012) indicated that until 1980s, few resources were allocated to education within UNHCR and hence, typically relied on refugees to create their own primary school opportunities. A number of empirical case studies dating back to the early 1970s have documented that when education is not available, either in the acute phase of an emergency or due to lack of resources,

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<sup>7</sup> It is clear that this approach doesn't involve collaboration with government. Moreover, it gives less emphasis to access to higher education and hence, it is limited to short term goals.

<sup>8</sup> This approach, most commonly expressed by refugee parents and children, takes a long-term view of education, with priority on current access to quality education but always with a sense of future relevance toward individual livelihoods and societal advancement.

refugees often develop their own schools and other informal learning programmes (UNHCR 2012: Dagne et al. 2012). While devolving responsibility for primary education to refugee communities, international organizations started to focus on post-secondary education (Dagne et al. 2012).

In general, the main target of international organizations is primary education. But, it is very important to examine the benefits for refugees when they attend higher education institutions. If there is no chance for continuation from primary through secondary to higher education, then there is little incentive for students to stay in school and apply themselves to their education. Research also indicated that dropout rate of refugee children and youth in countries of first asylum is much higher than children and youth from the host community (Sherab 2016). Refugees often face inequality in work rights and protection, meaning that children may leave school to support their families to reduce the financial burden (*ibid*)

On the other hand, higher education has a variety of benefits that do not simply affect the individual, but also have a positive impact on the community. This argument is still valid in the case of refugees. Report of UNHCR (2012) indicated that studies at a higher education institution endow refugees with the knowledge and skills to contribute to the community as role models and to transfer these benefits in turn to their communities through employment in fields which enable them to have a lasting impact upon reconstruction and sustainable development in the refugee community and their origin country (*ibid*).

Hence, higher education provides the opportunity to refugees to continue with their life and it also allow them to support their communities in exile. Refugees can also contribute to the future development of their home country (El Jack 2010; UNHCR 2012). On the other hand, higher education provides an opportunity to bridge the gap between emergency response and sustainable development role as both protection and sustainable development (*ibid*). It also provides protection from harm, contributes to post-conflict reconstruction, promotes social, economic and gender equality, and empowers refugee communities.

Generally, access to higher education for refugees provides three main benefits. Firstly, it can motivate primary and secondary school students. Access to higher education is only possible in contexts where students have been able to complete primary and secondary school. On the other

hand, attending university is often listed as a primary aim for displaced students (Gladwell and Tanner 2013). As stated earlier study shows that where tertiary education is not a possibility, learners have reported lower levels of motivation and persistence at the primary and secondary levels (Chaffin 2010; Dagne et al. 2012).

Secondly, higher education makes a significant contribution to the protection of older youth increasingly by providing a suitable environment (Gladwell and Tanner 2013). Providing education services for this particular group can both maintain a sense of hope for the future and provide powerful ‘university student’ identity factors that can mitigate the risk of young people being drawn into identification with violent or sectarian ideologies (El Jack 2010).

Finally, higher education is a means that helps to enhance the human and social capital necessary for future reconstruction and economic development in their countries of origin. For instance, a research conducted by UNHCR in Afghanistan indicated that refugees demonstrated “a direct link between a refugee programme focused on tertiary education and national reconstruction” (UNHCR, 2012). In addition, providing higher education opportunities for refugees has the potential to limit the socio-economic burden for hosting countries, as the economic and social benefits facilitated by higher education (OECD 2012).

### **2.3. Socio-cultural Theories of Learning: Pedagogical Perspectives**

Examining the challenges faced by refugee students helps to understand how teaching- learning practice impact on the learning of students from different socio-cultural backgrounds. According to the socio-cultural theory of learning, teaching and learning are shaped by social and cultural context of learning environment as well as by the complex human activity within them at a particular point in time (Wang 2007; Fahim and Haghani 2012).

In light of refugees’ experiences in higher education institutions, the theories explain the link between the condition of the new learning environment and previous educational experience, and the cultural and social backgrounds of specific students for facilitating or obstructing learning. They are helpful in understanding the kinds of difficulties that refugee students report in their new learning environments.

An individual's personal, social, cultural, economic and political experiences will shape his/her knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, language, identity and even thinking, and this applies to both learners and teachers (Arenas 2009). Teachers' background beliefs and assumptions also influence their teaching practices, including sometimes in a negative way. On the other hand, the socio-cultural theory of learning helps to broadly discuss the issue in terms of various dimensions rather than a single box and creates the chance to explore the type of difficulties that refugees report and the challenges involved in addressing these issues in practice.

### **2.3.1. Socio-cultural Theory of Learning and Culturally Responsive Teaching**

According to Lin and Scherz (2014:17), "cultural responsiveness reflects the awareness of an individual to variances within cognition, behavior, language, and education among individuals who have differing racial, ethnic, social, gender, linguistic, religious, political, or other backgrounds and experiences". Different studies also noted that culturally responsive teaching includes different characteristics including valuing and respecting diversity, managing the dynamics of difference assessing and using cultural knowledge and background of students as well as institutionalizing cultural knowledge to facilitate student learning (Ariza 2010; Terrell and Lindsey 2009).

Collier (2011) also stated that four key elements of cultural change (behavior, language, cognitive development, and education) were based on the influences and interactions of both internal and external circumstances. For this reason scholars argued that teachers must be knowledgeable of the cultural characteristics of their students and understand how culture affects learning and teaching (Gay 2000).

Instructors' self-knowledge, knowledge of their local community, and knowledge of their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds are essential foundations for culturally responsive teaching. According to Lin and Scherz (2014:18), instructors "who 'think pedagogically' about diversity are able to build a practice that is both academically challenging and [culturally] responsive to students".

Culturally responsive instructors are empowered to integrate students' learning styles, learning expectations, and academic strengths into an inclusive learning environment for all students. For instance, in the case of international student, instructors can adjust their teaching methods and

assessments so as to be inclusive for diversified group (Lin and Scherz 2014). At the same time, domestic students also benefit.

On the other hand, socio-cultural theory of learning views learners as cultural and historical beings embedded in social relationships and process (Lim and Renshaw 2001; Wang 2007). It also holds much promise for the creation of a culturally inclusive society. Hence, socio-cultural theory of learning can be considered as an alternative educational pedagogy in teaching culturally diverse groups. The need for recognition of individual differences is not only in terms of culture but also in language; evidences confirmed the link between lack of language proficiency and isolation (Femton-Smith et al 2017).

### **2.3.2. Socio-cultural Theory of Learning and Student-Centered Approach**

Students who are exposed to and engaged in varying experiences and interactions are more likely to develop different experience such as cultural, linguistic, and academic (Dole et al. 2016). By employing a student centered approach teachers can create an inclusive context while facilitating processes, resources, and content. Students, on the other hand, are encouraged to articulate their own goals for learning and are actively engaged in the learning process. They construct knowledge, synthesize information, develop essential questions, and work collaboratively with others.

According to Huba and Freed (2000), in student centered approach “learners make sense of course material and develop a deeper understanding than they would if they passively listened to a lecture”. Additionally, instructors and students, as co-managers of learning, share the joint responsibility of generating learning opportunities in class. In contrast, others argued that student centered approach might be challenged in a situation where students have not been introduced to it in primary and secondary school (McCabe and O'Connor 2014).

It is clear that the socio-cultural learning theories take a student-centered approach. Rather than viewing students as individuals, it considers the role of social relations, community and culture in cognition and learning (Lim and Renshaw 2001). The core idea in socio-cultural theories is the idea that “learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world” (Arkoudis 2006).



In light of the refugees, learner-centered approaches to teaching and assessment are promoted in socio-cultural learning theory; these approaches must be carefully structured for the inclusion of refugees. Hence, by centering the learners in the learning process, refugee and international students will be empowered to bring their various experiences as a member of a larger global community. And hence, a student centered approach is becoming a means to create a culturally and linguistically inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students (Arkoudis 2006).

### **2.3.3. Socio-cultural Theory of Learning and Assessment**

Measuring students' knowledge and level of understanding is the major function of assessment in higher education institutions (Bailey and 2010). A teacher needs to continuously measure students' interests, goal orientations and level of understanding, based on which the teacher may plan future lessons and provide differentiated adaptive intervention. The main purpose of formative assessment can be summarized into two aspects: it helps to inform the teacher how to plan lessons based on students' needs, and to inform the students of the learning targets and how to achieve the expected learning goals (Yorke 2003).

In light of refugees in higher education, diversified assessment methods may also account for cultural diversity and individual characteristics. Students from a particular culture may be more used to certain types of assessment, and diversified assessment may help them appreciate other types of assessment and understand their performance better (Hudson 2009). Informal assessment through teacher observation and teacher–student interaction, and intermittent assessments (assignments, quizzes) help teachers to determine and clarify the learning targets, and guide students to meet expectations.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the argument is that a formative type of assessment is of great value to the students. Hence, assessment is considered as an interactive process in which teachers and peers support students so as to use their potential for the next step in their learning (Sardareh and Saad 2012). Refugees and international students are especially dependent on feedback to identify whether or not they are on the right track and if not, what steps to take to get there. Feedback on what has been done well is also useful. Feedback is more likely to be useful if it links to examples of good work, suggests sources for additional language/skill support, models

other ways in which the student might have addressed an issue, and/or provides specific criticism on one aspect of the work (along with a suggestion for its improvement) (Duhs 2010),

#### **2.4. Approaches in Coping Strategies**

Cockerhan and Ritchey (1997:167) explain coping and behavior as “processes by which individuals appraise and respond to social and environmental sources of stress in an effort to reduce the difficulties induced by those stressors so as to reduce or prevent stress”. On the other hand, different research has been conducted to contextualize the issue coping strategies from of cross-cultural adoption perspective. The main emphasis has been the cross cultural experience, whether to consider cross cultural adaptation as stressful and undesirable or a process of facilitating learning. In explaining what cross-cultural adaptation includes Kim (1988:31) defined cross –cultural adaptation as:

The dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments.

According to the above definition the focus should be on the communication between individuals and host environment and hence, both the host and the individual influence each other reciprocally (Zhou et al. 2008). On the other hand, the dynamic process of cross-cultural adaptation may result in both pleasant and unpleasant outcomes based on the communication between the two actors.

Early research on a “*cultural shock*” (model) from a psychological angle focused on the negative effect of cross-cultural experiences on individuals’ mental health. According to Oberg (1960:177), cultural shock refers to an “anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse”.

Another model, i.e. social skill model, suggests that coping model may include positive outcomes by motivating skill-learning responses. According to this model, cross cultural adaptations help a student to develop language and communicative skills as well as learning appropriate behaviors (Ward 2008). A number of factors which influence cultural adjustment

were identified such as host culture, past experience with cross-cultural relocation and amount of interaction with host nationals (*ibid*).

The third model is the stress and coping model. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provide an approach of more relevance to the current study for understanding learning experience . In many studies, this model was applied to examine the response to stress by international students. Needless to say, the level of stress faced and the copying styles adopted by individuals differ based on the individual philosophy appraisal of the situation as well as the availability of resources. According to Zhou et al. (2008), students who face a number of challenges need to be resilient, adapt, and develop coping strategies and tactics. The theoretical argument here is that cross-cultural travelers develop their own coping strategies to deal with various challenges.

## **2.5. Analytical Framework**

### **2.5.1. Why Socio-cultural Theories of Learning and Coping Mechanism**

In examining students' learning experience in higher education, different analytical frameworks have been employed by different scholars. Some studies which focus on the aspects of teaching and learning are often underpinning the role of power to examine the social, cultural and economic structure issues (Sawir et al. 2008; Robinson-Pant 2009). As such, they explore students' learning experience using ethnography which gives much emphasis on the experience of international student 'life world' (Sawir et al. 2008). Others employed an identity perspective and hence, they employed the theory of social identity and analyzed the impact of international study on one's identity formation (Robinson-Pant 2009).

Moreover, intercultural and cross cultural communication theories are often used to examine the ways that personal relationships and knowledge are shaped and changed by culture and cultural interactions (Chen et al. 1998). Some studies examine the power relationships between teachers and international students, using theories and methods such as critical pedagogy, discourse analysis, or postcolonial theories to examine international education as an exercise in hegemony (Madge et al. 2009).

In general, based on their own preference, scholars use different theories as analytical framework to examine the experience of international students in different part of the world. However, these analytical frameworks are less appropriate for the study under investigation. This is because the theories give less emphasis to the learning experience of marginalized groups. They assume homogeneity of students and hence, they are less relevant as learners' cohorts become more diverse.

In contrary, socio-cultural theory of learning offers a more appropriate framework for this study. Thus, in light of the specific objectives of the research two relevant and interrelated theories have been selected as analytical framework for this research: Socio-cultural theory of learning and coping model. In light of refugees' experience in higher education institutions, the theories explain the link between the condition of the new learning environment and previous educational experience and the cultural and social background of students for facilitating or obstructing learning. They are helpful in understanding the kinds of difficulties that refugee students report in their new learning environments.

### **2.5.2. Socio-cultural Theories of Learning**

Vygotsky is the scholar behind this theory. He explains that “learning is embedded within social events and social interaction plays a fundamental role in the improvement of learning” (Wang 2007:151). Vygotsky also defined learning in terms of what individual is able to do with the help of another person (*ibid*). According to socio-cultural theory of learning knowledge is the outcome of social interaction and thus, a learner's environment plays an important role in learning. Fahim and Haghani (2012) also stated that learning is thought of as a social event taking place as a result of interaction between the students and the environment.

In its initial stage this theory focuses on three interrelated ideas. Firstly, “cognitive development, including higher-order learning, is rooted in social interactions and mediated by abstract symbols, which he referred to as tools” (John-Steiner and Mahn 1996:192). Secondly, “Vygotsky asserted that these tools are not created in isolation but rather are products of the sociocultural evolution of an actively involved individual” (John-Steiner and Mahn 1996:192). And thirdly, learning viewed as a developmental or genetic process (*ibid*). Hence, in any environment learning experience should make the student stretch to meet high expectations.

Establishing a positive relationship between students and faculty is important in facilitating learning and hence, pedagogical strategies are relevant to this outcome (Wang 2007; Fahim and Haghani 2012). In light of refugee students the assumption is that without support a refugee student's development is unlikely to reach full potential. Thus, the university must provide proper support so that students can interact with other students and faculty members to reach the highest level of development. It is also important to note that the socio-cultural theory of learning can help teachers to focus on individual differences among students (in these case refugees) rather than thinking about students as a homogenous group. In the case of exploring the challenges faced by refugee students the core concepts of socio-cultural theory of learning, which are relevant to study, can be summarized in the following points:

Firstly the individual factor: language is not only a tool of communication rather it is where teachers direct students to meaning and definitions that are specific for that subject (Poehner and Lantolf 2014; Wang 2007). In this regard, it helps refugee students to communicate with and understand domestic students and teachers. The socio-cultural theory helps to understand challenges related to language.

Secondly, cultural-historical factors: the socio-cultural theory explains learning as embedded in a social and cultural context. The assumption is that the mind is shaped and influenced by culture and history (Poehner and Lantolf 2014; Havnes et al. 2016). Hence, the theory can help to explore the challenges related to the new environments for refugees and how it can relate to learning.

Thirdly, social (interpersonal) factors: socio-cultural theory focuses on the relevance of interaction (Lantolf 2000; Havnes et al. 2016). The assumption is that students are fundamentally changed by experience. Thus, in order to examine refugee students' experience of learning it is important to go beyond the classroom walls and explore how other factors affects the students learning experience.

### **2.5.3. Coping Mechanism**

According to Baqutayan (2015:484) "coping can be defined as the ways that people respond to and interact with problem situation". The coping model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1986), was based on specific efforts that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize

stressful situations. Scholars differentiated two general coping strategies. Firstly, problem-solving strategies: what students do actively to alleviate stressful circumstances. Secondly, an emotion-focused coping strategy; focuses on efforts to regulate the emotional outcomes of stressful events (Lazarus et al. 1986; Folkman 2013).

Hence, this coping model included two categories of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. In this regard, different types of coping mechanism were developed (Lazarus et al. 1986). Confrontative coping and seeking social support are among types of problem-focused coping strategy. This type of coping model enhances a feeling of control and reduces stress by considering that the conditions can be changed (Baqtayan 2015). It also requires using different mechanisms to deal with a problem at hand.

Emotion-focused coping includes distancing, positive appraisal, self-control, accepting responsibility and escape/avoidance (Baqtayan 2015). This type of coping focuses on managing all types of emotional distress including anger, anxiety and depression. Here it is important to note that students can use both emotion focused and problem-solving strategies to combat most stressful events.

Different research has been conducted to contextualize the issue of coping strategies in different fields. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, refugee students may encounter different challenges and difficulties in a new environment. At the same time in addressing certain challenges the refugee students would adopt different coping strategies. Accordingly, their strategies may be influenced by a number of personal and environmental factors. Hence, in light of the specific objective of this study the emphasis is to explore how a refugee student develops his/her own coping strategies to address certain challenges.

#### **2.5.4. Relationship between the Two Theories?**

In exploring the challenges related to learning experiences, examining the issue from a socio-cultural theory perspective is very important. Coping strategies are also more convenient to understand how refugee students deal with the challenges they encountered. Hence, socio-cultural theory and coping strategies support each other and their combination can be more relevant for getting a fuller understanding of the issue. As has been discussed, refugee students

experienced some challenges and such stressful experience can be examined using socio-cultural theory, which takes into account the students' background and the environment in which they are studying. On the other hand, coping focuses on how refugee students develop coping strategies to deal with the challenges. In short, by using the socio-cultural theory of learning and coping strategies as analytical framework, this study examines the challenges faced by refugees and their coping strategies towards the challenges. Both theories can usefully explain the nature of the challenges.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Methodology and Methods**

In order to achieve the specific research objectives a qualitative research method was employed. Primary data was collected from refugee students and key informants. In addition to this, secondary data was collected from concerned bodies: communication director of Mekelle University, UNHCR and Ministry of Education and Immigration Office. This chapter presents research strategies, methods, and selection of research participants as well as the practical experiences on how data were collected.

#### **3.1. Research Design**

Taking into account the objective this study, a case study is an appropriate research design. As stated by Bryman (2012) the focus of case study is examining a limited number and specific issue in a very detailed way. Likewise, this research also focuses on very limited number of refugees with objective of examining their learning experience. According to Yin (1994), cause study is more appropriate for answering questions that start with ‘why’ and ‘how’. This research focuses on the issue of how refugee characterizes the challenges related to their learning experience. However, for many scholars one of the critics against case study research is the finding of the research cannot be generalized, which is one of the limitation of this research.

The study is guided by interpretivism<sup>9</sup> epistemologies world view. According to Mason (2005:1), through a qualitative research methodology “it is possible to explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world and the weave of everyday life as well as experience”. Qualitative research generates a detailed explanation about specific issues, which is impossible to obtain through

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<sup>9</sup> Selecting the right research philosophy is an important part of the research methodology. This is because the philosophical perspective or our world view guides the investigation (Guba and Lincoln 1982). It also defines philosophical paradigm. Hence, the two research questions: exploring the learning experience and coping strategy were guided by interpretivism epistemologies. Interpretivism focuses on the social role of individual in accordance with our own interpretation. As stated by Rowlands (2005), a qualitative research methodology requires interacting with individuals in order to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality.



other research strategies (Slote et al. 2005:1376). Therefore, it is clear that qualitative methods are important for exploring topics in a particular context. Qualitative methods can help to understand and interpret refugee student's hope, experience and coping that would not have been easily handled by statistical procedures.

The research tried to answer two interrelated specific questions. First exploring the lived experience of refugees in higher education and secondly, exploring the strategies employed by refugee students to address the challenges. The study gives much emphasis to exploring the social phenomena from the refugee student's perspective. Thus, attempts have been made to capture multiple realities by collecting in-depth data. Primary data were collected from both refugee students and key informants. In addition, documents, reports, books and academic literatures were analyzed. The data that was collected via various instruments were analyzed systematically in order to increase, credibility, validity of the research finding.

### **3.2. Respondents Selection Method**

In qualitative research the number of research participants can be small (Slote et al. 2005). According Dawson (2007:34), "for many qualitative researchers, the ability to generalize their work to the whole research population is not the goal. Instead, they seek to describe or explain what is happening within a smaller group of people". Consequently, the goal is not to generalize findings, but rather, to provide an in-depth view on the topic. Considering this the researcher decided the number of research participants based on the data collected from research participants.

In selecting research participants the researcher employed purposive sampling system. According to Kotheri (2004:59), in purposive sampling "items for the sample are selected deliberately by the researcher; his choice concerning the items remains supreme". Three groups were identified. Firstly, refugee student participants, attempts were made to combine senior and first year students. To this end 12 refugee students were interviewed. Taking into account gender issues 5 female and 7 male research participants were interviewed.

In relation to the country of origin equal quota were given to Eritrea (4) Somalia (4) and South Sudan (4). For the purpose data consistency all research participants are from Mekelle

University's College of natural science. Secondly, academic staffs; in selecting academic staffs the number of refugees in their classroom was taken into account. And thirdly, administrative staffs of the university were interviewed. All refugee students who participated in this research were higher education students. The research participants were from year one to year three.

### **3.3. Data Collection Tools**

#### **3.3.1. In-depth Interview**

According to Mack (2005), in-depth interviews are useful for exploring experiences and individual perspectives. Thus, in-depth interviews were employed to explore a thorough understanding of personal learning experiences of refugee students. Data was collected through in-depth interviews from the students of Eritrea, Somalia and South Sudan. During the in-depth interviews the main objectives of the study were explained to research participants. In addition, arrangements of time, comfortable place, and securing confidentiality were assured by the researcher.

#### **3.3.2. Key Informant Interviews**

Collecting adequate qualitative data requires that research participants should be pre-selected based on their professional background, knowledge, and experience (Flick et al. 2000:10). In light of the goal of the research different key informants were interviewed. As has been mentioned, in selecting teachers the numbers of refugee students in their class were considered. Thus, key informants interview was employed as an instrument to collect data. Academic staffs, department head, student service dean were interviewed.

#### **3.3.3. Document Analysis**

In addition to in-depth interviews and key-informant interviews, document analysis was employed. As stated by Bowen (2009:29) "document can provide background information and broad coverage of data, and are therefore helpful in contextualizing one's research within its subject". In this regard, document analysis was employed to support data collected via in-depth interviews. Reports from UNHCR as well as international human rights instruments were selected because of their supportive role in displaying facts and figures.

In general, by using different data collection tools; in-depth interview, key-informant interview and document analysis an attempt was made to triangulate data. According to Bryman (2012), there are four ways to ensure the validity of any document: the credibility of the evidence, the representativeness, and the legitimacy of the origins and clarity of the documents, these criteria were considered in examining documents for this research. Internationally recognized legal documents related to refugee rights (legitimacy) and latest reports from the United Nations about refugees also served as a source of data.

### **3.4. Research Site: Mekelle University**

Mekelle University locates in the north part of Ethiopia, Tigray Regional State. The university is one of the largest and oldest universities in Ethiopia. The university has 5 campuses, with two more under construction within the capital city of Tigray Regional State. According to the data from the university, it has 7 colleges, 8 institutes, and 90 undergraduate and 70 postgraduate programs. The student intake capacity of the university has reached 31,000.

### **3.5. Validity and Reliability**

#### **3.5.1. Validity**

In developing interview guidelines attempts have been made to use specific research questions as a base. Moreover, using the purposive sampling method refugee research participants were selected and hence, it helps to enhance the validity of the study. According to Bryman (2012), participant's response validation is crucial in qualitative research. To this end, the researcher has provided refugee research participants with the early findings of study or the summary of the study. This helped the participants to ensure that what they said was written in a very responsible manner. The tools employed to collect data from participants were successful in producing data which were examined through the analytical framework of the research. The selection of tools was basically to achieve the main objective of the research by collecting data using appropriate methods.

### **3.5.2. Reliability**

Reliability is another important aspect of qualitative research. It is clear that reliability in quantitative research is very different than in qualitative research. According to Nobel et al. (2015:2) “Reliability is achieved when truth value, consistency and applicability have been addressed. Centers on acknowledging the complexity of prolonged engagement with participants and that the methods undertaken and findings are intrinsically linked to the researchers’ philosophical position, experiences and perspectives”. Bryman (2012) also noted that in qualitative research reliability all about trustworthiness of research. To this end, before the actual interview the process of data collection was clarified. During investigation data were well documented, which enhances reliability of the study.

### **3.6. Ethical Considerations**

In a qualitative research, ensuring the voluntary approval of human subjects is absolutely essential. Ensuring the willingness of all research participants was given high priority in interviewing refugee student’s research participant. In addition, the purpose of the research was explained to all research participants so as to ensure the consent of research participants.

In order to ensure the rights of research participants; refugee research participants were informed that they have the right to withdraw from the research any time. Attempts also made to ensure the confidentiality of their comments by not disclosing participant’s background.

### **3.7. The Practice: How were the Interviews Conducted?**

Before the actual interview, the researcher visited Mekelle University, classroom, student council office and all the facilities in the university. The objective of the visit was to get a general overview about the learning environment. This visit also helped the researcher to establish some links with concerned bodies. The next important step was identifying refugee research participants, with the help of the college dean and the academic vice president of Mekelle University, the researcher identified refugee students in the university.

After identifying the research participants the researcher had to spend much time with students before the actual interview. This helped the researcher to create a very positive relationship with

refugee research participants. Then the researcher selected an appropriate place for each interview. The interview guides were arranged by taking into account the research questions of the study, analytical framework as well as literature reviews. The researcher briefed refugee students about the objective research and confidentiality of the data. The researcher assured them that they have absolute right to withdraw from the study. After the general information, participants signed in the consent sheet prepared by researcher.

In light of the research questions, the researcher was able to start with a very general questions and flexible in-depth interviews to explore the challenges. Some of the introductory questions focused on the overall journey of refugees. Hence, the warm-up questions and informal discussions with refugee students contributed an important role in the process of winning the confidence of refugee research participants. After winning the confidence questions related with challenges were raised. Each interview with refugee students lasted between 60 and 100 minutes.

When refugee research participants felt bored attempts were made to change some topics for refreshment. In some points the researcher allowed refugees to talk about the experience of their friends. In exploring the challenges the researcher was expecting challenges more with the classroom, in contrary refugee research participants believed certain challenges that happened outside of the classroom affect the learning experience. To this end, the researcher was forced to be more flexible and let the participants discuss the challenges in their own words.

The data that was collected via various instruments were analyzed systematically in order to increase, credibility, and validity of the research finding. The researcher recorded and at some point made notes at the time of field observation and interview. After changing the records to note, the researcher read the interview, which helped in the analytical process. After reading several times, the researcher translated the Tigrigna version to English. Then identified the keywords used by research participants. In light of the research questions the researcher then clustered different sub-topics into main topics.

In general, during the investigation the researcher faced certain challenges. Firstly, the researcher was focusing on issues related to classroom activities and how they affect student's learning experiences. During the interview a number of challenges were raised by refugee students. To this end, an attempt has been made to include what refugees perceived as a challenge rather than

literature based assumptions. The researcher focused on the voices of refugee students. The other challenge was a lack of accurate data about the number of refugees in Ethiopian higher education institutions. Data from Ministry of Education and UNHCR discloses the general number of refugees who enrolled in Ethiopian higher education institutions, without specifically mentioning the number assigned to each university.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Presentation of Findings**

This chapter presents the main findings of the study about the learning experience of refugee students at Mekelle University and their coping strategies on the challenges. This chapter is divided into four major parts. First, a brief explanation of refugees' desperate journey and how they came to Ethiopia is presented. Second, how they got the historic chance of access to higher education and their hope. Third, it examines challenges encountered by refugees in their learning experience at Mekelle University. Consequently, the fourth part deals with the coping strategies employed by refugee students to address certain challenges.

#### **4.1. The General Background of the Research Participants**

As part of introductory questions refugee students were briefly asked why they left their country. South Sudan refugees noted that the ongoing conflict among political parties is the main cause for leaving the new nation in the Horn of Africa. On the other hand, Eritrean refugees confirmed that the undemocratic nature of the government coupled with the forceful and limitless military service forced them to leave their home country. Research participants from the Republic of Somalia also stated the absence of peace and terrorist threat as the main factor for leaving their country. Some Somali interviewees also unveiled that drought is the source of displacement in their country. Data collected from the interviewees reveals also that they have less contact with their family. All in all, for a better hope thousands of refugees from the three countries are living in one of the stable nations in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia.

#### **4.2. The Journeys: From Refugee Camp to Higher Education Institution**

The Republic of Somalia was one of the stable countries in the Horn of Africa during the regime of Siad Barre. As discussed in the background part of this research, the first major displacement occurred after the collapse of the regime in 1991 (Harper 2012).<sup>10</sup> After that life became tough for the people of Somalia. Information collected via the in-depth interviews shows that the

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<sup>10</sup> Afterward, Somalia became the well-known country with a protracted war and displaced population in Africa. In 1970s different factors contribute to the huge displacement of Somalian: internal conflict, natural disaster, and economic hardship are among the major ones (Harper 2012; Dersso 2009).

conflict between the terrorist group called Al-Shabaab and the government is one of the main factors for the major displacement. One Somalia refugee interviewee said the following:

In my home city, there was always a war between the government and the terrorist group. The government controlled the city for some period but again the terrorist groups took it after some months and implemented their own law. In such situation, it was very difficult to live in my home country. So I have decided to come to Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup>

Somalia refugee interviewees also disclosed that the journey towards Ethiopia was very tough and faced some challenges. Some of them were forced to travel for weeks without having enough food and water. To have a clear image about their past life attempts also were made to understand what it seems living in a refugee camp. Life in refugee camps (in Ethiopia) was not as they expected. According to the research participants, inadequate rations and certain diseases were common in one of the biggest refugee camp in the world (Dollo refugee camp) with more than 200,000 refugees:

Living in a refugee camp was very difficult. Without any hope, we were living there. No job, no family contact just living. Hopeless... I cannot imagine the psychological impact of being idle. Depression was common and some of my friends become drug addicted.

Similarly, the reports from the United Nations indicated that up to 6000 people leave Eritrea each month (UNHCR 2017). Most of them remain in Ethiopia and Sudan, with limited numbers destined to Europe. As has been discussed, reports of international organizations show that the forceful national military service for all adults age 18-50 is the main reason for leaving Eritrea.<sup>12</sup> Refugee interviewees from Eritrea, broadly stated that they are trying to find a solution via seeking asylum in one of the horn of Africa countries, Ethiopia. Unlike refugees from Somali and South Sudan, Eritrean refugees leave their homeland illegally. As such, they are victims of smugglers who engaged in human trafficking:

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<sup>11</sup> Informant 5: Somalian Refugee

<sup>12</sup> According to Berhane and Tyyska (2017), lack of freedom, drought, famine and inadequate government services are also among the main contributory factors underpinning their decision to move.



During our journey to Ethiopia, some of my friends were raped by smugglers. I was also asked to pay money for the smugglers. Lucky enough my brother who is living in USA paid all the money. It was common to see people captured by the military. The punishment for such attempt is very serious.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the research participants also said that they assume Ethiopia as a transit to Europe and America. However, due to the high number of refugees in the camp, the process to the USA through the support of the American government was suspended. As such, thousands of Eritrean refugees are still in refugee camps for so many years without exactly knowing their future life. Female research participants also disclosed the sexual harassment faced during their journey to Ethiopia:

During our journey, those people who agreed to transfer us from the border of Eritrea to Ethiopia forced my friends to have sex with them. They had no option. It's very tough to remember what happened to my friends. The journey was very dangerous, traveling without adequate food and water for weeks.<sup>14</sup>

Coming to the third nation, the crisis in the youngest nation in the world South Sudan is becoming the most complex emergency in the Horn of Africa, and 1.7 million people have fled the country (Macharia et al 2017).<sup>15</sup> The prevalence of extreme hunger coupled with lack of security in South Sudan disrupted the livelihoods of the people of the new nation. Consequently, the people of South Sudan continue to seek asylum in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda. On the other hand, evidence from interviewees confirmed that the inadequate facilities in the camp coupled with inadequate food and water make it difficult to live in refugee camps:

Living in the camp was very difficult for me. I understand that moving from the conflict area (South Sudan) was the right decision. However, we have no clue when will the conflict stop. My families are still in refugee camps without hope.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Informant 1: Eritrean

<sup>14</sup> Informant 2: Eritrea

<sup>15</sup> In 2016, from the overall population of South Sudan around 6.5 million people are food insecure and 4.6 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance (UNICEF 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Informant 12: South Sudan

Reports from United Nations also indicated that there are some breaches in terms of realizing refugee rights in the camps. Considering the seriousness of the problem the United Nations raised several issues regarding refugee's right to access to education (UNHCR 2017). As explained by refugees the challenges of refugees were not only during their journey to Ethiopia it was also in refugee camps.

To conclude, the above evidence collected from research participants briefly explains their experience during their journey to Ethiopia and in the refugee camps. From the socio-cultural theory of learning perspective, the social background of students greatly influences the possibilities of using one's abilities to achieve the desired result. Thus, the overview of their journey reveals how refugee interviewees have a different background and experience in comparison with regular Ethiopian students. In the next section an attempt is made to explore refugees' hope and barriers to accessing higher education.

#### **4.3. Towards a Better Hope: Historic Access and Hope**

*“Education is the Only Hope”*

During the investigation the researcher examined how refugees got information about the access to higher education and what were the challenges in this. For refugees from the three countries, one of first steps to access to Ethiopian higher education is that they need to get the status of “refugee”, which is investigated by the federal government of Ethiopia. In order to get admission/scholarship into a degree program, refugees from the three countries must discharge certain criteria's such as; the recognition of their school documents, including school leaving qualification and certificates.

The examination of these documents is done primarily by the Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA<sup>17</sup>). The office cross-checks whether the secondary school certificate is recognized as qualified for general admission to Ethiopian university. Afterwards, there is an entry exam and thus, those refugees with the best result join Ethiopian higher education institutions. For example data collected from key-informants (Mekelle University Vice President Office) shows the following number of refugees were accepted in the year 2017/18.

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<sup>17</sup> A federal government office of Ethiopia working with refugees

Undergraduate Students:

Undergraduate Students			
College	Eritrea	Somalia	South Sudan
College of Business and Economics	3	4	-
College of Agriculture	1	-	-
College of Health Science	10	11	1
College of Law and Governance	1	1	1
College of Natural and Computational Sciences	-	3	-
College of Social Sciences and Languages	1	1	.
Ethiopian Institute of Technology	5	4	4
Total	20	24	06

Source: Mekelle University 2018.

Postgraduate Students			
College	Eritrea	Somalia	South Sudan
College of Health Science		2	
College of Law and Governance	-	1	
Social Science Sciences and Languages	-	1	.
Ethiopian Institute of Technology	-	4	
Total		08	

Source: Mekelle University 2018.

But the important question is: What were the barriers before getting the admission? Three interrelated factors were explored by the researcher: Lack of information and coordination, absence of documentation, as well as limited chances. The finding of the study indicated that one of the main problems during the initial stage of access to the Ethiopian higher education institution is lack of adequate information with regard to the scholarship opportunities. For

refugees from South Sudan, one of the reasons for such barrier is that the camp is located in rural areas of the country and hence, it was very difficult to get information:

I was not aware of the scholarship. Suddenly a volunteer who worked for international organization in the refugee camp informed me about the scholarship. Honestly, I didn't expect such kind scholarship from Ethiopia. I'm very thankful.<sup>18</sup>

Another refugee student from Eritria said the following:

A friend of mine whom I knew at Asmara, who have joined Mekelle University before five years helped me a lot in the process of joining the university ... he shared with me all his experiences, all the challenges and the strong sides of life at Ethiopian higher educational institution.<sup>19</sup>

This indicates that information from ARRA, the UNHCR and friends who previously joined the university are among the sources of information about access to higher education. As mentioned earlier, the second challenge is lack of documentation. In this regard, an Eritrean refugee revealed that absence of a school leaving certificate prevents many of his/her friends from applying to the scholarship. One of the reasons for not having a secondary school document is the nature of the government, when they leave the country they don't want let to know others:

It was very difficult to bring a school certificate. When we leave Eritrea we have to keep secret. If anyone is aware about our plan of leaving the nation, there will be serious consequences; like ended up in prison. Due to this no one is thinking about brining school certificate, which requires formal application.<sup>20</sup>

The third major challenge is limited access opportunities to higher education, often being seen as a luxury. As it has been mentioned, so far 2,386 refugees joined Ethiopian higher institutions. On the other hand, Ethiopia is home to the second largest refugee operation in Africa with more than

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<sup>18</sup> Informant 9 South Sudan

<sup>19</sup> Informant 3 Eritrea

<sup>20</sup> Informant 4 Eritrean

855,000 refugees from Yemen, Eritrea, South Sudan and Somalia. Needless to say, the demand for scholarships remains significantly higher than what is provided.<sup>21</sup>

Still, after passing the challenges some refugees got the historic access to higher education. To this end, interviewees were asked about their hopes. The study showed that for some refugees the access to higher education motivated them to have a hope in life and to think about their future. One research participant said the following:

After such terrible experience I'm studying at university to become professional. This is one of the best opportunities in my life. It helps me to have a hope in my life, one day I want to go back to my country to contribute my own share for the development of my society.<sup>22</sup>

A similar story from other research participants shows how education restores their hope. An interviewee from Somalia explained the benefits of enrolling in Ethiopian higher education institutions from a psychological perspective. It helps him to focus on education and hence, he emphasizes the therapeutic value of access to higher education. As has been discussed in the previous section, in their journey to Ethiopia refugee research participants faced a number of challenges, however, this chance helps them to restore their hope. It is important to keep in mind that the importance of higher education for refugees was highlighted in international human rights instruments.<sup>23</sup> Apart from the entry barriers and perceived benefits explained in the above discussion, refugee research participants stated that they face multiple challenges in their enrollment in Ethiopian higher education institutions. To this end, in the next section the practical obstacles encountered in their learning experiences are discussed.

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<sup>21</sup> Globally, despite the recognitions in human rights instruments and psychological benefits of higher education for refugees, the report of international organization shows that only 1% of refugee youth worldwide are enrolled in higher education institutions

<sup>22</sup> Informant 7 Somalia

<sup>23</sup> Apart from the story of research participants, the importance of access to higher education, vividly explained in a number of human rights declarations as well as treaties: in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 13), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 28) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26). On the other hand, providing access to higher education for refugees can create an opportunity to bridge gap between the emergency responses and sustainable development. Thus, the benefits can be summarized as protection and sustainable development.

#### **4.4. Learning Experience: Exploring the Challenges**

In the previous sections, the journeys of refugees and access to higher education were presented briefly. Education for refugees can help to build confidence and to provide them with skills and knowledge to benefit their origin and host state.<sup>24</sup> Report of UNHCR (2012) indicated that studies at a higher education institution endow refugees with the knowledge and skills to contribute to the community as role models and to transfer these benefits in turn to their communities through employment in fields which enable them to have a lasting impact upon reconstruction and sustainable development in the refugee community and their country (*ibid*).

From a socio-cultural theory of learning perspective, a learner's environment plays a vital role in the teaching-learning practice. Examining the challenges can help to have a clear perspective in developing mechanisms for solving the barriers. Hence, this section focuses on exploring the challenges encountered by refugees in their learning experience at Mekelle University.

##### **4.4.1. Language Barriers**

It is clear that the students' prior language level has an influential impact on their learning, thinking, and performance (Fenton-Smith et al. 2017). From the socio-cultural theory of learning perspective, language is more than a tool of communication where teachers directed students to meaning and definition that are particular for that subject. The study shows that refugee students experienced different challenges such as academic, social and cultural challenges. These challenges are intertwined with language barriers. Interviewees from the three countries have different experiences in relation to language. Eritrean refugees stated that they encountered language barrier because teachers taught them either in English or *Amharic*<sup>25</sup>.

For many of us including Ethiopian students English is not our first language, so it is very difficult. The professors are aware of this challenge and hence, they use local

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<sup>24</sup> Higher education can endow refugees with skill to contribute to the host state through employment. They can also use their knowledge in their return to home in rebuilding and reconstruction their home state.

<sup>25</sup> Working language of the federal government of Ethiopia

language (Amharic) to explain certain issues. While this is very good for Ethiopian students, for us it is tough.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, Eritrean refugees explain that in their relation with local students they use their own language. “Outside of the classroom, we speak our own language, i.e. *Tigrigna*<sup>27</sup>” a working language of the region in which the university locates. Hence, they successfully find friends from Ethiopia who speak the same language:

Contrary to Eritrean refugees, the South Sudan and Somalia refugees face the challenge in classroom and outside the classroom. Although some of the refugees had been living in Ethiopia at least 6 years, they are still struggling with Amharic. According to one interviewee, these challenges affect their social interaction with the students in working on an assignment and thus, hampered their academic performance. Especially in working with a group of students, while Ethiopian students help each other and discuss in Amharic, the refugee student had to devote more time to internalizing the study materials. During the interview, one research participant from South Sudan said the following:

The challenge is not limited to lecture from the professors, it goes beyond that. Some of the instructions or explanations about exam, assignment and group work are explained by local language (Amharic). Even during group discussion, students prefer to discuss by their own language i.e. Amharic.<sup>28</sup>

The same is true with English; the interviewees indicated that they have some difficulties in explaining their view in a very clear manner. In general, all refugee interviewees revealed that it is very difficult for them to participate in classroom discussions for a number of reasons. While the medium of instruction is English, local students prefer to discuss in Amharic. The interviewees indicated that they had to follow the discussion contextually and face challenges to contribute to the discussion. According to a refugee from Somalia:

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<sup>26</sup> Informant 3 Eritrea

<sup>27</sup> Working language of Tigray Regional State as well as National Language of Eritrea

<sup>28</sup> Informant 10 South-Sudan

The challenge is not only English, Amharic is also the main barrier and hence, it is very difficult to participate and contribute orally to the conversation. Only a few students understand what we are facing during the discussion.<sup>29</sup>

As explained by interviewees, with regard to teachers' usage of language the students stated that when some of the content of the subject is not clear they prefer to explain it in Amharic, which often affect their motivation to participate and attentively listen to the lectures. A research participant from South Sudan said the following:

When students ask some questions for further explanation, the professors thought the source of the problem is language as such they switch to the local language i.e. Amharic<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, findings from other research participants indicated that the students believe that the challenge of language in the classroom affects refugee students' comprehension of the subject matter. It also affects students' participation and motivation. During the interview the refugee students also argued that unlike other students they allocate more time to accomplish some academic tasks. Data collected via key informant interviews shows that the teachers recognize the prevalence of such challenges: a teacher from the department of civics and ethics said the following:

Language is the major challenge in teaching refugee students at our university. I have been teaching, Civics and Ethics for couple of year. I met with dozens of refugee students accordingly. Most of the refugee students hardly speak Amharic and English languages. It is very difficult to communicate with these refugee students. Refugee students faced difficulty in communicating with non-Tigrigna speakers (teachers, administrative staffs and students).<sup>31</sup>

In light of the socio-cultural approach to learning, knowledge is the outcome of social interaction and thus in relation to language, the learner's environment plays an important role (Wang 2007; Fahim and Haghani 2012). The theory also contextualizes language in terms of participation,

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<sup>29</sup> Informant 8 Somalia

<sup>30</sup> Informant 11 South Sudan

<sup>31</sup> Key-informant: Teacher, Civic and Ethical Education



which includes the social context with learner acquisition (*ibid*). Despite of such role of language the finding of the study indicated that refugee research participants encountered language barriers which affected their learning process and motivation.

#### **4.4.2. Discrimination and Isolation**

The inclusion of refugees in Ethiopian universities can be examined through exploring the challenges related to social inclusion. In addition to the mentioned language challenge refugee interviewees face discrimination and isolation. In general the interviewees felt homesick in the early stage after moving to the university. Research participants explained that during their refugee camp life they had close friends from their home country, but after joining the university they were less successful in making friends. When the interviewees were asked about challenges, discrimination and isolation revealed as a barrier in their learning experience at Mekelle University.

Refugee research participants who study at Mekelle University had some expectations that Ethiopian students will be supportive. Contrary to their expectations, the local students were not supportive enough. Their classmates were unable to accommodate diversity in terms of language. According to the result of the in-depth interviews, some professors help Ethiopian students by explaining some unclear issue while ignoring refugee students, as a result refugee student felt discriminated. Apart from this, refugee students are experiencing social isolation and loneliness. The finding of the study indicated that it was particularly difficult for those students who are from South Sudan and Somalia, due to language challenges. South Sudan and Somalia refugees mentioned the difficulties in developing friendship:

It is very difficult to explain my feeling. If you see how students are making friends, primarily it is based on ethnic lines. Especially this year there was a lot of conflict among different ethnic groups of Ethiopia and hence, students prefer to be with students from their own ethnic group. In contrast, we are alone.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the difficulty in making friends in the university is manifested in the absence of participation in leisure activities. During some of the festivities and ceremonies in the university,

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<sup>32</sup> Informant 6 Somalia

the students explained that the networks that exist in the university are much more suitable for domestic students; as such they felt loneliness and isolation. One research participant said the following:

When there is some festivity the students came in groups usually a group based on ethnicity. As such, it seems difficult to have new friends.<sup>33</sup>

In general the cross-cultural differences based on ethnicity can be considered as a barrier for refugee students to form friendship with Ethiopian students. As explained in the previous chapter, there are some relations between lack of language proficiency and the feeling of isolation (Femton-Smith et al 2017). Other scholars argued that lack of language proficiency is a cause for less academic performance. As per the socio-cultural theory of learning, the achievement of students in higher education is subject to different factors, including cultural, social and academic integration (Femton-Smith et al 2017). The socio-cultural theory of learning focuses on the role and the relevance of social interaction.

#### **4.4.3. Cultural Challenges**

Research conducted by scholars indicated that networking and cultural participation experiences are viewed as opportunities and challenges (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009; Benzie 2010). Like international students, refugee students can struggle with adapting to a new culture and environment. The issue of cultural challenges<sup>34</sup> and social relationships refugee students faced in university included those with professors, students, non-academic staffs as well as the community members. In this regard, refugee students mentioned certain challenges which they assumed affect their performance:

The culture of the north Ethiopia is really different from what I experienced in South Sudan. It all starts from the food.<sup>35</sup>

Refugee research participants from Somalia and South Sudan experienced a cultural shock because of the difference in views and values. They also mentioned the issue of food provided by

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<sup>33</sup> Informant 12 South Sudan

<sup>34</sup> In our case culture-challenge is viewed in relation to adapting new environment, meeting new people and country

<sup>35</sup> Informant 9 South Sudan

the university. The most common food provided for the student is “*injera*<sup>36</sup>” which is somehow new for South Sudan refugees.

For refugee students from South Sudan and Somalia it is very difficult to approach students for help in the area of language and academics. Hence, it is very difficult for them to develop friendships and thus, they had limited opportunities to interact socially with Ethiopian students in the classroom and outside the classroom. In an attempt to explore to what extent the university environment is suitable for them, interviewee stated that the university social integration is less successful; this resulted in grouping based on ethnic lines. Data collected from key-informants also indicated how refugees face some difficulties in integrating with domestic students:

The refugees come from different socio-cultural and political context. They face difficulty in adapting and integrating into the university environment. The Eritreans are very advantageous in this regard as they come from somewhat similar cultural context. The problem with other refugee students is they hardly want to integrate with other students ... some refugee students become friends only with other refugees.<sup>37</sup>

As noted in the analytical framework, the socio-cultural approach explains learning as embedded in social and cultural contexts. As has been noted, refugee students revealed that they felt lonely. Local students are advantageous in terms of networking, they shared information and discuss in a group. The study shows that refugees experienced cultural challenges. On the other hand, the socio-cultural theory of learning emphasizes the relevance of understanding learners environment because it can play an important role in motivation and achievement (Lim and Renshaw 2001; Arkoudis 2006).

#### **4.4.4. Academic and Instructional Challenges**

The teaching methods and teachers play a central role in educational institutions. The data collected from interviewee indicated that the teaching methods are mainly student centered. Thus, refugee students are expected to actively participate rather than being passive listeners. Likewise, the strategies of the university clearly stated that teachers are considered as facilitator

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<sup>36</sup> Traditional food; it is made with teff, a tiny, round grain that flourishes in the highlands of Ethiopia.

<sup>37</sup> Key informant 3: Teacher

of students. This aimed at encouraging independent work and more autonomy. In this regard, research participants stated that the approach contradicts with their previous experience of learning:

Here in Ethiopia, teaching is very different, the teachers focused on student's independent work and they come up with a method that help student to develop self-directing learning. I'm not familiar to this kind of teaching.<sup>38</sup>

Most interviewees said that what they experienced in Ethiopian higher education institution is totally different from what they are used to. In their experience of respective country they mentioned that teachers were using teacher-centered method of teaching i.e. more of dictating way of teaching. As such, the role of the teacher is transferring knowledge to the student. Eritrean refugee students revealed that in their previous experience the role of student was very limited with less participation and they depended on the explanation by teachers.

Similarly, interviews conducted with south Sudan refugees show that in their high school experience there was no student centered method and thus, learning was considered simply as a matter of memorizing what the teacher said. In contrast, they face a new challenge when some professors employed a conceptual learning and give the students an opportunity to be actively involved in the discussion. The critical challenge to students is not only the new exposure to new experience, but also the poor communication they had with other students made it tough for the refugees. From the socio-cultural theory of learning perspective, it recognizes the relevance of a student-center approach to learning. At the same time, it is important to note that the theory focuses on understanding the different backgrounds of students in class room and suggested diversified method of teaching (Lim and Renshaw 2001; Arkoudis 2006).

Interviewees also stated that in some courses they face different challenges. For example, the course Civic and Ethics is more related with previous high school courses. This course requires a good understanding of Ethiopian law, history and constitutions. Ethiopian students took this course starting from elementary schools. When the teacher gives them topics for discussion, refugee students have less information and knowledge about it. As per the refugee, the teachers

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<sup>38</sup> Informant 11 South Sudan

didn't consider their previous experience and knowledge. According to socio-cultural theory of learning, teacher's background beliefs influence their teaching practice (Arkoudis 2006).

Group work is one of the common activities employed by the teachers in the university. Refugee students especially from South Sudan and Somalia revealed that the method has some challenges. While they appreciated that it helps to share ideas and experience among students, they are also concerned with the barriers caused by language and multicultural background. A student from South Sudan said the following:

Working with the Ethiopian students is a bit tough. Since they speak their own language, understanding them is difficult. Only a few students realized the existence of different individual within a group.<sup>39</sup>

Because of the mentioned challenges students are less interested with group assignments and preferred an independent assignment.

In order to have a better understanding about the academic challenges refugee students were asked about assessment related challenges. Data collected via in-depth interviews indicated that in their previous experience learning was evaluated based on a single exam. They had limited experience of presentation and group work. In light of the university strategies, most professors employed 'continuous assessment' type of assessments. In this regard, refugee students come up with two different contradictory ideas.

While some of the refugee students argued the relevance of this type of assessment by saying it gave them the chance to improve their performance in each assessment, others argued that due to the exclusion and language barriers they preferred summative type of assessments. Hence, for the second group the new experience or the 'continues assessment' was a challenge. In light of socio-cultural theory of learning, it is important to consider a diversified method of assessment that takes into account cultural diversity and individual differences (Sardareh and Saad 2012).

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<sup>39</sup> Informant 10 South Sudan

#### 4.4.5. Financial Challenges

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, different international treaties and declarations which are ratified by Ethiopia recognize refugees' right to work and education. However, the finding of the study indicated that refugees from the three countries don't have a permit to work and they were informed that they don't have the right to work. One of the challenges mentioned by refugee students was financial hardship. Without differences all participants stated that the budget allocated by the Ethiopian government is not enough. Here it is important to note that the budget allocated for refugee students is similar with domestic students; however, they believe that most Ethiopian students have an additional income and support from their family.

The available food in the campus is not good in terms of quantity and quality. Most Ethiopian students get additional money from their family. For us it is very challenging. Our relatives are in refugee camps; they are waiting for support from international organizations. So we cannot ask any help.<sup>40</sup>

During the investigation interviewees stated that financial challenges are also common among Ethiopian students who are from low income families. It is also clear that unlike regular international students refugee students have less contact with their family. In this regard, participants revealed that the academic, language, and socio-cultural challenges coupled with financial challenges affect their learning performance.

To summarize, certain themes were identified by refugee students; cultural, social, academic and financial challenges. The finding of the study also indicated that the academic challenges coupled with social barriers affect students' motivation to participate actively and making friends inside and outside of the university. The mentioned challenges negatively affect refugee students; as such a challenge in one sphere intensifies the challenge in other spheres more for refugee students than for Ethiopian students.

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<sup>40</sup> Informant 2 Eritrea

## **4.5. Coping Strategies**

As has been discussed in chapter 2 the coping strategies perspective was basically derived from the psychological model of the impact of life events. Coping strategy includes problem focused and emotion focused coping (Baqutayan 2015). In light of refugee students in higher education, coping strategies has to do with refugees' skills, abilities and approaches to solve some difficulties. As has been discussed, refugee students encountered various challenges and hence, examining their way of coping with these challenges, in other words, which coping mechanism they use in practice, is important to have a full image of the issue. Accordingly, refugee research participant's coping strategies towards the previously mentioned challenges are discussed in this section.

### **4.5.1. Institutional Support**

As has been discussed, in most Ethiopian higher education institutions, including in Mekelle University there are no international students and thus, the inclusion of Somalia, Eritrea and South Sudan refugees can be considered as an additional task and new experience to the university. From a socio-cultural theory of learning perspective, establishing effective relationships between students, faculty and administrative staffs is relevant for stimulating better learning outcomes (Lim and Renshaw 2001; Arkoudis 2006).

Apart from exploring what challenges are experienced by refugees and how they are overcome, attempts have been made to understand if there is existing institutional mechanism to address the challenges mentioned by refugee students. As per socio-cultural theory of learning, social support for students is important for enhancing self-confidence, self-esteem and reducing stress (Wang 2007; Fahim and Haghani 2012). In order to support refugees institutional mechanisms have been established within the university and hence, attempts have been made to support refugee students. However, refugee research participants stated that it is not enough support:

During the initial period, the support and the welcoming ceremony was very impressive. At first it helps us to manage the sense of insecurity. After a while we

had a very limited contact with the institution. Since we are far from our relatives we need some support from the university.<sup>41</sup>

From socio-cultural theory of learning approach, refugee students' integration, their engagement and participation in academic and co-curricular activities have its own positive impact on achievement and integration. Various studies have also indicated the positive outcome of student-faculty interaction (Arenas 2009). And hence, good relationships between refugee students and the institution can help refugee students to overcome challenges and to promote professional development. In contrast, the finding of this study reveals that there is less interaction between the institution and refugees; for instance, with faculty. Refugee students believe that the involvement of faculty would have helped to overcome the language and social challenges. A key-informant interview disclosed that some professors at Mekelle University take their own initiative to support refugees. One professor said the following:

I have been using different teaching approaches to accommodate diversity in the classroom. I, especially allow my refugee students to express their ideas freely. I gave them a chance to share with us their experience about their own country. I also allow and arrange counselling time to the refugee students. I give them short lectures whenever they availed themselves in my office. But in classroom, despite my effort to enhance participation, they hardly did practically. I observe feeling of shyness ... I doubt their interest to participate.<sup>42</sup>

The researcher examines the institutional support to the mentioned challenges only. In this regard, most research participants are reluctant to go to concerned bodies when they face challenges. As such, an attempt has been made to examine why they don't use institutional mechanisms to overcome the challenges. One of the reasons is the language used by support staffs; most of the time they speak the local language of the region. For further information about their contact with the government and the UNHCR, interviewee were asked if there is further help from the two bodies; Refugees stated that the support after joining the university is mainly financial support.

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<sup>41</sup> Informant 2 Eritrea

<sup>42</sup> Key-informant 2: Teacher



#### **4.5.2. Problem-focused and Emotion focused Coping: Language and Academic Related issues**

As has been discussed, one of the challenges encountered by refugee students is language. The finding of this study indicated that one way of solving the challenges employed by the refugee student was facing them directly and hence, making an effort to resolve the challenge. A refugee from South-Sudan explains how he informed the teacher on the issue of using Amharic (local language) in the classroom and its impact:

As I told you the problem was beyond my tolerance and hence, I preferred to discuss directly with the professor and explained to him how it was problematic for refugee students.<sup>43</sup>

As mentioned in the previous chapters, stress and coping theory discussed by Folkman et al. (1986), helps to understand some active coping strategy methods and one of the coping strategies is appraising the situation, which was employed by some interviewees. It is also clear that problem-focused coping mechanism focuses on addressing the problem and strategy development (Baqtayan 2015). An interviewee from South Sudan explains how he tried to solve the exclusion of refugees in group discussions:

Firstly, I was tolerating the students when they discuss by their local language. I also informed the students to discuss the issue in English. But they continued and hence, I went to my professor and informing him that the discussion should be by the medium instruction of the university and he understands the case.

It was mentioned that emotion-focused coping strategy involves continued evolution of one's situation and action (Folkman et al., 1986). On the other hand, a research participant from Eritrea said that the Amharic language issue posed a challenge in his academic work. However, he coped with his academic stress by rising to the challenge and meeting students' expectation instead of being isolated from group work assignments. Problem-solving coping strategy includes attempting to resolve a challenge persistently. Here it is important to note that comparing with Somali and South Sudan refugees; Amharic is relatively easy for Eritrean refugees.

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<sup>43</sup> Informant 9 South Sudan

### **4.5.3. Problem-focused and Emotion-focused Coping: Comparing with Pervious Experience Vs Institutional Resources**

*“It is Manageable”*

In the previous sections it was discussed that refugee students faces a number of challenges in their journey from home country to Ethiopia. They also encountered different challenges in refugee camps. Accordingly, some refugee students compare their previous life experience with their life in university. The study indicated that the past experience in journey to Ethiopia and in the refugee camp help the students to positively appraise some challenges.

As I told you during our journey to Ethiopia I lost some of my friends. It was a tough journey. Later we spend all our time in a refugee camp by being idle. Can you compare such challenges with the challenges we faced in this university? It is manageable.<sup>44</sup>

As such their experience becomes a source of their strength. Emotion-focused coping strategy is relevant to deal with a situation when one believes that the solution is rather accepting reality than anger and anxiety (Baqtayan 2015). As has been discussed in the previous section, research participants also asked about the institutional support and how they are using the existing system to address the challenges.

Most research participants don't have enough information about the institutions. As an example, a research participant who felt that discriminatory practice was done against him/her can take the issue into the student counsel's office or to college dean. However, during the in-depth interview the researcher observes some confusion and lack of clarity among the students, about the institutional support system that exists. It is clear that institutional resource in a given university can help students to deal with the cultural, social and academic challenges. In contrast, underestimating and ignoring all the challenges is another coping strategy employed by refugee research participants. They stated that ignoring the issue and moving forward is the possible option to overcome the challenges:

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<sup>44</sup> Informant 2 Eritrean

The administrative/supportive staff themselves speaks local language. How are we going to talk to them? I personally preferred to keep silent.<sup>45</sup>

Likewise the researcher understands that interviewees didn't go to the counseling service to avoid some of the challenges. Only one research participant stated that he went to student council office to discuss some of the challenges. In general, most research participants are not interested in using the institutional resources to overcome the challenges. Refugee research participants explained that to overcome the academic challenges they preferred to meet their professors and ask for help, which can be considered as one of coping strategies. As per the refugees, some of the professors were very welcoming in addressing some of the challenges.

#### **4.5.4 Problem-focused and Emotion focused Coping: Isolation Vs. Friendship and Networks**

Building friendship and networks is among some of coping strategies employed by interviewees. In order to address certain challenges (isolation) Eritrean refugee students found themselves managing the challenges by seeking help from their fellow ethnic groups. The Eritrean refugees reported receiving different kinds of support from Tigrian ethnic group students. One Eritrean refugee student said that:

Talking with Ethiopian students is challenging due to language barriers and lack of common experience and thus, I preferred to speak with students who speak the same language. That's why most of my friends are from the Tigrian ethnic group.<sup>46</sup>

Other research participants stated that they receive support from peer students (Ethiopian). Some Somalia and South Sudan refugees are getting support from their classmates and friends. Refugee students revealed that when they face challenges in relation to the norm in the university they usually ask Ethiopian students. With regard to family support refugee research participants explained that they get less support from their family, some of them they don't have contact with their family. One Eritrean refugee research participant explained that during semester break semester he went to the refugee camp to meet his family and as a way of avoiding a stress.

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<sup>45</sup> Informant 10 South Sudan

<sup>46</sup> Informant 3 Eritrean

In general, to avoid social isolation some interviewees joined social groups in the university. But most of research participants, attempted to establish a link with previous refugee students. As it has been noted, Eritrean refugees preferred ethnic based social network due to language issue. Others seek support from their senior fellow refugees

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to explore the challenges encountered by refugees in their learning experience at Mekelle University. In order to achieve the main objective, the research employed a qualitative research approach. The experiences which are related to learning were examined in light of two theories; socio-cultural theory of learning and coping strategies.

The study illustrated the international legal framework that recognizes refugees' right to education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, are among the main human rights instruments that recognizes refugee's right to education. As a signatory of these international treaties, Ethiopia has an obligation to implement the rights recognized under the treaties.

Access to higher education for refugees is important to restore their hope and to integrate them into the society. Thus, it is crucial to understand their needs and potentials to be able to provide the adequate methods that accelerate the integration process. While there is a very high number of refugees in the world in general and the Horn of Africa in particular, very limited numbers of refugees are granted access to higher education. Eritrean, South-Sudan and Somalian are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship programmes initiated and funded by Ethiopian government. The study highlights some of the challenges in relation to this access of refugee students to higher education in Ethiopia.

The main challenge was the limited access to Ethiopian universities. Even though the country has a high number of refugees, there are limited access opportunities to higher education for them, and higher education is often considered as a luxury. Lack of adequate information about the scholarship was also identified as one of the main barriers. The absence documentation also was identified as a barrier for access to higher education. This is due to the nature of government in their home country. ARRA, the UNHCR and their friends were identified as sources of information about access to higher education.

In light of the study's research questions, the study explored the main challenges encountered by refugees in their learning experience at Mekelle University. The study also examines the coping

strategies employed by refugee students. In addressing the first research question, the study examined the journey of refugees from refugee camp to Ethiopian higher education institutions. Through in-depth interviews the study examined their learning experiences and coping strategies at Mekelle University. Findings related to learning experience were analyzed in light of socio-cultural theory of learning. The central assumption behind socio-cultural theory of learning is that learning is embedded in social and cultural contexts. To this end, the researcher gave much room to refugees to express themselves and to prioritize challenges related to their learning experience. For the coping mechanisms both problem-focused and emotion focused coping strategies were employed as analytical framework.

The socio-cultural theory of learning emphasized that a professor's knowledge and recognition of the linguistic background of his/her learners are essential for the learning success. The learning environment in the classroom can affect refugee students' academic achievement. The study reveals that one of the main challenges encountered by refugees was the language barrier. Even though the medium of instruction is English, the professors use a combination of English and local language, which creates a barrier for refugees of the three countries. As a result, refugee research participants are losing interest and motivation in classroom.

Moreover, socio-cultural theory of learning focuses on the vital role of social relations, culture and community in learning. It also focuses on the role of interaction and how learners are fundamentally changed through experience. In this regard, a student's environment plays an important role in learning. Coupled with the language barrier, the finding of the study disclosed that refugee research participants believe that they face discrimination and isolation. Homesickness, social isolation and loneliness were among the main challenges addressed by this study.

The study also examined challenges related to instruction by employing socio-cultural theory of learning. Student-centered approach to teaching is promoted in socio-cultural approach to learning. The finding of the study disclosed that the teaching style expected in Mekelle University differed from what refugee students were accustomed to and they found it challenging. The unfamiliarity of the approach coupled with a lack of interest in group discussions due to the language barrier become a source of challenge in the refugee students' learning experience at Mekelle University.

The socio-cultural approach to assessment focuses on considerations of diversified assessment methods for cultural diversity and individual characteristics. Learners may have different cultural backgrounds; some may be more used to some forms of assessments others may not. In light of the vision of Mekelle University, teachers employed continuous assessment. The finding of the study indicated that for some refugee research participants this is a new experience and considered as challenging one. According to the socio-cultural theory of learning, a learner's background affects the learning success. One of the findings of the study was the lack of enforcement of refugees' right to work. As a result, interviewees stated that the financial challenge is one of the main challenges, which affects their learning motivation.

On the other hand, social support for refugee students can enhance their self-confidence and address some of the challenges. Challenges such as cultural, language, academics and financial cannot be addressed only by the efforts of refugee students. Nevertheless, with the exception of the welcoming ceremony there was not enough support for refugee students in the university. The students perceived that the involvement of the institution would have helped to overcome language and other challenges. On the other hand, refugee research participants are reluctant to go to concerned bodies when they encountered challenges.

In light of the second research question of the study, the coping strategies employed by refugee students in Mekelle University were explored. This helps the researcher to understand how refugee research participants dealt with the challenges they encountered. To this end, two interrelated categories of coping strategies were employed as analytical framework. The first one is problem-focused, which centers on enhancing feeling of control and reducing stress by considering that the challenge can be addressed. The second is the emotion focused coping strategy, which focuses on regulating the emotional outcomes of stressful situations.

Accordingly, the study indicated that refugee students employed both problem-focused and emotion focused-coping strategies. In relation to language related challenges some refugee students tried to solve the issue through discussions with their professors. Appraising the situation and seeking help from Ethiopian students were among the coping mechanisms employed by interviewees.

Emotion-focused coping strategies include accepting reality instead of being driven by anger and anxiety. The study also disclosed that refugee students are not interested in using the institutional mechanisms to address the challenges. They compare their previous experience with the current situation and hence, they interpret the challenges as relatively minor. Thus, relativizing and ignoring the challenges was also another coping mechanism employed by research participants.

For the feeling of isolation, actively engaging with student counselling service was one of the mechanisms applied by participants. Others especially Eritrean refugee research participants received support from peer Ethiopian students, who speak the same language with them. Others to avoid isolation they joined social groups in the university. Some interviewees preferred creating networks with senior refugee students. Hence, the study disclosed that building friendships and networks is among some of coping strategies employed by interviewees.

In a nutshell, the study explored the challenges encountered by refugees in their learning experience, and made it clear that the challenges are numerous and complex. As stated by socio-cultural theory of learning, learning is all about what a learner is able to do with the support of others. The support can be offered in terms of those occurring in higher education institutions or those happening in the case of everyday unreflective activity. Creating suitable conditions for refugees requires looking after the challenges and coping strategies from all these perspectives. The challenges might represent a need for a paradigm shift from the traditional approach of perceiving students as having similar backgrounds. The evidence clearly shows that the need for a diversified approach, that is, a culturally and linguistically responsive approach for refugee education. In order to create socially and linguistically inclusive learning environments for refugee students, the university needs to re-assess the teaching-learning process.



## **Suggestions for Further Research**

For a number of reasons refugees are the most vulnerable group of society. Currently the issue of refugees has become the center of political discourse in all parts of the world. This study focused on issues related to learning experiences of refugees at Mekelle University, which is rather limited in scope. This might demand further research on the following possible research suggestions:

- For comparison purpose future research could investigate the experience of refugee students in all higher education institutions of Ethiopia.
- To gain a more holistic understanding of refugees and higher education, future research could investigate the experience of refugee students and graduated refugees. As such, the role of refugees in a host country's development could be the subject for further research.
- The issue of refugees' educational experience in other African countries can also be a subject for further research.
- The study indicated that there is a very limited chance of access to higher education for refugees. The issue of how refugees' access to higher education can be enhanced without traveling to Europe or US is still subject to further research. This might require financial considerations on how intergovernmental collaboration can support this in less-developing countries.

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## Appendix

No	Name of Informant	Age	Nationality	Educational Level
1	Informant 1	21	Eritrean	2
2	Informant 2	26	Eritrean	3
3	Informant 3	20	Eritrean	1
4	Informant 4	24	Eritrean	2
5	Informant 5	26	Somalian	1
6	Informant 6	22	Somalian	3
7	Informant 7	24	Somalian	2
8	Informant 8	23	Somalian	3
9	Informant 9	28	South Sudan	3
10	Informant 10	27	South Sudan	2
11	Informant 11	22	South Sudan	1
12	Informant 12	21	South Sudan	2

# **UNIVERSITETET I OSLO**

## **Department of Education**

### **Masters of philosophy in Higher Education**

Request for participation in a research project

My name is Yonas Gebreyosus, an MA student at the University of Oslo, studying Masters of Philosophy in Higher Education. I am presently writing my thesis on the topic “Being Refugees in Higher Education”.

This study aims at examining the challenges faced by refugee students in Mekelle University, Tigray Ethiopia. It employs a qualitative data gathering approach using in-depth interviews. Hence, the interview guide will be used to gather information necessary for writing my thesis and completion of my Master’s degree. Interview technique is chosen because of the researcher’s interest in getting in-depth information from the participant.

As the study will only be used for academic purposes, your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Your identity will be highly secured. The participation in this research is voluntary. You may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without any restriction. Only the researcher has the access to all the data collected from the interviews and direct observations. If you agree, I would like to record the interview process via an audio recorder strictly be used for the thesis. After recording, all data will be securely saved and not be distributed to others. Upon completion of the field work and data analysis, all audio records will be deleted. All direct personal data and indirectly identifiable data will also be deleted. The project is planned for completion by the 30th of May 2018. Throughout the entire research process, I receive supervision from my academic supervisor, who is also adhered to confidentiality.

**Consent for participation in the study**

I have received information about the study and I am willing to participate:

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature over printed name of the participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

**1) Interview Guide for Students**

Date and time of interview:\_\_\_\_\_

Sex:\_\_\_\_\_

Age\_\_\_\_\_

Department and Year:\_\_\_\_\_

**I. Introductory Questions**

1. How long have you been in Ethiopia/When did you arrive in Ethiopia?
2. How was the journey to Ethiopia?
3. How was life in refugee camp?
4. Can you please share with me your educational experiences before you arrived in Ethiopia?
5. When did you start to think of going to university (in Ethiopia or in your country of origin?)
6. How many members of your family have experience in higher education?

**II. Process**

1. Can you please share with me your experiences from the moment you decide to enrol in the university in Ethiopia to the actual registration?
2. How important was your family in this process?
3. Where there any other relatives, friends or acquaintances that played an important role in your efforts to enrol in the university?
4. Were there any organisations or agencies that helped you enrolling in the university, for example by providing you with important information, or a scholarship?
5. How helpful and supportive was the university in your efforts to get enrolled?

### **III. Mekelle University**

1. What is your overall impression of the university when it comes to its academic quality of its study programmes, the support structure for students, the facilities?
1. Was it hard for you to get used to the lectures?
2. Do the teachers encourage students to be active in class? How?
3. Which language do the teachers use in class? When and how much?
4. How do the teachers assess your performance in class?
5. Do you like the assessment methods that the teachers use? Why?
6. Do you get any particular support from the teachers?
7. Do you think there are methods or systems put in place to accommodate refugee students?
8. In relation to learning what challenges have you experienced in the university? Describe the cause, nature and origin of the challenges?
9. Do you and other refugees participate in decision making on teaching and learning process? if yes, in what way?
10. How would you assess your interaction with the faculty and students in your department in the college?

### **IV. Challenges and Coping Strategies?**

1. Do you feel welcome and accommodated in the university?
2. Was it hard for you to adjust and integrate into this environment? Have you fully adapted?
3. What has been the most academically challenging portion of your experience in the university?

4. Did you face any challenges in relation to financial issues?
5. Do you perceive that the challenges you face are peculiar to yourself?
6. Has your experience here helped you gain an ability to communicate effectively within and among diverse cultural groups? If so, can you cite specific examples?
7. Has there been a situation in which you needed to clarify erroneous stereotypes or assumptions about your home culture? How did you handle that situation?
8. What else can you tell me that would help me understand your thoughts about the challenges faced by refugee students?
9. What mechanism have you employed to address the challenges?

## 1) Interview Guide for Teachers

- I. Date and time of interview \_\_\_\_\_
- II. Sex \_\_\_\_\_
- III. Age \_\_\_\_\_
- IV. Total years of teaching experience \_\_\_\_\_
- V. Educational qualification \_\_\_\_\_
- VI. Which department you teach \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions

1. What do you think about the university in relation to refugees?
2. How does the university accommodate diversity?
3. What is your general observation about quality, motivation and involvement of refugee students?
4. What are the main challenges in relation to teaching to refugee students?
5. How your teaching methods to accommodate diversity in the classroom?
6. What do you think about the main challenges with respect to learning encountered by all students in your classes?
7. What do you think about the main challenges with respect to learning encountered specifically by refugee students in your classes?
8. Which language do you use in class? Does this create specific problems for certain groups of students, such as refugee students?
9. How would you describe your perception of the challenges refugee students face in adapting and integrating into the college system?



10. What is needed to improve refugee student achievements in the university?