The challenges – and rewards – of accepting a refugee student
Sharon Maxwell Magnus, programme leader for humanitarians and principal lecturer in journalism at the University of Hertfordshire

It starts with a question. Students at the University of Hertfordshire had gathered to hear about the creation of an exhibition on the subject of refugees, for the charity Breaking Barriers. One of the students, fearful at the story of a youth who had been tortured before escaping family- and pell-mell to London, asked what we could do to help refugees already here.

What if, I suggested blithely to the CEO of Breaking Barriers, our vice-chancellor could be persuaded to offer scholarships? I thought that the hardest part would be persuading him to shoulder the cost. But I felt that if we presented him with a profile of the individuals we would be helping, that would be harder to turn down. My colleagues agreed. In hindsight, persuading our vice-chancellor was easy. The pettiness were finding the refuge and navigating the Kafkaesque bureaucracy. With the confidence of the clueless, I started a ring-round of local councils. Everyone had refugees but they were all were utterly unsuitable. “She’s very enthusiastic,” said one council worker. “She hasn’t been in education since she was nine but she’d love to have a go.”

The most common problem was lack of English. I turned to the Refugee Council with a strict list of criteria. The student needed to have finished high school and had to want to study something we offered; they needed to live within commuting distance; and, most important of all, their English should be at IELTS 6.5, the lowest standard we could accept. They came up with a candidate who had recently escaped from Syria and had been granted refugee status. He had spent a year in university before coming to the UK and was desperate to continue his studies.

A quick appraisal by the staff who teach English to our international students revealed that he did not yet have good enough English. But he was not far from the standard required of international students who take our pre-degree academic English course. If the vice-chancellor would fund that as well, there was a very good chance that he could take – and more importantly succeed at – the degree.

This is where it helps to have a team. The English language teaching specialists volunteered to give our prospective refugee free tuition to get him through the first term. A local refugee group offered to fund his travel to the university, while our staff group raised money for living costs. And our admissions team sorted out his registration equivalency. One of the odder requirements was that he should supply an academic reference. Since refugees are by definition fleeing from persecution, the likelihood of their tutors being able to give them a reference is negligible. How would that have worked out for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution?

Finally, after a veritable battle of epic proportions, he is now on our academic English course in preparation for his degree this autumn.

Our prospective student is enthusiastic and charming, noting down strange English phrases he comes across and presenting them to us to translate. But he is having to come to terms with the trauma of leaving Syria while seeing what is happening there on the news. He is here in body, but still in Syria in spirit.

He has new cultural mores and expectations to navigate, as well as a host of small stress issues, from finding his way to the right campus, to getting a council tax rebate and even working out what his expectations are. He told me glumly at one meeting that he did not think he could write as well as the journalists on The Times, not even once his English improves.

It has been a lesson in cultural awareness for me, too. One day during the heatwave I rang a teaching colleague to find out how our new student was coping during Ramadan, with day-long English language sessions in equatorial heat, garnished by a long bus ride home. She replied curtly that he was not the only student fasting and wilted in the heat.

There will be further challenges as his degree comes to an end and has to adapt to a system of education that is so different from the one he is used to, studying alongside students whose lives have not been broken by war. But by trying to keep in contact with him, we will be in a better place to help him steer his way through. Then we will start preparing for the next refugee student.

If there is one thing I have learned, it is that it is not enough to offer a scholarship and just hope something will turn up. If you are going to give someone the opportunity to succeed in an entirely new environment, they need and deserve more than that.

Orban’s risky strategy of attacking higher education
David Matthews, reporter, Times Higher Education

"Too many young people go to university. They just waste their time drinking and learning useless things. Why can’t we learn a trade instead?"

So said every pub bore ever. But in Hungary, as I discovered when I visited Budapest, the prime minister Viktor Orban has expressed this view, and it is now government policy.

Hungary appears to be making dubious history by reversing the expansion of universities, once seen as a prerequisite of economic modernity. Aside from huge cuts in student numbers, research spending has taken a hammering too down about a fifth since 2010, making Hungary the only country in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development to fund university research well below pre-financial crisis levels.

The government’s response is that it is moving towards a more vocational system, with the subjects young people study based on "market need". This sounds defensible, but for the fear that enrolment in higher teaching of tertiary education, not just higher, have tumbled about 10 percentage points under the right-wing Fidesz party.

Why does this all matter to the rest of the world? Nobert Tabi, a higher education researcher for the threatened Central European University, told me that what is happening in Hungary is a "clear demarcation" of what a right-wing authoritarian higher education agenda looks like. Could Hungary’s highly unilateralistic policies be adopted in Poland, or even the US?

This might seem far-fetched in the case of the US, but there are echoes of Orbán – who speaks of his “respect” for manual workers – in Donald Trump’s focus on creating more jobs for coal miners. Both lionise jobs for which no degree is necessary.

If higher education does come under increasing attack from figures such as Orban, it is arguably quite vulnerable. Survey data have shown that Europeans are much more likely to support more spending on vocational training rather than higher education, following decades of university expansion. But, a word of warning for Orbán-like figures. Ending mass higher education, even if an economic case could be made, would cause an almighty backlash from the middle class. This is already far more respectable than Hungary, has expanded higher education at a furious pace, despite students being some of the regime’s most courageous opponents. Partly this is because Beijing still believes in the "knowledge economy" – the idea that you get growth through education – which critics say Hungary has given up on. But I suspect there’s another reason too: scaling back higher education would thwart the dreams of millions of parents who want middle-class status for their children. That would be a risky move. In Hungary, though, the middle classes and their children can simply emigrate, aided by the European Union’s freedom of movement rules, and enjoy tuition-free study in other countries, notably Germany.

About one in 13 Hungarians between 18 and 49 live abroad in 2013, according to UN data, and the pace of migration is accelerating, forcing the government to promise graduates jobs and housing assistance if they return. This exodus could be a safety valve preventing real opposition to Fidesz at home.