BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

OF REFUGEE POLICY RESEARCH: MAPPING THE SUBFIELD

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INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on refugee policy has grown substantially over the past decades, reflecting the increasing complexity of forced displacement and policy responses worldwide. This reflects the realization that state responses to refugees are not only shaped by legal and humanitarian considerations, but also by broader policy processes. It also invites deeper engagement with the field of policy studies and the insights it can offer to refugee and forced migration studies.

Refugee studies has long benefited from insights from different disciplines and, as forced displacement continues to pose complex governance challenges, it is crucial that the field maintains and expands this interdisciplinarity. Engaging with policy studies can advance scholarly analysis by shedding light on the institutions, actors, and ideas that shape refugee policy.

This paper examines the extent to which policy studies and refugee and forced migration studies have intersected in recent scholarship. In particular, it investigates how issues of refugee policy have been dealt with, looking into the theoretical and methodological approaches scholars employ.

The authors also explore what policy issues and themes are most prominent in recent research. Further, building on previous analyses conducted by LERRN, the paper also addresses key questions about which disciplines and institutions are shaping this subfield.

To explore these dynamics, the paper presents findings from a bibliometric and content analysis. By mapping key dimensions of refugee policy research, this study provides insights into the state of this subfield and highlights the potential for deeper cross-disciplinary engagement with policy studies

METHODS

For the purpose of this study, a bibliometric and content analysis was conducted of journal articles engaging with refugee policy and published between 2011-2020. In bibliometric analyses, documents related to a certain topic or field of study are retrieved and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.[i] Bibliometric indicators allow us to identify trends and evaluate important aspects related to a field or area of knowledge, such as its most prominent authors, journals, institutions, and countries, recurrent keywords, and research networks.[ii] In tandem, content analyses allow for a more nuanced understanding of some given qualitative data, allowing researchers to examine the presence of certain themes and concepts.

In this analysis, articles were retrieved from Scopus using a Boolean string.[iii] This analysis only considers journal articles published within the Social Sciences, in English language, and between 2011-2020. In order to limit the number of results, only articles reaching a minimum number of citations were included.[iv] In total, 1,082 articles were retrieved.

In the selection process, only articles engaging with refugee policy were included in the synthesis. In that, articles were only included if they either (a) investigated policy-making processes in refugee responses, (b) evaluated or compared refugee policies, or (c) proposed refugee policies. This resulted in the exclusion of 643 articles. A total of 439 articles were analyzed.

Main Journals & Disciplinary Fields

Articles published on refugee policy appear in a total of 187 journals. The most prominent journals are illustrated in figure 1. Notably, approximately 23.5 per cent of all articles included in our synthesis are concentrated in 4 journals. These are, namely, the Journal of Refugee Studies, the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Refugee Survey Quarterly, and the International Journal of Refugee Law. As such, and as detailed on figure 1, articles on refugee policy are largely published on journals linked to the fields of refugee studies and migration. A similar trend occurred within journals cited by articles included in our analysis (figure 2). Interestingly, however, as figure 2 reveals, journals with other areas of focus (e.g. common market studies, political geography, European public policy) rank in higher positions when compared to figure 1. This indicates that, while publications in our sample are largely concentrated in journals linked to the fields of refugee studies and migration, they tend to draw on publications linked to other fields

Figure 1. Top Journals, Ranked by Number of Articles Included in the Synthesis

Figure 2. Top Journals Cited by Articles in our Analysis, Ranked by Number of Articles Cited

As table 1 details, despite the growing interdisciplinarity, the foundational fields (linked to anthropology and international law) of refugee studies are still amongst the five highest ranking ones for works that engage with refugee policy. Meanwhile, the high-ranking position of disciplinary fields such as demography and geography reflects the fact that many works engaging with refugee policy are published in journals linked to the field of migration studies.

Disciplinary field	№ of articles	Percentage of articles	№ of journals
political science and international relations	131	29.8%	33
law	60	13.6%	23
demography	45	10.2%	12
geography, planning and development	36	8.2%	23
anthropology	31	7%	12
arts and humanities (miscellaneous)	26	5.9%	1
sociology and political science	18	4.1%	11
public administration	17	3.8%	9
education	16	3.6%	16
cultural studies	14	3.1%	14
social sciences (miscellaneous)	13	2.9%	10
development	10	2.2%	7
health (social science)	9	2%	6
management, monitoring, policy and law	4	0.9%	3
communication	3	0.6%	3
gender studies	2	0.4%	2
history	2	0.4%	2
library and information sciences	1	0.2%	1
communications	1	0.2%	1

Table 1. Predominant disciplinary fields

Journals included in our results span across 19 disciplinary fields within Social Sciences. As illustrated in table 1, the most frequent disciplinary field is Political Science and International Relations (29.8 per cent of articles), followed by Law (13.6 per cent), and Demography (10.2 per cent). On the other hand, the fields of Public Administration and Management, Monitoring, Policy and Law correspond to 3.8 and 0.9 per cent of articles in the synthesis, respectively.

Predominant Countries of Institutional Affiliation

A total of 531 authors and co-authors were included in our results. Authors (including co-authors) are linked to institutions from 47 different countries (figure 3). The most active countries are the United Kingdom (115 authors), the United States (81), Australia (50), Germany (37), and Canada (35) (figure 4).
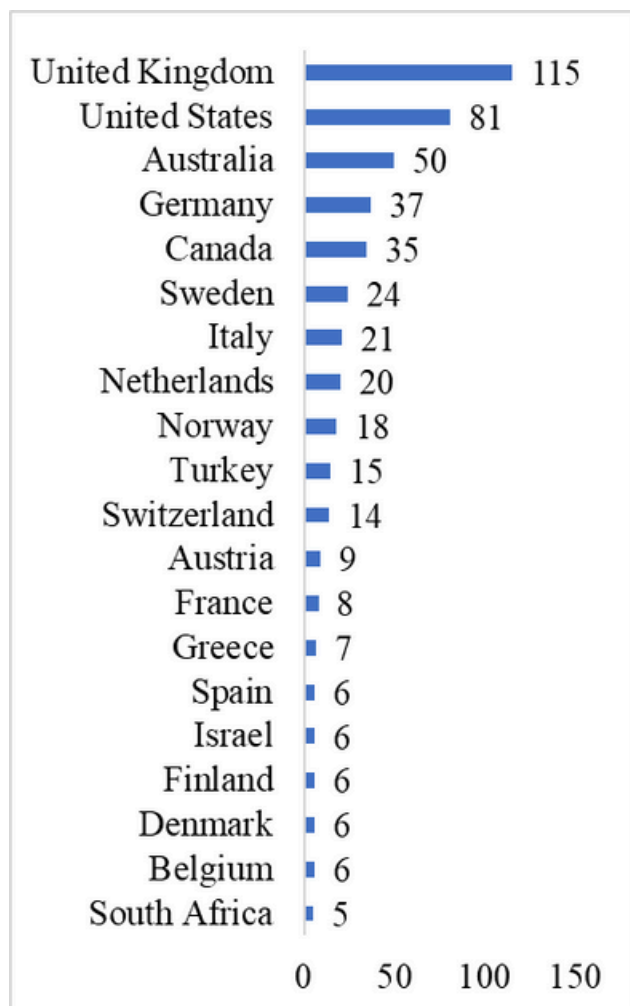
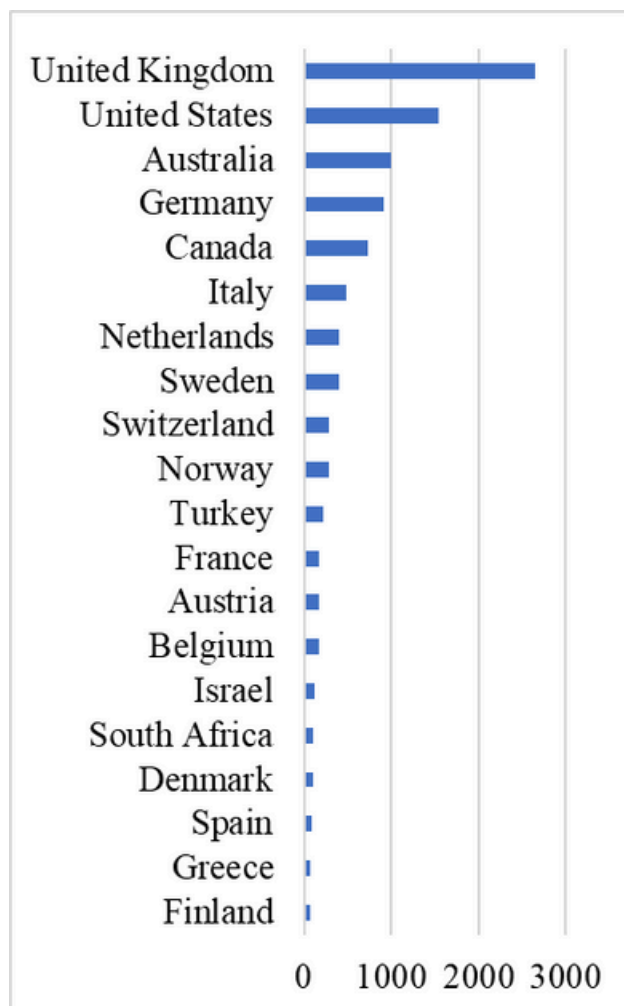**Figure 3**. Map of Countries of Institutional Affiliation, Ranked by Number of Authors per Country.

Note: Countries represented in darker shades of blue have a high number of authors.

A very similar pattern is also seen amongst authors cited by articles in the synthesis (figure 5). In addition, figure 6 shows that authors from certain groups of countries are also often cited together, such as those from the United States, Australia, and Canada.
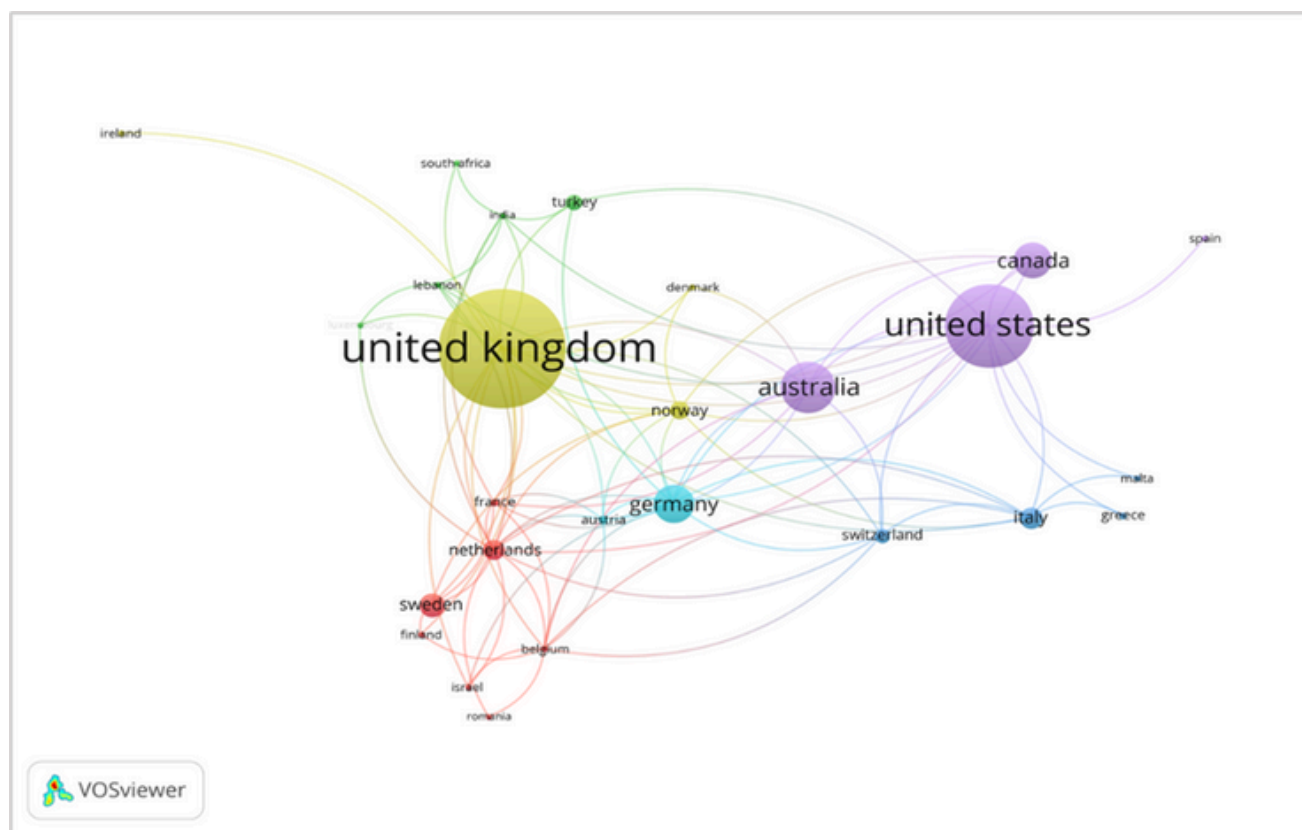
Figure 4. Top 20 Countries of Institutional Affiliation, Ranked by Number of Authors Included in the Synthesis

Figure 5. Top 20 Countries of Institutional Affiliation of Authors Cited by Articles in the Synthesis, Ranked by Number of Citations

Figure 6. Network of Cited Countries of Institutional Affiliation

Note: The figure shows how frequently countries (with at least 15 citations) are the locus of institutional affiliation of cited articles. Larger nodes indicate countries with a large number of cited publications. Countries with close citation relationships are clustered together in nodes of the same color.

Main Geographical Areas of Focus

In terms of geographical areas of focus, a total of 63 countries and four regions of were identified. Notably, however, 52 articles (11.8 per cent) did not have a specific geographic focus or focus on multiple regions, being hereby referred to as articles with a "global focus". The most prominent geographic area of analysis was the European Union, which was the focus of 79 articles (18 per cent) included in the synthesis, followed by the United Kingdom (10.2 per cent), Australia (9.5 per cent), and Turkey and the United States (tied with 6.1 per cent each) (table 2).
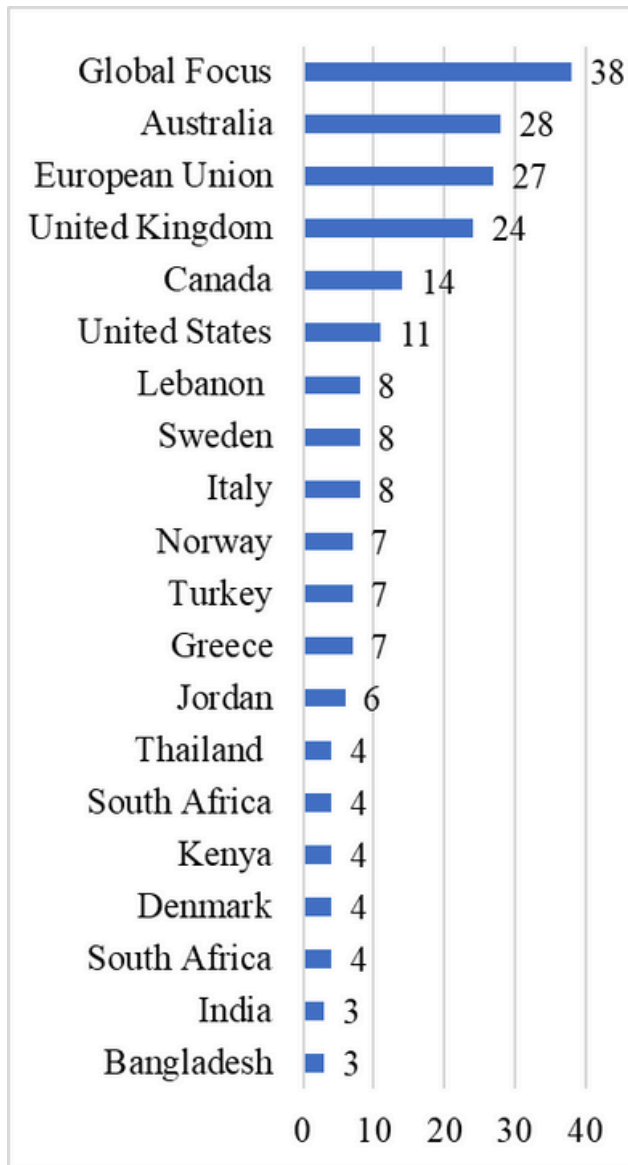
Interestingly, while there was no pronounced variation in countries of institutional affiliation over time, it is possible to notice that some countries and regions became significantly more prominent between 2016-2020 (figure 8) when compared to the 2011-2015 period (figure 7). This was the case of the European Union, Turkey, and Germany.

Finally, it is also possible to notice that certain countries and regions are often analyzed together within articles in our results (figure 10). This is the case, for instance, of the European Union and Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and the United States and Canada.
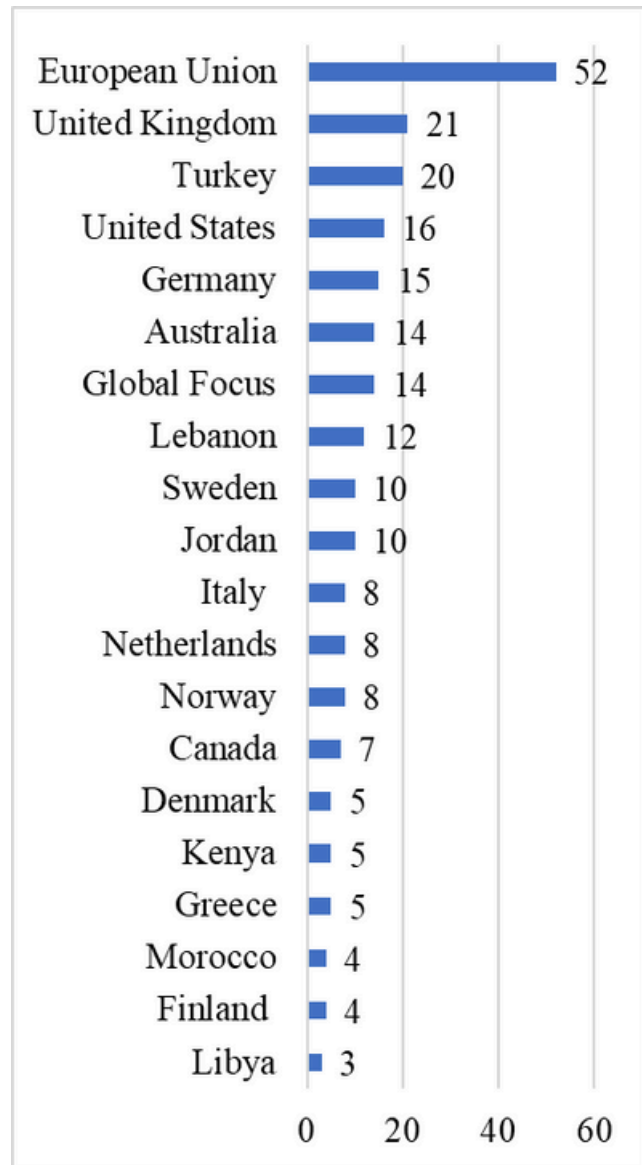
Table 2. Top Countries and Regions of Focus

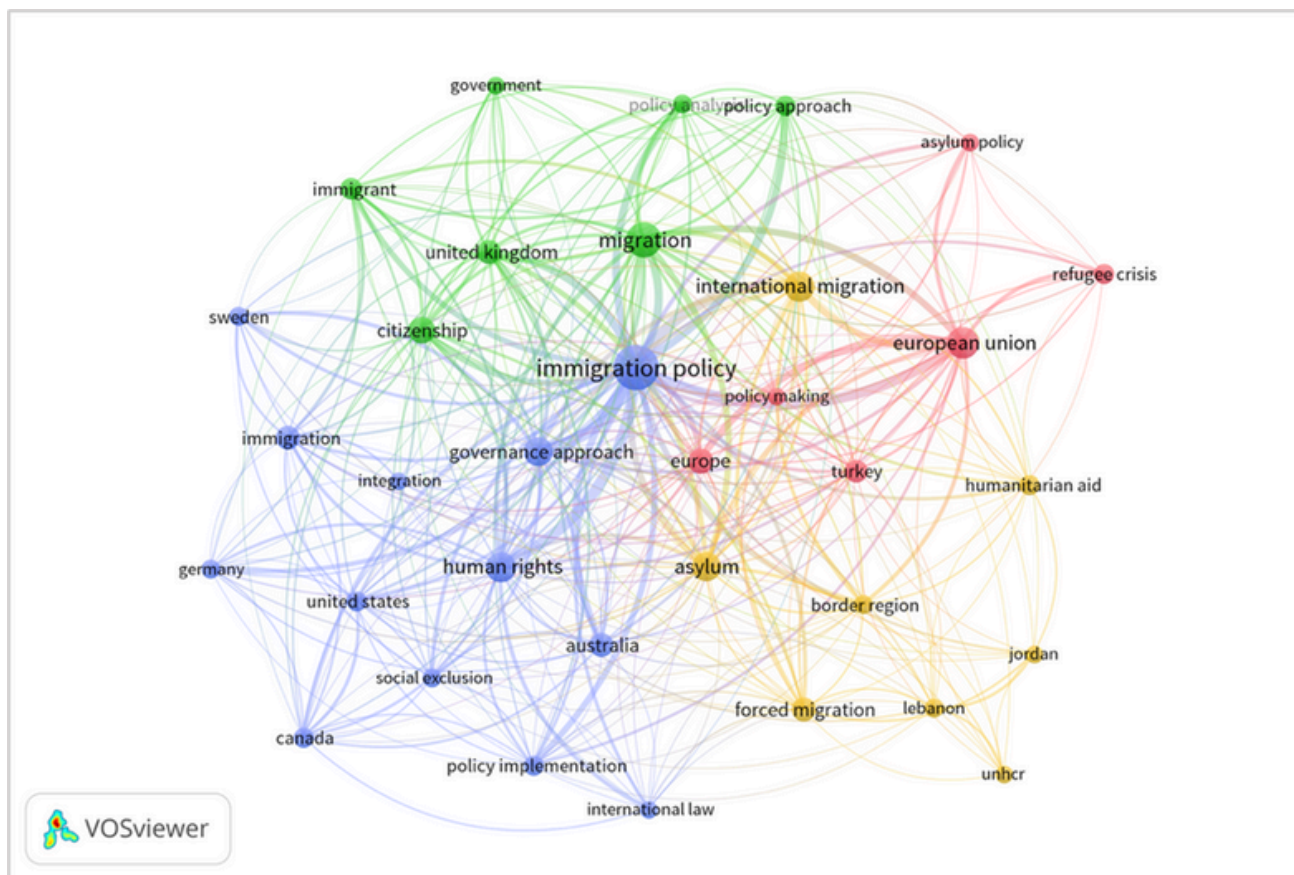| Top 20 counties/regions of focus	№ of articles	Percentage of articles
European union	79	18%
Global focus	52	11.8%
United Kingdom	45	10.2%
Australia	42	9.5%
Turkey	27	6.1%
United states	27	6.1%
Canada	21	4.7%
Lebanon	20	4.5%
Sweden	19	4.3%
Germany	17	3.8%
Jordan	16	3.6%
Italy	16	3.6%
Norway	15	3.4%
Greece	12	3.4%
Denmark	9	2%
Kenya	9	2%
Netherlands	9	2%
Thailand	7	1.5%
Bangladesh	6	1.3%

Figure 7. Top 20 Countries or Regions of Focus (2011-2015), Ranked by Number of Articles

Figure 8. Top 20 Countries or Regions of Focus (2016-2020), Ranked by Number of Articles

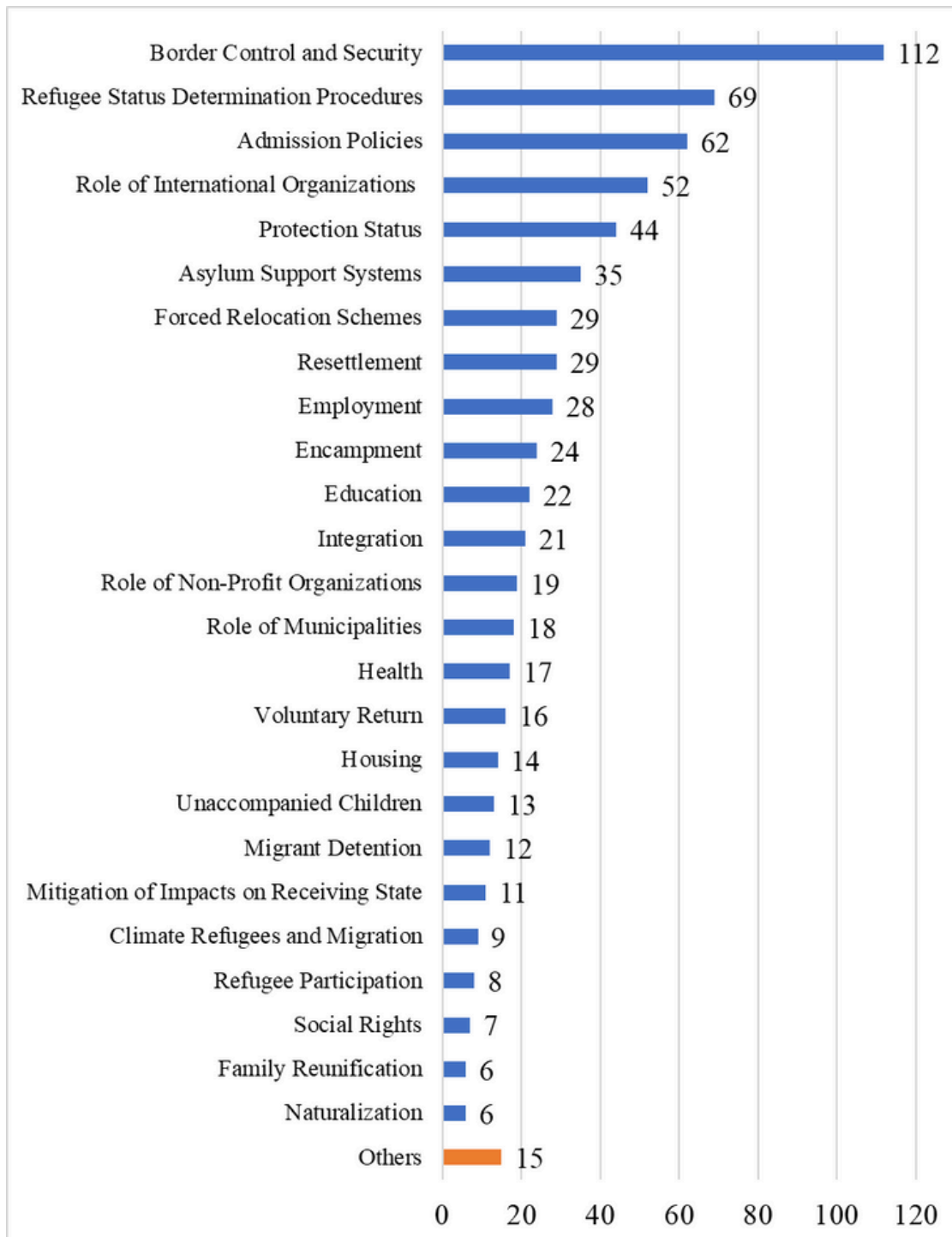**Figure 10.** Author and Index Keywords Network

Note: The figure shows how frequently keywords (with at least 12 occurrences) are found in the articles. Larger nodes indicate keywords with more occurrences. Keywords clustered together and in nodes of the same color have co-occurrence relationships. Keywords relating to migrant categories (e.g.: refugees, asylum-seekers, etc.) and generic index keywords (e.g.: article, humans, etc.) were restricted.

Main Policy Issues and Themes Discussed

In total, 33 policy issues were identified amongst the articles included in the synthesis. While most articles focus on a single policy issue, others cover multiple issues, going as far as covering 7 different ones. The most frequent policy issue covered was border control and security (identified 112 times), followed by refugee status determination procedures (69), admission policies (52), and protection status (44) (Fig. 11).
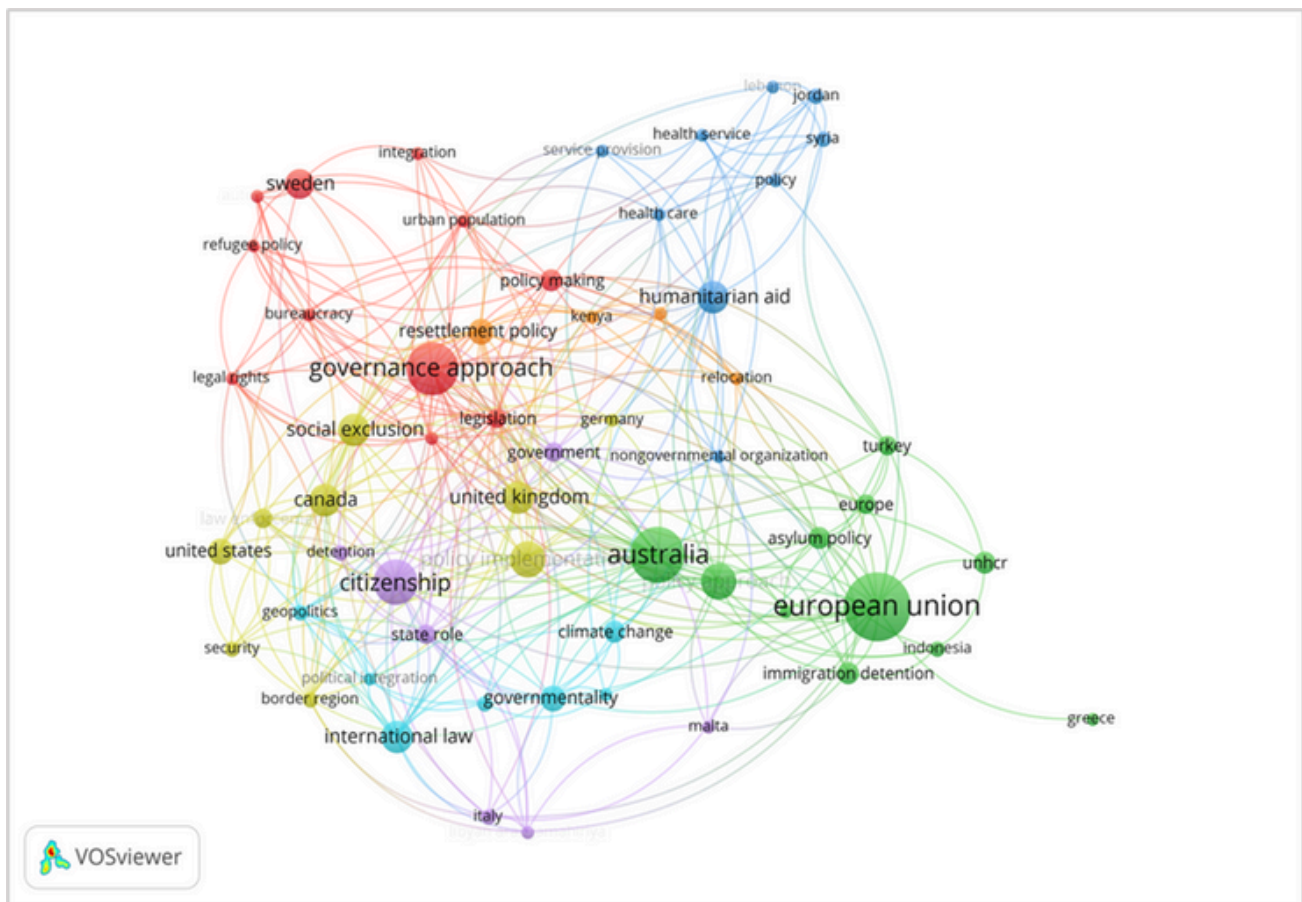
Figure 11. Top Policy Issues, Ranked by Number of Times They Were Identified Within Articles

Figures 12 and 13 display some of the most prominent keyworks and their linkages for the periods of 2011-2015 and 2016-2020, respectively. This allows us to notice some variation in the main themes covered by articles in these distinct time periods. For example, in the 2011-2015 period, many articles focus on Australia's refugee policy, but this theme loses some of its relevancy in the following period. Conversely, in the 2016-2020 period, themes related to "Syrian refugees" and Europe's "refugee crisis" gain more relevancy.
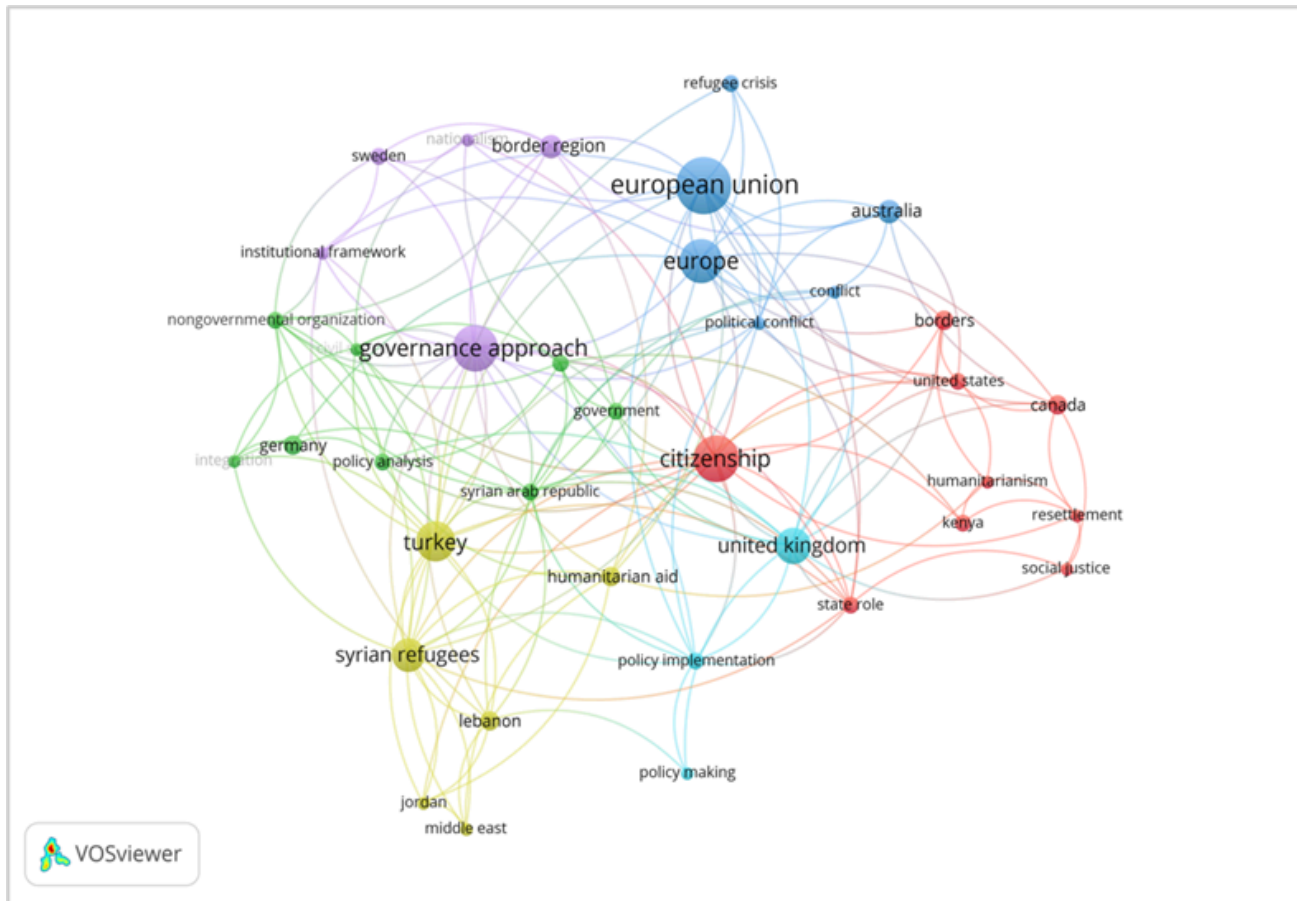
Figure 12. Author and Index Keywords Network (2011-2015)

Note: The figure shows how frequently keywords (with at least 4 occurrences) are found in the articles. Larger nodes indicate keywords with more occurrences. Keywords clustered together and in nodes of the same color have co-occurrence relationships. Keywords relating to migrant categories (e.g.: refugees, asylum-seekers, etc.) and generic index keywords (e.g.: article, humans, etc.) were restricted.

Figure 13. Author and Index Keywords Network (2016-2020)

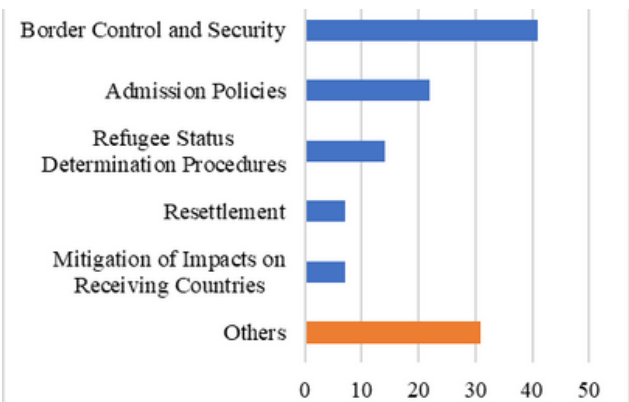Note: The figure shows how frequently keywords (with at least 4 occurrences) are found in the articles. Larger nodes indicate keywords with more occurrences. Keywords clustered together and in nodes of the same color have co-occurrence relationships. Keywords relating to migrant categories (e.g.: refugees, asylum-seekers, etc.) and generic index keywords (e.g.: article, humans, etc.) were restricted.
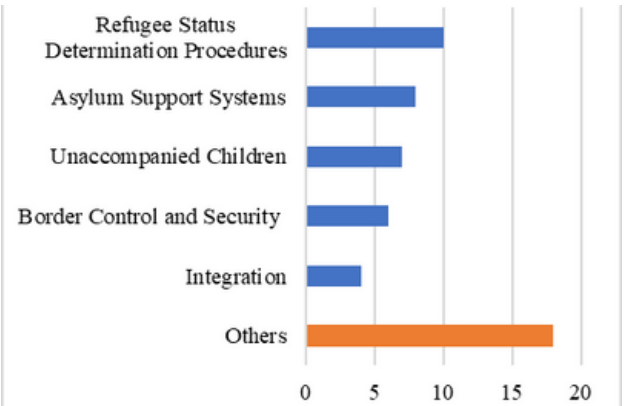
It is also possible to notice that certain countries or regions of focus tend to be more closely linked with particular policy issues. Figures 14-17 show some examples amongst the most prominent geographical regions of focus (viz. the European Union, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Turkey). Noticeably, articles on the European Union and Australia tend to focus on matters related to border control and security. Most of these articles have a particular focus on "border externalization" policies, such as the "EU Regional Policy", in the case of the European Union, and the "Pacific Solution" in the case of Australia. On the other hand, articles on the United Kingdom have a tendency of focusing on refugee status determination procedures and the country's asylum support system. Meanwhile, most articles on Turkey focus on the particularities of the country's temporary protection law.

Figure 14. Top 5 Policy Issues in Articles Focusing on the European Union, Ranked by number of Times They Were Identified
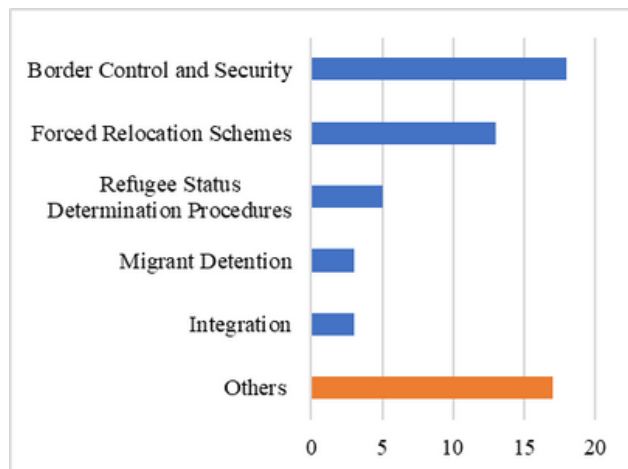

Figure 15. Top 5 Policy Issues in Articles Focusing on the United Kingdom, Ranked by number of Times They Were Identified

Figure 16. Top 5 Policy Issues in Articles Focusing on Australia, Ranked by number of Times They Were Identified

Figure 17. Top 5 Policy Issues in Articles Focusing on Turkey, Ranked by number of Times They Were Identified

Analytical/Theoretical Frameworks and Methods Employed by Authors

The vast majority of articles included in the synthesis did not employ any specific analytical or theoretical frameworks on their analyses. In fact, only 39 articles did so, an equivalent of 8.8% of all articles. A total of 27 different analytical and theoretical frameworks were identified (table 3). Albeit most of the employed frameworks are not originally linked to the study of public policy, they tend to be employed in articles which investigate policy-making processes in refugee responses.

In terms of methods, 54.8 per cent of articles in the synthesis (241 articles) were deemed to be theoretical. In that, the majority of articles in the synthesis did not conduct any type of field work (such as interviews, surveys, etc.) to support their analyzes. Meanwhile, 45.1% of articles (198 articles) employed empirical methods.

Table 3. Analytical and Theoretical Frameworks Employed in the Articles

Analytical/Theoretical framework employed	Originally linked to the study of public policy?	№ of articles
street-level organizations theory	yes	6
multi-level governance	yes	5
governmentality	no	2
liberal intergovernmentalism	no	2
public goods theory	no	2
agnotology theory	no	1
automated ensemble simulation approach	no	1
critical discourse analysis	no	1
discursive institutionalism	no	1
feminist policy analysis	yes	1
homonationalism	no	1
legitimacy theory	no	1
marxism	no	1
multiple streams approach	yes	1
neofunctionalism	no	1
orientalism	no	1
participatory parity	no	1
policy model	yes	1
policy overreaction	yes	1
policy transfer theory	yes	1
post-constructivism	no	1
poststructuralist discourse analysis	no	1
regime theory	no	1
resumption of an ordinary life	no	1
social networks	no	1
structuralism	no	1
systems thinking	no	1

RESULTS: RECOMMENDATIONS IN REFUGEE POLICY RESEARCH

Recommendations Made by Authors

Only 6.8 per cent (30 articles) of the articles included in the synthesis make recommendations to the study of refugee policy. On the other hand, 35.3 per cent (155 articles) make practical policy recommendations, and 57.8 per cent (254 articles) do not make any recommendations (Table 4). A few articles making recommendations to the study of refugee policy make multiple recommendations. Also, a minority of those make both recommendations to the study of refugee policy and practical policy recommendations.

Table 4. Recommendations Made by Authors

Recommendations	№ of articles	Percentage of articles
Make no recommendations	254	57.8%
Make practical policy recommendations	155	35.3%
Make recommendations to the study of refugee policy	30	6.8%

Most recommendations to the study of refugee policy set out areas in which further research is needed, such as the influence of bureaucracies and organizational procedures over policy (16 per cent), the influence and role of international relations (10 per cent), and the policy implementation stage (10 per cent) (Table 5).

Table 5. Research Gaps Identified by Scholars

Issue areas	№ of times recommended
Influence of bureaucracies and organizational procedures	5
Influence and role of international organizations	3
Policy implementation	3
Influence and role of actors at local level	2
Influence of international relations	2
Influence of asylum policies over integration policies	1
Global refugee policy	1
Influence of transnational municipal networks	1
Influence of domestic politics	1
Influence and role of civil society	1
Influence of experts at domestic level	1
Influence of media	1
Influence of marketization	1
Influence of culture	1
Influence of State preference in regional policies	1
Power sharing during formulation of regional policies	1
Policy change at regional level	1
Influence of COVID-19	1

However, albeit in a much smaller number, recommendations in terms of analytical and theoretical approaches to the study of refugee policy are also made (Table 6). In total, 5 different approaches were recommended, including multi-level governance, systems thinking, public goods theory, policy transfer theory, and multiple-streams approach.

Table 6. Gaps in Analytical & Theoretical Approaches (identified by scholars)

Analytical/Theoretical approach	№ of times recommended
Multi-level governance	2
Systems thinking	1
Public goods theory	1
Policy transfer theory	1
Multiple streams approach	1

CONCLUSIONS

Similar to previous LERRN analyses, the results of our study demonstrate a significant imbalance between publications from authors liked to global North institutions versus those in the global South. Only 7.5 per cent of articles included in our synthesis are linked to authors from institutions in global South countries. In tandem, over one quarter (26 per cent) of all articles are linked to a single country, the United Kingdom. This imbalance is further reflected in citation patterns within the literature on refugee policy.

Our bibliometric analysis revealed that the most relevant share of the literature on refugee policy from the 2011-2020 period tends to have originated from disciplinary fields linked to political science, international relations, and law. This includes, inter alia, the fields of refugee studies and migration studies. In that, while important contributions from disciplinary fields linked to public policy are visible, there is still a considerable disparity in terms of most cited articles engaging with refugee policy.

Notably, the vast majority of articles engaging with refugee policy do not employ any specific analytical or theoretical framework in their analyses.

However, among those that do, most rely on frameworks originating from the field of public policy. In fact, 81 percent of the analytical frameworks identified in this study are drawn from public policy research.

Additionally, while 35 percent of the analyzed articles offer practical policy recommendations, only 7 percent include recommendations for the study of refugee policy itself. This points to a limited dialogue between refugee studies and policy studies and suggests a need for clearer analytical direction within the literature.

These findings underscore the importance of strengthening refugee policy studies through the application of analytical tools and methods from public policy. To advance this, scholars should engage more systematically with policy studies frameworks, which offer valuable theoretical and analytical foundations to study of refugee policy.

SOURCES

[i] W. Sweileh, "Bibliometric analysis of medicine – related publications on refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people: 2000 – 2015", *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 17(7), 2017, 1-11.

[ii] O. Ellegaard & J. Wallin, "The bibliometric analysis of scholarly production: How great is the impact?", *Scientometrics*, 15, 2015, 809-1831.

[iii] The following Boolean string was employed on Scopus in June 2021 to identify publications that refer to refugee policy in their titles, abstracts, or keywords: "refugee" OR "asylum" AND "policy" OR "bureaucracy" OR "governance" OR "government" OR "regime."

[iv] In this study, a minimum of ten citations was established for articles published between 2011-2019. Meanwhile, for articles published in 2020, this threshold was of at least 2 citations, considering these articles had been published more recently and were thus less likely to have achieved a significant number of citations. No restrictions were established for editorials.

LOCAL ENGAGEMENT REFUGEE RESEARCH NETWORK