



 **S.U.C.R.E.**

Supporting University Community Pathways for Refugees-Migrants



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**GREEK
COUNCIL
REFUGEES**



**UNIVERSITY
AMSTERDAM**



**ARISTOTLE
UNIVERSITY OF
THESSALONIKI**

Accessing Higher Education in Europe:

**Challenges for Refugee Students
& Strategies to Overcome Them**

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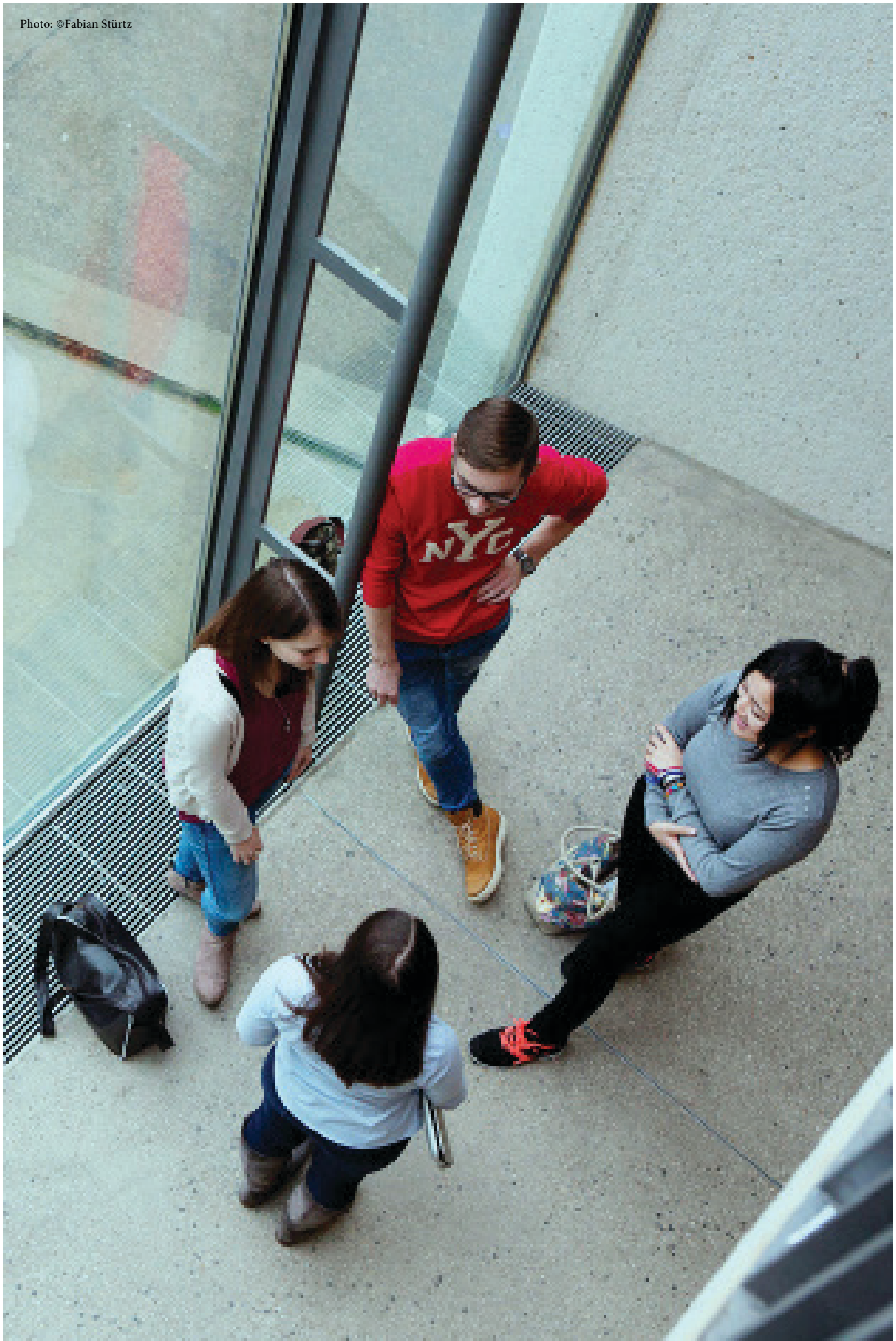
Finally, we would like to thank all individuals who dedicate their time to finding ways to enable refugee students to continue their educational journey away from home.

Mariana Arjona Soberón, Lena Reuter & Antonia Chibuzor

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INTRODUCTION

The S.U.C.RE. Project

The Key Action 2 (KA2) Erasmus+ project "Supporting University Community Pathways for Refugees-Migrants" (S.U.C.RE.) began in 2016 as a joint project focusing on the response of universities to the needs of refugee students and scholars. S.U.C.RE. is carried out by the University of Cologne, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Greek Council for Refugees, and is coordinated by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. This project analyzes the current refugee situation in the context of higher education institutions and explores five main areas called "Intellectual Outputs". These outputs are Admissions Procedures and Preparatory Programs (IO1), Institutional Support for Refugee Students (IO2), Institutional Support for Refugee Scholars (IO3), Psychosocial Support (IO4) as well as Health

Definition of Terms

In 1951 the United Nations¹ defined the term "refugee" as someone who has a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race², religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (...)"³ and has therefore been forced to leave their home country and is unable or, on the basis of those fears, unwilling to return.

In comparison, the definition of the term "migrant" by the United Nations Convention on Migrant's Rights from 2003 is closely connected to labor migration. A "migrant" is described as someone who leaves his country "in search of better socioeconomic perspectives", because of "extreme poverty" or in order to enable "their relatives to live better lives".⁴

However, the strict distinction between a refugee and a migrant is fluid and difficult to pin down. Migration can still be forced even if it is not caused by war, political or ethnic prosecution but by poverty and a lack of life choices. Another definition of a migrant is simply someone who moves between places internationally, without the indication of significant reasons⁵ other than a desire to migrate; such is the case for many international students. Even though international students face a variety of challenges similar to those refugee students have to deal with, the context of their migration and the legal and social realms surrounding it are entirely distinct which is why international students are considered to be a distinct category separate from that of refugee students.

and Legal Support (IO5).

This article addresses the topics established in Intellectual Output IO1: Admission Procedures and Preparatory Programs. The S.U.C.RE. project identified the need to not only collect information on initiatives for refugees looking to access higher education across Europe, but also the need for a framework that brings them together cohesively. Hence, this project will critically analyze the multiple barriers refugees face while trying to access higher education, as well as challenges experienced on the institutional side. It will also analyze the different programs initiated by higher education institutions (HEIs) that serve refugees on the road to integration in university degree programs. The main interest groups for this study are refugee applicants seeking admission at an institution of higher education in Europe and European universities seeking to provide a humane and realistic path to higher education integration for refugees.

Throughout this article the terms "higher education institutions" (HEIs) and "universities" will be used interchangeably, the former also addressing HEIs that may not officially be called universities (e.g. Fachhochschulen, Technical Colleges, etc.)

General Background

Debates surrounding asylum policies and integration in Europe have markedly increased in recent years. The topic of displacement was shoved into the spotlight as Europe witnessed significant spikes in numbers of refugee arrivals, due to persistent conflicts all over the world, particularly in Syria. More than half of the refugees worldwide come from only four countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Somalia⁶.

According to UNHCR (UN Higher Commissioner for Refugees) statistics, figures show a number of around 65.6 million people are forcibly displaced, encompassing 22.5 million refugees, 10 million stateless people, and 3.2 million asylum seekers.⁷ However, only a small percentage of refugees arrive in Europe,⁸ and the number of people being granted asylum status in European countries is much lower. In 2015, the recognition rate in EU countries is 52 per cent: this means that out of 1,323,465 claims, 593,140 decisions were made, and only 308,433 refugees were granted asylum.⁹

Refugees and Education

While those current debates focus on refugees as a challenge, and frequently even as an economic burden, new approaches targeting the potentials of refugees and the advantages for the host country are needed. Rather than only providing aid for basic needs, a more global perspective should be encouraged. Doing so offers a route to greater sustainability, and enables refugees to either participate actively in the formation of the host countries' landscape or to eventually return home and rebuild post-conflict societies.¹⁰ Especially for educational institutions, a set of new challenges arise due to a significant number of unaccompanied minors and young adults seeking asylum.¹¹ Society has a special responsibility for minors and young adults concerning their well-being, education, and life choices.¹² UNHCR statistics show, that only 50 per cent of refugee children have access to primary education, in contrast to a global average of 90 per cent. Regarding secondary enrollment, the gap becomes wider: just 22 per cent of refugee adolescents attend secondary school compared to a global average of 84 per cent. At the higher education level, we observe that one per cent of refugees attend university when 34 per cent of youth around the world do so.¹³

Education is a fundamental and universal human right and, therefore, an international obligation. In the UNHCR Education Strategy 2010-2012, the right to education is articulated as "[E]very child, youth and adult of concern to UNHCR (...) (a)ll people (...), being either refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, returnees or internally displaced persons assisted and protected by UNHCR have the right to education."¹⁴ Education provides children and young adults with skills they need to fully participate in their communities and is especially important when it comes to vulnerable persons. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, states that "Refugee education is sorely neglected, when it is one of the few opportunities we have to transform and build the next generation (...) (A)s the international community considers how best to deal with the refugee crisis, it is essential that we think beyond basic survival."¹⁵ Zeus¹⁶ refers to a growing pool of research, to state that education has gained recognition as the "fourth pillar" of humanitarian response alongside food, shelter, and health.

The need to acquire skills for life-long learning through primary, secondary and tertiary education is an indispensable

condition for modern times. The latter has long been an overseen extrapolation of intellectual formation. The UNHCR agenda defines higher education: "Higher education includes all post-secondary education. It includes education at colleges and universities that leads to degrees. It also includes training that is technical, vocational, professional and/or paraprofessional and that leads to certificates and diplomas."¹⁷ The accomplishment of a higher education degree does not grant a successful career. It is, however, less likely for individuals with degrees to be unemployed or work in low-income areas. This is especially true in the Global North, where the trend is 'the higher the degree, the better the income'. Chances on the labor market depend closely on a higher education degree.

According to the UNHCR, education forms the basis for income-generating activities and self-reliance, which in return is a fundamental ingredient for successful living in general. With regard to creating a stable environment for those who need it most, education plays a vital role in preserving one's identity, creating self-esteem, and enabling individuals to become a part of a community.¹⁸ For refugees and asylum seekers, a degree from a higher education institution leads the path for a successful development in the host country's society and community, as well as giving them the opportunity to create positive change in post-war situations in their home countries in case of return. Higher education might "act as a catalyst for the recovery of war-torn countries, not only by providing the skills and knowledge needed to reconstruct shattered economic and physical infrastructure but also by supporting the restoration of collapsed governance systems and fostering social cohesion."¹⁹ For people in a situation of forced displacement, a degree develops confidence and allows greater participation in civic and public life.²⁰

However, the process of refugee integration into existing HEI programs at European universities is complicated through many aspects. The Institute of International Education (IIE) estimates that around 450,000 Syrian refugees worldwide are of university age (18-22 years old) and around 100,000 of those people are eligible to enter university. Very few have been able to complete their higher education after resettling in the host community, an issue that has lasting implications for the individual's future.²¹

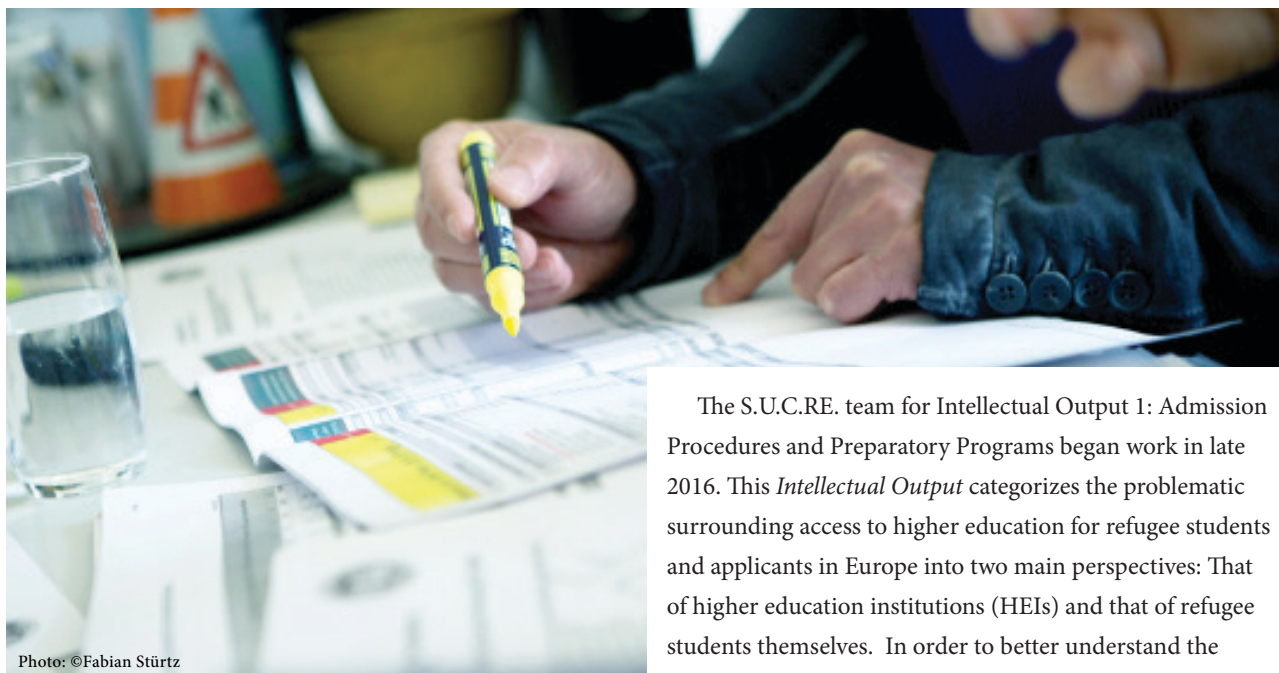


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STUDY OBJECTIVE AND METHOD

The objective of this research is to identify the main challenges that stand in the way of refugee student access to higher education and identify and further develop tools to overcome them. The output should be a framework that describes and analyzes these challenges, coupled with best practices to address them. Ultimately culminating in a roadmap for improvement, that helps guide institutions that do not yet have initiatives and helps evaluate initiatives that may already be in place. Societies, as well as HEIs, have invested interest in students being able to build a new support system in their host country in order to ensure their success throughout their educational pathway. Impacts of the implementations would be that students feel supported and understood and are in a position to take advantage of already existing opportunities at HEIs. The aim is to enable students to make informed decisions about their educational pathway. As well as, from the institutional perspective, to create diverse and inclusive programs which foster quality educational experiences for students. It would also allow universities to have better access to student concerns and wishes. As UNHCR points out, refugees' academic needs should not be overlooked: "Without the chance to study, an entire generation is at risk."²²

The S.U.C.RE. team for Intellectual Output 1: Admission Procedures and Preparatory Programs began work in late 2016. This *Intellectual Output* categorizes the problematic surrounding access to higher education for refugee students and applicants in Europe into two main perspectives: That of higher education institutions (HEIs) and that of refugee students themselves. In order to better understand the current status quo of issues regarding admissions and preparatory programs, a desk study was conducted. Over 120 European universities were researched online to find information on current programs that target prospective refugee students. The sample of universities is made up of universities featured in the EUA Refugees Welcome Map²³, from universities in the Coimbra Group²⁴ and universities that appear in searches through key words like "European universities, refugees, admissions and preparatory programs".

An online survey for universities was also developed, in order to gain insight on their experiences with refugee students, and the ways their institutions cater to this target group. This survey combines open-ended and close-ended questions about university initiatives and contact to prospective refugee students. In total, initiatives and experiences from 70 different universities were gathered. In-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted with university advisors and with advisors from NGOs that work with refugees. Additionally, an online round-table discussion in which different HEIs participated was organized in order to discuss challenges and best practices from an institutional perspective.

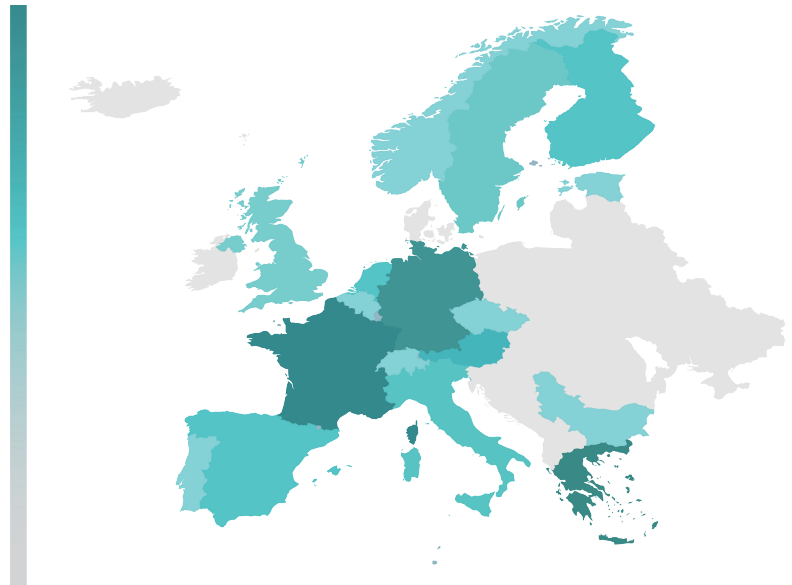
An online survey for students was also designed. This survey combined open-ended and close-ended questions about their educational journey and experiences in preparatory courses. Additional responses from evaluations of the preparatory programs were also used as data sources in this study. In-depth semi-structured interviews with students were also conducted in order to gain more detailed insight into their experiences at the university. In total, a record of experiences from 23 students was gathered.

DATA OVERVIEW

The following chapter will first give a general overview of the data set that was worked with, including the geographic distribution of universities that participated in the survey, and the nationalities of the students they work with. In addition, a small overview of university initiatives will be presented in order to better set the stage for analysis.

Geographic Profile: Universities

The following map shows the geographic distribution of the data on universities. Although the scope is relatively broad, the main countries that responded to the survey were France, Greece and Germany. This distribution influences the kind of stories and information the S.U.C.RE. project had access to.



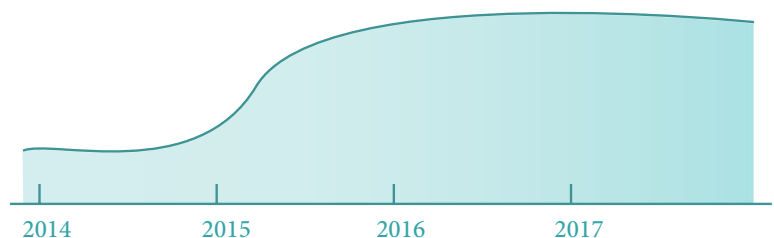
Geographic Profile: Students

The following word cloud is a visual representation of student's home countries as reported by the universities in surveys and by students in interview responses.



Contact Timeline: University-Refugees

The universities reported that most contact to refugee students was initiated in the past two years. Although we know that refugees have long been a part of the European educational landscape the institutional awareness of them shows that the past two years have seen an increase in contact from refugee applicants.



CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES

The following framework for analysis was developed based on the work of Shakya & Gurge, et. al²⁵ and Shalayeva²⁶. The categories in their work served as the groundwork and have been modified and expanded on in order to present the finding of this study.

The data collected revealed various "symptoms" of particular challenges. Three different perspectives for analysis were considered, the personal perspective (individual), the

systemic perspective, and the interpersonal perspective. These challenges have been labeled as:

- Transition into Adulthood
- Shifting Support Structures
- Systemic Barriers: Information Barriers
- Systemic Barriers: Non-recognition of “foreign” Education
- Systemic Barriers: Linguistic Barriers
- Systemic Barriers: Financial Barriers
- Lack of Administrative Harmonization
- Intercultural Gap
- Social Discrimination

Universities have taken various approaches to tackling these challenges. The following sections will give a detailed overview of both the challenges and best practices that have been identified in order to address them. It is important to note that the challenges and best practices flow into one another, because of the multifaceted and intersectional nature of this problematic.

SITUATION	CHALLENGES	BEST PRACTICES	IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Youth has been forcefully displaced ■ Education paths of youth are disrupted ■ Students find themselves in a new educational and cultural environment 	<h3>Transition into Adulthood</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Comprehensive “all encompassing” advising ■ Psychosocially Sensitive Advising ■ Staff Training ■ Human Perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students feel supported and understood ■ Students are in a position to take advantage of educational opportunities ■ Universities benefit from capable students who have been trained to understand the system they are in
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students are faced with a new social environment in which they are not well connected ■ Traditional support structures are either not there, or do not possess enough knowledge about the system to provide necessary information 	<h3>Shifting Support Structures</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Structured Buddy Programs ■ Long-term Advising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students are able to build a new support system in their host country. This support system will be important in ensuring their success throughout their educational pathway ■ Universities benefit from students with well-established support structures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students have to deal with a new set of educational systems which differ depending on university and country ■ Many of the programs implemented for refugee students’ needs are new and change on a regular basis which leads to confusion for staff and students 	<h3>Systemic Barriers: Information Barriers</h3>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Create an inclusive and informative website ■ Make Use of Community Resources ■ Talk and Listen to Refugee Students ■ Comprehensive information about the educational system and general opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students can make informed decisions about their educational pathway ■ Efficient advising and application processing can take place in universities, because students that seek further information about degrees and courses are well informed in their decision

SITUATION	CHALLENGES	BEST PRACTICES	IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students face a sort of degradation of their achievements in their home countries which leads to frustration and a longer process of academic career Some students cannot prove their academic achievements due to missing documents 	<p>Systemic Barriers: Non-recognition of “foreign” Education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transparent Evaluation Procedures Alternative Evaluation Pathways Respect and Appreciation for Applicants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students feel that their previous education has been fairly evaluated and understand why their educational journey begins at a particular point and not another Universities experience less resistance and frustration from students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students do not possess sufficient language skills of the language used in the host country Students are unable to be independent because of difficulties with language 	<p>Systemic Barriers: Linguistic Barriers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language Courses Translated Information Multi-lingual Advisors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are able to be self-reliant and independent. Allows students to have more agency Allows universities to have better access to student concerns, insight and wishes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students face a difficult financial situation since they are usually not eligible for national scholarships, and do often lack financial support from families or other traditional support structures Students have to bear the burden of providing for living costs by themselves instead of focusing on their studies only 	<p>Systemic Barriers: Financial Barriers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive Information about Funding Opportunities Creative Funds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are able to focus on their studies without having to worry about financial issues Universities get higher quality students and students who complete their studies on time (reputation) Gives universities the opportunity to engage alumni networks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are often given contradictory information The list of requirements for programs and processes changes and grows without students understanding why or hearing about the changes in a timely manner Initiatives, policies, and laws are constantly changing 	<p>Lack of Administrative Harmonization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transparency Is the Best Policy Create Clear Communication Channels Establish Networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students no longer feel like they are being set-up for failure and know they can trust the university to communicate changes and explain the reasons behind them. Universities are able to establish trust-based relationships with students which builds on their reputation both with students and other organizations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Misunderstandings between students and advisors due to a different cultural understanding lead to confusion and conflict 	<p>Intercultural Gap</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intercultural Training for Students and Staff Feedback Sessions Auditing Classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students understand the university processes and structures and feel understood in their frustration and difficulties University staff can communicate effectively with students, are better prepared for difficult situations that might arise and are less frustrated in their relationships with students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students experience discriminatory encounters in their daily lives 	<p>Social Discrimination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Openness and Acknowledgement Staff Training Deconstructing the Refugee Identity: Destigmatization Through Integrated Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students feel safe and respected in the university environment Universities are known for their inclusive and diverse culture

Transition into Adulthood

Refugees interested in higher education, specifically in bachelor degrees, are often young asylum seekers. These individuals not only find themselves in a new country with a completely different educational, cultural and social system (amongst others), but they are relatively new to adult life. Shalayeva²⁷ explains that adult life arrives with new responsibilities and social expectations and calls these refugees "suddenly adult" asylum-seekers. Although the focus of Shalayeva's article centers on the legal difficulties that young refugees have, it can also be extrapolated into the educational context. "Suddenly adult" refugees are legal adults. However, they are only beginning to grow into the role of being an adult, and this growth happens under a context of forced migration.

HEIs staff should keep in mind that the administrative procedures these young refugees are going through at the universities are often the first such processes these students experience. Although the same can be said for native students, unlike them, young refugees have not been socialized in the system of their host country. They are not only dealing with the run-of-the-mill difficulties of transitioning into adulthood and taking on more responsibility, but they are going through this transition in a foreign country, in a foreign language, with legal limitations and after having experienced a war-torn country that forced them to flee. These preconditions create a need for "special needs", like psychological concerns, one student pointed out:

"I think that they (the Germans) should take the initiative, for example, they should offer help in order to understand them (refugees) better (...) there are so many problems - many people fled the war (...) so many things happened to them and they (the Germans) cannot understand what they have been going through and that they ... they have issues, psychological issues. People have to talk to them and help them."²⁸

Guidance during this phase ideally extends beyond the educational realm and takes a holistic approach to students' well-being. One university explained:

"...when we started the program our main challenge was to help them to improve and stabilize their social situation in order to study in the best possible condition."²⁹

Another university shared advice in order to make sure that students understand the process throughout and feel guided over time:

"Ask the refugees what they want. Make sure your

institution has 1-2 contact person(s) that become case-holder and are willing to collect all necessary information for the individual. Otherwise, people get lost."³⁰

Examples of institutions with helpful programs are Uni für Alle Freiburg which offers intensive bi-weekly counseling sessions or the University of Würzburg which helps with general administrative questions, financing, accommodations, etc. The University of Cologne (UoC) also offers pre-application advising in which students are walked through the whole application process and system by a member of the UoC staff. This measure has guaranteed that the applications received are complete and correct. Intensive counseling builds relationships to students, and ensures that frustration with the social difficulties does not get in the way of their studies because they are being eased into the transition to adulthood.

Best practices

Comprehensive "all encompassing" Advising

Comprehensive advising, as shown in the above quote, attempts to stabilize a student's situation in order to have the best pre-conditions for learning. Through assisting them in aspects of their lives, other than just the academic ones, students receive necessary support in their transition into adulthood and are able to develop a healthy and well-informed sense of independence in their host country.

Psychosocially Sensitive Advising

Although HEIs are primarily responsible for academic and administrative advising, this target group requires a greater investment (although it could be argued that many other target groups do as well). "Suddenly adult" refugee students can benefit greatly from advising that is tailored to fit both their academic and psychosocial needs.

Staff Training

Training staff to understand the target group they are working with is indispensable. When staff is better prepared and informed, advising becomes more effective and both the university and student benefit greatly.

Human Perspective

Throughout this whole process, it is easy to forget that advisors are working with young adults that are in dire need of support and guidance. HEIs have the opportunity to be a major game-changer for every one of these individuals. Maintaining a grounded, empathetic human perspective is essential.



▪ Shifting Support Structures

Forced migration has a never-ending amount of consequences. Grinberg and Grinberg describe the situation of immigration as “one ceases to belong to the world one left behind, and does not yet belong to the world in which one has nearly arrived.” The disappearance of known and well-established support systems and structures is one of the most immediately tangible consequences.

“parental support and mentoring in education may be very limited for refugee youth whose...are more likely to be orphaned, come...unaccompanied, been separated from parents for extended periods due to forced migration.”³¹

Not only are most prospective university students transitioning into adulthood, but the traditional support structures that would usually guide them through the process of applying to universities and taking on more responsibilities generally (such as trusted teachers, parents or guardians), are either not present, or do not possess enough knowledge about the system to provide necessary guidance. In a study on the educational aspirations of refugee youth in Canada, it was reported that for young refugees in the new country

“(...)friends are the main and often the only source of support and advice.”³² Friend support-structures, which are invaluable for social well-being, are also disrupted through forced migration, and acquaintances in the host country may not possess the knowledge required in order to help.

It is important to acknowledge the shift that is occurring in the support structures of refugee students. Reestablishing oneself in a new country requires time, and inadequate access to experienced and trusted support sources is an important obstacle. For example, one student described their current situation as:

“(...) life here is difficult and sometimes ... well, different, not like in Syria (...) I mean, not that it is better in Syria, no, but in Syria, we get money from our parents, no (student) is working (...) you focus on your studies (...) here, you only rely on yourself. That is the problem.”³³

As shown in the above quote, the student articulates the shift in support structures, and the differences in expectations between what one would have experienced at home (Syria) and the realities in the host country. The student mentions they can only rely on themselves; this indicates that appropriate support structures have not yet been established. HEIs should be aware of the unique situation in which refugee students find themselves. It could be argued that students in a similar situation are international students (students from abroad who have not fled their home countries). However, the main difference is that for the most part international students have willingly decided to be in the host country, and refugee students have been forced by situations out of their control.

Many universities realize the importance of rebuilding these systems and share their strategies:

“It is very important to have resources that coordinate and monitor the refugee program... It needs a good buddy system or mentoring people.”³⁴

“Since 2015 we have been implementing a buddy-program including students and refugees willing to study [here]. They either want to start new or to continue their studies and in both cases, they are integrated into the campus life through the buddy program.”³⁵

“Each refugee student was supported by two students who helped him/her to integrate into the campus and into society as a whole. Members of University staff helped them to improve their spoken (language skills) by having lunch breaks with them regularly.”³⁶

“They also get educational guidance and are integrated into the

campus life by the students' associations."³⁷

A common theme that can be seen in the recommendations from universities is the creation of buddy-programs. These usually entail pairing refugee students with students (usually from the host country) in order to have them serve as a "friend" that can help introduce them to student life and serve as a peer confidant. One of the challenges with these programs is often the lack of consistency. They usually rely on volunteers that may begin the program quite enthusiastically but may eventually be tied up in their own complicated schedules. A student shared:

"[...]I have a buddy, and it's great (...) but we only met two times last year."³⁸

A university also wrote:

"(...) because the program was supported only by volunteers who were students (...) resulted not to have always the appropriate staff for the program."³⁹

Consistency is the key to turning these well-intentioned programs into a real foundation of support for refugee students.

Best practices

Structured Buddy Programs

The idea behind buddy programs is a step in the right direction. These programs pair peers and provide an opportunity for refugee students to be integrated into the social life of their host countries, by building support networks with other students. A way of making them more consistent is through the creation of structured buddy-programs. An ideal version would be one in which these programs do not just rely on volunteers but have a fixed student staff that reports to a University supervisor. It would allow universities to train the "buddies", and ensure that the advice and information they provide is accurate, and it would ensure that consistent meetings take place. Additionally, it allows universities to hear about students concerns and needs through a peer perspective and acquire insight that might otherwise have been difficult to come across.

Long-term Advising

Long-term and consistent advising is essential in building up trust between refugee students and universities. By having a named advisor assigned to them, students know that they can rely on this person throughout their application, preparatory and educational journey. Ideally, these advisors become a central part of the students' support system and can help ensure academic success of refugee students.

- Systemic Barriers: Information Barriers

While most European HEIs present information on programs and opportunities for prospective refugee students off- as well as online, for refugee students this information is not necessarily easy to find or to comprehend. In fact, finding and accessing the *right* kind of information is a challenge.

In many cases, the information is developed from an ethnocentric perspective, meaning that the information is selected and presented according to the standards of the host countries' own (information) culture and understanding. As a result, information channels often seem to miss the concerns of their intended target group, i.e. prospective refugee students, and their backgrounds and perspectives.

Refugee youths and prospective students seeking information on HEIs programs come from countries with different paradigms regarding service, educational systems, information and more generally, communication. Additionally, some of them do not speak their host country's language fluently. These are all significant aspects HEIs should keep in mind when developing their information sources and channels. It is crucial to present information for the target group of prospective refugee students in a comprehensive and complete fashion. Such information channels can be websites, flyers or, as one interview partner states, newsletters.

"The director of the academic component of the refugee program prepares a newsletter for students, informing them about events and different opportunities. It puts a lot of relevant information in one place."⁴⁰

This example addresses prospective refugee students and presents relevant information directly addressing at the target group. As a result, the HEIs do not run the risk of losing prospective refugee students in the maze of other information channels.

Another issue that was often mentioned in the surveys is that students were not aware of the structure of the educational system. This issue has to do with the fact that HEIs often present information for prospective students, which is only relevant to the direct application processes concerning the particular institution. However, it is important to keep in mind that these prospective students are often not even aware of their options. Presenting material that would seem "obvious" for advisors, and students from the host country (e.g. in some countries, the difference between universities and technical universities, etc.) is essential. It can save both students and advisors time and energy when students are able to make informed decisions about their educational journey.

For this reason (and others), several universities have specifically designed courses that introduce students to both the higher education system of the country and other aspects of the culture of their host country. The courses ease students into these systems and support them through the process of acculturation⁴¹ by openly speaking about issues or concerns students may have.

Best practices

Create An Inclusive and Informative Website

Information websites of HEIs for international student applicants, in general, and prospective refugee students, in particular, should present bundled information in an inclusive and accessible manner.

Make Use of Community Resources

Refugee students attending European HEIs have become a new group of experts of their own needs. As a result, refugee students have founded organizations like "Make It German" and other similar initiatives, in which refugee students themselves become mentors for their peers by offering academic career support. Universities can benefit from working together and cooperating with such associations, thus, closing cultural gaps between HEIs and prospective refugee students.

Talk and Listen to Refugee Students

Similar to making use of community resources, exchanging information with refugee students already enrolled in HEIs and asking them for their feedback can serve as a great method for detecting administrative

and educational areas that need improvement. 'What information do you wish you had received when you applied to our HEIs?', 'Would you have liked and been able to manage completing language courses parallel to your academic training?' etc.

Comprehensive Information About the Educational System and General Opportunities

Many refugees are unaware of the specifics and particular diversity of the educational system of their host country. Thus, they consider earning a university degree as their only option to enter the labor market later in their career. Instead, career paths such as apprenticeships or college programs are oftentimes considered just as prestigious and are highly respected amongst employers as well.

- Systemic Barriers: Non-recognition of "foreign" Education

Many refugee youths want to begin or continue their academic careers at a HEI in their new European home. Thus, for prospective refugee students one of the first steps towards being accepted by a HEI and enrolling in a university program is the evaluation of the academic certificates which they have acquired at educational institutions in their home countries. For those applicants who have lost or do not own any academic certificates whatsoever their overall academic competence has to be evaluated. Some refugee youths might have lost their certificates on their way to a host country or their home university was not able to issue proper academic certificates due to a war-torn infrastructure.

Depending on each European HEI this can create quite the complex, lengthy and frustrating process of document evaluation. However, as "[t]he EC recognises that education plays a crucial role in helping migrants and refugees settle in new countries and environments" (NOKUT), in order to make education accessible to prospective refugee students, it is in the interest of European HEIs and the applicants to facilitate such bureaucratic processes.

"The main challenges are clearly the language (French and English level) and the official documents needed for admission. They are often missing."⁴²

Regardless of whether academic documents and certificates were lost or if foreign documents do exist and need to be evaluated, the main challenge is the assessment

of each individual prospective refugee student's academic competence as well as the compliance of their home university's curriculum with certification structures of the prospective European HEI. The lack of transparency of assessment processes conducted by many European HEIs can, however, be daunting for prospective refugee students.

"I think a lot of prospective students are probably intimidated by our document requirements. It definitely keeps some of them away. But then again, if they really don't have any documents there's not much we can do for them. I don't think we should say that everyone is allowed to come regardless of if they have documents or not. Another university did that a while back and they were completely swamped with people that wanted to study there, but they had no way of really knowing if they had studied before or not."⁴³

There are some best practice examples of European institutions and initiatives that have implemented strategies to facilitate the examination process of foreign academic documents and certificates. One such best practice example is the work of the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). As an institution for quality management and assurance in education, NOKUT offers clear academic certificate evaluation pathways.

If prospective refugee students hold all academic certificates Norwegian HEIs generally require they can apply like any other international student. In case applicants cannot present any academic certification, NOKUT, first, maps the background of each prospective refugee student. In a second step NOKUT offers level placement tests of qualifications, such as TestAS. Thirdly, and finally, a committee of experts appointed by NOKUT assesses each prospective refugee student's case individually.

It is worth considering the centralized implementation of a similar strategy, at least for all HEIs of one country. Until this is achieved, as a result of the overall lack of regulations for the evaluation of international documents and certificates of prospective refugee students, some applicants are simply rejected by HEIs based on the challenges and efforts related to the administrative evaluation of documents.

"The objective is to establish a procedure and standards for assessing refugee advanced knowledge level, given that refugees have no access to the institutions they were attending and carry no relevant official documents with them."⁴⁴

In conclusion, reviewing and minimizing systematic barriers is in the interest of European HEIs as well as prospective refugee students. In order to minimize bureaucratic regulations yet ensuring a fair and transparent application process for prospective refugee students (just as for all the other (inter)national applicants) the implementation of national or European standardized processes in regards to document evaluation should be considered.

Best practices

Transparent Evaluation Procedures of Previous Education

Prospective refugee students oftentimes face new obstacles and bureaucratic hurdles when applying to a European HEI. Thus, being rejected by different HEIs is even more frustrating if the bureaucratic processes, one is not familiar with, are not transparent. Therefore, European HEIs should implement document assessments strategies that are transparent to the applicants as well as the academic administrators.

Alternative Evaluation Pathways

The situation calls for new and flexible measures and holds major potential; so does the group of prospective refugee students who are interested in attending European HEIs. Exploring alternative evaluation pathways of previous education is important to providing access to HEIs. Assessing academic competence through tests like TestAS or having academic experts evaluate students in a systematic way in order to assess study competency are plausible alternatives.

Respect and Appreciation for Applicants

The tough bureaucratic hurdles oftentimes give prospective refugee students the impression that their academic achievements are not respected by European HEIs. The implementation of transparent evaluation procedures of their previously achieved academic certificates as well as offering alternative evaluation pathways to them would show prospective refugee students that European HEIs take them, their application, their academic career seriously, thus, consider them valuable and equal members of society.



• Systemic Barriers: Linguistic Barriers

Both students and universities identified linguistic barriers and the process to overcome them as the key challenge in the educational journey of refugee students. This aspect creates the most misunderstandings, is the main source of frustration, and influences every aspect of students' day-to-day life and future prospects. One university reported:

"Also a very "funny" misunderstanding was the English word STUDY. Here (...) it means to be part of an institution in tertiary higher education. But a lot of refugees understood it as "learning" things and receiving the A-levels, just like in high school. Language is also one, if not the MOST important issue for refugees. Learn the language of your host country! Without that no education will work."⁴⁵

That being said, most surveyed European institutions have ambitious language requirements, at times even knowledge of two languages is required, as is the case in the Netherlands, Norway and regions in Spain, to name a few. This means that the first step in a refugee student's educational journey is to take language courses. In many countries, introductory language courses are offered as a part of integration measures. Opportunities such as the OLS⁴⁶ language courses from the European Commission are also important programs that were mentioned by many universities.

The process of language learning is arduous, and the language exams for university qualification are difficult. It is not unusual for students to fail these exams on various occasions. In Germany, on average only 26,4%⁴⁷ of TestDAF (one of the most common language tests) participants

successfully achieve a language level that guarantees entrance into study programs. Language often becomes the main roadblock between them and their envisioned future, and students become unmotivated with every failed attempt and passing month. One student explained:

"I don't want to study for this (language) exam my whole life"⁴⁸

The language courses themselves often mix participants from several levels due to funding restrictions, which can be frustrating for both advanced learners and students who may not yet be so advanced:

"There are many different levels grouped together in one class, some students are really really good, and others ...well they have not yet learned so much. For example, some have B2 and some B1 (...) some are fast and some are slow, that was a bit difficult"⁴⁹

Studying a language can be extremely exhausting, especially when the focus lies exclusively on the grammatical construction of a language and the slow acquisition of vocabulary. Most of the students in these courses are not learning the language for the sake of learning a new language but because they *must* learn it in order to move on to content that actually interests them. During this language acquisition period, the subject specific content that might fuel the desire to learn the language is not there, which can make the process even more frustrating. One student who was enrolled in a program that had language and subject specific courses in parallel explains:

"It was very useful to be in a cohort with other students (taking subject specific courses). It motivated me; I would have given up on the language otherwise"⁵⁰

On the other hand, advisors and teachers are concerned that including subject specific courses, distracts students and takes time away from learning the language, which can be detrimental to the learning process. One of the universities from the survey is considering removing the subject related courses from the first year of the preparatory program, to allow students to focus entirely on learning the language in the first year.

Social contact with peers who are native speakers of the language was also mentioned by several students as an important and exciting way to learn the language. However, most also mentioned that establishing this contact to peers was challenging, specifically within the university, because most language and preparatory programs "isolate" refugee students to a certain degree in their program cohorts.

"I feel like, in my encounters with people who do really know the German language well ... my language skills are improving (...) the thing is, we don't know many (Germans), we are all suffering because of that (...) I know some, but not many (...) not from university, but because I attend events, I go clubbing sometimes or into a bar (...) just like that (I know some), but not from university"⁵¹

At the time there is no "best" strategy, just multiple approaches, however, patience on all sides is required in order for the process to be successful.

Best practices

Language Courses

Working together with language departments is essential in order to come up with suitable language learning opportunities for refugee students. The survey revealed that language courses were the most common initiative in European universities for refugee students. In cases where the language courses were a component of preparatory programs which also focused on other skills aside from language, participants usually had to prove they had a B1 level or above in order to enroll. Expanding the levels offered by universities could offer continuity in language learning making the process of language learning more efficient for refugees.

Translated Information

Achieving any level of independence is a monumental challenge when linguistic barriers present themselves on every application form, instruction guide and service center. However, being able to be independent even in these small aspects can go a long way in the development of confidence and agency in the host country. Universities can strive to translate basic forms in a wider array of languages in order to best accommodate refugee students.

Multi-Lingual Advisors

HEIs benefit from diverse teams. In a practical sense, when universities diversify their teams in such a way that advisors are multi-lingual, some of the linguistic barriers in place for refugees can be overcome.

Systemic Barriers: Financial Barriers

In addition to those obstacles, young asylum seekers often find themselves in a difficult financial situation. In general, refugees, including students, are mostly dependent on social welfare when they first arrive in a European country. A lack of language proficiency leads to difficulties in finding jobs and oftentimes refugees are not even allowed to apply for jobs because the status of their asylum application prohibits it. In the case of refugee students, the loss of welfare support when enrolling in university programs must be considered, since the student status may be in conflict with social welfare regulations. Students are not necessarily aware of these conflicting policies, and may find themselves in a sudden state of dire financial need, where their social benefits disappear unexpectedly. University staff must be aware of these regulations in order to be able to provide accurate and well-informed advice to prospective students.

For unaccompanied minors and youth, as well as refugee students who came to Europe with their families, systemic barriers intersect in terms of financial matters and shifting responsibilities within family structures. Traditional support structures foresee students focusing on their studies, which in a case concerning native students usually means their parents cover costs of daily student life, including rent and tuition fees. In cases, where parents are not able to support their children, many European countries offer state-funded grants to allow a non-discriminatory access for pursuing academic careers. However, in most countries these programs only support national students. For a great majority of refugee students, relying on parents or relatives to finance their studies is practically impossible. Moreover, because social support is limited to nationals, refugee students have no chances to continue their studies while being funded by the state. Although there are several solutions to these situations, policy is only beginning to address them, which can leave people in precarious positions, where they lose funding for a period of time, or are unable to continue their educational journey because of financial limitations.

Many refugee students who have a clear asylum status have a full-time job besides their studies, which might lead to sub-optimal learning conditions. One university reported:

"Based on our experience, many students faced difficulties to follow courses mainly because they were still struggling with their personal material conditions."⁵²

Such situations might raise strong concerns before even pursuing an academic career and lead to rash decisions concerning tertiary education.

An ex-advisor in a youth center spoke of a young Syrian who articulated his fears about "wasting" time and being unable to support his family back in Syria:

"This young man is 21 years old and has studied in his hometown in Syria for a couple of semesters. After we collected all information, and calculated his financial needs, he decided to dismiss his plans to continue his studies. Instead, he wanted to search for a job after finishing the required integration courses to earn money faster. He said he could not wait for such a long time before supporting his family. He also had debts due to an extreme case of blackmailing, where his brother has been the victim of kidnapers and ransom was demanded, a case which occurs quite a lot in war-torn Syria."⁵³

As shown in this quote, financial pressures limit life choices students can consider. These pressures may be exacerbated by not having access to social help, and having other financial commitments that are remnants of a war-torn home country.

Several universities have alternative financing schemes for refugee students:

"Under the "Unibo for Refugees" scheme, The University of Bologna offers study grants of 8.000 € gross to deserving refugee seeking students who wish to register for First Cycle, Second Cycle or Single Cycle Degree Programmes at the University of Bologna for A.Y. 2017/18. Unibo for Refugees study grants are assigned for one academic year, with the possibility of renewal in subsequent years." - University of Bologna⁵⁴

The University of Cologne also opened a stipend fund with donations from private donors in order to be able to help refugee students who are not eligible for social support.

Best practices

Comprehensive Information About Funding Opportunities

The rules around funding opportunities are often difficult to understand even for university staff. A simplified guide with the main funding opportunities and the most important considerations would be both a help for refugee students and an opportunity for staff to better inform themselves.

Creative Funds

The financial situation is difficult for both universities and students. Thinking out of the box is always a good idea. Universities can consider strategies for creative fundraising, with either alumni or interested donors in the city or state.

▪ Lack of Administrative Harmonization

Photo: ©Fabian Stürtz



Programs, initiatives, policies, and even laws concerning refugees are constantly changing. This is in part a positive thing because it means that systems are adapting to fit the circumstances that are being presented. In universities, it usually means that institutions learn from unsuccessful strategies and strive to improve programs to better serve students and the institution. Although much can be gained from this flexibility and willingness to change, these changes are difficult to communicate. A university described one of the main challenges in admissions as:

"Informing the staff of new rules about accepting refugees in courses - having a common procedure."⁵⁹

Often times, university staff will not necessarily be aware of all the policy and program changes within the institution. In situations where communication between different organizations like the foreign office, or welfare office, and universities, must take place, communication and an understanding of the administrative procedures of the other can be an even greater challenge.

This rapid change in policies and administrative

procedures makes the program landscape often resemble patchwork (...) changes happen way too frequently in one administrative field and way too slowly in another, resulting in mismatches and lack of harmonization."⁵⁵

The lack of administrative harmonization can affect things like asylum applications or smaller aspects like language courses. A representative example that was mentioned repeatedly both by students and advisors was the lack of harmonization between language schools in cities and language courses provided by universities. Students are often required to prove they have already achieved a particular language level by providing a certificate at universities, however, this certificate does not ensure that they can continue to study at that level. Students often have to take a language test at the university and they are regrouped at different levels depending on the results of this test. A vast majority of students are assigned a lower level than what they thought they had.

"I thought that I can start in B2 or C1 level, and I was surprised to find out I have to attend B1, B1+ classes. That means I had to attend this class for one month and... like 6 weeks in total before taking an exam (...) so 6 weeks were just gone, I lost 6 weeks (...) before that, I already had to do one semester, so in total about seven or eight months... that was really disappointing."⁵⁶

This occurs because language schools outside of universities tend to focus on aspects of the language which are more necessary for everyday life, such as spoken skills and regionalisms. However, language tests and courses at universities focus on writing skills and reading comprehension skills, which are aspects of the language that are more necessary in an academic setting. An advisor shared:

"People come to me and say, "I want to be done quickly, I want to begin my studies today not tomorrow" which I can totally understand. However, people often overestimate their skills, they often notice that their speaking skills are sufficient, but don't realize that their writing skills (which are important for their studies) are not yet there...and people don't always notice this discrepancy."⁵⁷

This disconnect between the focus of those two organizations creates a situation where students feel like they are being set-up to fail and they lose trust in the system.

Another student described:

"I had many problems; I have been here about three times. The first time, they asked me to bring B1 and my Syrian certificate and something else I don't remember. The second time, I had to (bring) TestAS, I didn't know that. Finally the

third time, I wanted to hand over (TestAS) and they told me I had to use uni-assist in order to check. So, that was difficult for me."⁵⁸

Although the university was well intentioned in the changes, the speed at which they happened and the way in which these changes were communicated made the student feel like there was a lack of transparency and that they were not being adequately advised.

Best practices

Transparency is the Best Policy

In order to reduce the frustration created by such rapid changes and "patchwork" situations, an important step is to be transparent with students and to explain from the beginning that such situations can and probably will come up. However, admitting to this can give refugees the feeling that they are being fairly treated and that sometimes even advisors are surprised with changes but they will do everything to try and help.

Create Clear Communication Channels

Communication is key when confronting changes in requirements for university applications, regulations for financing or even changes in the schedules of the welfare office. By establishing clear communication channels and strategies through the usage of e-mail or other digital or traditional means, students can be informed of these changes and will feel taken care of by the university. Although this requires investing resources, once the system is in place, effective communication can take place. This helps build up a relationship of trust with students and contributes to the reputation of the university both with students and with organizations that will appreciate well-informed visits.

Grow Your Network

Establishing a healthy network between universities, NGOs, government agencies, etc. can not only be helpful in creating more harmony but can eventually lead to the development of better ideas and strategies that capitalize on the institutions' ability to synergize with each other.



▪ Intercultural Gap

Oftentimes, the issue with communication is not only language, but also the different cultural background, value systems, and priorities that clash in the exchange between students and university staff. Fred Jandt explains that culture acts as a backdrop for communication "Culture provides diverse ways of interpreting the environment and the world, as well as relating to other peoples. To recognize that other peoples see the world differently is one thing. To view their interpretations as less perfect than ours is another."⁶⁰ This word of caution is addressed to all partners of exchanges, in this case, to university staff and to students. When asked to describe the main challenge of working with refugee students, one respondent wrote:

"Intercultural differences; eagerness of the refugees to get started (but having to tell them that there are quite some formalities to get through first)."⁶¹

In the interviews, students reported frustration with program timelines and complicated requirements. The surveys further showed that universities and students have a different set of priorities. Most students reported wanting to be able to move forward, to begin their real studies and their life in their host country. Although they understood learning the language was an important aspect of this, they felt the language courses, and preparatory programs were somewhat

of a roadblock and "lost" time. On the other hand, university staff communicated the importance of preparing students to be successful in their studies, and equipping them with all the necessary skills to compete on equal footing with their peers. One advisor wrote:

"Students want to be done quickly, especially in cases where they were almost done with their studies in their home country...they then have to do everything here again... learn the language, get their previous studies recognized (or not), apply for admission in a higher semester, or start from the beginning again. [...] That can be very frustrating, and you can't really do anything but say "step-by-step". These are things that one should do in order to be able to establish themselves here (host country). These people (students) will most likely not be gone tomorrow; they will probably stay here longer. I think the time it takes (to go through this process) is an investment".⁶²

The clear contrast between the concepts of "lost" time vs. invested time, shows a disconnect between how staff and students are viewing preparatory programs and language courses. Although these steps may indeed be an essential part of settling in the host country the way universities talk about these programs and more specifically the way HEIs communicate with refugee students about these programs must be revised. When asked about student frustration with a new preparatory program timeline (it is now longer) an advisor explained:

"[...]You can try and explain the reasons behind the decision and just say "we didn't do this to get in your way or because we are trying to be mean, but we noticed the concept wasn't working and we have to make it better." We want the best for our students."⁶³

When asked to provide advice two universities responded:

"Patience! Not to forget where they come from, not to forget what they have been through. The trauma they have, which shows after a while and if refugees do not show up for class it might not be because they are (...) lazy, but because they have a hard live to organize in the host country and often also at home. Some, who can also work, will send money to their families or they live in precarious living situations with many roommates in one apartment. Not all of them have access to computers or learning devices or the quietness necessary to study."⁶⁴

"Work with small and surveyable projects, be very clear in your communication, bear in mind that language is an issue, educate yourself in intercultural communication."⁶⁵

Best practices

Intercultural Communication Trainings for Staff and Students

Intercultural communication trainings are highly recommended for both university staff and students that are participating in preparatory programs and language courses. These trainings can help staff and students be more open to the concerns, actions, motivations and perspectives of the other.

Feedback Sessions

Regular feedback sessions between university staff and students can provide an opportunity for honest conversation and transparency. HEIs can benefit from student feedback and the insight into what aspects of a program students consider troubling or particularly successful. These feedback sessions allow for an evaluation of initiatives to take place and open the door to improvement.

Auditing Classes

University staff often tell students that they are not ready to participate in classes because of missing language skills. Giving them the chance to audit classes can help them experience what a learning setting at the university actually looks like and a chance to evaluate their language skills in a subject specific academic setting. Often students will realize that their language skills do, in fact, need work, but will become motivated by the desire to understand the classes they are auditing.

▪ Social Discrimination

Due to the stigmatization of the refugee status, many refugees face discrimination on the basis of "race" and ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, gender expression and identity, political belief and socio-economic status. While any form of discrimination is traumatizing it can be particularly shocking and ostracizing when it is administrators and professional contact persons, such as education administrators, who discriminate against them. Social discrimination is often intersectional, thus, can occur

in any context and has major effects on the successful (re-) establishment of a life in the host country.

One example reflecting the severe consequences social discrimination can have is the housing situation of many refugee youth. For example, the surveys show that refugees not only have difficulties in finding an apartment in bigger cities due to a general lack of housing but face additional discriminatory partiality. A study conducted by the Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavaria's public broadcasting service) and the German news magazine Spiegel⁶⁶ and published in June 2017 has shown that prospective tenants with a foreign last name are less likely to find an apartment than those with German-sounding names. While the study did not specifically focus on refugees or on foreign-sounding names of a specific language, it shows that people in this circumstance, in general, (which includes most refugees), can have a hard time finding housing in Germany. The search for appropriate housing is even more difficult for prospective tenants who are people of color or have an accent. As a result, container homes or refugee hotels, which were supposed to serve as temporary solutions have become long-term homes for many refugees. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that people on welfare are often stigmatized. Individuals on social benefits often suffer under prejudice that labels them "lazy" and "lacking hygiene" due to their minimal financial means. The belief in such stereotypes is especially dangerous when shared by property owners and landlords, since it might result in them deciding not to rent their properties to refugees on social benefits. Not finding affordable apartments close to their HEI often forces students to live on the outskirts of cities creating long commutes and sometimes entailing high train or bus fares. One student shared:

"I found a room in an apartment with roommates (...) I searched for about six or seven months, I always made appointments to look at the apartments, I applied online, but now I finally found something. This has been really difficult. The problem is ... the landlords. You know, the apartment would be paid by the welfare office – but living costs by myself! But that's why it didn't work out (with the landlord)."⁶⁷

Additionally, housing that is available tends to be spatially limited and precariously equipped. Oftentimes four people or more share one small room and a kitchen. Therefore, conflicts caused by the massive lack of privacy are inevitable, and studying in these settings can be a huge challenge for refugee students. A university wrote:

"Some (students), who can also work, will send money to their families or they live in precarious living situations with a lot of roommates in one apartment. Not all of them have access to computers or learning devices or the quietness necessary to study."⁶⁸

Unfortunately, refugees are subjected to social discrimination in other contexts as well. Many times administrative officials act annoyed and impatient towards customers who are refugees. One refugee describes his attempt to open a new bank account as frustrating since the administrative officials acted as though he required "special" treatment. They ended up offering him bad conditions (expensive rates, yet less service) and justified it with the "bank guidelines". This instance reflects the issue that refugees are often not perceived as equals. As a consequence of such dehumanizing stereotypes and issues like language barriers, they tend to receive less and worse service.

It can be said that intersectional discrimination stemming from "race" and ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, gender expression and identity, political belief and socio-economic status towards refugee youth can cause severe social disadvantages, which in turn might hinder their educational career, successful acculturation and trauma recovery, and often times even creating new experience of trauma. Therefore, in order to diminish and eliminate such issues it is important for HEIs advisors to address them openly when advising refugee students. HEIs should also strive to offer a comprehensive overview of the forms and consequences of social discrimination refugee students are confronted with and, consequently, provide safe spaces where students feel at liberty to share their experiences.

Best practices

Openness and Acknowledgement

HEI staff should always believe students when they talk about incidences of social discrimination they have experienced and be open to have conversations about difficult topics and take the time to listen.

Staff Training

Staff sensitization for the identification and elimination of social discrimination.

Deconstructing the Refugee Identity: Destigmatization Through Integrated Activities

Refugees struggle with merely being identified as refugees, it is important to redefine the image behind the concept "refugee". Communicating the diversity of the refugee community within HEIs by bringing members of all different communities together under the umbrella of academics. HEI should offer integrated activities, such as sports, music etc., which enable refugee students to take part in regular student life, i.e. outside of programs in which they are merely perceived as 'refugees'.

ADVICE FROM AROUND EUROPE

Survey respondents were asked to give advice to universities looking to begin a refugee initiative or looking to improve theirs:

“Have as many people as possible from all the university’s departments and services involved in the refugee topic (teachers, lawyers, administrative staff, rectorate).”



“Based on our experience, many students faced difficulties to follow courses mainly because they were still struggling with their personal material conditions.”

“After 2 years of experience, we realize that most of the issues that we are facing are commonly shared with most of the actors dealing with refugees issues. That’s the reason why we believe that we should work together in order to create a network who will be able to put pressure on the institutions and share good practices.”

“Try to have a close and good contact with the different services and offices of the University (International Office, Service Center etc.). Also, try to stay close to your participants with emails and reminders. Otherwise, they won’t continue to come.”



“It is very important to have resources that coordinate and monitor the refugee programme...It needs a good buddy system or mentoring people. Universities in other countries are different and to understand that is not always easy.”

“It takes motivation and time but it should be worth it...”



“Rector’s leadership is the key. Budget for tuition or University fees is not enough, students drop-off [drop out of programs] if they have to work full time to survive”

“Work with small and surveyable projects, be very clear in your communication, bear in mind that language is an issue, educate yourself in intercultural communication.”

“It is so important to have a good preparation of the educational material and build good relations between the participants and the volunteers.”



“It is necessary to accompany these students with more meetings to help them in their project, whether academic or professional.”

“...suggest all the universities in having a transnational approach. So we would like to share the experience of other universities.”

“Work together - our experience is that there are many good initiatives, but we are stronger together. Try to integrate the research on migration/refugees.”

“Be prepared for several revisions of your initial research/education/implementation plan because the conditions of the target-population are extremely fluid and unforeseen cultural, linguistic and administrative barriers constantly appear. Also, base your actions on diverse teams of experts with different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds”

“Be pragmatic. Do with what you have, because it is very difficult to create new things, except if you can give money for that.”

“It’s important to prepare a time schedule and work plan before launching a program.”



“Start a preparatory program!”



“Ask the refugees what they want. Make sure your institution has 1-2 contact person(s) that become case-holder and are willing to collect all necessary information for the individual. Otherwise, people get lost.”

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the European community has been very active in striving to create new programs and to overcome challenges that stand in the way of refugee students' access to higher education. While this is commendable and inspiring, the challenges outlined in this publication show that there is still much work to be done, and are indicative of both policy and institutional failures. Although the results of this study are largely influenced by the perspective of HEIs in Germany, working on this research and speaking with diverse European stakeholders has shown that there is a similar urge for new and improved strategies, and a wealth of information to be found across Europe.

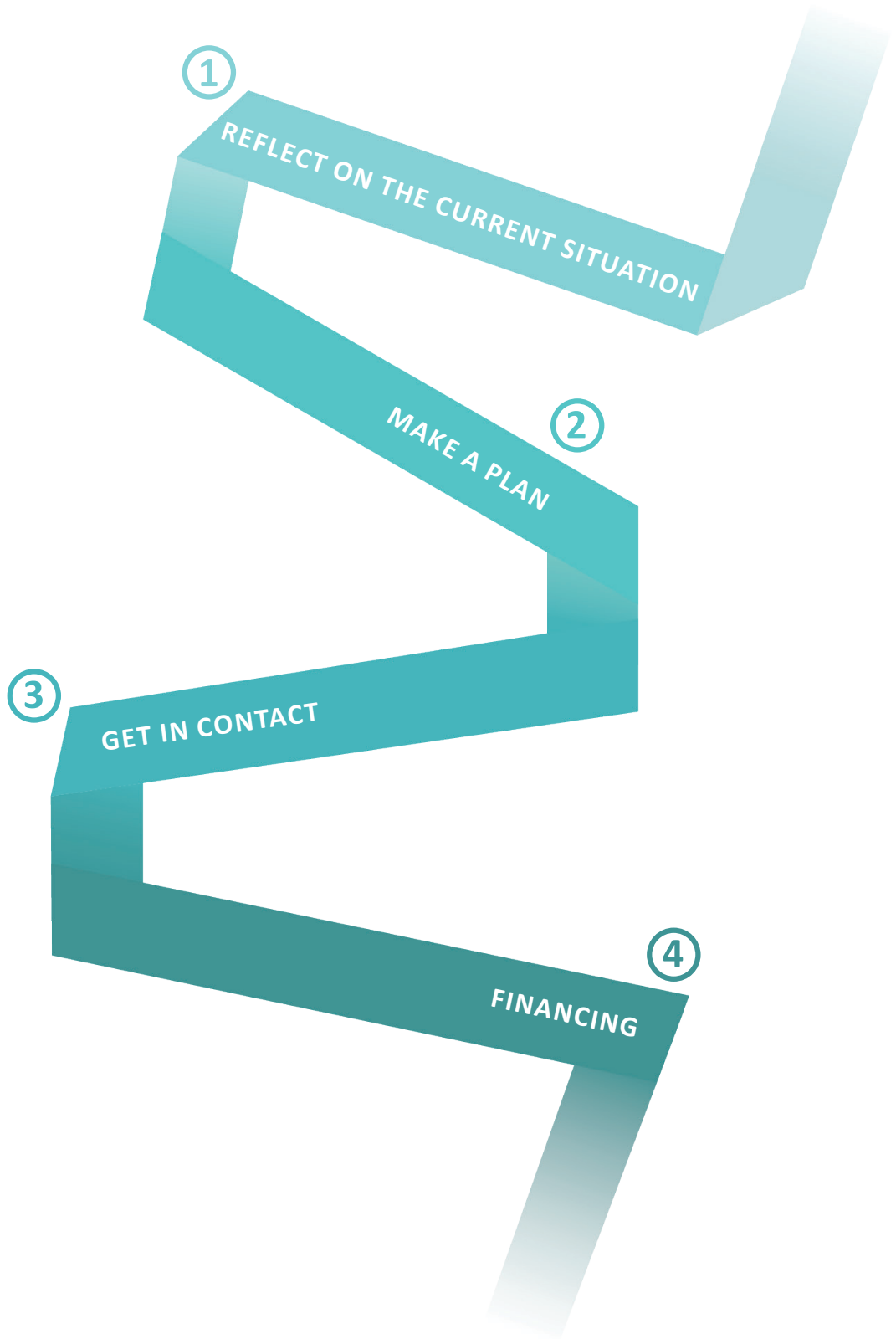
The increasing number of challenges refugee students face when it comes to accessing HEI programs, as well as the challenges faced by institutions trying to overcome them, require attention. These programs need to be invested in if their impact is to broaden and be long-lasting. It would not be realistic to expect universities to address each and every challenge with their initiatives, however by cooperating with other HEIs and stakeholders, creating a network of comprehensive expertise, initiatives can become more holistic. Language courses with specific educational goals in mind need to be developed and be continuous so that a B1 level remains a B1 level regardless of what institution one is in. Advisors must be adequately trained and be provided with enough time and resources to properly respond to student concerns. Funding for structured buddy programs could make a world of a difference in helping refugee students improve their language skills and build their support structures in their host countries. Strategies for recognition of foreign documents can be shared and should be transparent. Social discrimination can be fought with trained staff and an informed and aware student body.

Creating an inclusive, diverse and international academic community should be in the interest of all stakeholders involved in education, be it HEIs, NGOs, refugee initiatives, and, most importantly, refugee students themselves. Achieving this goal is challenging, yet rewarding. As a group of competent individuals, prospective refugee students can enrich HEIs and the European academic community. Although intercultural and administrative challenges are inevitable, these must not prevent the European academic community from striving to be an inclusive and excellent

academic society. It is precisely this interdisciplinary, intercultural and academic exchange that can break down bureaucratic barriers and lead to innovation in the content of research, educational strategies and in administrative structures. Refugee students who become members of these academic communities will be able to operate as academic, political and cultural multipliers, helping to rebuild their communities and make those in their host countries better.

Cooperating with numerous stakeholders for this study has shown that all of the parties involved have valuable expertise in the areas of higher education, migration, and refugee policy. This publication hopes to inspire more stakeholders to contribute to overcoming the challenges for refugee students to access HEIs in Europe and to encourage further dialogue between other stakeholders.

Finally, supporting fellow human beings in need is the moral and social responsibility of the international community. With education being the key to generating insight, exchange, understanding, and respect, it serves as the foundation of any multicultural society.



ROADMAP FOR IMPROVEMENT

The critique that often follows studies like this one is that the analysis stays on paper and concrete actions rarely follow-up on the conclusions presented. In the following pages, we will walk through different steps in order to establish a new initiative or to improve on your current one.

1 **STEP 1:**
REFLECT ON THE CURRENT SITUATION

Plan your first initiative

Answer Question Set 1

Revise your existing initiative

Answer Question Set 2

Set 1: Establishing the Groundwork

Answer these questions to begin your journey towards an initiative for refugee students:

Have you been contacted by refugee students? (How many? Since when?)

.....

.....

.....

.....

Are there any refugee students currently enrolled in your institution? (How many? Since when?)

.....

.....

.....

.....

What are admissions / requirements at your institution?

.....

.....

What do you think are the needs of the refugee students?

.....

.....

What resources do you already have in order to fulfill these needs?

.....

.....

.....

.....

Set 2: Critical Evaluation

If you have already established your initiative, it is important to reflect on its successes and challenges in order to be able to improve.

What types of initiatives do you have in place?

.....

.....

.....

Who is/are the target group(s) of the initiative(s)?

.....

.....

.....

.....

What challenges have you faced?

.....

.....

.....

.....

What are the success stories?

.....

.....

.....

.....

What feedback have you received from students?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2 STEP 2: MAKE A PLAN

Plan your first initiative The challenges we addressed in this publication can serve as a guide to help establish what main priorities your initiative should have, use this chart establish what challenges your initiative should address and to what extent. Check one box if the challenge is a minimal priority, and all five if it should be the main priority.

Revise your existing initiative The challenges we addressed in this publication can serve as a guide to help find areas of opportunity in your initiatives and to recognize aspects of your initiative that are working well. Use the form to rate how your initiative addresses the different challenges. Check one box if your initiative only minimally helps address the challenge and all five if your initiative has been successful in addressing it.

Rate your Initiatives

Transition into Adulthood	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	Shifting Support Structures	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
Systemic Barriers: Information Barriers	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	Systemic Barriers: Non-recognition of “foreign” Education	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
Systemic Barriers: Linguistic Barriers	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	Systemic Barriers: Financial Barriers	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
Lack of Administrative Harmonization	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>	Intercultural Gap	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>
Social Discrimination	<input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/> <input type="radio"/>		

Plan your first initiative Use the chart you just filled out and look for tools that specifically target the challenges where you set your focus.

Revise your existing initiative The chart you just filled out should help reveal different strategic alternatives. Either you can work towards strengthening areas your initiative may not be so strong in, or you can further specialize your initiative.

Use ideas from the toolbox to tailor a program that best fits your institution's needs and priorities. Don't hold back and dream a little!

Toolbox

- Plan a comprehensive advising strategy
- Plan Staff Training to learn about pedagogy any empathetic listening and advising
- Staff Training (admin and academic)
- Transparency in Processes and Timelines
- (Add your own)
- (Add another)

- Create a structured buddy program
- Long-term Advising
- Centralize Information and create a newsletter or database
- Comprehensive information about the educational system and general opportunities

- Language Courses
- Translated Documents/Tests
- Multi-lingual Advisors
- Transparent evaluation procedures
- Alternative evaluation pathways
- Comprehensive Information about funding opportunities
- Creative Fundraising
- Integrated Activities
- Intercultural Communication skills

3 STEP 3: GET IN CONTACT!

Once you have a plan, it is important to meet with stakeholders both within and outside your university.

University Leadership	Speaking with university leadership can help give you an idea of how much the university is willing to invest in the initiative and much of a priority the initiative is.	<input type="radio"/>
Students	Meeting with student or prospective student representatives can help you see if your initiative is going in the right direction, and if it is really responding to the needs of refugee students in your community.	<input type="radio"/>
Other Institutions	Getting in contact with other institutions that might be planning, or may already have initiatives, is a good way of brainstorming new ideas, and learning from others' experience.	<input type="radio"/>
With the S.U.C.RE. Team	Feel free to contact us with ideas and questions. We would be happy to help!	<input type="radio"/>

4 STEP 4: FINANCING

Establish priorities. Money is a tough issue, and the “dream” plan might not be in the cards right now (or maybe it is, in which case you can skip over this bit). Look at your current budget and plan, what aspects of your initiative are “must haves” and what aspects are “nice to haves”?

A

“Must Haves”	“Nice to Haves”

B Use the following funder categories to look for opportunities:

University Funds	<input type="radio"/>
National Agencies	<input type="radio"/>
European Level Agencies	<input type="radio"/>
Private Funds	<input type="radio"/>
Alumni	<input type="radio"/>



BEYOND THE ROADMAP

The ideas and steps laid out in this publication are but a small portion of what is out there. Explore the “off-road” trails and try out new things. At the end of the day, we are all trying to make our institutions better and to make a difference for the students seeking knowledge and refuge in them.

BEST PRACTICES INITIATIVES PROFILE

KEYWORDS

In this section, we are naming some examples that could be used as best practice examples. It is understood, however, that up to now, no university has found the perfect way to deal with the situation, and there might even be no such way. To do our best, we can nonetheless seek inspiration from already existing programs, which are for sure not necessarily yet perfect, but on the right track.

- MORE
<https://www.wu.ac.at/en/the-university/about-wu/more-programm/>
- Let's Work Together
<https://letsworktogetheredu.wordpress.com/>
- VINCE
<http://vince.eucen.eu/>
- S.U.C.RE.: Supporting University Community pathways for REfugees-migrants
<https://eurep.auth.gr>
- OLS for Refugees
<http://www.unipi.gr/unipi/en/intl-office-home/item/325%20>
- Project P.R.E.S.S.
<https://www.eap.gr/en/links/cooperations/project-press-provision-of-refugee-education-and-support-scheme>
- OLS Language Support
<https://www.uv.es/uvweb/philology-translation-communication/en/faculty-philology-translation-communication-1285848125311.html>
- InclUusion
<https://www.uu.nl/en/education/inclusion>
- VASVU
www.vu.nl/vasvu
- School of Modern Greek Language (SMG) of AUTH
The teaching staff of the School of Modern Greek Language (SMG) of AUTH provides refugee students with the following material:
 1. Welcome guide for refugees and migrants
 2. Educational support material
 Web Site and Support Materials: <https://opencourses.auth.gr/courses/ZEUS101/>
 E-book: <https://joom.ag/4KIW>, <https://joom.ag/wCIW>
Greek for Refugees
 Link e-book: <http://joom.ag/Km2W>
 Web online learning portal: <https://opencourses.auth.gr/modules/document/?course=ZEUS101>
- Department of European Educational Programs of AUTH
<https://erasmusplusols.eu/ols4refugees/>
<https://eurep.auth.gr/el/node/1256>

SEE ALSO OTHER INITIATIVES AROUND EUROPE:

- Unibo4refugees
<http://www.unibo.it/en/homepage>
- TaaleNT2
<https://www.windesheim.nl/werk-en-studie/opleidingen-en-cursussen/educatie/taal-en-vvto-tto/schakeljaar-anderstaligen-taalent2/>
- "UiB seminar for refugees"
<http://www.uib.no/en/>
- Global Platform for Syrian Students
www.up.pt
- UCM Refugees Welcome Plan
<https://www.ucm.es/ucmrefugiadas>
- Discovery Semester for Refugees
<http://www.int.uzh.ch/en/in/refugees.html>
- FFL Intensive programme
www.univ-lehavre.fr
- Accueil des étudiants réfugiés
<http://www.crous-reims.fr/actualite/les-institutions-universitaires-francaises-sengagent-pour-laccueil-des-refugies-2/>
- Central Coordination for Refugee Integration
<https://www.tu-darmstadt.de/international/refugees/index.en.jsp>
- Study Preparatory Courses for Refugees
<https://www.portal.uni-koeln.de/academicrefugeesupport.html?&L=1>
- Auditor Programme for Refugees
<https://www.uni-jena.de/en/refugees.html>
- Uni für Alle e.V.
<https://unifueralle.jimdo.com/>
- InHere
<https://www.inhereproject.eu/universities/paris-1-pantheon-sorbonne-fr>
- UCL-Réfujiés
<https://uclouvain.be/fr/decouvrir/soutien-aux-refugies.html>

ENDNOTES

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- ²⁸ Original quote: „Ich glaube auch, dass sie (die deutsche Bevölkerung) manchmal die Initiative haben sollen, also zb dass sie ihre Hilfe bieten sollen, dass sie auch die Leute (Geflüchteten) verstehen können, dass sie auch zb wie also es gab viele Schwierigkeiten jetzt, es gibt Leute die aus dem Krieg geflohen (..) aber viele Leute bei ihnen viel passiert und sie können das nicht verstehen und das ... sie haben Probleme, psychische Probleme, und also diese Leute müssen mit ihnen sprechen und ihnen helfen.“ - Interview Participant, Syrian
- ²⁹ Survey Respondent
- ³⁰ Survey Respondent
- ³¹ Shakya, Y. B., Guruge, S., M. H., Akbari, A., Malik, M., Htoo, S., Alley, S. (n.d.). Aspirations for Higher Education among Newcomer Refugee Youth in Toronto. *Refuge*, 27(2), 65-78.
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- ³³ Original quote: "[...] das Leben hier ist schwierig und manchmal...fremd, nicht wie in Syrien ...] Ich meine nicht, in Syrien war besser oder so, ich meinte was anderes [...] In Syrien bekommen wir Geld von unseren Eltern, niemand arbeitet [...] man konzentriert sich auf sein Studium [...] hier man muss sich auf sich verlassen. Das ist das Problem." - Interview Participant, Syrian
- ³⁴ Survey Respondent
- ³⁵ Survey Respondent
- ³⁶ Survey Respondent
- ³⁷ Survey Respondent
- ³⁸ Interview Participant
- ³⁹ Survey Respondent
- ⁴⁰ Interview Participant
- ⁴¹ "Acculturation is the change in an individual or a culturally similar group that results from contact with a different culture. Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (2002) pointed out that there are differences between psychological and sociological acculturation. At the individual level, changes can occur in one's sense of identity, values, and beliefs. People may experience acculturative stress, such as anxiety or depression, as they try to adapt to a new culture." In Mcbrien, J. L. (2005). Educational Needs and Barriers for Refugee Students in the United States: A Review of the Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 75(3), 329-364. doi:10.3102/00346543075003329
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- ⁴⁹ Original quote: „In dem Kurs es gibt viele unterschiedliche Niveaus, es gibt Leute die sehr sehr gut sind, dann gibt es Leute die ein bisschen ... die noch nicht viel gelernt haben. Also bis B1, es gibt Leute zum Bsp die B2 haben und es gibt Leute die B1 haben (...) wir waren nicht auf einem Niveau, und es gab ein bisschen Schwierigkeiten zum Beispiel eine ist sehr schnell und eine ist sehr langsam, und das war ein bisschen Probleme mit dem Kurs.“ - Interview Participant, Syrian
- ⁵⁰ Original Quote „(...) es hat sehr geholfen, Teil eine Kohorte mit anderen Studierenden zu sein (...) ich hätte sonst aufgegeben, das hat mich sehr motiviert.“ - Interview Participant, Syrian
- ⁵¹ Original quote: „Ich finde, in meinen Kontakten zu den Leuten die gut Deutsch können, dann kann... die Sprache wird besser (...) wegen des Kontakts manchmal (...) das Problem ist, wir haben keine mehr Kontakte, wir leiden alle darunter (...) ich kenne einige, aber nicht so viel (...) nicht von der Uni, sondern, ich gehe immer Veranstaltungen, manchmal gehe ich feiern auch, manchmal in die Kneipe (...) einfach so, aber nicht von der Uni.“ - Interview Participant, Syrian
- ⁵² Survey Respondent
- ⁵³ Interview Participant
- ⁵⁴ Università Di Bologna (2017). <http://www.unibo.it/en/services-and-opportunities/study-grants-and-subsidies/exemptions-and-incentives/unibo-for-refugees>
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- ⁵⁶ Original quote: „Ich dachte, dass ich direkt B2 oder C1 besuchen könnte, kann, aber ich war überrascht weil der Kurs war B1, B1+, das heißt wir haben diesen Kurs einen Monat und, also insgesamt 6 Wochen gemacht, dann haben wir eine Prüfung gemacht (...) also 6 Wochen waren weg, ich hab 6 Wochen verloren (...) und davor ein semester, also insgesammt ungefähr 7 oder 8 Monate, ja... das war auch enttäuscht.“ - Interview Participant, Syrian
- ⁵⁷ Original Quote: „Es kommen schon Personen zu mir, die sagen 'Ich will, dass alles schneller geht', und am liebsten heute statt morgen das Studium beginnen; und ich kann es total gut verstehen. Aber oft ist auch so, dass die Personen sich selber überschätzen und... merken, dass sie mündlich schon ziemlich gute Kenntnisse haben, aber im schriftlichen Bereich hapert es dann... und diese Diskrepanz ist den Leute selber oft nicht so ganz klar.“ - Interview Participant
- ⁵⁸ Original Quote: „Es gab sehr Schwierigkeiten; ich war hier vielleicht dreimal zur Beratung. Erste Mal, fordern sie mich an, dass ich, ich glaube B1 und mein syrische Zertifikat und Lebenslauf und noch ein, ich glaub, ich weiß es nicht. Dann, die zweite Mal, muss ich auch mit TestAS, also ich wusste nicht. Und dann die dritte Mal, also ich wollte das abgeben, dann sagten sie dass ich durch uniassist überprüfen lassen soll. Und das war die Schwierigkeiten.“ - Interview Participant, Syrian
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- ⁶⁰ Jandt, F. E. (2013). An introduction to intercultural communication: identities in a global community. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- ⁶¹ Survey Respondent
- ⁶² Interview Participant

⁶³ Original Quote: „Man kann das nur erklären und einfach auch sagen, das haben wir nicht gemacht, weil wir irgendwie jemand quälen wollen oder es böse meinen, oder so was. Aber einfach, weil wir gemerkt haben, das erste Konzept ist sozusagen nicht aufgegangen und deswegen verändern wir es jetzt. Wir wollen das Beste für unsere Studierenden.“

⁶⁴ Survey Respondent

⁶⁵ Survey Respondent

⁶⁶ Diskriminierung auf dem Mietmarkt: BR Data und Spiegel Online. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.hanna-und-ismail.de/>

⁶⁷ Original quote: „[D]as war auch sehr schwierig, ich suche seit 6 oder 7 Monaten ungefähr, ich mache immer Besichtigung, immer bewerben, ja, im Internet, aber jetzt habe ich gefunden. Aber das war auch sehr schwierig (...) das Problem war mit äh Mit Vermieter. Also, bei der Wohnung, die wird vom Amt bezahlt bei mir, aber mein Leben von mir, deswegen hat es nicht geklappt.“ – Interview Participant, Syrian

⁶⁸ Survey Respondent

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