

## UNESCO Chairs / UNITWIN Networks Policy Brief Template

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[Section for Higher Education](#) | Division for Education 2030

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### **SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE UNIVERSITY IN THE ERA OF REFUGEE CRISIS**

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#### **Abstract**

The recent refugee crises have shed particular light on the role of universities to build inclusive tools with the aim of facilitating migrants and refugees' access to university education and research, and promoting their social integration and active participation in academic and social life. To this aim, the international community and academic institutions are called upon to strengthen collaboration around common priorities, and initiatives addressed to refugees should be integrated in a broader approach to diversity. The UNESCO chairs may participate to this debate as a community of knowledge, offering a contribution of ideas to national, international and UNESCO policies.

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[Note: The following narrative, including footnotes, should not exceed 4,000 words – this does not include references and any annexes]

## Introduction

As migration towards Western countries continues to increase, the issue of social and cultural integration of immigrants has become a priority for all governments, which are called upon to ensure equal opportunities for third-country nationals, and more generally for individuals with a migrant background, to access quality learning opportunities, including at tertiary level. The recent refugee crises have shed particular light on the role of universities to build inclusive tools with the aim of facilitating migrants and refugees' access to university education and research, and promoting their social integration and active participation in academic and social life.

The right of refugees to access higher education is enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and confirmed by the commitment to 'Leave no one behind' in the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, which specifically mentions refugees and addresses the issue through the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets. Policies and intervention programmes for refugees' pathways into higher education institutions are needed in order to guarantee equal access to educational opportunities. To this end, the international community and academic institutions are called upon to strengthen collaboration around common priorities.

## Improving university access for migrant and refugees

According to UNHCR, only 77% of refugee children in the world attend primary school, while 31% of adolescents are enrolled in secondary school. The situation is even more dramatic for higher education: only 3% of refugees have access to university: a long way from the target of 15% set for 2030 (UNHCR 2019). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has made even more pressing the issue of inclusion of the most vulnerable in the context of higher education and the labour market.

For refugee students, school and university represent a fundamental step on the path to social inclusion. Despite the un-precedent number of persons forced to flee from their home countries, literature on the educational response for refugees and migrants in refugee-like situations focuses mainly on compulsory education, whereas research about university access and inclusion is still limited (Earnest et al, 2010, Cerna, 2019; Crosier & Kocanova, 2019; Ramsay and Baker, 2019; Arar, 2021). Refugee youth develop strong aspirations for higher education in their new location. Nonetheless, they often found systematic barriers that frustrate these aspirations (Arar, 2021). The most frequently cited obstacles are related to eligibility for HE, recognition of transcripts from foreign countries and other admission barriers such as lack of information on available academic programmes or language literacy (Baker et al., 2019; Salehyan, 2019).

As argued by Arar (2021), refugee access to higher education is highly dependent on specific national contexts and interests, so that the response of many higher education institutions reflects general government policy towards refugees. The author reviews the main challenges encountered by refugees and displaced students when traversing pathways to HE. These include: financial difficulties and lack of academic, socio-cultural and economical readiness for higher education studies, lack of resources such as internet access, the lack of training for teachers and lecturers to cope with the refugees' language and culture, stereotyped attitudes towards female participation in higher education, difficulties of exile and distance from family and other support networks, continued psychological and emotional effects of past traumas,

and facing discrimination and social detachment in the host society.

In their meta-analysis, Ramsay and Baker (2019) review the recommendation on how to improve access and participation in HE for students from refugee backgrounds and emphasise that the distinct experiences of refugees need to be recognised as assets rather than deficits. Moreover, the authors stress, *inter alia*, the need to provide education that meets the distinct needs of students from refugee backgrounds in a way that is sensitive and which recognises their inclusion in higher education as enriching rather than problematic.

On that direction are many initiatives promoted at institutional and academic level in Europe with the aim to break down the barriers that have been underlined by the literature.

In the context of the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (CoE European Treaty Series - No. 165), Governments are called upon to make long-term commitments to promote the integration of refugees, displaced persons and those assimilated to refugees into open and inclusive higher education and research systems, even where the qualifications obtained cannot be supported by documents certifying them.

Higher education is among the main areas of action in the European Commission's recent plan for Integration and Inclusion 2021-27, which devotes particular attention to facilitating the recognition of qualifications and degrees obtained in countries of origin.

In 2017, starting from an initiative of the Council of Europe, a pilot project was implemented in several European countries to test the so-called European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR), which allows the determination of refugees' qualifications in cases where these cannot be completely documented.

In 2019, the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education was adopted by the 40th session of the UNESCO General Conference, establishing universal principles for fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education qualifications and qualifications giving access to higher education and promoting the recognition of refugees' qualifications, even in cases where documentary evidence is lacking. Also at national level many actions have been implemented. As pointed out by Di Stefano & Cassani (2021), the incorporation of refugees and asylum seekers into higher education is approached at different degrees across Europe, and only a few countries have adopted specific strategies at national or regional level to facilitate refugee access to universities. Moreover, even among those countries that have adopted national policies, there are substantial differences concerning the levels and scope of such policies (for a detailed documentation see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). As a result, in many cases support to refugees has been left to the action of individual institutions, which have tried to fill the gap of missing national and European policies by putting in place new procedures and services to support the inclusion of refugees.

The efforts of the European universities in their attempts to make their institutions more accessible to refugee students have been recently investigated in the context of the InHere project<sup>1</sup>. Results have brought to the develop a set of recommendations to inspire universities' future actions. In particular, the recommendations, which were presented in Brussels in September 2018, have indicated a number of key elements to make the university system more accessible. These include: improving access to information through the provision of comprehensive information and advisory services; increasing the funding for universities to support refugees; enhancing the harmonisation of procedures; supporting the employability and the overall incorporation of refugees into societies. To ensure sustainability and continuity of actions, the recommendations stress the importance of including initiatives for refugees in a

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<sup>1</sup> InHERE is an Erasmus+ project implemented by UNIMED (coordinator), Sapienza University, University of Barcelona, Campus France, EUA and UNHCR (associate partner). Information on the project can be found at [www.inhereproject.eu](http://www.inhereproject.eu).

broader overarching strategy, as part of universities' social responsibility under their Third Mission, as this would enable the different departments and stakeholders of institutions to collaborate in providing the best possible support to refugee students and scholars. These recommendations have contributed to the European debate on the development of an integrated approach to the issue of migrant and refugee inclusion in HE, inspiring the ongoing project '*UNI(di)VERSITY, Socially responsible university for inclusive societies in the era of migration*'. The project, funded by the European Commission, is aimed to support HEIs to integrate initiatives addressed to refugees and migrants in a broader approach to diversity.

### **The commitment of Italian universities towards refugees**

According to the most recent data from the Ministry of Universities and Research, there were over 101,000 foreign students enrolled in Italian universities in the 2020/2021 school year, 5,5% of the total number of students<sup>2</sup>. The number of refugees enrolled in the Italian university system has steadily increased in recent years.

From 2019, several Italian universities have agreed to the "Manifesto of the Inclusive University" proposed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR Italy). This manifesto, composed of general principles and programmatic commitments, requires universities to undertake or expand activities and programmes in favour of refugee students, such as information and tutoring services, recognition of qualifications obtained abroad, scholarships and incentives, and university corridors for the legal entry of refugee students residing in third countries.

In the light of the experience developed with the so-called humanitarian corridors, from 2019 in Italy refugees can benefit from the University Corridors for Refugees (UNICORE), currently aimed at refugee students in Ethiopia and which provide a regular and safe entry path, the pursuit of their studies and support in entering academic life and integrating into the local social environment.

For current projects to achieve their goal of providing refugees full access to higher education, universities must actively engage in facilitating the enrolment of refugees into their academic pathways. This includes making general information about the university fully accessible and actively recruiting refugees, but also facilitating the admission process by implementing flexible and fair enrolment procedures that take into account the specific needs of refugees, developing measures to simplify the recognition of previous qualifications, adopting diversified and sustainable financial solutions, working to overcome language barriers and differences in academic culture and methodological approach.

It is imperative that universities provide assistance to refugee students during their studies, providing them with adequate academic and administrative support, actively promoting the integration of refugees within the local community and the society in general, and providing them with psychological support in the process of academic and social integration.

National and European efforts to enhance the employability of refugee students should be intensified by providing guidance and training to explore and access labour market opportunities. European higher education institutions can contribute by providing refugee students with information on the structure of the national labour market and training in interview techniques, as well as facilitating access to internships.

Building inclusive higher education systems for refugees is a key aspect of universities' Third mission. In order to create a more inclusive society, Universities need to take into account the particular circumstances and needs of refugees by planning structural and durable solutions that guarantee them equal opportunities and fair treatment in the long term. Strengthening cooperation with external stakeholders would be desirable in order to effectively address the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://ustat.miur.it/opendata/>

challenges of refugee inclusion and to contribute to an open and non-discriminatory European higher education system.

Sapienza University of Rome is among the most active universities in the field of migrant and refugee inclusion in Italy. A Scientific Technical Committee on Diversity and Inclusion was created in 2021 aiming to implement strategic plans and projects to enhance individuals' potential, support equality and integration, promote collaboration, and create new networks, both internal and external, to foster inclusion policies. As far as refugees and migrants with a refugee(-like) background are concerned, Sapienza University of Rome has adhered to the UNHCR's Manifesto of the Inclusive University since 2019, and carried out several initiatives focusing on the inclusion of students and scholars with refugee background, in partnership with national and international institutions.

#### **The commitment of Unesco Chairs**

The Italian UNESCO Chairs, developing an intense scientific dialogue on the goals of the 2030 Agenda, have started a process aimed at operating as a collective body, interacting and proposing themselves as a *community of knowledge*, with the project "UNESCO Chairs' Dialogues: a laboratory of ideas for the world to come".

Whithin this project, and with the support of the Italian National Commission for UNESCO, the Chairs drawn up a Declaration for sustainability and socio-ecological transition, that represents the commitment of the Chairs in the development of Education and Knowledge in relation to the global environmental challenge, offering a contribution of ideas to national policies, international and UNESCO policies.

In this context, the UNESCO Chair on Population, Migration and Development has long been engaged in the study of the educational and academic paths of foreign students and refugees, and in particular in the analysis of inequalities related to migrant and refugee background, both in terms of entry into higher education and of academic success/failure.

The Chair promotes collaboration with other Chairs who are interested in working on the issue of building an inclusive university, characterised by increasingly responsive and flexible educational systems.

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