



BM 77 – Malta

Resolution on Improving the Accessibility of Higher Education for people with refugee backgrounds and seeking asylum

By the end of 2018, there were 70.8 million refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people worldwide. 50% are under the age of 18. In coherence with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Students' Union (ESU) also believes that education is integral to building refugee self-reliance, fostering inclusion in host societies, and in recovery and rebuilding processes post conflict. Yet displacement has a direct, and destructive, impact on equitable access to quality education. Only 63% of refugee children have access to primary school, dropping to just 24% at the secondary level. And, at the end of 2018, only 3% of young refugees were enrolled in higher education, compared to the global average of 37%.

Although the right to education is enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this right is far from being realised for many people, especially in the context of higher education. Even with major international conventions (e.g. the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention), global targets (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 2015) and regional commitments (e.g. the 1999 Bologna Declaration) that reinforce the right to access quality higher education, persistent institutional and societal inequalities are still excluding marginalised groups of potential students from accessing and completing higher education.

ESU acknowledges the following reasons as key barriers to people with refugee backgrounds and displaced persons in accessing and completing higher education:

- Prolonged, bureaucratic and ambiguous processes for achieving international protection status, VISA and work permits.
- Financial insecurity and insufficient funds.
- Inadequate language support provisions.
- Lack of information, guidance or understanding to navigate national university procedures, from the application stage, for example when prior learning and qualifications are not recognised, through to course support.
- Unfamiliar academic culture and pedagogical approaches.
- High exposure to stressful situations with simultaneous lack of mental health support.



Guaranteeing that any and every person who wishes to further their education can exercise their equal right to do so requires stronger commitment and holistic collaboration from all educational stakeholders including higher education institutions (HEIs) and governments at the community, regional, national and European level. Commitments and actions must be universal, but should also recognise the need for different levels of support proportional to the number of refugees, displaced persons, and people in refugee-like situations within the respective European countries.

The Together, Moving Forward (TMF) programme (<https://www.esu-online.org/?project=together-moving-forward>) has provided ESU the vehicle to support student-led actions and projects around Europe aimed at breaking educational and societal barriers, and to amplify the voice of students advocating for a better perception of EU citizens toward migration challenges. The programme engages with several youth and student activists, elected student representatives, European institutions and other international organisations working in the field of access to higher education.

Based on the main findings and good practices from the TMF projects' portfolio, TANDEM (Towards Empowered Migrant Youth in Southern Europe) project recommendations¹ and the recommendations from the European Commission for member states to adopt Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNIL)² in all national education systems, ESU resolves to support the following recommendations and comprehensive and proactive policy measures at national/ regional and HEI level in enhancing accessibility and completion of Higher Education.

1. Recognise the potential of the higher education sector's contribution to integration:

- It is part of HEIs social responsibility to ensure that their student body reflects societal diversity and to support student participation in higher education.
- Strategic approaches for social inclusion and equality should be implemented.
- Policy levels on student support systems should review institutional practices and consider upscaling by linking these practices with action plans including mental health support and affordable student housing.
- Remedy ambiguities regarding recognition procedures, institutional responsibilities and overlapping and disconnected policies and measures

2. Include the perspective of higher education access in integration and language courses for asylum seekers, refugees and displaced persons.

- European and nationally funded language courses to reach the language level necessary for higher education access.



- HEI to open up their language courses to potential future students, and recognising such individuals as students, entitled to all benefits of that status.
- Special courses or mentoring programmes should be developed to help the students on methodology aspects (essays, research, CV/cover letter, etc)
- HEIs should consider integrating language learning throughout educational programme for non-native speaking students.

3. Ensure equal treatment of national/EU students and refugee students in higher education policy and practice.

- In HE policy and practices, students with refugee backgrounds are often treated as regular third country national students and can be subjected to:
 - High tuition fees and foreign student quotas.
 - Additional barriers and more urgent integration needs.
- Affirmative measures for adequate treatment regarding admissions, fees and support (at least the same as for domestic or EU students).

4. Address the information gap and streamline recognition procedures

- European and national levels should invest into
 - Basic information material, programme-targeted information on HE access and contact points in several languages.
 - Training for staff working directly with the target group, especially with newcomers on intercultural/multicultural approaches.
- HEIs increase accessibility to user-friendly and understandable websites, outreach and support efforts (including buddy/ peer to peer and cultural activities).
- Implementation and recognition of The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees* as a specially developed assessment scheme for refugees, even for those who cannot fully document their qualifications.

*Document providing an assessment of the higher education qualifications based on available documentation and a structured interview. It also presents information on the applicant's work experience and language proficiency. The document provides reliable information for integration and progression towards employment and admission to further studies.

5. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) as a way of overcoming legal and practical barriers to accessing higher education.

- Engage decision makers (both at public and private sectors) to commit and to invest in the process of VNIL for newcomers in order to enable their faster integration and increase their self-esteem.
- Train professionals and provide them with tools and resources to deal with any type of candidate, whatever their background and situation might be.
- Monitor success, progress and needs at institutional and national level.



6. Broadening access and academic success by providing targeted funding

- HEIs should strive towards being free of tuition fees. In the case when this is not immediately possible, tuition fees should be waived for refugees.
- Targeted scholarships and other direct support should be made available via EU and national programmes to students with refugee backgrounds and institutions that offer additional services to host them.
- Encourage student-led initiatives by improving accessibility to existing funding instruments, for host and newcomer students to build projects together that foster integration and inclusion by linking cultural diversity with academia.
- Exploring Complementary Pathways (<https://www.unhcr.org/complementary-pathways.html>), such as private-, community- or institution-based scholarships, traineeships and apprenticeships as a possible means of safe and regulated avenues that complement refugee resettlement.

7. Consider integration as a two-way process

- Successful integration is reciprocal and brings mutual benefits. Measures should address the target groups and their hosts. EU and national policy levels should communicate better about positive impact of integration projects to help overcome negative perceptions.

ESU calls on all educational stakeholders at the institutional, Ministerial and European level to thoroughly review and suggest tangible targets and action plans to the list of policy recommendations detailed in this resolution. Although an exhaustive list, universities cannot afford to be exclusive at a time when society is evolving quickly and awareness of different dimensions of diversity, and their potential social, political and economic rewards, grows. As labour markets change, becoming more informal, transient and global, universities must respond accordingly, embracing and actively ensuring the inclusion of all members of society, that can and will benefit from being part of the university community.

Addressing these issues is not be considered an act of charity or philanthropy. Realising these demands is a political responsibility that upholds access to education as a fundamental human right, guaranteed in law, to every person in the world, regardless of their citizenship status.



European Students' Union (ESU)

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List of References:

1. Stoeber, H. (2019) *Higher Education for Third Country National and Refugee Integration in Southern Europe*. International Organization for Migration (IOM) and European University Association (EUA).
2. The Council of the European Union (2012) *Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning*. (2012/C 398/01).

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Seconded by: NUSUK, SFS, CREUP, USI, UDU, NSO, DSF, POFEN, EUL, SRVS, LSVb, SSU, UNEL, FZS

10, Rue de l'Industrie/Nijverheidsstraat
1000 Bruxelles, Belgium

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The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 46 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries. The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO.