Accessing Higher Education in Europe –
Challenges, Good Practices and a European Project's Practical Response to Current HE Realities

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Introduction

According to the UNHCR, as of the end of 2022, Europe, encompassing Turkey, served as the host for over a third (36 percent) of the world's total refugee population. During this period, the number of refugees residing within European nations surged from 7 million at the conclusion of 2021 to a staggering 12.4 million by the end of 2022. This

increase was primarily attributed to the influx of millions of refugees from Ukraine, who sought refuge and safety in neighbouring European countries.

In addition to geopolitical, economic, social, cultural, ethnic, violent and other realities, the climate crisis is poised to drive a continued increase in migration to Europe, with numerous regions worldwide facing environmental challenges that compel their populations to seek refuge elsewhere. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa, notably the Sahel region, are grappling with prolonged droughts and desertification, while coastal areas face rising sea levels and extreme weather events. In South Asia, frequent and severe monsoons and flooding are becoming commonplace. Additionally, small island nations in the Pacific and the Caribbean are confronting existential threats due to rises in sea-levels. Climate-induced and other hardships are expected to push a growing number of migrants towards Europe, seeking safety and stability in the face of multiple adversities.

Research affirms that the thousands of young people who embark on perilous journeys to Europe, have premeditated long-term plans that took shape when they initially decided to leave their home countries (Pisani, 2009). For the majority of these individuals, their aspirations include educational advancement such as, for example, enhancing language skills and improving English proficiency but also aspirations to pursue postgraduate studies at universities.

However, the practical realization of these educational goals remains a formidable challenge. In the absence of a stable income and basic necessities like food and shelter, education often takes a backseat, even when it is ostensibly available free of charge (Sultana, 2022). This paradox underscores the centrality of education in individual aspirations, juxtaposed with the harsh reality faced upon reaching European host countries.

European Union countries, on their part, recognize education as a fundamental human right, as prescribed by international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, EU Asylum and Refugee Law, and Non-Discrimination and Equality Laws. Nevertheless, accessing higher education remains a multifaceted challenge for dispersed and diasporic communities of learners. This complexity arises from intricate power dynamics, systemic obstacles, and exclusionary mechanisms often

deeply rooted in xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic narratives (Pisani, 2009).

Systemic Barriers in Migrant Access to Higher Education

Over the past two decades, scholarly investigations into impediments obstructing migrant access to higher education have been conducted across an array of academic disciplines: education studies; political science; sociology; psychology; economics; law and human rights; anthropology; social work; critical studies; public health; migration studies; gender studies; and geography. Within this multidisciplinary discourse, a prevailing consensus has emerged, highlighting five core barriers that must be addressed to facilitate migrant access to education effectively. These barriers are: (a) legal and policy barriers; (b) poverty; (c) social isolation; (d) linguistic barriers; and (e) challenges pertaining to the recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning experiences.

Legal and policy barriers

Legal and policy barriers represent a wide critical category of impediments that migrants often confront when seeking access to higher education in various countries in the European Union. These barriers can significantly hamper the educational aspirations of migrant students and may include visa restrictions, restrictions pertaining to their legal status in the host country, residency requirements and prohibitive tuition fees.

Poverty

Refugees and asylum seekers frequently arrive in host countries with constrained financial means. The substantial expenses associated with higher education, encompassing tuition fees, textbooks, and living costs, often serve as formidable deterrents to their pursuit of tertiary education. These financial impediments are further exacerbated by a complex web of intersecting disparities and social constraints including access to private and public resources like healthcare and infrastructure.

Moreover, asset poverty is not just a lack of tangible possessions but also lack of intangible assets such as social connections and networks. The experience of poverty among this population has multifaceted dimensions, including subjective aspects like diminished self-esteem,

compromised dignity, restricted choices, and diminished personal agency.

Poverty adversely affects the acquisition of the local language(s), the development of a profound comprehension of local culture(s), and the ability to access essential facilities that facilitate self-sufficiency. These range from the capacity to establish a bank account, meet rent obligations, and access critical services such as healthcare (Sultana, 2022). These factors collectively compound the financial challenges that refugees and asylum seekers face when aspiring to access higher education.

Social isolation

The experience of social isolation and discrimination represents a significant impediment to accessing higher education for migrants. Within educational institutions, migrants may grapple with a profound sense of detachment and struggle to establish a sense of belonging. Furthermore, exclusionary mechanisms serve to either perpetuate or push refugees and asylum seekers to the societal periphery, both physically and metaphorically. Upon their release from detention, a substantial proportion of asylum seekers find themselves residing in large open centers, often located in remote areas of host countries. This geographical isolation yields adverse consequences as it restricts the extent to which asylum seekers can engage in influencing various aspects that directly impact their quality of life, including access to higher education. Additionally, it curtails their ability to exert political agency and influence policy development in their favour. Furthermore, factors such as the challenging conditions within detention centers, restrictions on the right to work, dependence on in-kind benefits, and the pervasive stigma associated with asylum seekers collectively yield enduring and demoralizing effects. These conditions frequently compel asylum seekers to the fringes of society, thereby suppressing, if not extinguishing entirely, their drive for education.

Linguistic barriers

Attaining proficiency in the language(s) of the host country stands as a paramount factor for academic achievement within higher education institutions. This critical aspect becomes particularly pronounced as migrants navigate their educational journeys. Language barriers present formidable hurdles that obstruct their ability to engage effectively in coursework and academic discourse.

These linguistic challenges manifest in various forms, spanning not only the capacity to understand and communicate in the host country's language but also the nuances required for academic pursuits. Migrant students may encounter difficulties comprehending complex academic texts, participating in classroom discussions, and producing academic writing that meets the expected standards. Moreover, language barriers reach far beyond the classroom, impacting the capacity to engage in research, access academic resources, and collaborate with peers and educators. Language-related impediments transcend mere communication; they influence the broader educational experience. Students grappling with language barriers may experience reduced self-confidence, hindered social integration, and increased stress levels, which collectively undermine their academic journey.

Additionally, migrants with limited language proficiency may face restricted access to specific programmes, encounter challenges in navigating administrative processes, and struggle to secure financial aid or scholarships.

Challenges pertaining to the recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning experiences

Another significant challenge faced by migrants in their pursuit of higher education is the recognition of their previous educational qualifications within their host countries. The complexities surrounding the recognition of prior qualifications introduce substantial barriers that necessitate comprehensive consideration. Migrants often carry academic credentials obtained in their countries of origin which may span various levels of education, including degrees, diplomas, and certifications. However, the process of having these qualifications recognized in the host country is very often intricate and time-consuming. It may entail navigating diverse regulatory frameworks, standards, and evaluation procedures, which can vary widely from one country to another. Consequently, many migrants encounter difficulties in achieving the necessary equivalency or recognition of their qualifications within the host country's educational system.

The repercussions of this recognition challenge are profound. In addressing this issue, Recognition, Validation, and Accreditation (RVA) systems emerge as pivotal mechanisms with the potential to mitigate barriers to educational access for migrants. RVA systems are designed to facilitate the assessment and recognition of prior qualifications, skills,

and competencies acquired in different educational contexts, including those outside the host country. However, challenges persist in the efficacy of RVA systems. These systems often exist in an ad hoc or fragmented manner, lacking the necessary robustness and trustworthiness required to effectively serve migrant populations (English & Mayo, 2019).

Migrant Access to HEIs - challenges and good practices across three countries in the European Union

This section delves into the geographical contextualization of the aforementioned issues. It focuses on three specific countries - Malta, Germany and Spain - which serve as the immediate, real-life backdrop for the authors. While shared challenges are acknowledged, this section elucidates nation-specific nuances and the corresponding measures adopted to foster inclusivity.

Malta

Malta's integration policies have shown significant improvements between 2014 and 2023. Yet, according to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) for the year 2020, Malta's policies, owing to their relatively recent implementation, continue to present as many challenges as opportunities for migrants particularly in the field of access to higher education. Ongoing works on a Second National Integration Plan for Malta signal that Malta is indeed striving to adopt a comprehensive approach to integration. However, there are also clear indications that the country continues to fall short of ensuring full equal rights, opportunities and security for migrants.

Compared to other Mediterranean countries, Malta's integration policies are less robust than Italy, Portugal, and Spain, but they are more advanced than those of Cyprus and Turkey. Malta's approach, described in the MIPEX 2020 analysis as comprehensive yet not fully reaching its maximum potential, bears resemblance to the integration strategies adopted by the Czech Republic and Estonia.

MIPEX 2020 rates Malta's performance in the field of education as 'slightly unfavourable'. Policy improvements in the realm of education have predominantly revolved around the well-being and educational prospects of migrant children within the national school system. One

can take as an example here the Ministry for Education and Employment's Policy on 'Inclusive Education in Schools' of 2019, which put specialisation in areas of diversity, such as multiculturalism and language diversity, at the heart of teacher training. The policy set in motion plans for specialised teams to support educators in their work with students from ethnic minorities. Its aims aligned with the findings of the 2019 report 'A Passage to Malta: The Health and Wellbeing of Foreign Children in Malta' put together by the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta in collaboration with the Commissioner for Children. According to this report, 10% to 20% of foreign students schooled in Malta face "considerable difficulties in various areas of their academic engagement and social inclusion." The report states that students from a low socioeconomic status "are less likely to be engaged and included. Students from Africa and the Middle East appear to be less taken care of and less likely to learn new things, to work collaboratively, to participate actively in classroom activities, to have friends or be included in social activities by their peers when compared to peers from other nationalities."

So while enhancements have been observed in the support provided to migrant children within the Maltese educational system, it is crucial to note that these improvements have not yet led to advancements in the facilitation and encouragement of higher education opportunities within migrant communities, nor have they effectively addressed the persistently notable barriers impeding such access. For this reason, the MIPEX analysis for the year 2020 highlights the need for further progress in fostering multicultural education and diversity within both primary and secondary educational institutions, as well as in higher education institutions. Additionally, it highlights the necessity for structural reforms aimed at removing obstacles hindering access to higher education for migrants. The recommendations stemming from the analysis concur with standard definitions of barriers to access to higher education for migrants including refugees, asylum seekers and third country nationals in their emphasis on (a) measures designed to assist those with limited financial resources and (b) a call for the improvement of the recognition of qualifications and skills acquired by migrants.

Generally, migrants in Malta encounter heightened obstacles in their pursuit of fundamental rights, including opportunities in the realm of higher education, and security, in comparison to their counterparts in countries with more comprehensive integration policies. These obstacles include particularly challenges related to family reunification, long-term

settlement and full participation in public life. The lack of avenues for migrants to exercise voting rights in Malta results in their inability to engage with political representatives and participate in moulding public life and societal attitudes in their favour. The bureaucratic and discretionary characteristics inherent in Malta's pathway to Long Term Residence and citizenship also emerge as primary factors impeding access to fundamental rights including the right to education.

These recognized deficiencies collectively erode the likelihood of both newcomers and local residents establishing meaningful interpersonal connections, cultivating favourable attitudes toward one another, and nurturing a shared sense of belonging, trust, and active civic engagement. And the significance of such circumstances extends beyond their immediate impact on the integration process or their impact on access to education and higher education; it also exerts a notable influence on the dynamics of interaction and perception between migrant populations and locals.

Currently, Malta's policies as well as the rhetoric employed by politicians do not actively foster a climate encouraging the public to view migrants as neighbours, equals, and fellow citizens. By permitting hundreds of migrant lives to be lost at sea each year, the national government inadvertently conveys a message that categorizes migrants as 'problems' that Malta must eliminate, and worse still, allow to perish at sea. The lack of inclusive language and practices recognizing the humanity of migrants raises serious concerns about the message conveyed to local communities regarding integration. Moreover, the failure of national integration strategies to address the deplorable conditions in which traumatized individuals are confined within military barracks, devoid of adequate sanitary facilities, privacy, dignity, and safety, prompts a critical inquiry into the message being communicated.

Good practices

In terms of good practices, within the University of Malta, these complex and intersecting aspects are being confronted and countered by the recently established Platform for Migration which offers a dialogical space in which researchers from different academic disciplines can work towards understanding the evolving aspects of migration. The platform's long term goal is to contribute to an equitable, more sustainable and more inclusive society that brings benefits to migrants

and their families, communities of origin, destination and transit, as well as their receiving countries.

The Platform for Migration establishes a foundational framework that paves the way for addressing barriers to higher education at both policy and administrative levels within the university. This responsibility is chiefly overseen by the also recently established Equity Office at the University of Malta. The Equity Office's ongoing five-year strategic plan for mitigating barriers to access includes the development of outreach initiatives and policies aimed at facilitating the recruitment and retention of ethnic and minority groups. Current plans encompass the formulation of policies and programmes geared toward attracting and retaining students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, mature students, and those with caregiving responsibilities. The Equity Office also endeavours to actively monitor and assess the efficacy of policies and programmes that promote the inclusion of students from non-traditional social backgrounds. It also seeks to explore ethical methods of data collection that take diversity into account.

The Ministry for European Affairs and Equality's 2017 policy 'Integration Equals Belonging' established the I Belong Programme that offers lessons in Cultural Orientation, the Maltese language and the English language for migrants who are working towards obtaining Long Term Resident status in Malta. The Department for Inclusion and Access to Learning within the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta is one of the higher education institutions entrusted to deliver the I Belong programme to migrant students.

Second National Integration Plan

Whilst the I Belong programme has been a significant step forward for migrants who are working towards obtaining Long Term Resident status in Malta, to date there is a total lack of structural support to facilitate the integration of migrants in detention and open centres. This situation was reported in the 2016 document 'Struggling to Survive: An Investigation into the Risk of Poverty among Asylum Seekers in Malta' by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and Aditus Foundation.

Ongoing works on a Second National Integration Plan for Malta signal that nothing has changed in this regard since 2016 and that: "to date there is no formal programme to systematically provide language training and cultural orientation" for this more precarious section of the migrant community. As a result, "new arrivals are often completely lost

and many refugees who have lived in Malta for years are still unable to communicate in English or Maltese. The lack of language proficiency acts as an obstacle when refugees are seeking employment; it also makes it very difficult for them to further their education."

Non-formal education

Non-formal education, with its strong emphasis on social mobilization and transformative action, has the potential to provide an educational framework that aligns with the specific requirements of migrant populations, notably refugees, asylum seekers, and recently arrived migrants residing in detention facilities and open centers. (Pisani, 2012). In this context, it is evident that non-formal education initiatives developed by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including JRS Malta, Kopin, Spark 15, and the African Media Association, employ potent pedagogical strategies. These approaches bring individuals from diverse backgrounds into collaborative learning environments that address both immediate practical needs and long-term considerations, such as preparing for higher education. They also provide highly engaged political platforms with a focus on democracy and social freedom for migrant populations with otherwise no space for representation and participation in the political sphere. These initiatives serve as highly engaged political platforms for migrant populations which otherwise lack opportunities for representation and active participation within the political realm. In this sense, whilst local political parties often articulate their rhetoric concerning refugees, asylum seekers and migrant populations in fervent nationalistic terms, there exists a strong local network of advocacy movements that pressure the state to offer improved prospects for the personal, educational, and professional development of migrants, typically driven by considerations of social justice (Spiteri, 2105). This constant trickle of organised pressure counters social, cultural, political and economic practices that legitimise racism and xenophobia and serves as a source of informed awareness of the fundamental rights of migrants in Malta.

Whilst recognising that higher education institutions are not independent variables when it comes to ensuring optimal access to higher education for migrants, they have a strong contributory role to play that has the power to effect change (English & Mayo, 2019). Tools for this change include: a) Financial Aid and Scholarships; b) Recognition of Prior Learning; c) Language Support Programmes; d) Counselling Services; e) Orientation Programmes; f) Peer Support

Networks; g) Cultural Sensitivity Training; and h) Community Engagement Projects.

Germany

In recent years, Germany's migration landscape has undergone substantial transformations driven by various factors, including economic conditions, shifts in European Union labour markets, and a significant increase in asylum seekers since 2015-2016 (Baas, 2021). These changes have not only altered the composition of the migrant population but have also had a profound impact on the educational pathways pursued by newcomers to the country. One notable outcome of these evolving migration patterns is the emergence of a clear educational divide within the migrant community. On one end of the spectrum, Germany now hosts highly skilled individuals seeking educational and career opportunities. On the other hand, there are those lacking formal vocational qualifications. This educational polarization presents both challenges and opportunities for the nation's educational system, with educational participation serving as a critical gauge in national discussions (Baas, 2021).

Access to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for migrants in Germany holds significant importance due to the country's commitment to inclusivity and its status as a favoured destination for migrants. Nevertheless, this also presents challenges, as integrating migrants into the higher education system can be a complex endeavour.

Cultural and social integration

For migrants, gaining a foothold in a new country can be a complex and multifaceted experience. One significant challenge is the potential for discrimination. Migrants may face prejudice and bias from members of the host community, which can manifest in various ways, such as unequal treatment, exclusion, or derogatory attitudes. Refugee students frequently face unwelcoming public discourse and feelings of alienation in Germany (Arar, 2021). These discriminatory experiences can be profoundly disheartening and undermine a migrant's sense of belonging, leading to feelings of frustration and disappointment. Moreover, isolation is another significant issue that migrants may grapple with during their academic journey. Due to language barriers, cultural differences, or unfamiliarity with local customs and norms, migrants might find it challenging to connect with their peers or to engage in social activities. This isolation can lead to a sense of loneliness

and alienation, further exacerbating the difficulties of adjusting to a new educational environment. The consequences of these challenges for the academic experience of migrants can be substantial. When individuals feel discriminated against or isolated, their emotional well-being suffers, which in turn impacts their ability to focus on their studies. The feeling of not belonging or not being fully accepted can also affect a migrant's motivation and self-esteem, making it harder for them to engage actively in their educational pursuits. These emotional burdens can be a significant distraction, potentially hindering academic performance, and the resulting educational experience may not be as fulfilling or productive as it could be.

A clear picture of this aspect of social and cultural integration emerges from interviews conducted with foreign students about their experience in Germany. Because academic institutions are influenced by ongoing public discussion on foreigners and refugees in German society, students express feeling alienated in their academic environment (Arar, 2021):

> *Actually, I see this phenomenon more in society. They are wary of Arab students as foreigners; it is irrelevant if the student has good command of the German language. They look at them as foreigners among native speakers. There is no harmony! No matter how much we try to integrate, watching news in German, following and obeying the rules, we still have feelings of alienation in German society.* (Arar, 2021, n.p.n.)

Aware of these challenges, some good practices have proven helpful for migrants to facilitate their integration into HEIs. According to Wolter (2021) "German higher education institutions are very active in the implementation of target group-specific provisions – supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) or the Federal Government, and also some state governments" (see also: Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2016; Borgwardt et al., 2015; Borgwardt, 2017). German HEIs primarily focus on non-degree offerings like language courses, programmes for visiting students, welcome initiatives, and study preparation measures. Currently, nearly all HEI institutions have implemented such non-degree provisions. For example, a very active institution providing a variety of mostly digital programmes is Kiron Open Higher Education, described as "something like a non-state social start-up" (Wolter, 2021).

Language barriers

According to Jungblut et al. (2020), the first barrier to HEI access is the language barrier, as many HEIs offer programmes primarily in German. Language proficiency requirements can be a significant challenge for migrants who may not have a strong command of the language. Migrants with insufficient language skills may find their choice of programmes limited to those offered in English, restricting their options, and potentially preventing them from pursuing studies in specific areas. In addition, language barriers can hinder migrants' ability to integrate into the academic and social fabric of German HEIs. Limited language skills can lead to isolation and difficulty in forming relationships with other students. The absence of effective social support measures for displaced students hinders their successful integration into HEIs in Germany. Challenges related to cultural adjustment further compound this issue. This underscores the importance of implementing social support measures, which could encompass activities like community-based language practice to enhance the integration of migrant students within their local environments.

Conscious of the problem of language barriers that migrants encounter in Germany as a whole, the government offers free German language courses to individuals granted asylum. Civil society organizations often step in to provide courses for residents in temporary housing before asylum is granted. Government-sponsored classes typically bring participants to an intermediate level in German. However, according to Sieg and Streitwieser (2019), universities typically require a higher proficiency level of C1, following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. In response, many HEIs offer intensive language courses and preparatory programmes to help migrants improve their German language skills before entering regular academic programmes. These courses often include language proficiency tests as part of their admissions criteria: "many universities have opened their language preparation courses to students and potential students of refugee background at no cost, allowing them to achieve the advanced level of German necessary for university admission" (Sieg and Streitwieser, 2019).

Furthermore, as of 2019, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research has initiated two programmes with a combined expenditure amounting to EUR 100 million. The aim of these programmes is to improve the availability of language courses for refugees (Arar, 2021).

So-called "Studienkollegs" (German preparatory courses) were also expanded. These are language courses which prepare international students, including refugees, to undertake studies in German HEIs (Arar, 2021).

Challenges in qualification recognition and financial aid access

Germany is indisputably a destination of choice for migrants seeking Higher Education and better opportunities. However, the journey towards realising their educational aims often comes up against significant obstacles. Migrants come from different countries, with different education systems, making it difficult to assess the equivalence of their qualifications in the German context. It is important to note that access to Higher Education depends on the applicant's demographic and academic resources, including the student's degree of preparation and suitability for university studies. It also depends on the degree of openness and willingness of HEIs to accept the applicant. Highlighting the difficulties encountered by migrants, and refugees in particular, in having their former qualifications recognised, Arar (2021) shared the real-life experience of one particular refugee:

> *We arrived in Germany on 20/1/2017. In November 2017, I finished Level B2 and by June 2018 I had attained levels C and C1. I decided to enroll in a [German] university. Unfortunately, the school I graduated from did not have an American high school diploma. I did not take a state exam in Lebanon but a school exam similar to an American high school diploma. My application was refused. Here, they do not have a Freshman year and they told me I had to go back to Lebanon and get 30 credits and improve my Lebanese matriculation certificate and then return to Germany. They did not consider my wasted years studying German but I was forced to do so and tried hard to find a university. (n.p.n.).*

This statement confirms Wolter's view that it is very difficult to validate the exact level of migrants' existing qualifications, as the standards in their countries of origin may not be equivalent to the requirements in Germany. This is particularly true for refugees, who may not have documents to prove their qualifications or skills (Arar, 2021). As a general practice, however, applications from refugee students for university courses are evaluated on an equitable basis, with specific allocations set aside for refugees, thus augmenting their opportunities.

Financial difficulties are a major challenge for refugee students in the German Higher Education system. Some students have to work long hours to support themselves and their families, making it almost impossible to combine study and work. In addition, some students have difficulty obtaining grants and financial aid because of their refugee status (Arar, 2021). However, many newly arrived refugees express their intent to commence or continue their higher education, with approximately one-third possessing the necessary formal qualifications for university admission (Brücker et al., 2016; Berg 2021). In response, the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and the DAAD initiated funding schemes to facilitate study preparation for refugees at German HEIs. Similar programmes were also introduced on a regional level in some states ("Bundesländer"), resulting in the establishment of support programmes at HEIs across the country within a relatively short timeframe. Scholarships, grants, and financial aid options specifically designed for migrants and refugees have been introduced by some universities and government agencies. These financial resources can help alleviate the cost burden.

Spain

In the context of labour migration, Spain was, until the 1980s, a country of emigration, especially to Latin America, and in the 1960s and 1970s to Europe (mainly France, Germany and Switzerland). Starting in the 1980s, particularly in the wake of economic revitalization, political transformations such as the shift from dictatorship to democracy, and Spain's accession to the European Economic Community, this dynamic underwent a shift, rendering Spain a more appealing destination for international immigration. In fact, as indicated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2022, Spain presently ranks as the tenth most significant nation in the context of migratory corridors, primarily welcoming individuals from North Africa (Morocco), Eastern Europe (Romania), and Latin America. The social, economic and psychological situations and conditions in which migrants and refugees find themselves in Spain differ. The pursuit of international protection, particularly for refugees, involves several interconnected phases. Firstly, there is the quest for a safe space, followed by navigating administrative procedures to regularize one's status within the host country. This is accompanied by adapting to a new economic, cultural, and social milieu, while managing emotions and expectations. Access to education, the labour market, and even the real estate sector plays a pivotal role in this transitional journey. It is essential to recognize that this process

undergoes significant changes, and its intensity and duration can be influenced by various factors, potentially placing individuals in vulnerable situations.

In the context of non-compulsory education, and specifically within the realm of university higher education, there are at least seven discernible factors that have been recognized for their role in constraining the access of migrants, particularly refugees, who find themselves in vulnerable situations:

- economic precariousness and the impossibility of assuming the economic cost of tuition fees, study materials and travel costs;

- difficulty of reconciling work and studies;

- limited number of scholarships or the absence of scholarships that address the specific situations of migrants and refugees in all their diversity;

- limited presence of diversity and inclusion strategies in universities that include refugees and migrants and incorporate elements of intersectionality;

- slow processes of recognition of foreign qualifications;

- in cases where individuals lack proficiency in the language of the host society, there is a shortage of bridging courses or intensive language programmes that facilitate a smoother integration into the educational institution. These 'landing' courses are designed to gradually immerse students in the language and foster engagement with the educational community;

- in cases of refugees, the absence of well-established protocols for validating prior academic credentials presents a challenge. These protocols should ideally create a flexible framework that enhances university accessibility for individuals with incomplete or lacking documentation of their educational history.

Since 2015, Spanish universities have increasingly focused on creating and implementing initiatives, projects, and programmes to support the arrival of refugees, particularly those fleeing the Syrian conflict. This emphasis became even more pronounced, and on a larger scale,

following the second wave of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that commenced in February 2022.

These actions, on most occasions, have been carried out in coordination and collaboration with organisations specialising in the field of refugee affairs, such as CCAR (Spanish Commision for Refugee Aid), and have focused on measures to encourage student enrolment through, for example, exemptions from tuition fees. The scarcity of programmes taught in English, particularly at undergraduate levels, underscores the need for students to become proficient in the Spanish language. In some Autonomous Communities, like Catalonia, there are even incentives for learning Catalan. Access to language courses for refugees has also been developed or encouraged.

Likewise, psychological support services, access to legal advice services, accommodation in university residences or links with the university community are offered. There have been innovative and internationally recognised experiences such as the University of Barcelona's Support Programme for refugees and people from conflict zones and, specifically, a university transition course (InHere, 2019). A language and human rights course, jointly funded by the University of Barcelona and the Barcelona City Council, has also been established. This programme is designed to provide additional educational opportunities and secure paths to resettlement including the opportunity of a full scholarship. This opportunity is intended for refugee students facing significant financial challenges, and experiencing human rights vulnerabilities. Students eligible for the scholarship must be residing outside the European Union when they apply, and the scholarship covers their entire university education.

The scholarship holders enter Spain with an international student visa. The grant covers full board accommodation, psycho-emotional support, legal advice, academic guidance, mentoring and language support throughout the course of their studies at the University of Barcelona .

Some of the ongoing challenges in providing access to university for migrant or refugee students in Spain are centered around:

- the design and implementation of policies and strategies to promote inclusion in the university including providing support through financial and human resources, and with a focus on embracing diversity through an intersectional approach. In order

to promote inclusion effectively, these policies and strategies should account for essential factors, including the accessibility of higher education for a diverse range of groups, encompassing refugees and migrants. Additionally, they should address student and staff retention and ensure the representation of diversity within decision-making structures.

- increasing economic resources and designing diversity budgets with a twofold objective: (1) to ensure the sustainability of actions, programmes and projects in the medium and long term and (2) to create scholarships that allow access to 'non-traditional' students such as individuals with a migrant background, refugees, students with families to support and single-parent students;

- the design and implementation of human rights principles and a sustainable solutions approach into the university's actions and initiatives;

- the creation of a national-level regulatory framework or protocol for recognizing prior educational achievements, facilitating university access for individuals who possess incomplete or non-accrediting documentation

There are some steps in the above direction. For instance, the Spanish Ministry of Universities has financed a feasibility study for the adoption of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. This protocol for recognition will allow for the effective realisation of the right to education of hundreds of students and is a challenge to be taken on.

In a different context, the rise of European University Alliances in the European higher education landscape necessitates the development of a proactive strategy for the social and educational inclusion of migrant and refugee students. This strategy should enable the dissemination and implementation of effective practices.

SMILE - A European project's response to the need for more inclusion in European HEIs

Aware of the challenges that migrants face in accessing higher education institutions, challenges which, as indicated above, are both external and internal to the HEIs' operational realities, the SMILE consortium, a broad-based team of European universities as well as non-governmental

organisations, led by the Barcelona-based European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN), embarked on a three-year (December 2020 – November 2023), KA3 project aimed at addressing broad actions associated with meaningful initiatives in the direction of enhanced access to higher education.

SMILE focused on three main areas of inequality and disadvantages in higher education: a) learners with migrant background; b) learners with low socio-economic status; and c) women leadership in HE with a focus on diversity management.

The four deliverables that constituted the SMILE project's three-year agenda included: 1) research aimed at providing a preliminary understanding of the complex nature of HEI access in the context of migration; 2) an audit tool created with a view to helping institutions of higher learning to critically reflect on their willingness and capacity to maximise migrant access as well as migrant transition into meaningful work upon graduation; 3) training of academic as well as non-academic members of staff in cultural competence; 4) a set of policy recommendations and actions aimed at helping HEI communities in building educational cultures that are genuinely inclusive.

This section will foreground the above-mentioned deliverables with a focus on migrant learners, as per the remit of the institutions represented by the authors of this paper.

Research

The first phase of the project was dedicated to research. This phase was planned to help consortium members understand better the lived experiences of migrants who struggle to access the institutions of higher learning in Europe. This phase, lasting six months or one-sixth of the project's allocated time, generated rich data in this regard. In general, the data indicate that while different governments and education authorities in Europe have taken positive initiatives in the direction of integration, the European rhetoric of inclusion is irregularly matched by emancipatory economic, social, cultural and fiscal policies. In the absence of across-the-board, consistent, effective and efficient policies in the aforementioned realms, many migrants are not free to make informed, future-focused decisions regarding their educational trajectory.

The consortium-led research, while preliminary in nature, indicated multiple roadblocks to access. Roadblocks which originate outside the education institutions range from precarious work, where migrants have to work long hours to make ends meet, and institutionalised racism, to uncertainty regarding migrants' status within the host country and weak infrastructures for migrant integration.

Issues which are internal to the educational institutions range from weak guidance, counselling and mentoring services, lack of investment in hybrid pedagogies, and Eurocentric curricula, to limited support for students with mental health issues, inflexible timetables, fragmented approaches to access and limited provision in the area of recognition of prior learning.

Personal issues that block participation are related to poor health, precarious mental health, stress and exhaustion, poor self-esteem, fatalism, false sense of entitlement, language barriers, lack of social capital and marginalization.

Migrant communities were also identified as potentially problematic to educational access. The research conducted by the consortium indicated that such communities tend to reproduce the social relations of the country or region of origin. The research identified caste systems, tribal tensions, gender- and sexuality-based violence, cultural norms and age-related power structures as some of the inter- and intra-community issues that limit access to education.

The research signposted five areas of interest that the consortium recognised as worth exploring in the build-up to the other three deliverables. The areas include: 1) advocacy; 2) admission; culture; 4) policy; and 5) transition to work. The five areas provided the framework for a diversity audit model; a guide for moderators to conduct audit sessions on diversity in HEIs. The diversity audit model constituted the second deliverable of the project.

The diversity audit model

Informed by the evidence collected during Phase 1 of the project, the consortium members of the three institutions that constituted Pillar 1 (the pillar tasked with producing deliverables that address migrant issues), namely Mainz University, University of Malta and University of Barcelona, contributed to an audit model aimed at helping HEIs in their self-auditing processes. Addressing the entire higher-education

community, the audit model is a flexible tool that can be used at the institutions' discretion and in response to their perceived needs. While Pillar 1 worked on migration, two other pillars contributed to access in the context of 'students of low socio-economic status' (Pillar 2) and 'women in leadership' (Pillar 3) respectively. The model's flexibility and the pillars' shared values allow for transversality and intersectionality in the use of the tool.

The section within the audit model that deals specifically with migration emphasises the importance of the presence of migrants in the audit process. As conceived by the members of Pillar 1, and as practised by the same three partners, the reflective process mediated by the audit model ought to follow a 'migrant for migrant' approach.

With the migrant-centered approach leading the way, the audit model invites HEI stakeholders to reflect on five areas that cover most of the terrain inhabited by HEIs. The reflections generated by the tool are question-driven, and the following are examples of questions related to the five areas of interest:

a. **Advocacy:** Is your institution active in publicly pushing for policies and practices that enable greater access to Higher Education? Is your institution present in public policy fora that may have an impact on access to Higher Education? Is your institution present within the different migrant communities, helping with awareness and preparedness?

b. **Admissions:** In a context marked by a digital divide, how is your institution facilitating

   access to information regarding course programmes? How is the institution facilitating entry in the case of migrants: 1) whose financial situation is precarious; 2) who are undocumented; 3) whose credentials are insufficient for the course programme of the migrant's choice; 4) who lack the language proficiency necessary to profit from a course programme? Are the entry-point needs of different migrants being addressed in a one-stop-shop approach?

c. **Culture:** Are continuous professional development courses in the foregoing areas being provided on a regular basis? How often are migrant students consulted on issues that range from pedagogy to curricular content? How are international students made to

feel welcome and an integral part of the institutional community? What infrastructure does the institution have in place to mentor and enable migrant students?

d. **Policy:** Are institutional policies robust enough to guard against any form of racism and discrimination? What mechanisms are in place to ensure across-the-board awareness and execution of non-discriminatory policies? How are the different institutional entities (faculties, departments, offices, etc.) being monitored and evaluated, against the standards set by the official policies?

e. **Transition:** Is the institution adequately equipped in the area of guidance and counselling to help migrant students to make the right career choices and to eventually transition into the career of one's choice? Is the institution in a position to offer job shadowing and internships to the migrant students? Is the institution working closely with employers to ensure meaningful and equitable work places following graduation?

Is the institution following migrant graduates in their career trajectory?

The ultimate aim of the audit model is to help the institution identify barriers to migrant access, locate good practices in migrant access to Higher Education, and identify future avenues.

One important action in the direction of an enhanced inclusive culture is continuous professional development (CPD). CPD constitutes the third deliverable of the consortium.

Continuous professional development

As with other areas of training that the SMILE project is committed to addressing, namely low socio-economic-status students and women in leadership, the migrant-focused CPD sessions are informed by seven fundamental educational principles:

- The main objective of the CPD is for participants located within HEIs to gain more knowledge on issues related to migrant students access to higher education;

- The CPD materials respect the complex nature that defines accessibility in HEI contexts and beyond;

- In synch with the inclusive agenda of the CPD, the materials are to be used flexibly and as per the real needs of the particular HEI community undertaking the CPD;

- Accessibility implies inclusion. In the best inclusive tradition, the CPD is about creating communal encounters and, therefore, reflections are to be generated within a group, in the presence of a facilitator. These encounters can happen both in person as well as virtually;

- This CPD course takes a problem-posing approach. It is meant to stimulate curiosity and critical engagement rather prescribe solutions.

- Lived experiences and participants' intuitive knowledge are foregrounded;

- Migrants are considered as protagonists rather than objects of participants' discussion.

The CPD targets academic and administrative staff as well as potential, actual and former students who share a common interest in nurturing inclusion within HEIs, are interested in foregrounding human-rights-based and fair societies, and who have direct contact with students, in their different capacities.

While the CPD produced by the consortium members is defined by a general script, complete with outcomes and development steps, the expectation is that the bulk of the knowledge will be produced as a result of a pedagogical stance that enables participants to co-discover, co-explore, co-interrogate, co-analyse and, ultimately, co-produce knowledge in the process. The CPD builds on the notion that critical thinking is a collective act of creativity and, therefore, while the CPD facilitators offer a directive role, the session should never degenerate into one-way transmission of knowledge.

The CPD is designed for flexible use of the different steps outlined by the full CPD description. Given the different institutional and societal contexts in which the HEI learning communities are working, it is expected that the CPDs unfold differently in different HEIs.

Pedagogically, the CPD is expected to adopt a dialogical approach aimed at foregrounding participants voice, mutuality and reciprocity,

and co-construction of knowledge. The CPD is seen as a journey of reflection and discovery, and the outcomes as signposts rather than a fixed terminus. The quotidian experiences will always constitute the core content of the course.

While institutions may opt to organise the CPD differently, as is, the CPD is organised into two, four-hour sessions. The sessions set out to achieve four broad outcomes. Under the title 'Understanding Key Concepts and Interrogating Access', Session 1 addresses two outcomes: 1) Demonstrate sound knowledge of the key concepts of access and intersectionality; and 2) Distinguish between the key concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism.

In the first part of the session participants will explore the meaning of two basic concepts that are key to a social-justice approach to equitable presence in higher education. As the discussion unfolds, participants will reflect on enablers and barriers to access in HEIs.

The second part of this session combines an analytical exploration of the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism with how they are understood and used by the participants in their respective roles. It allows participants to reflect on the role of language in building multicultural competence. In more specific terms, the first part of the session sets out to: understand the meaning of the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism; reflect on how different notions related to multiculturalism and interculturalism are presented in the participants environment and what impact this has on people and society at large; illustrate the dynamic and complex nature of the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism.

Under the banner entitled 'Competencies and biases', this session will address two outcomes: 1) Demonstrate the ability to map out the key competences of the multicultural educator; and 2) Critically evaluate the self in relation to key multicultural competences through biographical reflection.

In the first part of Session 2, participants will focus on the key competences of a multicultural educator, given the understanding that any encounter, be it academic staff with students as well as administrative staff with prospective or actual students, is essentially an educational encounter. For this purpose, the first part of the session will employ a game and a case-study approach to gauge participants'

cultural intelligence that would lead to personal work plans aimed at improving gaps in knowledge, attitudes and skills.

While the first part of the session focuses primarily on contexts, the second part zooms in on the self. How organisations (governance bodies and policies) and how members of these organisations deal with cultural diversity will impact on, for instance, curricula, teaching and learning environments, academic achievements, sense of belonging or the type and the quality of the services offered to the university community and to society. In acknowledging diversity one/the institution can make better decisions, can bring the university closer to society, and bring innovation and talent to the classrooms, the laboratories, the research and debate spaces, without leaving no one behind, as the United Nations points out in SDG 4 1: "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".

The sessions were tested multiple times by the consortium partners of Pillar 1. Four fundamental facts emerged from the testing phase of the CPD: 1) the lived experiences of migrants are rich in content and provide multiple texts for institutional as well as personal reflection; 2) facilitators are called to humility to be able to foreground experiences over the transmission of scripted and prescribed curricular material; 3) the dialogical approach, where participants 'voice is foregrounded and affirmed, creates a safe space where those present feel safe to share their lived experience, allowing for critical engagement with the narratives; and 4) migrant presence at such CPDs is indispensable.

Policy document

Based on the shared experience of all consortium members, the SMILE project produced a set of ten policy principles and recommendations for action aimed at creating educational contexts which are enabling, genuinely inclusive and diverse.

The ten principles promoted by SMILE's fourth deliverable include: 1) to promote diversity and inclusion as added values which enable us to learn from each other and overcome the challenges we face towards achieving a more equitable Europe; 2) to apply an intersectionality analytical framework to inclusion; 3) to promote active engagement and advocacy towards diversity and inclusion in society at multiple scales; 4) to ensure collaboration between all education stakeholders in the process of promoting diversity and inclusion to increase participation of regionally and/or locally specific disadvantaged groups; 5) to ensure

adequate support for all stakeholders in education as they navigate the complexities of inclusion and diversity; 6) to enable flexible pathways in Higher Education for everyone; 7) to offer staff training at different levels; 8) to identify and use inclusion and diversity-oriented funding opportunities such as institutional funding and student funding; 9) to establish diversity-oriented study programmes promoting Higher Education access in accordance with the students' needs; and 10) to follow progress and needs at institutional level but also at national level through data collection and monitoring.

Each policy principle is described in detail and accompanied by actions that can be undertaken by HEI top management, policy makers at national and EU levels, and civil society.

Conclusion

European Higher Education Institutions bear a profound ethical responsibility and legal obligation, as custodians of education, mandated to uphold the principles of the right to education, non-discrimination, and human dignity. The continuous arrival of forcibly-displaced populations in Europe, driven by a myriad of conflicts and global crises, underscores the enduring nature of this responsibility. Consequently, the moral and ethical relevance of higher education institutions hinges on their willingness to confront this obligation. This necessitates an unwavering commitment to addressing long-standing barriers to access - (a) legal and policy barriers, (b) poverty (c) social isolation, (d) linguistic barriers, and (e) challenges pertaining to the recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning experiences - which have been extensively documented across various academic disciplines and decades of research. For higher education institutions to uphold the principles of the right to education, non-discrimination, and human dignity, they must ensure a pervasive understanding of these five fundamental barriers to migrant access to higher education. This understanding should be embedded within every facet of their institutional framework, from academic departments, administrative bodies and student organizations to courses, pedagogical approaches, and curricula. Moreover, institutions should annually pledge to actively engage with and ameliorate these barriers, even when doing so necessitates challenging the prevailing governmental and political contexts in which these institutions operate.

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