

Identification of Needs

(IO2)



EUCRITE

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR REFUGEE
INTEGRATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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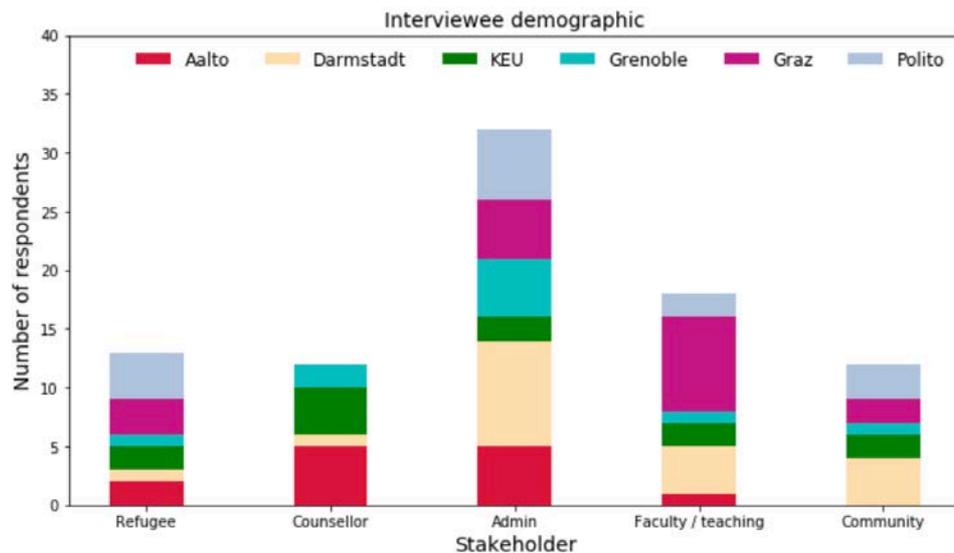
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Partners:

Aalto-Korkeakoulusäätiö
Technische Universität Darmstadt
Technische Universität Graz
Institut polytechnique de Grenoble
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Politecnico di Torino



This report summarises key findings from a total of 87 interviews conducted within six European universities: Aalto, TU Darmstadt, KU Leuven, Grenoble INP, TU Graz, and Polito. Each institution provided 13, 19, 12, 10, 18, 15 interviews respectively. The respondents are loosely classified into one of five categories: Refugee (students of asylum seeking background), Counsellor (counselling and support staff), Admin (administrators), Faculty / teaching (professors, department deans, foreign language instructors), and Community (student organisations, volunteers). We note that refugees were only ~15% of the survey respondents.

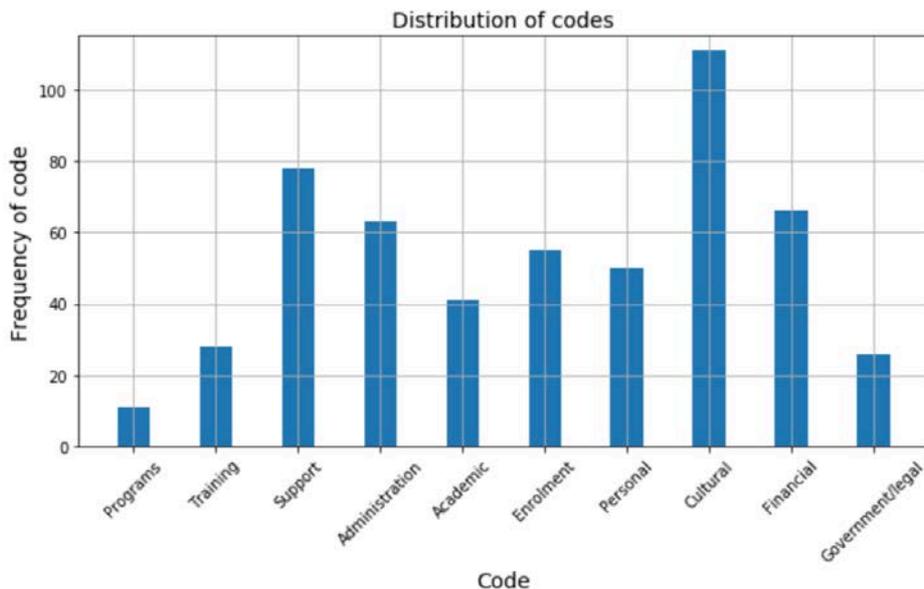
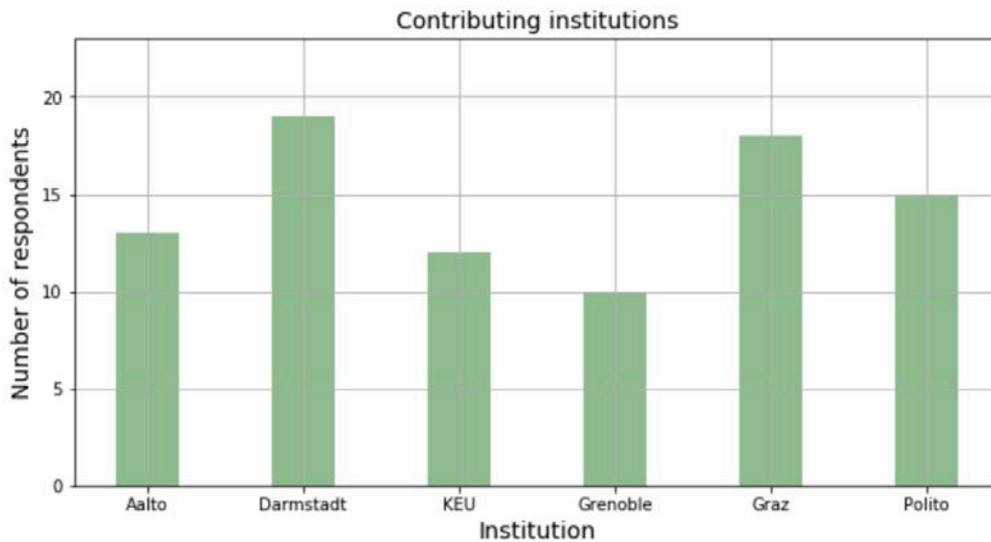


The interviews were examined holistically and relevant passages were tagged by ‘codes’, that is, recurring topics we identified as of interest to the investigation. This analysis was facilitated with MAXQDA, a qualitative and mixed methods data analysis software. Broadly, the codes we identified are:

1. Problems for Universities
 - a. Programs
 - b. Training
 - c. Support
 - d. Administration
2. Problems for refugees
 - a. Academic
 - b. Enrolment
 - c. Personal
 - d. Cultural
 - e. Financial
 - f. Government / legal

aalto admission all already analysis background because been
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MAXQDA generated cloud of word frequencies appearing in interviews. [



Below we highlight, under each code, general sentiments that emerged from the interviews.

Problems for universities

Programs

Several respondents highlighted the high dropout rate as problematic and discussed the need for better pre-matriculation preparatory programs, in particular “pre-learning courses” with a language focus and tutoring for admissions examinations. Another common recommendation was an extended, part-time course of study requiring fewer classes per semester. Many respondents cited the importance of orientation programs that provide “human support” and information tailored to refugees’ needs and situation. These should acclimatise refugees to the university, educational culture, and social scene. Organised social activities were identified as important to this ‘soft’ integration, and a respondent suggested that these be student-run but institutionally-funded.

Other problems raised included: unclear application instructions for prospective students of refugee status, the poor racial / ethnic diversity in visuals on university webpages (featured only Caucasians), and the unstructured, “ad-hoc solutions” approach to processing refugee students, in place of an “integrated approach” encompassing all relevant university stakeholders.

Training

A very large number respondents cited the need for more training focussed around diversity and intercultural communication. These should improve cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity for staff and volunteers. Several respondents note that refugees pose unique pedagogical challenges, especially as there is no “education science for adult education” and faculty are more often academics than pedagogues. One respondent suggested that language instructors “misjudge the challenges with a refugee group”.

Trauma awareness and psychological support training was also discussed by many respondents. These include trauma recognition, risk management and awareness of trigger material, student stress / trauma management, understanding how trauma affects daily life and language acquisition, and how to provide psychological support. The need for institutional support (i.e. information centres and healthcare) was also noted.

A few respondents also wanted training for: legal and right to asylum, education systems in foreign countries, group dynamics, and knowing the available support resources. The training received by staff vary – several indicated openness to and acknowledged the need for better training, one administrator received no training, and another is “very satisfied” with the available tools and training. One respondent sees no need for training and believes she can handle all potential challenges herself.

Support

Several respondents emphasised that support should come from contacts within the university, including professors, student tutors, and associations, especially as it is otherwise difficult to form relationships with locals. Suggestions included refugee-local buddy programs, increased support for volunteer workers, and exchange of experiences between counsellors to learn collectively from precedents. One language teacher expressed that as an instructor, she could only provide support to some degree, and must have counselling resources to which to refer her student.

Counselling should be complemented by logistical support both prior to admissions (finding documents, pre-study programs) and continuing past matriculation (academic help, health insurance, liaising with authorities). Some respondents believed refugees needed clearer, more accessible information on the law, education system, financial aid, and accommodation. One refugee wished for more advice during application process and financial support.

The importance of an inclusive culture and empathic attitude to refugees was a recurring theme, and at times prioritised above systematic structural change. Working with refugees demands solidarity, intercultural open-mindedness, and a positive, caring approach. Many respondents held the 'don't treat refugees differently' perspective: for one refugee, being treated equal to other international students contributed to his sense of welcome, several non-refugees believed that refugees should be defined as students or individuals rather than 'refugee' or some other group; one suggested that teachers should be aware but not too sensitive to refugee concerns, as it may compromise objectivity. Two respondents suggested that broader prejudice beyond university is the real problem, limiting qualified, highly-educated refugees to blue-collar jobs. This causes them to become disillusioned or to opt for studying out of scholarship or free accommodation incentives.

'Refugee' is an inhomogeneous class with diverse problems, needs, and qualifications that can span a cross-section of the socioeconomic ladder. Some interviewees noted a need for individualisation that is sensitive to different histories, ways refugees discuss their experiences, and even work ethics. The administration is often insufficiently agile for handling exceptional cases. Interestingly, consistent with the aforementioned perspective that 'refugees should be treated equally', one respondent suggested that remaining ignorant of a student's background promotes equal treatment.

Refugees should be made aware of study options (e.g. Open University, alternative entrances into university) and future prospects (typically vocational options). Two respondents expressed that refugees sometimes had unrealistic aspirations such as entering competitive medical or law programs.

A few (admin and community) respondents believed the main challenge for refugees is stress exacerbated by financial uncertainty: insufficient time for studies due to home situation, stress of losing scholarship, and pressures with social security causing loss of focus. Another respondent suggested offering refugees free accommodation, free public transport, and fee exemptions.

Administrative

Administrative concerns largely centre around communication. The need for strong institutional communication networks was cited by a large number of respondents, especially in facilitating communication with authorities, streamlining the referral of problems to the correct organisation or position, and providing a more compact and centralised refugee help resource. Many discussed improving communication between universities and with aid organisations, with suggestions of more frequent inter-institutional meetings and staff exchange 'internships' to gain insight into different practices.

Admissions was the main other recurring theme. For administrators, there is lacks a common understanding about processing refugee applications, especially when documents are ambiguous or required documents are absent. Several respondents wished to standardise the protocol for admitting refugees, both for their own administrative ease and to make the process simpler and less prohibitive for refugees. Some also noted that information on admissions, university offerings, program requirements, maintaining scholarship eligibility etc. should be more accessible and understandable.

Some less pervasive points included: streamlining internal databases, understanding education systems in refugees' home countries, better integration of the international program within university administration, and the bureaucratic obstacles of financing and implementing courses, particularly with restrictions e.g. on target groups and class size. A few respondents found that all relevant information was readily available or informal discussions with colleagues was sufficient solutions. One refugee respondent was very satisfied with the administration at TU Graz.

Problems for refugees

Academic

The academic struggles of refugees are evinced by high dropout rates. Attaining degree or course recognition was a frequently expressed frustration, including the associated bureaucratic struggles, having to redo a qualification, and misplaced optimism that only a few courses would be sufficient to have home qualifications recognised. Sometimes differences in curricula content and education systems are so stark that qualification transfer is truly unjustified, not just an administrative obstacle; refugees may even fail the admissions test. Other difficulties include: language, lack of time, difficulty acclimatising to academic demands, insufficient fiscal means, and navigating complicated, poorly documented education and admissions systems.

A very common suggestion was to make available extended, part-time programs of few courses per semester; for a refugee, this is a more feasible time commitment and eases the transition to student life (particularly for asylum seekers not legally permitted to formally commence studies). It was also noted that refugees are often pressured to complete their degree as quickly as possible. Other suggestions included extended language support, sharing lecture notes and course materials, online classes, and special exam provisions (e.g. extra time, allowing dictionaries).

Enrolment

There is no standard procedure for admitting refugees, and administrators are often inflexible towards incomplete applications and missing documents. One respondent suggested more personal interaction during admissions, to address special cases and the problem of missing documents, which can halt applications at the first step. Some respondents suggested that admission is too complicated, poorly communicated, and should be relaxed with regards to deadlines and required materials for refugee applicants. One administrator does not see room for improvement.

Many respondents saw the need for a streamlined system for recognising prior learning, criticised the bureaucratic overhead, and saw that many qualified refugees who are "a resource, not a problem" are underemployed. However, many also admitted that the quality of a foreign education is difficult to assess, with one administrator doubting that most refugees have the background knowledge to complete their studies, let alone have past learning recognised.

From refugees' perspectives, particular admissions experiences vary, from smooth and eased by a dean, to cumbersome and prolonged. Sometimes additional pre-matriculation requirements or prep programs are mandated, and even so refugees may have to start from scratch.

Personal

Many staff and community members note the difficulty of integration, in academic settings (e.g. avoiding group work) and social interactions. Past traumatic experiences sometimes manifest in a general wariness or fear of being attacked or identified. Language barriers, culture shock, age difference, and the greater time they need to spend studying further limit refugees' capacity for social interaction. Some respondents note that refugees are extremely time-pressed, while asylum seekers awaiting approval or interview live in an unhealthy stasis.

Many refugees suffer stress and uncertainty regarding their family, financial standing, and residence status. The psychological strain detracts their concentration and motivation (i.e. why study if could be evicted). One respondent reported that some refugees are reluctant to ask for help despite their struggles, while another reported that they blame teachers for failed exams. There were suggestions to increase counselling for refugees, and psychological and pedagogical training for other involved parties. Another respondent noted that teachers need to separate their work from their personal involvement with the refugees.

Culture training and programs

Uncertain how to interact with refugees, a great number of non-refugee respondents wished for diversity and cultural training; however, this was not a great concern for refugees. One teacher noted that some refugees stopped attending class because they felt disrespected by some "trivialities," while others refused to work with others due to their cultural background.

Language was frequently cited by all stakeholders as possibly the biggest challenge to cultural integration and student success. Some noted the especial importance of language teachers as the "gate keepers to study" and the loss of language immersion outside of class as problematic to rapid improvement. Several suggested workshops focussed on the written language (e.g. academic writing) and technical language (perhaps subject specific) to supplement coursework. One respondent suggested relaxing language prerequisites for enrolment, but another recommended that refugees be barred from enrolling before fully meeting requirements.

Many respondents spoke to the challenges of social integration. Some pointed out that refugees are lonely and marginalised (barriers included age, language, and history) and are not socially part of the university; some live in a "bubble" where they only have contact with refugees or others of the same language. The situation is worse for asylum seekers not yet permitted to study or work. A large number of respondents suggested that the university should offer more activities to encourage mixing between refugees and locals. Interestingly, one respondent cautioned that overly institutionalising refugee integration would inadvertently cause refugees to be 'singled out' to the detriment of their organic assimilation into the community.

Financial

Financial challenges (paying for language exams, enrolment, pre-study programs, along with living expenses) were discussed by a large number of respondents. Many underscored the stress of balancing studies and maintaining a scholarship with the employment needed to support oneself, and the resultant harms to academic performance.

Several respondents described the labour market as unfriendly to refugees, with language being a major barrier; one refugee worried that employers would negatively judge his failure to complete exams on time. Generally,

there is a dependence on external support and scholarships, but sometimes enrolment results in loss of other state benefits. Some universities cannot provide aid before a student is enrolled.

Accommodation was considered problematic by many respondents. They recommended more apartment-hunting help for refugees, especially as such logistics distract from studies. Financial strain limits the quality of the accommodation (some refugees reported living in cramped, loud, or unclean spaces that were poor work environments). Some refugees had good experiences with financial aid (reduced tuition, subsidised housing, allowances). One administrator reported that stipends given to refugees are largely managed by associations, and little of it is personal spending.

Government and legal

Many counsellors noted that they would benefit from legal training e.g. on the right of asylum and residence permits. Asylum seekers experienced frustrations dealing with unfamiliar bureaucracy; according to one administrator, refugees often misjudge situations with authorities, misinterpret explanations and social support. During this often long legal process, some refugees can neither study nor work, and those that can often have a disrupted learning experience due to stress and unavoidable absenteeism. A few refugees reported no legal difficulties, other than those concerning study abroad programs.