A Framework of the Integrated Arqus Plan for Refugees and Students at Risk

Enabling Refugees (2.6)

Table of Contents

Since civil war has been raging in Syria for more than a decade now, over one million Syrian refugees have been seeking asylum in the European Union alone. With the miserably failing international Afghan politics and the humanitarian crisis at the European-Belarussian border, both starting in the summer of 2021, the numbers of people fleeing to the EU peaked with the addition of the escalating war in Ukraine. While many European states and societies were heavily engaged in creating a welcoming environment, it soon became increasingly apparent that a post-covid and war-shaken EU is more than ever in need of long-term activities and inclusive strategies for a large number of displaced people in all spheres of society, since most refugees have no prospect of a safe and dignified return home. "Increasing education pathways linked to a secure status with protection safeguards for refugees is, therefore, more urgent than ever and is a tangible way for states and the international higher education community to provide durable solutions to refugee students while contributing to improvements to their access to tertiary education" (Education Pathways Manifesto, 2022, Manifesto section, para. 6).

Widening access and inclusion to university for under-represented groups is one of the ARQUS network's major goals. Throughout the duration of the project and with the tense political situation in place, ARQUS has always been very committed to enabling refugees and students at risk. At the beginning of the project, a task force was set up with the aim of developing inclusive strategies that would help dismantle barriers in higher education and strengthen academic opportunities for refugee students. A model of an Integrated Plan for Refugees and Students at Risk that is based on the student life cycle was developed. Of course, with the continuing Syrian civil war, amongst other situations of conflict, many universities already had various initiatives in place to support refugee students. In addition, the proposed solutions do not necessarily correspond to the official stand of all Alliance partners on these issues.

Nevertheless, the exchange of best practices, the collective identification of challenges that can be transformed into opportunities, and joint actions, such as the organisation of webinars (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vce59AsG7z4). These practices, which went beyond the question of refugee access to higher education and encompassed issues related to both students and scholars at risk from a broader perspective, could contribute to a more

holistic and inclusive framework that all task force members of the ARQUS universities could agree on.

The paper goes on to describe in detail the need for access to (Tertiary) Education Pathways for refugees and students at risk and "why it matters". Following this, the decision of the task force to use the term "students at risk" in the university context rather than other terms is explained. In the second part, the challenges identified are presented, together with a few best-practice examples to overcome them. Finally, the task force's integrated plan, designed as a student life cycle, is presented.

2. 2. Why it matters!

As the *UNHCR* (2022) points out, only 5% of refugees have access to higher education (HE), which is far below the global average of higher education enrollment among non-refugees, which stands at almost 40%. In view of this vast gap, the *inHERE project* (*Higher Education Supporting Refugees in Europe*) recommends that: "In order to reduce the possibility of a lost generation, it is essential to improve access to higher education for all those refugees who qualify" (inHERE, 2018, p. 3). The authors go on to state that "universities should include refugees in their overarching strategy, as an important aspect of their social responsibility, in view of their mission of internationalization, diversity and inclusion and thereby as part of contributing to society" (inHERE, 2018, p. 7). This is essential in order to work towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 ("Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning"), which "cannot be achieved by 2030 without meeting the education needs of vulnerable populations, including refugees, stateless persons and other forcibly displaced people'' (UNHCR, 2016, p. 6). However, a report by the European Commission and Eurydice (2019) remarks that most countries in Europe do not have specific policies for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into Higher Education (HE). By facilitating and promoting the sharing of best practices, and by providing a forum for ongoing discussion, the *ARQUS European University Alliance* can serve as an integral part of attempts to fulfill this responsibility.

Education is the key to the future of individuals and communities. It is a basic human right, enshrined in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989) and the 1951 *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (UNHCR, 1951). Yet as underlined by

UNHCR (2016) "refugee children and youth are not only disadvantaged but their educational needs and achievements remain largely invisible" (p. 5). The participation of refugees in higher education strengthens education systems to the benefit of both local and refugee communities. Therefore, an inclusive strategy, with the key aim of dismantling barriers and strengthening opportunities for people at risk in order to create educational and social equality lies at the core of ARQUS' general goal. Thus ARQUS aspires to increase the number of asylum seekers and refugees able to start or continue their studies or academic careers, improving flexibility in admission procedures and efficiency in the assessment of qualifications. The term "people at risk" or "students at risk" is used here as it was deemed that the framework could also serve as a basis for procedures aimed at a broader range of addressees than "refugee" or "asylum seeker". The latter refer to categories based on a certain legal standing, rather than their needs. As it was witnessed during the first working period of this ARQUS task force, several challenges that refugee and asylum seeker students are facing also apply to other international students, who could be defined as "students at risk". The term was inspired by the *Scholars at Risk Network* (see: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/), which is working for the protection of "scholars facing grave threats" (Scholars at Risk, 2022). Even if not seeking asylum, international students may choose to study abroad for reasons connected to perceived threats to their safety or academic freedom, related for example to politics, ethnicity, social class or gender.

However, there are some challenges that are specific for people being forced to leave their home. Firstly, as the reason for their presence is the insecure situation in their country of residence, most of them did not decide to study abroad and therefore did not specifically prepare for higher education and are not aware of the requirements of the national HE systems. Therefore, as shown by the mapping process of best practices that the members of the task force conducted in their respective universities, there may be a lack of knowledge about the education system in their new home as well as academic requirements. Secondly, the situation in their countries of origin and the flight from them, which often takes years and is marked by several interruptions, causes patchwork biographies (von Blumenthal, 2018) and lack of documentation of the studies conducted at the home country. Thirdly, the situation in the host country also affects the life of these students. In this category burdens can be seen in the insecure residence status, experiences of discrimination, mental health issues and trauma, dealing with one or more (new) foreign language(s) and challenges of balancing family and student lives as well as unstable financial situations.

The ARQUS strategy adopts an intersectional approach, acknowledging that different barriers to access higher education, such as social class, gender, race, ethnicity and disability, are deeply entangled and therefore have to be kept in mind when evolving models to include students at risk, for example taking account of the specific needs of "women at risk".

The word inclusion thereby refers to the concept of providing equal opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise not get them (Oxford Dictionary, 2022). Inclusion creates equal participation. People from marginalized groups will get the chance to actively shape the processes themselves.

3.   3. Development of an Integrated Plan for Refugees and Students at Risk

During the first three years of the project, in order to compile a **flexible model,** which could be relevant to as wide a range as European Universities as possible despite possible differences in approaches to people being forced to flee their home regarding access and support, exchange on a regular basis took place in online meetings. A first analysis based on a questionnaire about the university conditions, state policies and best-practices for refugees was published and two webinars on refugee tertiary education pathways were organized (see: https://www.arqus-alliance.eu/news/refugee-students-european-higher-education   and https://www.arqus-alliance.eu/news/second-webinar-enable-refugees). During meetings of the ARQUS members current conditions regarding inclusion of students at risk were exchanged. Witnessing different approaches regarding the topic as well as various preconditions, influenced by national legislation, political decisions or available funding, and best practices were shared to learn from each other. On-topic presentations, also from external contributors, and discussions led to the formation of the integrated plan.

3.1 Challenges

As a starting point, the challenges that students at risk are facing were identified in order to suggest suitable solutions through the ARQUS plan. The results are consistent with previous studies and research (e.g., Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; inHERE 2018; Lambert et al., 2018; S.U.C.R.E. 2017). The arguments are supported through personal experiences by task force members of the ARQUS Universities that work with forcibly displaced persons.

Challenge (1): Language preparation

The majority of study programmes at the ARQUS Universities are not offered in English. Therefore **preparatory language courses** are needed to fulfill the language requirements (e.g. the Integra Programme of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Germany, see https://www.daad.de/en/information-services-for-higher-education-institutions/further-information-on-daad-programmes/integra/).

Challenge (2): Recognition of former careers

Although in 2017, a recommendation on the recognition of refugees' qualifications was adopted by the committee of the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee, 2017), the challenge is the actual implementation of the European strategy as a uniform process for missing or lost documents. Also, apart from previous studies, refugee students and students at risk might have previous long-run work experiences and non-formal/ informal learning experiences to bring into their curriculum. Various European countries, also within the ARQUS community, have developed a national strategy. In Germany, a self-disclosure form has been designed by the national application platform uni-assist that functions as a plausibility check on the prospective students' academic career (see: https://www.uni-assist.de/en/tools/glossary-of-terms/description/details/self-disclosure-form/.

In addition, when no national strategy exists, the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees is an effective international tool produced by the Council of Europe and partners that was developed to assess refugee's and students at risk's qualifications for which there is insufficient or missing documentation (see: https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications). It was introduced to the ARQUS community during the first task force's webinar on "Enabling Refugees".

Challenge (3): Administrative barriers

While identifying challenges, the task force members witnessed that orchestration and coordination of advisory services for students are a key to successfully entering university. Setting up digital and on-site **specific advising services for students at risk** as well as the implementation of **buddy and mentoring programmes** serve as best-practices within the network to meet this challenge.

Being forced to leave your country of origin is mostly a speedy process, and a drastic, often life-threatening decision. As a consequence, it leaves almost no room to prepare your studies in a new educational system. Therefore, the implementation of preparatory **workshops on the education system or guest-student programmes** like the Austrian MORE initiative (see: https://uniko.ac.at/themen/more/; https://refugees.uni-graz.at/de/) are examples to break down barriers and facilitate the inclusion process.

Furthermore, restricted study programmes or low quota for international students or refugee students create a long and difficult road to access the path of higher education in Europe. Often, these quotas do not mirror the demand of prospective students. When aiming to train tomorrow's leadership, increasing the study places is an important step towards a more inclusive University and social environment.

Challenge (4): Psycho-social support

Traumatic experiences from war, oppression, and abuse, as well as escape routes dangerous to life are only a few reasons to develop post-traumatic stress that can severely damage mental health. A hostile environment in the host country generated through discriminatory behavior towards migrants, no secure residence status and the need of financial security, as well as living in overly crowded places (like asylum centers) even reinforce the desperate situation many migrants face. However, all that seems far away from everyday university life and an adequate learning environment. In order to ensure a successful preparation and study phase, **counseling needs to specifically target the problems students at risk face** and should inform them about funding, housing and support structures and programmes (University Lyon, D.U. passerelle programme, see: https://www.univ-lyon3.fr/du-passerelle).

Challenge (5): Awareness raising

Discussions in the task force indicated that often, a lack of awareness among the university community about forced migration and the student life cycle with a refugee background exists. Therefore, it is the Action Line's and task force's aim to raise more awareness within the university for the identified needs and struggles. Information and training about under-represented groups, diversity and inclusion are essential. So, the implementation of an inclusive "students and scholars at risk" plan within the university could serve as a starting point.

Staff training for the administration, as well as the teaching and research staff are key points of an integrated university plan and function as concrete tools and approaches for addressing diversity and raising the awareness level. Ultimately, this will foster inclusive learning, teaching and research environments (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019).

Public engagement through lectures or training for civil society completes an effective inclusive strategy by raising awareness of migration and refugee issues. One possible proposal could be the organisation of open lessons or seminars, aimed at school students or members of the general public, in which refugee students take on the role of teacher. Alternatively, universities can collaborate with local associations to organise activities such as sports events or tours of the local area.

3.2 The Model of an Integrated ARQUS Plan for Refugees and Students at Risk

Following the assessment of the challenge for students at risk to access higher education, the task force produced an integrated plan. We also suggest two characteristics that may favor its implementation: first, **collaboration with external partners,** such as the city, NGOs, social civic agents. For example, this can be seen in the best-practice in Italy, where cooperation with the *Scholars at Risk Network* (see: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org) and the *UNHCR* simplified the realisation of measurements for students at risk. Second, implemented programmes need to be **flexible**, especially regarding the recognition of former education, in order to be adopted to often spontaneous changing international developments and migration/flight movements (see best practices Lithuania Belarus initiative: https://www.vu.lt/en/news-events/news/vilnius-university-inviting-belarusians-to-study-for-free-and-obtain-scholarships).

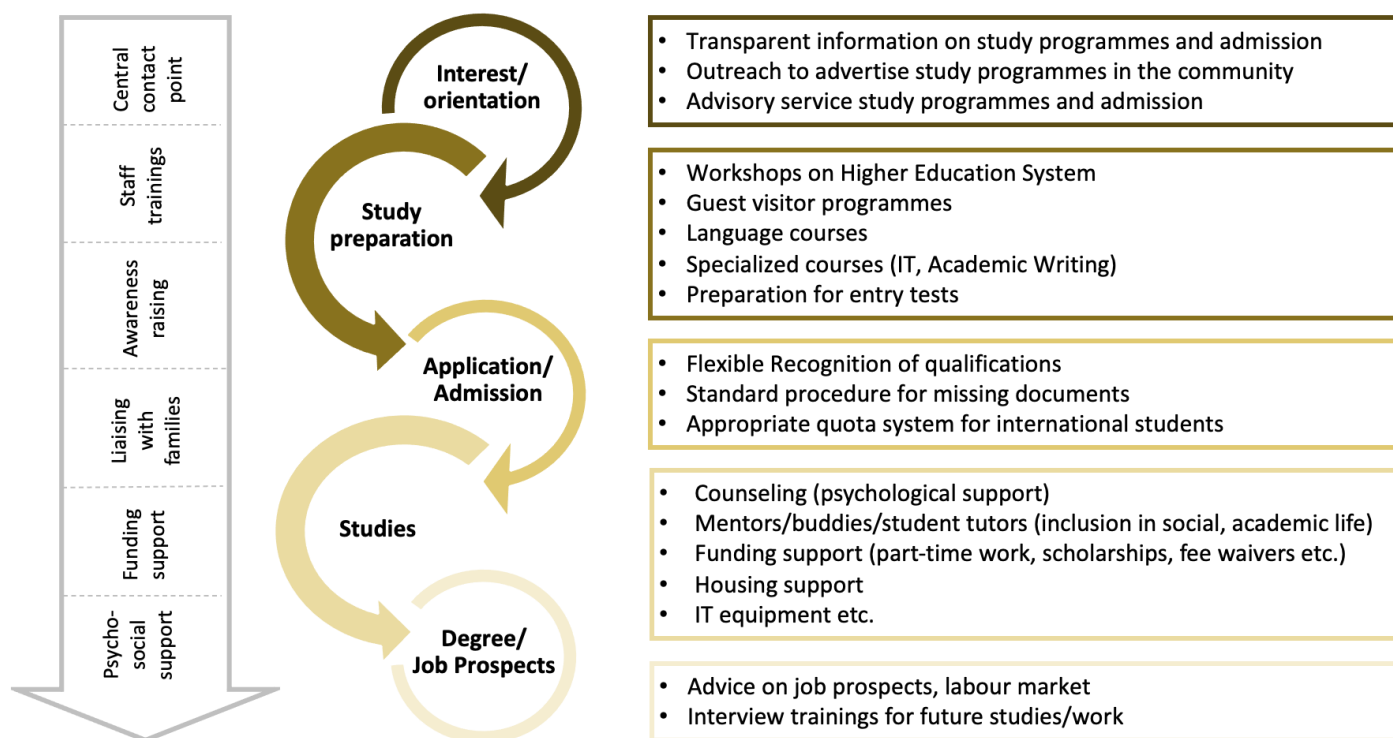| Central contact point		Interest/orientation	• Transparent information on study programmes and admission • Outreach to advertise study programmes in the community • Advisory service study programmes and admission
Staff trainings		Study preparation	• Workshops on Higher Education System • Guest visitor programmes • Language courses • Specialized courses (IT, Academic Writing) • Preparation for entry tests
Awareness raising		Application/Admission	• Flexible Recognition of qualifications • Standard procedure for missing documents • Appropriate quota system for international students
Liaising with families		Studies	• Counseling (psychological support) • Mentors/buddies/student tutors (inclusion in social, academic life) • Funding support (part-time work, scholarships, fee waivers etc.) • Housing support • IT equipment etc.
Funding support		Degree/Job Prospects	• Advice on job prospects, labour market • Interview trainings for future studies/work
Psycho-social support			

Figure 1: Model of an Integrated ARQUS Plan for Refugees and Students at Risk

Based on the student's life cycle, the Integrated Plan for Refugees and Students at Risk demonstrates (Figure 1) different possibilities of support, which need to be further implemented in the network. The student's life cycle represents the phases that every student goes through during their studies: it starts with an orientation phase and study preparation, followed by the application and admission process, then the actual study phase takes place and finally it ends with graduation/career perspectives. All offers and structures aim to enable students at risk to actively participate in academic and social life and contribute to social development, both within and outside the university.

Interest/orientation

For the orientation phase, it is necessary that universities and institutes provide transparent information on the various study programmes and requirements available to anyone interested. In the host country, for example, universities should forge close links with local administrative bodies and organizations dealing with migrants so as to reach those "students

at risk" who might be interested in a university career. Finally, a pre-university advisory service should be established to assist students in finding out which degree programme is suitable for them in view of their future prospects and previous qualifications, also taking into account issues of vulnerability.

Study Preparation

To prepare students for their studies, universities should offer workshops on the educational system and different guest auditor programmes to give them an impression of the university and student life. Many study programmes take place in the national language. Therefore, offering (pre-enrollment) language courses is another important pillar to enable students at risk to take up studies. In addition, specific subject foundation or "bridging" courses should be offered, for example in computer skills or in the field of mathematics, as these skills are often required and necessary to cope with studies, especially if the former education is not recognized. Finally, students should be supported in preparing for entry tests. The preparatory courses should be free of charge or linked to a scholarship programme.

Application/Admission

When it comes to access to university, the recognition of previous careers is often the biggest challenge for students at risk. Therefore, higher education institutions should offer support in admission procedures and provide a uniform procedure for missing documents, such as a self-disclosure form to facilitate the recognition of qualifications. Furthermore, it is desirable to introduce an effective quota system for international students for admission.

Studies

It is of utmost importance that higher education institutions monitor the participation of students at risk in their study programmes and the extent to which they are included in university life. In fact, the 2019 Eurydice Report notes that such monitoring occurs in very few countries. During their studies, students at risk should receive special support to keep up with their studies and to stay enrolled successfully. To achieve this, universities should first of all, and most importantly, offer counselling in different languages. In addition, mentoring and buddy programmes, as well as student tutors, can help at-risk students integrate into social life and a new academic system. Moreover, hardware and IT equipment need to be available, and the students should receive housing and funding support, including informing about scholarships

or finding part-time work to support studies if necessary. Finally, families' involvement in studies should be considered.

Degree/Job Prospects

In the final phase of the student life cycle, the degree and job perspectives, there is a need for guidance on job perspectives and the labour market through, for example, a career service that also helps the students to prepare for interviews and is aware of the specific issues, e.g. residence and social laws, that determine the situation of students at risk.

Throughout all phases, each university should have specific contact persons that know the respective responsibilities for different issues that can arise during the phases. In addition, effective systems should be put in place to monitor at-risk students throughout their careers and understand where the weaknesses in the system lie. As there are more issues to be considered when supporting students at risk, it is important that the administrative staff and student tutors receive special training and that universities in general raise awareness for the situation of this student group. Besides, psychosocial counseling should be provided during all phases of the student's life cycle.

4.   4. Outlook

The ARQUS task force on "Enabling refugees" intended to inspire dialogue and provide an opportunity to develop new ideas and strategies to break down barriers in higher education and create a flexible model within the network for supporting at-risk students and scholars whose academic freedom was threatened in their country of origin. In terms of raising awareness, responding, and supporting in emergency situations, the work of the past three years showed that an integrated institutional strategy and plan for the future is needed.

With a war raging again in Europe, it has never been as important to be committed and join forces on common (policy) visions, strategies, and actions. The ARQUS project will be extended for a second phase and "Enabling students at risk" will again be one of the major goals. While the first phase concentrated on the inner circle of the University, the second phase will focus more on public engagement, to reach out to the whole community, share experiences and expertise with other support networks and organisations to raise more awareness.

Finally, the years of work in the task force showed that true inclusion is only possible when there is a change of perspective: it is essential to take the perspective of those affected and thus get students and scholars at risk involved.

Claeys-Kulik, A., Ekman Jørgensen, T., & Stöber, H. (2019). *Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions: results from the INVITED project*. European University Association. https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf

Education Pathways Manifesto (2022). *Manifesto on expanding refugee tertiary education pathways in Europe.* EDPATHWAYSMANIFESTO. https://www.edpathwaysmanifesto4refugees.eu/manifesto/ (accessed 01.09.2022).

European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice (Ed.). (2019). *Integrating asylum seekers and refugees into higher education in Europe: National policies and measures*. Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, Education and Youth Policy Analysis. https://doi.org/10.2797/649493

Lambert, L., von Blumenthal, J., Beigang, S. (2018). Flucht und Bildung: Hochschulen. [Flight and education: Universities]. *Flucht: Forschung und Transfer. State-of-Research Papier 08b.* https://flucht-forschung-transfer.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SoR-08-HS-04-2018.pdf

Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee (2017*). Recommendation on recognition of refugees' qualifications under the Lisbon recognition convention and explanatory memorandum.* Council of Europe. https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/7473_Recommendation_on_Recognition_of_Qualifications_Held_by_Refugees_Displaced_Persons_and_Persons_in_a_Refugee_like_Situation.pdf

inHERE (2018). *Recommendations of the project. Enhancing the access of refugees to higher education in Europe and their integration*. inHERE. https://www.inhereproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/inHERE-RECOMMENDATIONS-EN.pdf

Oxford Dictionary (2022). Inclusion. https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/inclusion (accessed 01.09.2022).

Scholars at Risk Network (2022). *About*. Scholars at Risk. https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/about/ (accessed 01.09.2022).

S.U.C.R.E. (2017). *Accessing higher education in Europe: Challenges for refugee students & strategies to overcome them*. Supporting University Community Pathways for Refugees-Migrants. https://sucre.auth.gr/sites/default/files/media/attachments/SUCRE-IO1-Final%20Publication.pdf

UN (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Unicef. https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text# (accessed 01.09.2022).

UNHCR (1951). *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.* UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10 (accessed 01.09.2022).

UNHCR (2016). *Missing Out: Refugee Education in Crisis*. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/57d9d01d0/missing-refugee-education-crisis.html (accessed 06.09.2022).

UNHCR (2022). *Tertiary Education*. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html (accessed 23.02.2022).

Università di Parma (2018). *Piano d'Ateneo per i Rifugiati*. Università di Parma. www.unipr.it/sites/default/files/albo_pretorio/allegati/18-12-2018/piano_dateneo_iniziative_per_i_rifugiati_1.pdf (accessed 06.09.2022).

University of Trento (2015). *Asylum Seekers to University Project*. University of Trento. https://www.unitn.it/en/ateneo/60469/asylum-seekers-to-university-project (accessed 06.09.2022).

von Blumenthal, J. (2018). *Wo liegen Probleme für geflüchtete Studierende?* [What are the problems for refugee students?]. Mediendienst Integration. https://mediendienst-integration.de/artikel/wo-liegen-probleme-fuer-gefluechtete-studierende.html (accessed 01.09.2022).