



Higher Education Values in Practice

Integration of highly skilled refugees and at-risk academics in Europe

GREET Stakeholder forum
Summary report

Background of the event

On 13-14 June 2019 the GREET stakeholder event took place in Brussels, at the European Committee of the Regions. This public event, titled “**Higher Education Values in Practice - Integration of highly skilled refugees and at-risk academics in Europe**”, was co-organised with the team of the Academic Refuge project, funded under the Erasmus+ programme. The aim of such a joint event was to bring together the actors in the international higher education (HE) community who are engaged and interested in wider cooperation in the integration of students and scholars with refugee background and at-risk academics – primarily but not exclusively in Europe.



Image 1: Plenary panel on the refugee integration practices and policies in Europe (photo by Bruno Achen)

During the two half-days in Brussels, more than 120 delegates engaged in discussions on academic freedom, higher education role and values, internationalisation of higher education and support for highly skilled refugees, as well as cooperation at different levels, from institutional to national and European. The presence of a different range of stakeholders – from higher education institutions (HEIs), international associations and networks, national and EU authorities, national Erasmus+ agencies and EURAXESS contacts points - was valuable for sharing experiences in the past several years and looking into

what kind of actions are needed in the future, after the initial “crisis response”. In this light, it was emphasised that continued support from policy makers at both national and European level is highly needed in the future, especially with the view to the next generation of EU programmes, primarily Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020. i.e. Horizon Europe.

The event [programme](#) combined plenary and break-out sessions, which allowed for broader discussions in the audience as well as smaller-group exchange on more concrete topics focusing specifically on students, scholars and cooperation platforms that can enhance influence on the kind and extent of support the HE community receives from decision makers.

The aim of this summary report is to provide an overview of the main discussion points during the sessions designed and coordinated by the GREET consortium and to put forward a number of recommendations for policy makers, with a particular focus on the future of European cooperation.

The sessions to be covered in this report addressed the following topics:

- Awareness raising for supporting higher education in emergencies
- Support for students with refugee background - Student engagement initiatives
- Networks, associations and task forces as support structures and advocacy tools
- Initiatives to support integration of highly skilled refugees into higher education in Europe

The following pages will provide an outline of the main points raised by the speakers or audience during the sessions and some examples of practice provided.

Awareness raising for supporting higher education in emergencies

Moderator:

Sini Piippo, Finnish National Agency for Education EDUFI

Panellists:

James R. King, Director, IIE Scholar Rescue Fund

Marita Häkkinen, Coordinator, University of Jyväskylä

IIE-Scholar Rescue Fund Fellow / Visiting Scholar, Oslo Metropolitan University

Outline and rationale of the session and topic

The session provided the participants informative perspectives to **the humanitarian crisis and the higher education emergency in Yemen**, which has not been receiving sufficient international attention. The discussion was then broadened to the possibilities of supporting scholars and PhD students from crisis areas with the efforts of European higher education community.

When education in emergencies is discussed, the focus tends to be rather on basic and vocational levels and higher education in many cases is not among the priorities. In this session, the speakers shared their perspectives on the *importance of supporting higher education in emergencies* as a path to obtaining qualification in many fields, but equally as a means of protecting the lives of scholars and of helping them continue their research. Furthermore, the (European) higher education community bears the responsibility of supporting future generations of academics with the view to their potential return to home countries and rebuilding post-conflict societies.



Image 2: Panel on higher education in emergencies (photo by Bruno Achen)

competencies brought to the host universities in Europe.

At the same time, it is necessary to help people to integrate into the new countries, which is not only important to individuals but also to host universities. Compared to those who have chosen to study or do research abroad, scholars at-risk were forced to leave their home countries. HEIs should thus also support individual career planning to facilitate mobility of researchers as well as learning the language and supporting the situation of the entire family. It is shown that academia in the host country benefits from the research and teaching of at-risk scholars, including but not limited to valuable experiences, knowledge and

Key points

One of the recurring issues was providing **funding for scholars and the sustainability of the support structures. The funding schemes, such as the Scholar Rescue Fund provide a valuable support mechanism that could be utilised even more widely.** Finding a sustainable funding after the grant period might be challenging, as the researchers/PhD students in most cases need to compete for funding in the regular funding schemes. One idea raised during the session were the possibilities of working in closer collaboration with foundations on national level to create supplementary funding schemes. One area not covered currently are the scholars who have already resided in a safe country for several years.

As one of the potential mechanisms to ensure more sustained co-funding might be **regional placements**, involving cooperation with HEIs in the countries neighbouring scholars' country of origin, also as a way of keeping scholars near their home countries, given that there are less cultural barriers as well.

A point was raised concerning the importance of **ensuring sufficient institutional resources** for the implementation of this kind of initiatives: the higher education institutions should be willing and aware of the importance to allocate specific resources to ensure successful efforts. In some cases this has been challenging.

One of the topics discussed during the session focused on the **role of different support providers**, such as Scholar Rescue Fund (SRF) and Scholars at Risk (SAR), **and local/national authorities**. It was noted that, understandably, the relations depend on the country of origin and the level of risk for scholars. In many cases it has been proved to be highly beneficial to involve the actors from different levels to ensure sufficient support: as a best practice example, the collaboration structure between the Scholar Rescue Fund, EDUFI and the Finnish host higher education institutions was discussed.

In addition to discussing the crisis in Yemen, the participants of the session raised the complexity of the current situations in Turkey and Libya in the discussions.



It is important for the HEIs to participate more in the different support activities and networks in order to learn more and to gain understanding on the individual approaches. HEI staff should receive more specified training in order to have the expertise needed to support the prospective students/scholars. Networks between HEIs are very important but also contacts with different stakeholders and sharing information. Such networks and contacts help to create a safety net for students/scholars at-risk.

Commitment and competence are needed in order to really support study and career paths!

Support for students with refugee background - Student engagement initiatives

Moderator:

Julia Kracht Araújo, German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD

Impulse speech and Moderator

Christian Gerhus, Coordinator study start for new immigrants, University of Siegen

Majdi Bido, Assistant preliminary studies for new immigrants, University of Siegen

Outline and rationale of the session and topic

Student-led initiatives can play an important role when it comes to the integration of refugee students into the university. Students can give first-hand advice and know obstacles and solutions well from their own experience. Also, a student buddy or mentor is more approachable for some than the international office.



Image 3: Session on student engagement initiatives. (photo by Bruno Achen)

This way, a student initiative can become a strong support and a multiplier for the international office. Often, student initiatives arise from voluntary engagement amongst the student body and do not require much funding to be implemented. They can take various forms, from mentoring programmes, campus tours, language buddies, social integration and many more.

In this session, a student initiative from Germany (University of Siegen) presented their work and spoke about how they came into existence, how they are linked to the university, funding, organisation of the initiative, knowledge transfer, etc. The university of Siegen's project is funded by the "Welcome" programme which provides HEIs in Germany with funds to support their student-led initiatives for refugee students. The programme is funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research and administered by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The aim of the session was to provide other universities with ideas, inspiration and practical tips on how to support or start student initiatives at their institution, in order to provide the best possible integration for refugee students into the academic life.

Key points

The persisting challenge across European countries is **lack of documents**, i.e. diplomas and subsequently, the challenge of how to test knowledge and competences. Christian Gerhus illustrated how this is done in Germany via the [TestAS](#), a test that checks subject-related knowledge of international students to make foreign certificates comparable. With funding from the BMBF, the test was also made available in Arabic and free of charge for refugees (<https://refugees.testas.de/en/>). It was noted that a similar test exists in Finland as well, which can be taken in Finnish, Swedish or English.

Language competences remain another pertinent issue for course enrolment and in some countries, such as Germany, C1 is the language level required for a degree course. Some institutions, including the University of Siegen, allow enrolment as of B1. However, the speakers stressed that there have actually been no success stories from amongst people who enrolled with B1 level. At the same time, C1 is a very high level for most refugees - language learning represents a big hurdle vis-à-vis the time and effort

required to learn the German language. In the case of the University of Siegen, only few courses are available in English, so the knowledge of German is a basic requirement to be able to study there.

As another example and based on a survey amongst 1000 Syrian students in Turkey – language is the second biggest challenge, in addition to **legal status** and **recognition of diplomas**. Social integration and making friends represent another problematic aspect for refugee students, which is why peer-to-peer counselling from refugees for refugees plays a very important role. The **buddy programme** at Siegen has no special restrictions to the matching. All starting students are matched to an older student, including immigrants. They are matched to German students, refugee students or international students. Unfortunately, it was noted that, despite the relevance of such support, **finding volunteers** has become challenging as the numbers of volunteers in Germany seem to be decreasing. Although obtaining ECTS is a motivational element, most universities in Germany do not give credit points for engagement in the Welcome initiatives. The major difficulty for the HEIs seems to be adapting curricula accordingly. However, the number of student initiatives in the “Welcome” programme has stayed almost the same since the programme’s start in 2016.



Some of the advantages of the peer-to-peer approach include cultural proximity, e.g. language and intercultural competence; shared experiences and “seeing eye-to-eye”, having a peer/buddy as a role-model and mentor, sensitivity and authenticity, direct feedback and empowerment.

Although it may be challenging to engage volunteers for buddy programmes, a personal approach is always the best way to find new volunteers - speaking to people and raising their interest directly in the topic.

Networks, associations and task forces as support structures and advocacy tools

Moderator:

Marija Mitic, Policy Officer, Academic Cooperation Association (ACA)

Panellists:

Mathieu Schneider, Associate Professor in history of music and Vice-President of the University of Strasbourg
Marjolein (Jo) Breda, Senior Policy Officer Social Affairs, Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad (VLIR)

Outline and rationale of the session and topic

The level and magnitude of support for initiatives aiming at developing or enhancing integration practices of students and scholars with a refugee background varies across Europe. In some countries, national-level support – through funding, coordination or other measures – allows higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop support models for incoming refugee students or academics. In some countries without such support, HEIs have joined forces to cooperate and to advocate jointly towards decision makers at local, regional or national level. At the same time, European-level exchange is still highly needed for training and peer learning purposes, and university networks and stakeholder associations are using this asset to be platforms for exchange and dialogue with EU policy makers.



Image 4: Panel on networks and associations for advocacy, (photo by Bruno Achen)

In this session, the panellists shared their experiences in creating formal or informal networks for cooperation and advocacy at various levels and discussed how the actors in the European higher education community at large could and should get involved to further link the existing networks and associations.

Key points

The role of university networks and rectors' conferences in lobbying and advocacy activities was emphasised as one of the crucial factors in ensuring support for HEIs at national level, as well as cooperation with local authorities. Through the example of the **MENs network** in France, Mathieu Schneider illustrated how cooperation and engagement of different stakeholders, including cooperation with media, can make an impact in the support provided to highly skilled refugees and commitment by policymakers. As he pointed out, it is important to move from observation to action. Jo Breda presented the current *modus operandi* of the **Equal Opportunities Working Group and working group Refugees in Flanders**, which involve Flemish higher education institutions. Illustrating goals and challenges encountered along the way, she pointed to the relevance of **delegating responsibility** where it belongs and distributing it across different actors by task and competence.

Another relevant point raised is the **relevance of existing research and evidence**, which should serve as a strong argument to policymakers as to the need for more support at all levels. A lot of existing projects and initiatives can provide relevant evidence, which is another reason to point to the need for more cooperation and networking between project consortia in Europe. This is especially the case with EU-

funded project, where more (coordinated) communication would be welcome between the European Commission and project consortia, not the least to keep awareness and visibility of the different activities implemented across Europe and to avoid redundancy and overlap, and instead - ensure synergies. A European framework for action was called for in order to have a common voice, join forces and effectively advocate at the EU level for enhancing the support for refugee-background students and scholars.



Even if there is no more imminent "crisis", there is undoubtedly a lot more work to be done to support threatened scholars and highly educated groups with refugee background. It is relevant for all policymakers to acknowledge that the higher education community actors – from universities, civil society organisations, schools, university networks, etc. – need sustained support in ensuring that the highly skilled refugees in Europe have further opportunities to continue studies, research and work in the host or another European country. A lot has been done since 2015, largely towards removing major administrative barriers and allowing access to the different systems, whether university or labour market. In order to sustain or enhance the existing support structures, there should be a common and coordinated approach among all relevant actors both at national and European level.

Initiatives to support integration of highly skilled refugees into higher education in Europe

Moderator and presenter:

David Crosier, Eurydice

Panellists:

Julia Kracht Araújo, DAAD

Mathieu Schneider, University of Strasbourg/MEnS network

Kaisu Piironen, Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture

Majdi Bido, University of Siegen

This plenary panel provided an overview of national-level policies for refugee integration through the Eurydice network, and then gave concrete examples of developments in a number of countries and higher education institutions (Finland, Germany and France). Setting the scene with the Eurydice report [*Integrating Asylum Seekers and Refugees into Higher Education*](#), published in February 2019, David Crosier presented some of the findings, indicating a very mixed picture of national responses across



Image 5: Panel on integration initiatives in Europe (photo by Bruno Achen)

Europe. The three most commonly stated measures in place are 1) **linguistic support** 2) **financial support** and 3) **guidance and counselling**. The experience in the countries and institutions represented in the panel confirms these findings, and panellists emphasised some good practices and lessons learned so far. Above all, it was agreed that **language learning** is crucial. The good practice in Germany is that lessons take place at the university so that the learners can already get familiar with the academic setting and institutional culture. Equally important is clear **communication with all the stakeholders** and not less, **listening to the target group** so that support measures are adequately implemented. In France, for example, **cooperation with local authorities** proved to be crucial in supporting refugees not only with the academic opportunities, but also with accommodation and administrative support. Keeping refugee students as a separate group at the early stage of learning and then integrating them with other students also proved conducive for their smoother adaptation in the environment. In Finland, one major lesson has been to start with data collection as early as possible to build solid evidence and thus ensure continued support by decision makers.

What are the next steps? The panellists put forward some possible actions with the view to supporting the HE community in the future:

- **Creating a European framework of action:** acknowledging the differences in higher education systems and policy actions across Europe and building on the Eurydice report, it would be helpful to bring together the results achieved so far and put forward proposals for the way ahead within a common European framework.
- **More and better sharing of data and information,** including on existing successful integration initiatives in Europe: there is public mistrust towards migrants and refugees and the community has the responsibility to change the perceptions through solid evidence, good examples and success stories.

- **Continuation of support and funding** for integration initiatives, both on national and European level: after the initial “crisis”, there is work in continuing support for refugee-background students and scholars, who – as it was noted – will form a new high-skilled generation of people who know the value of academic freedom and importance of the support received in a host country, which will impact the course of Europe in the future.

GREET online compendium

As part of the GREET project, the consortium is currently developing an online compendium – a repository of existing European, national or institutional-level initiatives, projects and policies that aim to support the integration of students and scholars with refugee background. The aim of the compendium is to provide a comprehensive overview of relevant activities in this field and facilitate information sharing in the European higher education community. It will also contain all the material developed in the GREET project.

The online compendium will be launched in September 2019.

If you would like your work to be featured in the compendium, please send a short summary (one paragraph of up to 10 lines), a picture and relevant link(s) to the consortium at:

marija.mitic@aca-secretariat.be

Deadline: **15 September 2019**.

Recommendations for European-level action

In conclusion and with the view to EU-level support in the next generation of programmes, especially Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, a few points have been mentioned more than once at the event and deserve closer attention of the HE community and EU policymakers. Amongst many relevant points raised throughout the event, below are some that have been repeatedly addressed not only at this event, but within the European HE community at large.

***Continued EU support:** The GREET consortium welcomes the EC's announced support for already existing networks and platforms in the next framework programme, Horizon Europe. This approach will ensure sustainability and better coordination of activities in the mid and long-term perspective, especially with the view to building stronger links between these support structures and influence more system-level changes in integration of refugee-background students and academics.*

***More European-level cooperation:** A repeated message across the HE sector since 2015, has been to develop a European framework for action in supporting highly skilled refugees in order to use the existing knowledge, structures and tools in place and build synergies in the future.*

***More coordinated communication with and within the European Commission:** especially between the EC Directorates-General (EAC and RTD) and EC-coordinated networking support for project teams for stronger cooperation and minimum repetition in the implementation of activities under such funded projects. Beneficiaries of EU programmes agree that it would be highly helpful to have some introductory meetings organised by the EC, where project leaders would meet, present their projects and discuss a roadmap for cooperation.*



For more information about the GREET project,
visit the project [webpage](#) or contact ACA at marija.mitic@aca-secretariat.be

For more information about the CARE project,
visit the project [webpage](#) or contact the consortium at care@aca-secretariat.be

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