From Onboarding to Securing Academic Success:
Guiding Refugee Students Towards University Studies in Europe.
A Handbook

IncluSTEM - A Training Program for Sustainable Rapid Inclusion Leading to Employment via STEM Universities in Europe

www.inclustem.eu

About IncluSTEM

IncluSTEM is a 3-years project co-funded with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The partnership aims at developing common standards for the integration of students with a refugee background at the partner universities and, in the long run, also in the European labour market.

Overall goal

IncluSTEM is a strategic partnership programme between three European universities: KTH Stockholm, TU Berlin, and UP Madrid. The programme addresses and aims to solve two societal issues: first, the slow inclusion of highly skilled migrants and refugees into European society and labour market and second, the demand for STEM and IT-professionals of the increasingly digital labour market.

The IncluSTEM Consortium

KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden (coordinator)

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain

Technische Universität Berlin, Germany

Website: https://inclustem.eu/

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Introduction: Why this handbook?

According to UNHCR, 108,4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced at the end of 2022. Compared to this huge number, the number of refugees registered in the European Union seem small: More than 8 million refugees from Ukraine, and ca. 3 million refugees from other countries were registered in the member states in mid-2023. Still, migration and integration (or inclusion) are among the most important topics in contemporary politics and society not only in the EU. Since the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, the influx of refugees has not only been challenging our societies, bureaucracies and social systems, but also our education systems and academics.

A significant number of refugees coming to Europe are well-trained and highly motivated, but were forced to interrupt their academic careers due to their flight. They often face huge challenges on their way to enter the higher education systems in Europe because most of them did not plan and prepare for entering a university abroad. Not only do they lack sufficient command of the respective language of instruction, but also knowledge and understanding of the European university system. Precarious living conditions and constraints connected to the legal status as a refugee add to this difficult situation.

Oftentimes, universities have not been well-prepared to successfully include this group of students: Students with a refugee background need extensive advice consuming time and staff we both oftentimes don't have. And they force us to think outside the box - which is something we are not used to do.

In the IncluSTEM project we collected best-practice examples for successful inclusion of refugee students in higher education from the three partner universities KTH Stockholm, UPM Madrid and TU Berlin. And, first and foremost, we tried to shift our perspectives away from seeing refugees as problematic, but as a resource: Many of them bring a lot of knowledge, and their perspectives add to making our universities more creative, open, and diverse. Finally, we asked ourselves what we can learn about our institutions and our ways of working if we find it challenging to deal with this group.

This handbook is a result of this process. It sums up the situations at the three partner institutions – which have very different perspectives, but at the same time face surprisingly similar challenges when it comes to working with students with a refugee background, and it presents the best practice examples we have collected. From these experiences and discussions, we developed guidelines for administrative staff working with refugee students which can serve as a blueprint to establish common standards also in the work with other "atypical" or "non-traditional" student groups and at other universities as well.

The situation of refugee students in Germany, Spain and Sweden

Germany: Technische Universität Berlin (TU Berlin)

International students in Germany and at TU Berlin

Germany is among the most popular study destinations for international students: It ranks 4th in absolute numbers after the US, Great Britain and Australia. In winter semester 2021/22 440.564 international students (i.e. students with no German passport) were enrolled at German universities. This is ca. 15% of the 2.9 million students in Germany. At TU Berlin this rate is almost twice as high as the German average: In the winter semester 2021/22, 27,4% (9.291 in absolute numbers) of its 33.864 students didn't hold a German passport.

But not all of these students are 'international' in the sense that they move to Germany for university studies: 22 % of the students considered as "international" hold a foreign passport, but a German university entrance qualification. Here we can see why categories like "international" or "migrant" students are often blurry: parameters like passport or school leaving diploma do not necessarily tell us something about the educational and social background of a person. It becomes even more complicated when we talk about students with a refugee background: In Berlin, the residence status is not being monitored during the enrolment process. Therefore, presenting reliable figures about this group of students is hardly possible. But we estimate that ca. 10% of the students considered as "international" at TU Berlin have a refugee background.

Legal situation of refugee students in Germany

The legal situation of refugee students in Germany improved significantly in 2015/16: From then on, everybody who met the admission requirements was allowed to take up university studies, and the legal status of a person ceased to play a role in university admission.

Whereas from the university perspective all international students are being treated equally, the type of residence status still plays an important role when it comes to living conditions and financing: During the asylum process refugees usually cannot choose their place of residence freely. Depending on their country of origin and the phase of the asylum process, they must live in communal accommodation and are not allowed to move or find a flat for themselves. Accordingly, their means to continue or take up university studies are very much limited. In Germany, asylum seekers are usually not allowed to switch to a "regular" visa process, i.e. they cannot apply for a study visa or a visa for employment. Especially for refugees whose asylum application is likely to be rejected, this is a problem: It can take years until the process is finished and the rejection is legally binding. Years these students try to spend on learning German and continuing their academic career without having an appropriate perspective to stay.

Most of the restrictions described here do not apply for refugees from Ukraine according to the EU temporary protection directive. Ukrainian citizens are granted a residence permit for temporary protection (usually for two years) without an asylum procedure[1]. As a result, war refugees from Ukraine receive a secure status much quicker: They have access to social benefits directly after their arrival, and are much freer to choose their place and their conditions of living than refugees from other countries. Moreover, Ukrainians can switch from the war refugee status to another type of visa (e.g. for studying or

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[1] https://fluechtlingsrat-berlin.de/news_termine/ukraine_english

employment), or into the asylum process. Hurdles regarding access to the higher education system remain similar for all students with a refugee background though.

Access to the higher education system
In Germany, education is within the responsibility of the federated states. The states run and fund the (public) universities, and they pass legislation regarding university entrance and admission. Legislation and processes follow common standards of course, but there can be significant differences between the states, e.g. when it comes to the question of how many university places are allocated to international students. Moreover, universities have a high level of academic autonomy when it comes to the definition of admission processes and recognition. This makes it particularly difficult for refugee students to find their way through the "university jungle".

Recognition and admission
The universities are responsible for recognition aiming at undergraduate and postgraduate admission as well as transfer of periods of study and examination outcomes[2]. In the evaluation of international degrees and credits universities usually follow the guidelines published by the Central Office for Foreign Education, ZAB (Zentralstelle für ausländisches Bildungswesen), the central authority for the evaluation of foreign qualifications in Germany. ZAB also provides information about the countries and their educational systems.[3]

When it comes to special regulations for refugees and their access to institutions for higher education, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK)[4] plays a significant role. Following the Lisbon Recognition Convention that came into effect in Germany on 1 October 2007 and the article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention that offers refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation the opportunity to have their qualification recognized, even in case documents are missing, the KMK has adopted a resolution. This resolution from December 2015 recommends plausibility checks among other measures.

As with the regulations from 2015, the KMK has also developed guidelines and a resolution as an answer to the war in Ukraine in 2022. The most recent KMK resolution from February 2, 2023 is directed at high school students and students at universities from Ukraine that could not finish their school or university year as originally planned. Students who aim to access the German higher education system should not have any disadvantage even if they cannot show proof of all the exams from high school and / or school that would regularly be required. In addition to this resolution, the ZAB offers a so-called "Plausibility procedure" for refugees from Ukraine with missing educational documents.

Language
The vast majority of undergraduate programs are taught in German. Only 25 English-language undergraduate programs were offered in engineering and natural sciences at German universities in 2022. At TU Berlin, all bachelor's programs are taught in German, 19 out of 89 master's programs are taught in English. Thus, in most cases German language skills (on level C1) are required for admission.

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[2] https://www.kmk.org/kmk/information-in-english.html
3This information is accessible via the database 'anabin': http://www.anabin.kmk.org An English version of this database is provided by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD): https://www.daad.de/en/study-and-research-in-germany/plan-your-studies/admission-database/
[4] The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (in short and German: KMK) plays a significant role as an instrument for the coordination and development of education in the country.[4] The KMK also plays a crucial role when it comes to the access to higher education for refugees without evidence of their qualification.

Funding

The majority of German state universities do not charge tuition fees for their programs - with exceptions in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Saxony where tuition fees can be charged from students with a non-European passport. At TU Berlin students have to pay so-called semester fees including mostly administrative fees (€ 113 for the winter semester 2023/24).

Even though costs for university studies are moderate in Germany, many international students find it difficult to cover their living expenses during studies. Funding opportunities depend on the legal status: Students holding a visa for study purposes have to finance their living individually. They are allowed to work 120 full or 240 half days per year and do not have access to social benefits. Refugee students who have applied for asylum but still wait for a decision can get financial support according to the Asylum-Seeker Benefits Act. Students with an official refugee status have access to social benefits such as unemployment support and support according to the Federal Law on Support in Education (BAföG).

Spain: Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM)

International students in Spain and at UPM

International students find Spain to be quite an attractive study destination. This country has a well-organized educational system, numerous degree programs to choose from, and unmatched academic expertise. The total number of international students in higher education institutions in Spain was 208,366 according to the Ministry of Science and Innovation in the academic year 2019/20. This number has been on the increase over the last few years, considering that the appeal of studying abroad is constantly increasing. Statistics from the academic year 2019/2020 show that out of the 208,366 foreign students enrolled in Spanish universities, 55,277 are international students in mobility programs. This number is for both public and private universities and includes male as well as female international students.[5]

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM) is the country's largest technical university, and an influential European higher education institution. As a university with an international outlook, the UPM attaches great importance to international education. It has signed more than 900 agreements with European universities with respect to the courses it offers under the Erasmus+ programme. It also has agreements with Latin American universities under the Magalhaes programme and agreements with the USA, Russia, and China, among others. Every academic year more than 1,000 students go on an Erasmus+ exchange to a European university, and approximately 700 international students come to the UPM under this programme. The UPM regularly hosts about 70 students from Chinese universities and sends about 35 UPM students to China as part of the Spanish-Chinese Campus, funded by CSC scholarships or UPM grants, as well as about 40 students who developed their Final Year Projects in developing countries. As of 2022, UPM has 2500 agreements signed with foreign universities and there are 96 double-degree programs with foreign universities at UPM.[6]

Legal situation of refugee students in Spain

Guaranteed by the Constitution of Spain, Art. 13.4 ensure the terms under which citizens from other countries and stateless persons may enjoy the right to asylum in Spain. In addition, Spain signed the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol in 1978. According

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[5] https://www.studying-in-spain.com/spain-international-student-statistics
[6] UPM en cifras 2022 ES.indd

to Spanish Law 12/2009 from 30 October 2009, a decision on an asylum application must be reached within a period of six months. However, the process often takes longer than that. If a positive decision is taken, the person can be recognized as a refugee or be granted subsidiary protection. There is also the possibility to be rejected but be allowed to stay under humanitarian status. While waiting for a decision on the asylum application, the person is considered an asylum seeker and holds temporary documentation that gives the right to remain in the country and to access the job market after six months since the application was lodged.

The Spanish Asylum Act also states that the granting of the right to asylum or subsidiary protection shall imply access to education under the same conditions as for nationals. However, the Spanish legal framework is not well equipped when articulating access to higher education for asylum seekers, refugees and those with other protection statuses. This means that there is no clear definition of the set of rules, rights and obligations concerning access to higher education for this group. Thus, the Spanish higher education institutions and education authorities require them to comply with access requirements like all other foreigners who reside in Spain without taking into consideration the special situation of refugees, especially in relation to their limited possibility to present documentation and verification of prior studies.

Access to the higher education system
The education authorities at the Ministry of Universities are responsible for carrying out the process of homologation and validation of previous studies. [7] The applicant initiates the request and the application must be presented at the Spanish Ministry of Universities registries. It may also be submitted electronically. Once an application is submitted, the Sub-directorate General for Qualifications and Recognition of Qualifications examines it. It is a very long and cumbersome process because previous studies in the country of origin are to be accredited.

Recognition and admission
Bureaucratic processes are very complex and prospective students with a refugee background have to comply with the same requirements as any other foreigner legally residing in Spain when it comes to accessing higher education.

First, Spanish Higher Education institutions require applicants to support their application with original, official evidence of their previous studies. This is a criterion, which many fail to meet. The enrolment process to higher education institutions in Spain is quite different from other EU countries because applicants must prove that their studies in the country of origin are validated or homologated.[8] This means that their previous studies in the country of origin are to be accredited and certified. The process may last for more than 2-3 years and a large number of documents to support the application is required for the homologation process. This documentation includes a personal documentation (passport and residence permit), certified copy of certification of academic studies, certified copy of the accrediting certification of the courses, etc. Applicants need to pay a fee of 160 EUR and even complying with all the requirements does not guarantee that applicants will be granted the homologation, as this has to be examined by the Ministry of Universities through comparison with equivalent studies in Spain. This already points at some of the barriers that international, and especially prospective students with a refugee background, face when planning to have their previous educational qualifications recognized in Spain.

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[7] Marcu, S., 2018, 8 in: Yıldız, A. (Ed.). 2019. Integration of Refugee Students in European Higher Education: Comparative Country Cases. Izmir: Yasar University Publications, p.57
[8] Ibid. p.61

Language

Most degree programs in Spain require proficiency in the Spanish language and only a few bilingual degree programs are offered, frequently only by private institutions. This means that a poor knowledge of Spanish is one of the hurdles towards accessing higher education. Usually, a Spanish language proficiency at B2 level (CEFR) is required to successfully apply for a degree program. Before the war in Ukraine, most of the prospective students with a refugee background arrived from Venezuela or sometimes other Spanish-speaking countries. In this way, the situation is different than in Germany or Sweden where acquiring the necessary language skills is one of the main hurdles on the way to accessing higher education.

Funding

Another main obstacle for prospective students with a refugee background is the funding of their studies. In principle, refugee students are entitled to study and no special legal status is required to study. However, they do not have access to certain grants and refugee students are treated just as any other international students in terms of tuition fees. In the case of asylum seekers, they have to pay the same amount of fees as non-European students and this results in a difference of a few thousand Euros. In any case, the asylum seekers can apply to grants dedicated to low-income students.

Sweden: KTH Royal Institute of Technology

International students in Sweden and at KTH

For the university year 2021/21, 23900 new international students entered Sweden.[9] That means the pre-pandemic levels have almost been restored. About half of the students are exchange students and half are so-called free movers, meaning they are not connected with any higher education institution in their country of origin. Exchange students predominantly come from European countries (84%) and Asia (9%). Among the free mover students, a third come from Asia (32%) and a fourth from Europe (24%). Since 2011 non-EU/EEA students have to pay a fee, whereas students from the EU can enrol without fees. The situation is different when it comes to students at PhD level. PhD studies are free of charge because it is a job in Sweden. Each year, KTH welcomes around a thousand exchange students to the over 1,000 courses given in English. Just as many international Master's students arrive at KTH each year to study over 60 Master's programs taught in English. Out of the new admissions in 2020, 44% of students have had an academic degree from a country other than Sweden.[10] KTH currently has 220 prominent exchange universities in 44 countries.

Legal situation of refugee students in Sweden

Asylum seekers are not entitled to any state-funded Swedish language programs free of charge but there are many voluntary organizations and educational associations that offer study circles in Swedish for those that are waiting for a decision of their asylum case. If they do not have sufficient means, asylum seekers are granted a daily allowance from the Migration Agency. Once granted a residence permit, the right to financial support is lost and the right to financial support may also be lost once a decision about rejection or deportation has been received or when the time limit for leaving the country voluntarily has expired.[11]

Immigrants with a residence permit under the Temporary Protection Directive can also apply to study at a university in Sweden without paying application or tuition fees. However, they are not entitled to student

[9] Sveriges Officiella Statistik. Higher education. International mobility in higher education from a Swedish perspective 2021/22
[10] https://www.kth.se/en/om/internationellt/about/internationalisering-for-kth-1.4142
[11] Migrationsverket. Protection and Asylum in Sweden

loans (CSN).[12] There are many different options to learn Swedish once an immigrant has been granted a residence permit, one of which is the SFI (Swedish for Immigrants). SFI is intended for people that need to learn basic Swedish and is offered at various locations throughout the country, organized by the respective municipality. There are also professional Swedish classes that are directed at people that seek to access the job market as soon as possible. Moreover, Swedish as a second language is offered for those that have completed their SFI courses and want to keep improving their Swedish language proficiency.

Ukrainian refugees who have been granted a residence permit under the Temporary Protection Directive, currently extended to 4 March 2024, are not eligible for Swedish for immigrants (SFI), but can take a course called Swedish from Day 1, which is an orientation course about Sweden with basic Swedish. The participation is free of charge.

Access to the higher education system
Two networks were established in order to support the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and put its framework into practice in Sweden: NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Center) within the EU and ENIC (European Network of Information Centers) within the Council of Europe and UNESCO. The centers represented in the networks provide information about the recognition of qualifications for academic and professional purposes, and they also provide information about the systems of education.

Recognition and admission
The Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) evaluates foreign qualifications in order to provide support for people who wish to continue studying. Similar to the ZAB in Germany, UHR provides a database so that prospective students have the opportunity to do research themselves before having their documents officially evaluated. Prospective students who have completed their upper secondary studies and are ready to apply to a bachelor's program, can apply for courses and programmes directly online. The UHR manages the application process together with universities and there are different platforms for international and national prospective students (international applicants use this website: http://www.universityadmissions.se/). Applicants have to register and hand in supporting documents such as transcripts, language test scores etc. online. UHR then reviews the applications and evaluates whether general requirements are met. After that, prospective students receive a notification of their selection results in the courses and programs they have applied to.

What's special in the case of prospective refugee students in contrast to other "international students" is that their move is not planned a in advance. Oftentimes they lack (parts) of their educational documents. UHR provides for a special procedure in these cases. If a person has completed their education programme with a degree but is missing documentation of this (education document such as transcript and diploma), UHR may still be able to assess their qualification. In these cases, the submission of other documents and information is required. There are specific criteria that need to be met if a student lacks complete documentation. A prospective student needs to have completed their post-secondary education from a country other than Sweden at a recognised higher education institution/education provider and there needs to be a reason for why a person cannot obtain their education documents. Examples include being a refugee or having completed their education in a country at war. The assessment can either lead to a recognition statement or a background paper. Both the recognition statement and a background paper can serve as a basis for applying for continuing education.

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[12] https://www.informationsverige.se/en/jag-har-fatt-uppehallstillstand/du-som-har-flytt-fran-kriget-i-ukraina.html

Language

The majority of bachelor's degree programs in Sweden require Swedish language proficiency. At master's level the situation is slightly different since there are a number of programs taught in English. For these English-language programs there is usually an opportunity to hand in either a certificate that proves the language proficiency or to prove the language proficiency based on a previous educational document.

Funding

When it comes to fees for applications and studies, differences are being made based on citizenship. Applicants from non-EU countries usually have to pay application and tuition fees.[13] Citizens from the EU, EEA or Switzerland generally do neither pay application nor tuition fees but there are a few exceptions based on specific programs. Asylum-seekers that have not yet been granted a resident permit, must pay full application and tuition fees and there are no exceptions to this rule. This means that a prospective student who is still in the asylum process, can study at the university level, but will be considered a fee-paying student until a resident permit has been issued. Applicants with a Swedish temporary or permanent resident permit granted for reasons other than studies do not have to pay fees. Ukrainian refugee students apply to the centralized application system Anytagning.se as well and Ukrainian students who already were studying in Sweden should continue to pay fees.

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[13] Swedish Council for Higher Education. Information for asylum seekers

Findings: Common challenges for refugee students

Although the higher education systems in Germany, Spain and Sweden differ significantly when it comes to admission requirements, recognition, fees and funding, the general nature of the hurdles faced by refugee students and also staff working with them are surprisingly similar. The first obstacle that was always mentioned when we talked about the integration of refugee students at the partner universities was the complexity of **bureaucratic processes** related not only to the asylum process but also to university admission, and how these processes fail to account for the special needs of the target group on the one hand and to identify their qualifications on the other hand.

The complexity of our university systems and admission processes combined with a lack of language proficiency and networks make it particularly difficult for refugee students to identify possible steps towards accessing higher education. The problem here is not always a **lack of information**, but sometimes an overload thereof and the inability to determine what is relevant for decision-making. This points at the importance of actors that are sensitive to the very specific situation refugee students are in. Similarly, it underlines the significance of people working in advising and guiding refugee students that are able to "translate" the bureaucratic processes into feasible steps, taking off pressure and creating a (long-term) perspective together with the prospective student.

When it comes to the lack of **language proficiency** of refugee students as such, the situation is more diverse in the three countries we have looked at. Since the majority of prospective refugee students in Spain arrive from Spanish-speaking countries, the provision of language courses is less important than in the case of Germany and Sweden. While generally it is not a problem to start learning German and Swedish once in the country, what is a challenge is to get to the language proficiency required to enter university. The level of language proficiency required to access institutions of higher education is quite high and usually state-funded courses do not lead up to these levels or, if they do, it takes years of attending language classes to reach the required level because the courses are not intense.

Whereas the provision of language courses and the sensitive and inclusive counselling and guidance of (prospective) students with a refugee background are challenges that institutions of higher education can tackle themselves, there are other issues that are less so in the hands of universities. Problems related to the **residence status**, to the **financing** of studies or to **housing** opportunities are some examples for hurdles that are not directly linked to the university, but directly affect the ability to study. Regardless, "the translation of bureaucratic processes" can be one main service that staff working at institutions of higher education can offer even though the means to tackle these challenges directly are limited.

On a more general note, laws and legal issues are often used as an excuse for not acting or for delaying to act when it comes to paving the way for students with a refugee background. But even though the system seems to be rigid and reluctant to change we saw in our project that it allows us very well to use our scope for decision-making and find individual solutions. Simultaneously, these solutions can be applied when looking at other "atypical" student groups as well.

Best practice examples

One of the main ideas behind the IncluSTEM project was to shift our perspective from just looking at deficiencies and hurdles on an individual level, and thereby labelling refugee students as "difficult", to finding solutions for the challenges they face and focusing on their potential. Therefore, we started collecting best practices examples where the partner institutions successfully supported refugee students with (re-)entering academics. A selection of these examples is presented in this chapter.

Accelerated onboarding through integrated, low-threshold measures and extensive support

On their way into university studies, students with a refugee background are often confronted with very complex bureaucratic processes that take a lot of time. The feeling of being at the mercy of a bureaucratic jungle often causes frustration and loss of motivation for those looking to create a long-term perspective for their lives and their academic paths. This is where low-threshold measures and a close support system during the onboarding phase come into play.

Abdul came from Damascus to Germany in 2015.[14] He had graduated in Civil Engineering from Damascus university. Therefore, Technische Universität Berlin was one of the first addresses he contacted after his arrival in Berlin. After only three months in Berlin he registered as a guest student and applied for the first intensive language course TU Berlin's Preparatory School and Modern Language Center offered for refugees. The course was the blueprint for many more similar courses to come: It focussed on German for academic purposes in the STEM subjects and led participants from scratch to the assessment test (level C1) within just eleven months. Despite this very ambitious schedule, Abdul managed to pass the assessment test at the first attempt and took up his master's studies in Civil Engineering at TU Berlin in 2016 - just two weeks after he had finished the language course, and 14 months after his arrival in Berlin. His studies were funded by a scholarship from Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Alongside his studies in Civil Engineering Abdul committed himself to supporting other refugee students with their arrival at TU Berlin. He worked as a student assistant in the In(2)TU Berlin program in the Academic Advising Service from 2017 to 2019. Abdul also gave refugee students a voice in his private life: His essays about what "home" means for him were published by Berliner Zeitung and Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. In his YouTube channel he published tips for newcomers in Germany. Abdul graduated from TU Berlin in 2019, just four years after his arrival in Germany, and he found a job in a private middle-sized company right away.

In hindsight it seems that everything went smoothly in Abdul's career. Above all, his success story required a lot of hard work from himself. But it also shows the strengths of the action to support refugees taken at TU Berlin: With the help of the Academic Advising Service Abdul quickly got reliable information regarding the German education system, the evaluation of his documents and admission requirements. He learned about suitable options to continue his educational career, the next steps he needed to take, and thereby soon found "the right place" to go ahead with his education. The close cooperation of the actors involved at TU Berlin as well as the integrated nature of measures (academic advising, language

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[14] https://www.tu.berlin/en/topics/international-affairs/2020/mai/university-without-borders

courses, guest student program) ensured that little standby time occurred at points of transition. This made it possible for him to develop close bonds with the institution at an early stage and to keep up his motivation during the whole phase of study preparation and beyond.

Polina was the first Ukrainian student to approach the UPM Refugee Office for support. She had completed a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Science and Food (Subject Area "Agronomy") at the Ukrainian National University of Life and Environmental Sciences in Kiev and she wanted to continue her master's studies. Polina had travelled alone from Ukraine to Spain and was initially hosted by the Red Cross, which supported her with her accommodation and living expenses for the first six months, and provided her with her first Spanish classes.

Given that Polina had no knowledge of Spanish in the beginning and knew only very basic English, the first thing UPM proposed to her was to start studying the languages she would need to manage both at university and in everyday life. She applied for the Official Master's Degree in Gardening and Landscaping at the Technical School of Agricultural, Food and Biosystems Engineering and got admission, as she had been able to leave the country with her academic documents. The problem UPM encountered in her case, as in the case of the other students, was that her level of Spanish did not allow her to take a 90 ECTS Master's course in Spanish. Therefore, after some conversations, UPM offered her an opportunity to take a bridging course, that is, to take only three subjects where the use of the language was not essential. The idea was to not enrol her as a regular master's student, but as an Erasmus Mobility student. All this in the hope that this bridging course would serve not only for her integration into the university world but also to achieve some knowledge of her master's degree subjects, and most importantly, to strengthen her knowledge of the Spanish language in order to be capable of following a regular course next year. This also allowed UPM to give her the opportunity to have an Erasmus scholarship for the entire academic year of € 1100 per month, which meant an important qualitative leap in her quality of life. So far, the Red Cross had taken care of her accommodation and maintenance, with the university committing to take over immediately so as not to leave her without support. Since then, Polina has been able to live an independent life without having to depend on third parties for maintenance, which gives her security and autonomy.

Through the UPM Language Centre, from the moment she was admitted to the Master's Degree, she was offered to start an intensive Spanish Summer course as soon as possible so that she could reach a minimum level before the starting date of the course. She finished the course with good results, and once the academic year started, together with the rest of the Ukrainian students, she started a new Spanish course at the same language centre and an online English course through the Capman platform, which was offered to refugee students free of cost. Polina is currently focused on completing her subjects and making progress in achieving a B2 level in Spanish that will allow her to finish the Master's degree for which she wanted to come to Spain when the war broke out. She is integrated with the rest of her classmates, and the Spanish teachers report that she is learning well and quickly. This determination makes her think about her future so that she can finish her Master's degree, with the support of the university, and look for a job in Spain or in Ukraine, if the conditions are appropriate.

The Refugee Service Office, the UPM Language Centre and the Erasmus Mobility Office, all of which are part of the Vice-Rectorate for Internationalisation, were faced for the first time, with a case of reception of refugees in a very short space of time, with great confusion in the way of handling a number of students for whom a rapid reception was not planned. Thanks to the personal commitment of the staff and the support of other universities in Madrid, staff at UPM has managed to ensure that students such as Polina do not lose their enthusiasm to finish their studies, despite the circumstances, and seek a professional future through STEM education.

Missing documents: paving alternative ways into the university

Even though legislation has been passed to make the education systems more accessible especially after 2015, students who have lost official documentation of their education due to flight still have a particularly high risk of falling through the cracks on their way to re-enter academics. One of the main reasons for this is that for this group often individual solutions are needed and these most often are not part of our standardized admission processes. These individual solutions require the close cooperation and willingness of various actors.

Abdulfatah was one of the first refugees from Syria who approached the Academic Advising Service of TU Berlin in 2015. His situation was exemplary in many respects: Abdulfatah had already studied Architecture in Aleppo for five years and graduated with a bachelor's degree ("Idjaza"). But he had lost most of his education documents during flight. When he first met the Academic Advising Service he could only provide proof of his school education, but didn't have any documents proving his academic career. He did not speak German yet, but he had English skills on level B2. His goal was to continue his education with a master's program in architecture.

Both bachelor's and master's in Architecture are taught in German at TU Berlin. Thus, German language skills on level C1 are required for admission. Even if Abdulfatah could have provided proof of sufficient German skills at that time, he would only have had the qualification for studying a bachelor's program on paper. This would have meant another three years of bachelor's studies plus at least one year of language preparation until he could have reached his goal to study master's in Germany. With this not very promising prospect it would have been likely that Abdulfatah would have decided to leave university to earn money and support his family instead of pursuing his academic career.

In individual advising sessions the Academic Advising Service started to elaborate a possible path into the university together with Abdulfatah and he substantiated that he had studied at the university already. As a first step he registered for the guest student program "In(2)TU Berlin". Participants can take part in regular courses and earn credits at TU Berlin even before they meet all admission criteria. Participation in the program gave him the opportunity to get in touch with "his" field of studies again while acquiring the necessary German skills. Meanwhile TU Berlin worked on paving an alternative way of proving Abdulfatah's academic qualifications: As a participant of the "In(2)TU Berlin" program, he had already attended courses in architecture and he got to know the lecturers. They were willing to check the plausibility of his studies. It was an advantage here that one of his former professors from Aleppo worked at TU Berlin as a Scholars at Risk fellow and helped with the plausibility check.

The department of Architecture finally decided to conduct an alternative bachelor's examination with Abdulfatah, which could serve as a prerequisite for his master's application. This examination was based on a plausibility check by the faculty involving his former professor from Syria. This process was also co-ordinated with the faculty's Examination Board and the Admissions Office. Abdulfatah was able to successfully complete the German course in a very short time and he successfully passed the bachelor's examination. However, conducting and passing the exam required thorough preparations from both sides and it was beyond all application deadlines when the process was finished. In this individual case, the architecture department in cooperation with the Admissions Office decided to admit him outside the regular capacities. Abdulfatah finally became an official student in the master's program in Architecture in the winter semester 2017/18, only two years after his first contact with the university. Thanks to his

participation in the guest student program he had already finished courses in Architecture at TU Berlin, which could then be recognized for his master's studies.

This success story would have been unthinkable without the contribution of the various offices and authorities concerned: The Academic Advising Service, the Preparatory School (Studienkolleg), the Course Guidance at the department, the Head of the Department, the Examination Office, the Admissions Office, the Immigration Office, and other institutions. Each of them contributed to this success – by using their individual scope of decision-making within their respective area of competence. The Academic Advising Service's role was to accompany Abdulfatah on his way, to provide him and the offices involved with all relevant information, and to encourage everyone to find solutions by "thinking outside the box". Today, Abdulfatah lives and works as an architect in Berlin.

Cross-institutional cooperation and support throughout the whole student life cycle

Many of the hurdles for refugee students we have discussed in the first section of this handbook lie outside the university because they are related to the legal status or social questions such as funding or housing. Even though the university's scope of influence oftentimes is limited here, we have to be aware of these hurdles and take them into account, e.g. when making decisions about admission, because they directly affect the students' ability to take up or continue their academic careers. Again, it is necessary to find individual solutions in close cooperation between the offices involved.

John came to Berlin in March 2022. He was studying in his second semester of his master's in Management in Ukraine when the war broke out. Before he moved to Ukraine he had finished high school and his bachelor's in Building Technologies in Nigeria. John contacted the Academic Advising Service because he wanted to learn more about his options to continue his academic career. In the following months an intensive contact via email, video calls and face-to-face meetings evolved. It became obvious that he was in particular need of support because as a so-called "third-party national" from Ukraine he was in a particularly difficult situation: Non-Ukrainian nationals affected by the war were allowed to stay in Berlin for a limited period of time to apply for a (student) visa, but during that time they were not given any official status which excluded them mostly from the state support system for refugees. Students like John did not have access to any state funding, language courses or housing programs. These circumstances put him in a very unstable situation posing a lot of pressure on him to continue his studies as quickly as possible to secure his residence status and give him a prospect to stay in Germany. Together with the Academic Advising Service he identified the English master's program Civil Systems Engineering as fitting in terms of contents and admission requirements. He started as a guest student in the summer semester 2022 which gave him the opportunity to prepare his official application and establish contacts with the department.

With the help of the Academic Advising Service John managed to successfully hand in an application via uni-assist for the winter semester 2022/23, and he obtained admission - only three months after his arrival in Berlin. Problems continued though: As John had been living from his small savings since his arrival in Berlin, he was now unable to finance the semester fees and the health insurance, which is compulsory for enrolment. On top of that he was facing housing issues and his preliminary residence status was about to expire. This put him in a more and more desperate situation. Luckily, TU Berlin had successfully been collecting donations for its Ukraine aid fund from spring 2022 to support students and researchers affected by the Ukraine war. Originally support from this fund was also only available for

Ukrainian nationals. From the experience in the Academic Advising Service with students like John it was obvious that narrowing down the support for such a small group did not serve the purpose. Finally, all offices in charge agreed that students from all nationalities should be supported from the aid fund. Thus, the fees for application and enrolment could be reimbursed. Moreover, TU Berlin covered the health insurance rates for John for the whole first semester. Meanwhile, the admission office had extended John's deadline for enrolment until all financial issues were solved.

Organizing this involved close cooperation and contacts with TU Berlin's international office, its financial management, and admission office as well as John's health insurance company. Finally, John was able to enrol as a master's student of TU Berlin. Thanks to the good contacts with his department he had established as a guest student already he was able to get a job as a student assistant shortly after this enrolment. Finally, he was also granted a regular student visa and thereby was given a long-term perspective to stay in Berlin.

Guidelines: Common standards to support refugee students

What can we do to support refugee students?

During the process of collecting best practice examples from the partners, and discussing them with the offices in charge, we saw that – apart from linguistic and subject-specific study preparation – mainly two things were important for successful onboarding of refugee students:

- Professional and reliable contact persons at the university who offer advice during the whole onboarding process and who are in close contact with other relevant actors in the university administration.
- Motivated and caring staff in the administration willing to use their scope for decision-making to find flexible solutions for bureaucratic hurdles.

If they work together closely, they can pave (alternative) ways into the university without undermining academic standards.

Professional academic advising during the whole student life cycle

What is academic advising?

Academic advising offers individual, in depth, and confidential consultation (online or in person) in which courses of action, and alternatives are shown and discussed. It helps to evaluate and weigh up these options whereas the decision itself always stays with the advice seeker. When it comes to advice for migrant or refugee students during the onboarding process one of the main tasks is explaining the respective university system and helping to step into this system by offering support for dealing with bureaucracy, helping with decision-making and identifying contact persons for the next steps.

Why is it important?

Unlike „regular" international students, refugees often were not able to prepare for studying abroad. Thus, they do not only lack language skills, but also knowledge of the European education system. Moreover, they often find themselves confronted with bureaucratic hurdles in many fields of their lives, ranging from the asylum application over financial support to university admission.

In this context, lack of knowledge does not necessarily mean lack of information. On the contrary: Many times, a lot of (if not too much) information is available, but students find it challenging to classify, prioritize, and evaluate it. Because refugee students often don't know the system, they can't understand who has which interests when promoting certain options ("They say I have to do 'Ausbildung' [vocational training]"). Moreover, the focus on and occupation with bureaucratic questions blurs the vision for what makes sense, and for developing a greater plan.

Therefore, unbiased, independent academic advising is crucial when it comes to both paving the way into the university system and ensuring the success of studies, especially for students with a migrant or refugee background. In-depth, professional advising should aim at enabling students to make independent, well-informed, and realistic decisions about their future (academic) career. Academic

advising should not only focus on what is possible, necessary or easy-to-reach in terms of paperwork and practical constraints on a short-time view, but on what makes sense in the long run.

To reach this aim, academic advising must be viewed as an ongoing process relevant during the whole student life cycle: from providing first information, over application and enrolment towards securing the success of studies and finally obtaining a degree. Migrant and refugee students have a high risk of "falling through the cracks" at all stages of this process: be it because they fail to identify the correct contact persons, misunderstand bureaucratic processes or because they find themselves in financially, socially, and psychologically unstable situations. Academic advising should offer reliable responsiveness and provide information and support to minimize these risks.

On an institutional level, academic advising can function as a seismograph for the students' needs, questions and problems. It can raise awareness for these in the administration, teaching and learning. It can help to identify hurdles and to find solutions for reducing them.

What is special about academic advising for students with a migrant or refugee background?
Academic advising services are experts for their educational institution and not for the legal system. From the experience at TU Berlin, little or no special knowledge in residence law or refugee regulations is needed to offer professional advising for students with a migrant or refugee background. If advisors have basic knowledge, e.g. of the asylum process or the academic systems of the students' home countries, it is an important asset to understand the situations and living conditions advice seekers with a refugee background find themselves in. But this is not the main thing needed for successful advising of the group: because the aim of academic advising is explaining the university system, channelling plans and ideas of the advice seekers to identify possible matches within the advisor's own institution, the knowledge and skills needed to advise students with a refugee background are the same as those needed for advising any other student. Still, it is important to understand the specific situation and background of refugee students:

Usually, general and personal living conditions of students with a refugee background are much less stable than those of many "traditional" students because often they are under pressure from various sides (financing, residency/prospect of staying, support for or expectations from their families etc.). Many hurdles refugee students see themselves confronted with lie outside the university, but have a significant effect on their studies and their decision-making: While self-fulfilment plays an important role for most German students, decisions of refugee students are often more driven by "practical" considerations and needs. Important questions for them in the decision process might be for example: What is "fast" and "secure"? In which field do I earn the most money? What helps me to get a permanent residency? In academic advising, it is important to take these motivations seriously and to acknowledge them, but to put them into perspective at the same time: Does "fast" also mean "good"? Is what is seeming to be "fast" now also likely to be successful in the long run?

In this context, successful and professional advising for migrant and refugee students should consider the following guidelines:

1. See advice seekers as what they are:
Even though language proficiency might not be sufficient yet, we should not forget what most refugees we meet in the academic advising are: First, (prospective) students and researchers, i.e., members of the academic community, and then refugees. Therefore, academic advisors should focus on the students' potential, meaning, on what they bring, not only on what they might lack: attractive international students, and experts in their fields with a lot of knowledge and unique experience which adds to the (academic) perspectives of our institutions.

2. Integration needs the right motivators:

It's not enough to hand a roadmap to a person seeking advice with many steps to be fulfilled until he or she can be considered a full member of the host society. Only if the goal is assessed as attainable and worthwhile, perhaps even partly experienced already, is the sometimes rocky and hard road attractive enough to overcome both linguistic and bureaucratic hurdles. To keep the motivation up, it is important to connect refugee students with their field of studies again as early as possible, e.g. in a guest student program.

3. It's not (only) about language:

Fulfilling language requirements is of course one of the main challenges for refugee students when entering the university system. Many of them lack sufficient language skills when they first contact us. This shouldn't keep us from starting the orientation process, however (see 4). Moreover, for the advising and decision-making process lack of language proficiency, isn't the most important challenge: Not knowing and understanding the system, and not having a network is even worse, and harder to make up for. This is where academic advising comes into play.

4. Take enough time and put the information in adequate portions:

On one hand, refugee students often need more explanation from scratch. On the other hand, not all information is needed at all stages of the onboarding and decision-making process. The focus should be on staying on top of things: Academic advising must ask and answer the right questions at the right time. Therefore, it can be helpful to offer several (shorter) advising sessions, rather than explaining all at once.

5. Put your own standpoint into perspective:

Academic advisors are experts in the university system of their country. Therefore, we tend to take things for granted which might not be obvious for students who are not familiar with the system. Moreover, motivations and aims especially of refugee students might differ from what we are used to from 'traditional' students. Academic advisors must take these motivations seriously and always reflect their own background and standpoints.

6. Give bureaucracy a break and focus on what is important:

Often students with a refugee background are overwhelmed with bureaucracy when they come to Europe. The first German vocabularies many refugees learn are terms like "Ausweis" (ID card) or "Termine" (appointments). Of course, paperwork plays a crucial role when entering the university, but when it's the first thing we focus on, it blurs the vision for more important questions. Thus, academic advising must help to bring back the students' attention to questions like: What do you bring and what do you want? What are your plans and goals? What makes sense for you?

7. Get the bureaucracy back on board:

Bureaucracy is often seen as a nuisance. However, a well-functioning administration can pave a secure path into the future. Academic advising therefore should not aim at circumventing administration or creating special paths for refugees. The ability of advisors to interpret and understand not only benefits those seeking advice, but must also always shine back into the institution. Different perspectives help to create new and stable foundations from individual case decisions. A regular exchange and understanding of the working methods of administration and advising is indispensable for this.

Reduction of bureaucratic hurdles & recognition of "atypical" education backgrounds

Why is bureaucracy particularly challenging for refugee students?
The processes of academic recognition and admission are mostly oriented towards the needs of "regular" international students who – often over a long term - plan and prepare their studies abroad in their home countries, and who, most importantly, have several study options and alternatives, be it at home or abroad. This is usually not the case with students with a refugee background: Their central motivation for coming to Europe is fleeing an individual threat and not first of all the desire for studying abroad. Thus, most of them were not able to plan and prepare for their studies abroad, also because study preparation is hardly possible in many countries of origin: Higher education institutions and embassies are closed, no language courses are being offered etc. Many refugee students were forced to interrupt their educational career and drop out of university or school. It is obvious that under these circumstances, certificates cannot always be presented in the required form, and that educational backgrounds do not always look like we would expect them to. Precarious living conditions in the country of arrival, as well as restrictions in terms of financing and mobility add to a situation that makes university entrance particularly challenging.

We often tend to see refugee students as "international" or "migrant" students also because we don't want to discriminate between these groups. This makes sense on the one hand because refugee students share many features with international or migrant students when it comes to academic backgrounds, culture or language. But on the other hand, this categorization is misleading because it neglects that the situation most refugee students find themselves in, their background and thus their needs differ profoundly from what international students experience in many ways.

When we think about facilitating admission processes and why this is important, we must be aware that refugee students:

- Could not prepare for studying abroad.
- Often had to quit their universities or schools and were forced to pause their education involuntarily during their flight.
- Are less mobile and flexible when it comes to choosing their place of residence and, as a result, their career paths: Unlike "regular" international students they are not free to go back to their home countries and cannot move to another city in their country of arrival easily due to legal and financial constraints.

As a result, students with a refugee background often:

- Lack understanding of the European university system and have no support network in their countries of arrival.
- Are not able to present documentation of their academic qualifications in a way we need it for our standard admission processes (loss of documents, incomplete or "irregular" qualifications due to termination of studies and flight).
- Have a high risk to fall through the cracks of our admission processes. At the same time, admission to our institutions might be the only reasonable option to continue their academic careers.

Which problems do refugee students face during the admission process?

Like all bureaucratic processes related to the situation of a person applying for asylum, the admission process at a university is similarly confusing and complex. This means, that one of the main challenges is obtaining knowledge of the necessary steps, documents and processes one needs to comply with. Moreover, we have to be aware that resources of refugee students are limited: Lack of access to adequate IT infrastructure or financial difficulties add these challenges. Here academic advising can offer support.

Leaving aside these very typical problems that other "international prospective students" share with refugee students, there are certain circumstances that make it even harder for them: the loss of documentation and 'atypical' educational backgrounds that do not fit the regular assessment criteria: When it comes to the loss of documentation, it is often impossible to reclaim any of the documents considering that many countries of origin are caught in on-going wars and institutions of higher education do not work properly. Thus, alternative ways of eligibility assessment have to be provided. The situation is even more complicated for students who can provide proof of their educational career, but this career does not fit our standard evaluation criteria: This is often the case with students who studied at the university already, but whose secondary education certificates should not have opened up access to higher education according to our evaluation standards. These cases require individual solutions.

What can universities do to reduce bureaucratic hurdles without undermining academic standards?

Looking at the best practice examples it seems obvious that an approach that does not focus on trying to make refugee students fit the system but that looks to create a system that is more flexible to accommodate the very diverse needs of 'atypical' students is the way to go forward.

1. Change the perspective:
What if it's not the refugees (or other non-traditional) students who don't fit our system, but it's our system that doesn't fit the requirements of a globalized, modern, and diverse family of academics? Looking into the difficulties especially refugee students face during the onboarding phase at the university tells us a lot about how we, and our bureaucratic processes work and what their advantages and their disadvantages are. But first of all, we have to develop a certain mindset to learn the right lessons from doing so: We have to break away from the idea that admission offices have to work as gate-keepers, and that understanding our bureaucracy and filling in the correct forms proves someone's ability to study. University administration plays an important role in making our institutions more accessible and diverse. Therefore, staff working in the administration have to understand that they are at the service both of the institution and, first and foremost, of the (prospective) students.

2. Developing alternative paths into the university is not giving anyone an "advantage":
Fairness or the obligation to "treat everyone equally" often is the main concern administrative staff expresses when we talk about finding flexible solutions to reduce bureaucratic hurdles. It is often used as a justification why we cannot make "exceptions" for refugee students during the admission process. When talking about fairness, however, we must keep in mind that preconditions are by no means "equal" or "just" because the target group's situation and resources usually differ profoundly from those of "regular" international students. Given the special situation and needs of refugee students, looking at their applications more closely and, if necessary, developing alternative paths into the university is not giving them an advantage over other applicants. On the contrary, it is often their only chance to get access to higher education at all.

3. Focus on academic achievements rather than on paperwork:
Instead of focusing on formal certificates and degrees only, consider academic performance. This means to recognize alternative or indirect proofs of educational qualifications. One way to do this is to do a "plausibility check" of previous studies. Establishing ways for refugee students to connect to their academic field before they officially enrol is crucial in this regard. The willingness and motivation to find ways for alternative forms of examination seems to increase if a contact between a refugee student and the department exists already (e.g. through participation in a guest student program for refugees).

4. Develop guidelines:
Oftentimes the cases of (prospective) refugee students are very special in nature. If a certain situation of a refugee student goes beyond being a 'single, special case', the establishment of binding rules is crucial to make sure that decisions are being made transparent and verifiable. At the same time, it ensures that different staff working on similar cases has a solid foundation to decide in a similar way. If regulations can be developed there is a potential benefit for other groups of 'atypical students' as well because these regulations can be adopted or modified to their situation.

5. Provide access to admission tests:
If admission to the university was possible in the country of origin but is not in the receiving country according to formal requirements, an admission test to prove academic credentials can be an option.[15] Providing refugee students in certain situations with the chance to complete an admissions test to prove their academic credentials is a way for universities to make sure academic standards are not undermined.

6. Create a surrounding where close cooperation is a matter of fact rather than an exception:
Close cooperation between Admissions and Academic Advising (and other actors) is key to reducing bureaucratic hurdles and for paving the ways for individual solutions at universities. Being in close contact and discussing questions of what is plausible, necessary and reasonable in a particular situation helps to widen perspectives on both sides and to find solutions for refugee students and their individual situation. This can be one way of making the system try to accommodate refugee students (and other groups of 'atypical' students) rather than making refugee students fit the system.

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[15] At TU Berlin, another 'atypical' group of students, students with professional qualifications, is given the chance to complete an admissions test at the preparatory school (Studienkolleg) before they can be considered for admission to a degree program. They need to pass this admissions test if the subject differs to the focus of their professional training.

Conclusion: Why should we be interested in supporting refugee students?

During our research for this handbook we saw a lot of dedicated staff offering professional and in-depth support for refugee students. All of them acted out of intrinsic motivation because they found important what they did. However, many, not all, of them were 'lone fighters' with varying support from their institutions often struggling for (financial) resources. On a general note, it seems that political, public, and institutional interest in offering support for the target group has been decreasing since we've started to think about this project in 2019 – with a short rise in the beginning of 2022 when the war in Ukraine started. Even though numbers of refugees are on the rise in Europe again, it seems that integration and support measures are not on the (political) agenda. In this context, it seems that offering professional support for refugees at the university is rather costly in terms of time and resources. So why should we still be interested in this target group?

First of all, offering support for refugee students and researchers is a value in itself of course: Based on the human right to education universities worldwide have a moral obligation to support displaced members of the academic family. It's important, however, to understand that supporting refugees is not only about helping or being kind. If we pay attention to this target group, we - as a university but also as a society - can get something back: First, highly-motivated and often well-trained international students, and finally much-needed professionals. In times of an increasing shortage of skilled labour it seems ironic that European universities spend a lot of effort on attracting international students while the potential of those who are there already is widely neglected. In other words, the integration of refugee students at the university is not just for the benefit of the society, it also contributes to the much-desired internationalization of the university system.

Moreover, developing support networks and strategies for this very special target group can help us modernize our institutions: The problems refugee students face, especially during the onboarding phase, can tell us a lot about the deficiencies of our systems. Even if we agree on the afore-mentioned moral obligation to support students and academics with a refugee background, our admission and recognition processes are still not particularly good at identifying who is or has the potential to be a 'member of the academic family'. This applies also for other groups of non-traditional students. When we address the problems described in this handbook, we can make our institutions more open and accessible for everyone else. To do so, we have to change our perspectives first: We have to understand that refugees are not just lacking something (language skills, documents, or degrees), but also have a lot of potential (knowledge in their fields, experience, motivation) which we as an institution can profit from. Moreover, we should ask ourselves in how far our way of thinking, our structures and our means to evaluate competences need adjustment rather than trying to make students fit the system.

It is a matter of fact, that the competition for the 'best brains' will become fiercer not only among companies, but also among higher education institutions in Europe in the near future. It is also obvious that applicants and student body will become more and more diverse. The lessons we've learned from including students with a refugee background into our institutions can help us stay on top of this development. The supporting structures that have been established and the experiences that have been made with the recognition of 'atypical' educational paths can serve as a blueprint for working with other

groups of students. They can be developed further in the context of broader diversity strategies and thereby help to make universities more attractive for new students in general.