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Emergency Management in Higher Education Institutions: Guidelines for Handling Refugee Crises

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Abstract:	This document presents guidelines for higher education institutions in handling emergency situations related to refugees, based on the outcomes and reports of the AGILE project and survey analysis. The recommendations are structured in 4 main focuses of integration that include concrete organisational actions and managerial decisions.
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List of Abbreviations

The following table presents the acronyms used in the deliverable in alphabetical order.

Abbreviations	Description
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IDP	Internally displaced persons
NGO	Non-government organisation

WP	Work package in the AGILE project
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Executive Summary

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a critical role in responding to global refugee crises by offering not only access to education but also pathways to stability, empowerment, and long-term integration. Their campuses serve as spaces where displaced individuals can rebuild their lives, develop skills, and find belonging.

This report has highlighted the necessity for HEIs to implement a comprehensive, structured approach to supporting refugee students in administrative, academic, legal, financial, and psychosocial dimensions. Drawing on the findings of the AGILE project and other leading frameworks, it is evident that strategic partnerships, inclusive policies, and cross-sector collaboration are essential for meaningful and sustainable support. Looking ahead, the landscape of global migration continues to evolve, demanding that HEIs remain adaptable and resilient. Institutions must anticipate future challenges, embed emergency preparedness into their operations, and continuously refine their support mechanisms to ensure they can meet the diverse and changing needs of refugee students. By embracing this responsibility, HEIs not only fulfil their educational mission but also contribute to a more inclusive, just, and globally responsive society.

AGILE outputs and these guidelines will help HEIs to enhance their emergency management strategies for refugee students, ensuring accessibility, academic success, and overall well-being.

The AGILE project

This publication is a result of the EU-funded AGILE project (“Higher education resilience in refugee crises: forging social inclusion through capacity building, civic engagement and skills recognition”, <http://www.agileproject-erasmus.eu/>), whose aim is to increase resilience of HE systems to address the ongoing needs of refugees through social participation and skills recognition. The AGILE project aims to enrich HE curricula by proposing new pedagogical designs that encourage grassroots and digitally-enhanced actions in both formal and informal learning environments.

The project is coordinated by the University Paris 8. The consortium is made up of six universities (University Paris 8, Bordeaux Montaigne University, University of Hamburg, University of Ljubljana, Lviv Polytechnic National University, Kaunas University of Technology), one think-tank (Polish Rectors Foundation) and one business partner (Web2Learn) who specializes in open recognition systems and social learning.

I. Introduction

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In an increasingly complex and unpredictable global landscape, effective crisis management has become a critical function for organisations of all kinds, including universities. Natural disasters, climate change, pandemics, political instability, armed conflicts and refugee crises require immediate, coordinated, and compassionate responses. Universities, as complex organisations, are increasingly required to adopt formal emergency management strategies that align with principles of organisational resilience, crisis leadership, and risk governance. Universities also can learn from each other and share good practices on how to prepare for, respond to, and recover from crises, both internal and external. Crisis management today has become a strategic function of the universities, which requires strong leadership, structured planning, cross-functional coordination, wider cross-sectoral cooperation and an adjustment of the system of teaching and learning for both domestic students and newcomers, exiled or internally displaced ones.

One of the most urgent and complex challenges facing higher education institutions today is the need to support and integrate displaced individuals, particularly refugees or internally displaced persons, not only into new academic environments, but also into new social communities. Higher education institutions play a crucial role in responding to the needs of exiled¹ students by providing educational opportunities, support services, and integration programs. Thus, the universities must function not only as academic institutions with educational and research missions but also as humanitarian actors, as hubs of community support and social responsibility, which requires a shift from bureaucratic rigidity to adaptive governance. The recent universities' response to the massive refugee influx in Europe because of the Russian full-scale invasion on Ukraine, in particular presented by the AGILE project outcomes, proved their potential and vital role in emergency refugee management during times of geopolitical uncertainty and humanitarian crises for the future.

¹ In this Report, the term "exiled students" refers to all legal forms of refuge, asylum seeking or internal displacement (in case of Ukraine). The word refugee students can be used synonymously with the word "exiled", to avoid tautology, and does not mean a specific legal category.

This report aims to collect and summarise key findings from the AGILE outcomes produced in 2023-2025 and analyse the recommendations from the AGILE survey² on how to improve institutional responsiveness to refugee students in Europe, which will result in brief key guidelines for the future. The Report will also play the role of self-learning, reflection and assessment, which is necessary for effective crisis management processes.

It is important to underline that key AGILE outputs present recommendations for universities on the integration of exiled students in different dimensions (see Melo-Pfeifer, S., 2025), focusing on different perspectives and actors as illustrated in Figure 1.

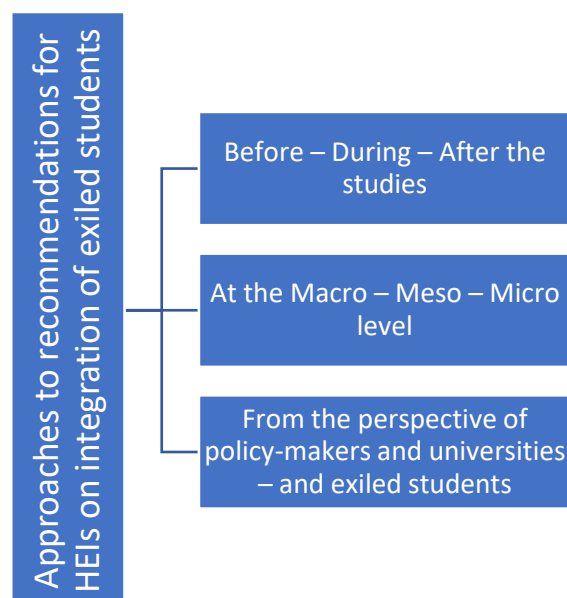


Figure 1. Structure of recommendations on inclusion of exiled students in higher education across the AGILE project outputs in 2023-2025. Source: own elaboration.

² An online AGILE survey was conducted in 2025, the whole country reports are presented on AGILE website - <https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/7-level-country-reports-on-support-mechanisms-for-exiled-students-in-Higher>. This Report refers to the analysis of recommendations.

These approaches extensively correspond with the specifics of the academic sector but can be complemented by general crisis management strategies and advanced by a migration studies focus.

In these guidelines, we would like to present key recommendations on emergency management at HEIs and integration of exiled students according to the theory of Hartmut Esser (Esser, H., 2001). Originally, Esser proposed that social integration of migrants and refugees in the host country occurs through four key dimensions: cultururation (acculturation), structural integration (position/placement), interaction, and identification (Figure 2).

(Ac)Cultururation:

refers to the process of adopting the customs, values, and behaviors of the host society.

Structural Integration (position/placement):

securing a position within the host society's structures, such as accessing education, employment, and housing.

Interaction:

involves building relationships and social connections with members of the host society.

Identification:

- developing a sense of belonging and a strong emotional bond with the host country.

*Figure 2. Four dimensions of migrants' integration.
Source: H. Esser, 2001³*

Esser's theory highlights that integration is a multifaceted process that goes beyond simply learning a new language or culture. It involves securing a place within the

³ Esser, H. (2001), Integration und ethnische Schichtung [Integration and ethnic stratification], 2001, available at: https://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2014/5134/pdf/wp_40.pdf, accessed 12.05.2025

social structures and building meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging within the host society. It is important that structural integration, particularly, is seen as crucial, emphasising the importance of a migrant's placement within the host society's structures, especially education and the labour market.

In this report, we will adapt these four areas of integration to higher education and address them to exiled students in the host university (Figure 3), highlighting key elements, organisational actions and managerial decisions needed for ensuring more effective response of the universities:

Focus on acculturation of exiled students:

- language and cultural skills and competences for refugees as the basis for social inclusion in the host society
- patterns of behavior, both in academic and social environment
- Key words: language, culture, cultural adaptation

Focus on placement of exiled students in higher education:

- acquiring the social or professional position, i.e. status of student, employee,
- gaining economic status and support (e.g. scholarships, social benefits for students),
- relates to the admission, administrative procedures/support, recognition, legal matters, funding, accommodation, and placement in society after graduation;

Focus on interaction of exiled students in higher education and the host community

- activities aiming at socialising of refugees at the universities, e.g. inclusiveness in the broader ethnic and social groups,
- the study process and support during the study
- training on university methodology
- university staff training.

Focus on identification of exiled students

- relates to the feeling of belonging to the host academic community,
- participation and engagement in the university life, in the academic self-government,
- volunteering for the local community,
- societal engagement and interaction with NGOs
- possibility for manifesting their own identity and support for refugees' initiatives.

Figure 3. Integration of exiled students in higher education. Source: own elaboration after H. Esser's theory.

Moreover, recommendations and guidelines will specifically focus on the issues. that have not been addressed before, i.e. the systemic conditions, mental health, psychological support, and strengthening of the sense of belonging.

II. AGILE Reports and main findings


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A comprehensive synthesis of key recommendations from the AGILE reports highlights the most relevant and important findings on how to ensure more inclusive and refugee-friendly academic environments (Table 1). Each report is focused on some specific aspects of the university response, while a lot of common findings and context can be found, but details as well as national specifics will allow for making lessons learning and response assessment processes more efficient.

The table's structure is chronological and presents an overview of the selected findings from the AGILE reports, offering a compendium of AGILE experience of actionable measures and good practices, allowing to find and apply relevant recommendations effectively, which also encourages the audience to explore the full reports.

Table 1. AGILE Reports in 2023-2025 and their main recommendations

AGILE Output	Main areas of findings and recommendations
Melo-Pfeifer, S. & Gerwers, F. (2023). <i>Design principles for improved curricula and institutional change for the benefit of refugee students</i> . DOI: 10.25592/uhhfdm.13420.	Ten principles for institutional change and curriculum design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P1. Differentiate the needs of forcibly displaced students • P2. Coordinate top-down and bottom-up approaches to integration in HE • P3. Combine standardised welcoming procedures with more personalised and individual ones • P4. Develop a holistic approach to refugee students' integration • P5. Create structures to facilitate enrolment, permanence, and success • P6. Train your staff to address the needs of refugee students • P7. Involve refugee students in curricula and institutional decision-making processes • P8. Promote partnerships outside academia • P9. Develop resilient and sustainable welcoming structures • P10. Conceptualise mechanisms of evaluation of the programmes and structures

	
<p>Oikonomou, S., Zourou, K.(2023). <i>European universities tackling the Ukrainian refugee crisis: insights into grassroots digital actions</i>. AGILE consortium.</p>	<p>Key findings relate to a crucial role of digital technologies in a crisis response at the universities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By adopting a broader understanding of university-society interaction in crisis response, this publication draws attention to the evolving nature of academia's social mission, while endorsing further collaboration among the quadruple helix actors (academia, society, industry and policy) to enhance institutional and social resilience. - Digital technologies strengthen crisis response mechanisms. Digital technologies have moved beyond being complementary tools to crisis response to becoming key means of effectively tackling crises while enhancing individual and social resilience. - The use of digital tools and social networks is integral part of outreach as well as support mechanisms developed especially by university students and researchers. - Universities can build resilience through bottom up digital actions - Cross institutional collaboration helps to tackle the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis
<p>Melo-Pfeifer, S., Brinkmann, L.M., & Gerwers, F. (2023) <i>Promoting and sustaining the transition of refugee students to higher education</i>. AGILE consortium. URL: https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/ (section « Results »). Doi : 10.25592/uhhfdm.16520</p>	<p>Measures to ensure equity in access to HE for refugee students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Best practices are not based on one-fits-all solutions but require critical adaptability and constant evaluation of support mechanisms, according to the institution and the society where it operates - Support system should be developed on 3 levels: Macro: connection to job market, connection to (student) associations, connections between home and host universities desirable. Meso: more accessible information; more occasions for interaction among students in the same situation; more occasions for informal interactions.

	<p>Micro: offering classes in other languages, information on teaching styles and attended academic performance; specific information on evaluation.</p> <p>Good practices to support transitions to higher education and facilitate transitions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Streamline administrative processes: simplifying enrolment and administrative processes, reducing bureaucratic obstacles and providing administrative guidance, including for visa status, documentation, and legal requirements; - Academic transition support: HEIs should offer academic counselling and orientation minimizing disruption to their studies (e.g. credit transfers, flexible pathways, students re-entering HE, switching academic tracks, providing personalized academic and career advice for students) - Language support: provision of intensive language courses, bilingual or multilingual options of studying, tutoring, writing assistance; - Comprehensive support services to address cumulative challenges and ensure that students are fully aware of available resources using multiple communication channels and onboarding sessions - To ensure access to financial support: flexible financial aid packages tailored to refugee students' needs (tuition fees, housing, living expenses, health and child care, ...). - Inter-institutional collaboration with origin countries and national institutions, universities in students' home countries to ensure smoother transitions and recognition of prior learning will facilitate diploma and credit recognition; more collaboration at national and international levels about their support mechanisms (design, implementation, and assessment of efficacy). - Mental health and psychological support for refugee students considering their past experiences and specific needs.
Melo-Pfeifer S., Brinkmann L.M., Gerwers F. (2024), <i>Principles for institutional change and</i>	<p>The University approach should be developed in three dimensions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Macro level: the society as large; institutions outside the academia. There is a need for higher education

<p><i>curriculum design to welcome refugee students in Higher Education. Technical report.</i></p>	<p>institutions to create synergies between other institutions, such as associations and NGOs, and to coordinate transition facilitation efforts with other organizations at the macro level;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meso level: institutional level (structures to welcome and follow up). Institutions might need to rethink their structures, creating diversified support mechanisms for refugee students, instead of amalgamating this particular profile of international students to others such as (Erasmus) exchange students; - Micro level: particular courses at the university; particular initiatives. At the micro level, it is important to implement measures that support refugee students' engagement with specific courses, content and curriculum.
<p>Lawrance, L. (2024). <i>Report on Higher Education – associations' cooperation</i>. AGILE consortium.</p>	<p>Cooperation between universities and NGOs and professional associations make crisis response actions more timely, efficient and inclusive.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Associations both within HEIs and in the larger civic community act as niches of social cohesion. By creating or using existing associations with HEIs, the latter reinforce their role as inclusive, engaging, and supportive environments, and they contribute directly to the social fabric of their communities. These associations ensure safe, inclusive environments where diverse communities can engage and collaborate for a more cohesive society helping refugees to overcome language barriers and cultural differences. - Refugees often participate actively in associations and, as was the case of the Union for exiled students, even create them themselves in order to help newly arrived refugees. - HEIs and NGOs should establish regular cooperation and exchange of experiences in the future, as both actors have much to gain. On the one hand, universities would gain insight into the situation on site, and NGOs would gain insight into scientific research and new findings. <p>Recommendations on how to expand HE-associations' cooperation in the field of refugee students</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating a community of support through local/regional coordination committees between the different associations and the HEI. - Giving visibility to all the voluntary sector support available to ensure that all refugee students and administrative staff dealing with exiled students have a comprehensive and up-to-date list of the associations available to help them (e.g. a booklet with contacts or a page on the university website dedicated to refugee students) - Workshops for staff and refugee students at the beginning of the academic year are a good way to present all the different associations and NGOs.
<p>NAU, Camille (2024). <i>HE-regional cooperation to develop welcome strategies for exiled students and researchers</i>. AGILE consortium.</p>	<p>The regional model of cooperation for student and researcher refugee integration (The Convention of Territorial Coordination of Nouvelle Aquitaine, France) as an original and very local response complements national initiatives. Universities in the region pool resources and share knowledge which reduces the strain on individual colleagues.</p> <p>Key drivers in the regional model:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to recruit a dedicated person: the project manager (a facilitator who organises exchanges and helps university staff to develop their actions), the political and administrative advisors (to work on this initiative) - to set up a dedicated policy that enables projects and programmes to be launched and to identify the right advisors to embody this policy within their institution, then definition of common actions, - to minimise the barriers (different institutional procedures, full engagement of the advisors and staff, non-priority of the group of exiled students, funding) - implement the actions which enhance the integration of exiled students: administrative measures (free scholarships, easier application forms), creation of bridge diplomas programmes, creation of mentoring programmes, organisation of regular training events for university staff and the creation of a “welcome desk” dedicated to exiled students (information, follow-up).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - coordination between HEIs at a regional or national level allows HEIs to exchange information, create shared tools and help work towards harmonised procedures.
<p>Lawrance, L. (2023). <i>Landscape analysis of HE crisis support mechanisms and initiatives for refugee students. Publication on findings</i>. AGILE consortium.</p> <p>Potolia, A., Fiallos, F, & Lawrance, L. (2025). <i>Résultats sur trois niveaux d'interventions pédagogiques</i>. AGILE consortium. https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/ AGILE Consortium. https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/ (section "Results").</p>	<p>The integration of exiled students to be a success, both from an academic and a social point of view, a holistic support system able to adapt to each individual is necessary. Sustainable housing, grants, financial aid, professional social and psychological help and specialised advisors to facilitate study and are all key factors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To create a European expert group, for both students and researchers at risk, to facilitate policy dialogue between EU institutions, member states and stakeholder organisations and to coordinate the design and implementation of possible European funding and support instruments; - To create a national or European charter to facilitate a coordinated response to incoming refugees - The best practices in place could be shared and HEIs could commit to the training of specialised administrative staff; the development of standardised responses in times of crises; the development of long-term welcoming policies; the development of shared data and assessment of programmes so as to ensure continuous improvement of responses. <p>Recommendations from policy-makers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appointment of policy officers at a university level to facilitate the organization and coordination of the various actions in place for exiled students both from a political and a practical point of view; - Creation of inter-ministerial work groups both a European and national level, in consultation with student associations, the people concerned and academic establishments should be set up; - Improvement of recognition of qualifications; - Creation of “one-stop shops” either virtual or physical spaces that would enable exiled students, either at university or city level, to find all the information they need in one place, and benefit from personalised assistance;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guarantee access to language courses for refugees in host language and English where classes are available in English, beyond basic communication and unconditional access to academic or professional training for new arrivals; <p>By training and raising awareness HEIs could transition from systems that rely heavily on individual commitment and contributions to HEIs who have a clear and coherent policy for welcoming exiled students. There is a need for a holistic and individual approach.</p> <p>Recommendations from the refugee students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual meetings to give personalised guidance and support (ranging from helping students fill in documents, understand health/accommodation services, their rights, to informing them where to go to receive professional psychological or medical help, legal advice, financial support etc.); - Extra language tutoring (by host country students) in groups of 2-4, overseen by language teachers, to enhance chances of success and increase socialisation; - Initiating regular language practice opportunities by creating places on campus for exiled students to meet and chat with host country students ("coffee and small talk", where students speak for ½ an hour in each language which can also raise self-esteem and help students understand language transmission), buddy programmes, informing them about student associations or how to do volunteer work etc.); - Building partnerships with artistic and cultural associations who organise off campus activities and who are experienced in dealing with exile; - Construct the cultural and social visits with the students; - Organise fun activities (e.g. bowling) to lighten the load of everyday life and forget about difficulties; - Use games to practise the language more (with local students at lunchtime for example); - Tell students that integration into a bachelor or master's degree is far more difficult and stressful than they will
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	<p>expect. Groups will no longer be small like in the bridge diplomas and they will be surrounded by local students who already know each other, they will need to make an effort to approach students;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be ready to change your study and career plan early on. Working in a second language means that some subjects are impossible after just one or two years of language tuition (prime examples being law and medicine); - Ensure that psychological help is offered to all the students (discussion groups with trained professionals, psychological help in native tongue); <p>More internships and contact with businesses should be offered so students can explore different careers.</p>
<p>Klos,L., Klymanska, L. (2024). <i>Ukrainian HEIs' response to the humanitarian and societal crisis</i>. AGILE consortium</p>	<p>Recommendations for host universities in providing social adaptation and integration of internally displaced persons (IDPs):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To create a separate information-consultation-coordination unit that will take care of issues of social and educational inclusion of IDP students and teachers, – To ensure interaction between various structural and functional parts of the university and the community to solve actual problems of IDPs; – To help in social adaptation and integration into the university and wider territorial community should be defined as part of the internal policy of the university and the strategy of the – To develop of HEIs for the future – To recognise the potential of social work in solving the problems of IDPs and the need of training more specialists (strengthening and change to the study program on Social Work) <p>Social support for IDPs should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensuring availability of a range of services for IDPs and their families; - Providing assistance in acquiring the skills of adequate behaviour in a new social environment, a part of which is the immediate environment; - Minimization of negative consequences or even complete resolution of family or individual problems;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elimination of difficulties associated with adaptation to new environmental conditions; - Provision of effective humanitarian services to improve the quality of life of families. <p>Training and retraining of social workers should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Monitoring and analysis of changes in the needs of IDPs, conflict zones and methods of solving such problems, - Practical social work (work with a specific person or group of people in need of social assistance), - Organizational work (organization of social service work, development of specific activity programs, - Direct work with IDPs
<p>Jonaityte L., Stuopyte E., Tautkaviciene G. (2024), <i>Academic libraries as niches of social cohesion</i>. AGILE Project.</p>	<p>To support social cohesion for refugees university administration should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement policy that promote inclusivity and diversity, ensuring refugees have equal access to university resources and opportunities. • Establish a dedicated team to support refugee students, providing guidance on academic, financial, and emotional needs. The team can be located at the Library. <p>Academic libraries can strengthen their role as vital centres of social cohesion and integration for refugees. Librarians and libraries can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Play a critical role in supporting refugees and promoting an inclusive and inclusive environment; – Work with faculty to integrate library resources into coursework that addresses refugee issues, fostering a deeper understanding among all students; – Work with local and international refugee organisations to better understand the needs of refugee students and identify areas for resource sharing and joint initiatives. – Offer tailored workshops that focus on research skills, digital literacy, and effective use of library resources, specifically designed for refugee students. – Participate in or offer training sessions on cultural competency to better understand and meet the needs of refugee populations.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Create inviting spaces within the library where refugees can study, meet, and participate in community activities, promoting a sense of belonging. – Actively seek feedback from refugee users to assess their needs and improve library services, ensuring that they feel heard and included. – Organise events, exhibits, or film screenings that highlight refugee stories and cultures, fostering awareness and dialogue among the library community. – Connect with the community and the target group, involve them and make them co-organisers of the events. <p>Academic libraries follow the aim to serve as niches of social cohesion within educational institutions. By embracing their role as inclusive, engaging, and supportive environments, they contribute significantly to the social fabric of their communities.</p>
<p>Boichenko, K., Oikonomou, S., Zourou, K. (2025), <i>Design and implementation of business-academia collaboration for Ukrainian refugees' resilience</i>, AGILE consortium</p>	<p>To build solid and long-lasting pathways for improving the lives of refugee students and scholars, HEIs and businesses should take into consideration the challenges in the implementation of refugee-oriented initiatives such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time constraints, - Combining different expertise, different priorities, different capacities and working cultures of academia and the private sector, - Engaging with people in disruptive and life-threatening situations, like war and armed conflicts, issues. <p>Academia-business cooperation may contribute to the refugees' integration by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of entrepreneurial skills (e.g. AGILE hackathon Challenge and crowdsourcing sprint) that combine humanitarian and developmental aims; - Continuity and sustainability of actions (to move beyond the "one-off event" perception and build a culture of continuous engagement and forging from the very beginning a realistic plan and integrate these actions as regular activities within the institution to sustain long-term development and enhancement); - Participatory and digitally-enhanced approaches deployed;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Empowerment through diversity and cross-cultural exchange, dialogue and clear allocation of roles and responsibilities, to overcome culture-related barriers and conflicts within diverse working teams; - Concerted effort from both academia and industry that involve students, researchers, refugees, and business practitioners in participatory initiatives where solutions to refugees' problems are developed collectively, instead of separately.
<p>Degtyarova, I., Kraśniewska, N. (2025), <i>Polish Academia Emergency Response. Managing large-scale inflow of Ukrainian refugees in higher education institutions in Poland, 2022-2024</i>. AGILE project.</p>	<p>To improve the responsiveness of the Universities in receiving exiled students, greater institutional support, financial assistance, simplified admission procedures, mental health services, and community integration initiatives are needed.</p> <p>On the one hand, it is important to treat exiled students as a separate group from regular international students and recognise the need to develop separate procedures and support systems for them, and on the other hand, ensure equality of attitudes and opportunities for all students.</p> <p>Dedicated recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expand financial support and scholarships, both governmental support and non-governmental grant programs - Implement flexible admission procedures - Provide orientation and mental health support - Establish dedicated HEIs support teams - Improve access to language courses - Strengthen collaboration with other HEIs, NGOs and international organizations - Foster a sense of community and inclusion - Enhance legal and administrative assistance - Develop bridging and remedial educational programs - Advocate for national policy changes for long-term solutions.
<p>Melo-Pfeifer, S., & Potolia, A. (2025). <i>Support mechanisms for exiled</i></p>	<p>Key conclusions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are strong and well-represented mechanisms of skills recognition, with a rather non-existent follow-up

<p><i>students in Higher Education. A seven European country level synthesis. AGILE consortium.</i></p>	<p>mechanisms and support for civic engagement for refugee students in European universities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening involvement of refugee students in decision-making could improve institutional policies, foster a sense of belonging, and promote more inclusive governance in HEIs, while at the same time closing eventual gaps between support mechanisms in place and desired support by exiled students. - The imbalance of support mechanism, which privilege skills recognition and capacity building over civic engagement, transpires the idea that HEIs are not actively supporting civic engagement, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection, which can affect their mental well-being and academic success. In terms of civic engagement, a more expanded collaborations with external institutions could lead to HEIs' programs that enhance students' skills, provide networking opportunities, and facilitate community integration. - A holistic approach combining civic engagement, skills recognition and capacity building would be a way forward of HEIs to welcome exiled students. - HEIs should develop and strengthen follow-up mechanisms as part of their commitment to supporting exiled students. By including post-graduation support in their portfolio of support mechanisms, HEIs can help students navigate their futures, fostering a more inclusive, ecological, and supportive educational environment, which goes beyond their time at the institution.
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Source: own elaboration from the cited AGILE reports.

Summing it up, AGILE reports emphasise three main areas for universities' actions related to the reception and integration of exiled students:

- 1) **HEI emergency response policies and support mechanisms** in European universities should include the following actions and steps:
 - a. identify challenges faced by HEIs and refugee students at all stages of education;
 - b. emphasise the need for inclusive policies and institutional changes to be made;
 - c. map internal and external partners in the exiled students integration;
 - d. develop comprehensive emergency management plans in HEIs;
 - e. involve local communities in integration.
- 2) **Academic and sociolinguistic integration** means:
 - a. rethinking and redesigning of the curriculum, according to the AGILE principles;
 - b. integrating the refugees' learning and professional experiences;
 - c. providing long-term language support;
 - d. considering the role of academic libraries and how they can foster inclusion and social cohesion;
 - e. learning from others and sharing good practices
- 3) **Develop more intensive business-academia cooperation for more efficient refugee integration**, which could be organised through:
 - a. conducting workshops and training sessions that enhance the entrepreneurship and employability of exiled students and refugees;
 - b. development of entrepreneurial initiatives connecting refugees with business opportunities;

III. Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions in handling the refugee crisis

III. Guidelines for higher education institutions in handling the refugee crisis

The AGILE survey⁴ conducted in 2025 within the WP5 allowed to gather recommendations from the various universities in the project partner countries (France, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Greece and Ukraine) on how to improve institutional responsiveness to refugee crisis in Europe, which actions, besides language or academic support are required today to make European universities more resilient and better prepared to deliver the comprehensive support for exiled students in a new country in the future. The description of the survey methodology and the structure of the questionnaire as well as the full results from the countries, are presented in the country reports and a general report (Melo-Pfeifer, S., Potolia, A., 2025)⁵.

We received 141 responses from all the partner countries, the majority came from Poland, Germany and France, which reflects the distribution of the refugees across the countries. The survey proved the wide range of actions aimed at placement and interaction. In this report, we would like to focus on the key areas of recommendations that were defined by the respondents as the most important and challenging: general conditions and mental health support aligned with self-identification issues, but often are not considered.

As a general condition, a systemic government approach to welcoming refugees in higher education is needed. AGILE studies prove that refugee reception and integration in higher education should not be considered an individual university challenge that, according to institutional autonomy, could be organised in a particular way. Still, it should be treated with a systemic approach and be rooted in the national legislation and be supported by other public and social institutions.

⁴ An online AGILE survey was conducted in 2025, the whole country reports are presented on AGILE website - <https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/7-level-country-reports-on-support-mechanisms-for-exiled-students-in-Higher>. This Report refers to the recommendations part only.

⁵ Melo-Pfeifer, S., & Potolia, A. (2025). Support mechanisms for exiled students in Higher Education. A seven European country level synthesis. AGILE consortium. URL: <https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/> (section « Results »). DOI: 10.25592/uuhfdm.1732agile w5. final international report on support mechanism. all partner countries 2025 final.pdf

Surveyed universities believe that this is a matter of political will and prioritising in the country and Europe:

“REAL political will on the part of the President dedicated financial and human resources (une VRAIE volonté politique de la Présidence; des moyens financiers et humains dédiés)” (France)⁶

“Get a directive from Europe so that there's a follow-up on exiled students” (France)

National policy dedicated to the inclusion of exiled students in universities must ensure that the responsibility does not fall solely on individual institutions or persons.

“If a real national policy was set up (by the Ministry of higher education for example), it would make the welcoming of exiled students mandatory and it would not only be on the shoulders of some colleagues sensitive to this issue” (France)

“Develop specific instruments for this community and not only the general ones for all students” (Germany)

“The University's operations could improve if changes were made at a higher - ministerial – level” (Poland)

Specific regulations focused on the needs of exiled students are needed, as well as strategies and dedicated support programs for exiled students, differentiating them from general international student policies. The surveyed participants stress that real political commitment from government bodies to address the crisis effectively means

⁶ The quotes from the surveyed universities are marked with the name of the country.

allocation of necessary financial and human resources. Other priorities include centralised language support (e.g. specific dedicated, state-funded preparatory courses for exiled students) and simplification of admission and harmonising recognition of academic qualifications across European countries (flexible national regulations for the recognition of educational documents, addressing administrative bottlenecks, such as delays in obtaining apostille/consular legalisations).

Some respondents of the AGILE questionnaire highlight that there is a need to engage EU bodies in formulating common policies, funding strategies, and legal frameworks to support exiled students across member states.

*“We need to gather experiences among universities and national governments, as well as EU bodies, so that the policies and funding would have common grounds and goals. We would need more funding and more comprehensive legal environment. Perhaps we could consider preparing special regulations for the exiled students' needs”.
(Poland)*

A systemic approach, besides legislation, should include the following elements:

- **Coordination and common platform for exchange of best practices** (create common procedures for handling exiled students, establish a national working group to assess and improve existing procedures, ensuring their effectiveness in supporting exiled students)
- **Financial assistance and scholarships for exiled students** (dedicated funding at both national and EU levels to support exiled students, targeted financial aid programs to ensure access to higher education, emergency financial assistance for exiled students, continuous funding for good projects)
- **Information support and infrastructure** (development of a centralised database and online support services at the national level, advisory and career guidance support for exiled students)

- **Strengthening institutional support** (administrative and psychological support services targeted at exiled students, mentoring, tutoring programs and peer-support programs to facilitate integration into academic and social life; preparatory and remedial courses, especially through e-learning formats, to support students struggling with academic content or unfamiliar educational systems)
- **Equality and transparency** (implementation of transparency and accountability measures to ensure that financial aid and institutional support effectively reach exiled students; mechanisms of control and oversight to prevent corruption in administrative procedures)
- **Wider partnerships with other actors** (with government agencies, NGOs and international organisations (e.g. UNHCR)) to identify and address the needs of exiled students in a better coordinated way; with other universities and associations of exiled students, academic networks for refugees; collaboration with the private sector facilitating professional integration of exiled students.

*“Collaborate with NGOs, government agencies, and universities – both locally and internationally – to identify the needs of exiled students and determine how different institutions, including governmental, academic, and non-governmental organisations, can provide support”
(Poland)*

*“The Studentenwerke, as legal institutions outside the universities, are responsible for the social assistance of students there should be a focus on and increased funding for the assistance of refugee students”
(Germany)*

In the institutional support system, two key elements must be ensured as specified in Table 2.

Table 2. Key elements of the institutional refugee support system.

Dedicated structures & people	Training & upskilling
<p>Dedicated unit operating as a “one-stop shop”⁷ / “one window”:</p> <p><i>“dedicated contact for exiled students (one window inquiry system)” (Lithuania)</i></p> <p><i>“Either a clear extra point of contact is needed, or it must be made clear which existing structures/institutions are responsible” (Germany)</i></p> <p><i>“A contact point for refugees that specialises exclusively in this target group is extremely important and should be supported” (Germany)</i></p> <p><i>“Transverse process with involved university departments (student life, international affairs, student health, orientation and professional integration, course managers...)” (France)</i></p> <p><i>“regarding the University's activities in the area of integration -</i></p>	<p>Trained and prepared staff to deal with the exiled students is a key to an effective response</p> <p><i>“Train academic, administrative and teaching staff on how to best support exiled students” (Greece)</i></p> <p><i>“More training of employees for the special needs of the target group” (Germany)</i></p> <p><i>“More attention should be paid on the preparation of academic staff” (Lithuania)</i></p> <p><i>“Dedicated staff to inform and welcome students, raise awareness among staff and offer training” (Germany)</i></p>

⁷ One-stop shop – a business or organisation that provides a number of different services or sells a number of different products in one place (Cambridge Dictionary, access: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/one-stop-shop>, 19.05.2025. See also Oliviera C. R., Abranches, M., Healy C. (2009), Handbook on how to implement a one-stop-shop for immigrant integration, gfmd_athens09_contribution_handbook_on_how_to_implement_a_one-stop-shop_for_immigrant_integration_en.pdf

<p><i>maintaining and developing the activities of the “Welcome Point” offices - supporting the ongoing needs of refugee students” (Poland)</i></p> <p>AND/OR</p> <p>Appointed person:</p> <p><i>“An exile advisor in all faculties” (France)</i></p> <p><i>“Create a mission manager / coordinator position dedicated to welcoming and supporting refugee students” (France)</i></p> <p><i>“Reconsider the availability of human resources that could deal only with IDP students and be included in administrative processes in parallel” (Ukraine)</i></p>	
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Source: own elaboration from the AGILE survey.

Structured support mechanisms at the university will ease the adaptation process and increase the sense of belonging to the host academic community. Transverse process with involved university departments (student life, international affairs, student health, orientation and professional integration, course managers, etc.).

In **creating a sense of community and belonging for exiled students**, the survey responses highlight a strong emphasis on fostering inclusion, community, and support for exiled students within the academic environment. Universities’ policies should focus on building bridges between refugee students, other international and local

students, and the broader university community, both socially and academically. Exiled students should feel that they are not outsiders but a part of their new academic family, and a key role belongs to student organisations themselves.

Good university practices show the value of social events and integration activities, aiming to break down cultural barriers, encourage friendships, and create a welcoming atmosphere. Raising awareness and promoting sensitivity to the presence of refugee students and their experiences can help reduce stigma, increase empathy, and foster a more inclusive campus culture.

“It is fundamentally important to constantly promote an open and welcoming culture within your university (among all employees and local students) towards international/refugee students and to provide easily accessible support services for all those involved” (Germany)

„It may be worthwhile to set up comprehensive administrative and language support before enrolment, together with a personalised plan including all the possibilities and forms of assistance they can benefit from as students and the responsibilities they have as students, which would make it much easier for refugee students to integrate successfully into the university environment” (Slovenia)

„Social actions to sensitise the university community to the needs of exiles, their presence in the academic community” (France)

Respondents also emphasise empowering refugee students by creating confidence-building workshops, promoting open communication, and offering online forums and additional support services. Inclusion is not only social but also institutional. However, the representation of exiled students in university governance remains very low.

"There is no direct exiled student representation in the university's decision-making bodies, but refugee students can give their feedback via the student parliament and also a member of the university executive board so that their voice can be heard" (Germany)

"More attention should be paid....on engagement of exiled students in decision making at the institution and involvement in social life of hosting country/city" (Lithuania)

Overall, the feedback of European universities suggests that combining social integration, academic support, exiled student empowerment, and institutional inclusion is vital for helping exiled students feel a genuine sense of belonging within the new university community.

"Greater involvement of local student organisations in activities integrating people fleeing war" (Poland)

Universities should introduce citizen engagement tools for exiled students at various levels and play the role of innovators in the integration of refugees into broader society and local community. An example of this approach is the Citizens' Jury held by the Technical University of Berlin in 2024, which was designed exclusively for "new Berliners" to develop recommendations on "what measures the city of Berlin should take to achieve sustainable, climate-friendly mobility". Participants included individuals who had relocated to Berlin from Syria, Morocco, Iran, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. The Citizens' Jury is an innovative deliberative participation tool in which participants are randomly selected⁸.

⁸ Climate jury with immigrants, <https://www.buergererrat.de/en/news/climate-jury-with-immigrants/>, accessed 21.05.2025

A big part of sense of belonging is **enhancing mental health and psychological support for exiled students**. Survey responses underline the critical importance of mental health care, psychological support, and structured adaptation programs for exiled students entering higher education because many of these students have experienced displacement, trauma, and serious challenges and disruptive changes in their personal and academic lives.

„We had good experiences in handling exiled students just like all other international students (with additional support where needed) to make them feel not singled out but part of the greater international community“ (Germany)

Respondents are concerned about the need for better communication about existing counselling and mental health services within universities, as exiled students are often unaware of them or face barriers in accessing help. Clearer communication strategies and targeted outreach are necessary to bridge this gap.

“Better communication to provide them access to counselling services and mental help support provided within the university” (France)

“Building up an orientation scheme for incoming students, providing suitable language courses, putting in place services of intercultural mediation, providing staff training, and promoting civic engagement for students” (Greece)

Many exiled students face post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other trauma-related mental health challenges. As such, respondents emphasise the importance of professional psychological treatment that is trauma-informed and culturally sensitive. Ideally, these services should be delivered by specialised institutions

and designed as long-term programs, recognising that healing and adaptation are ongoing processes.

“The experience of exile is already a traumatic one, and the resulting linguistic insecurity (fear of not understanding correctly / fear of not being understood correctly) is a major source of anxiety... [it is important] to train systematically administrative staff to receive exiled students, whose requests are sometimes complex and ambivalent. It's important for them to meet kind and empathetic people” (France)

“Many exiled students experience trauma. Universities should offer counselling services, peer mentorship programs, and cultural integration initiatives to ease their transition” (Poland)

“PTSD and trauma psychological treatment and counselling services are important. It would be better if such program is implemented by the specialised institution and has long-term character” (Poland)

The transition into a new academic and cultural environment can be overwhelming. To support this, respondents suggest developing comprehensive orientation schemes for incoming students. These should include intensive language courses, workshops and preparatory programs, intercultural mediation services, staff training to adjust and sensitise faculty and administrative personnel to the specific needs of exiled students, peer mentorship and social support.

In addition to professional help, respondents advocate for peer mentorship programs and initiatives that foster cultural integration. These not only provide emotional support but also help exiled students build social networks, navigate university systems, and develop a stronger sense of belonging.

“Creating confidence and communication workshops. Giving students a voice and create a culture of listening” (Poland)

Finally, a key insight is the recognition that adaptation takes time. Students should be given the time and flexibility needed to adjust – academically, emotionally, and socially—without pressure to immediately meet the same expectations as their peers who have not faced similar hardships.

Thus, creating a supportive, trauma-informed, and accessible mental health infrastructure – alongside strong orientation and adaptation programs – is vital for the successful integration of exiled students into university life. These services must be clearly communicated, professionally delivered, and built to last.

Summing it up, the AGILE results allow for the development of a set of guidelines for European HEIs on how to improve reactivity and resilience in times of refugee crisis, how to adapt curricula for refugees to reduce social and academic barriers, how to make studies more inclusive and increase success rates of the refugee students and graduates. The guidelines deal with short-term, emergency responses and long-term initiatives and relate to key dimensions, as defined by migration theories (Table 3).

Table 3. Key areas of action in higher education in handling the refugee crisis and exiled students' integration in universities (as defined by author in adapting Esser's theory)

AREA OF ACTIONS	DESCRIPTION/MIGRATION THEORY	KEY AREAS OF RECOMMENDATIONS
GENERAL CONDITIONS	Systemic conditions	Ensuring general country legislation Adopting the University regulations Availability of funding & resources Establishment of the support structures (national and institutional level) Ability to respond to the first refugee needs (humanitarian aspect)
FOCUS ON ACCULTURATION	Language and cultural skills and competences for refugees are the basis for social inclusion.	Ensuring of language learning Need for culture adjustment Support social inclusion, country learning

FOCUS ON PLACEMENT	Acquiring the social/professional position, i.e. status of student, employee, economic status and support.	<p>Policies for admission to the University</p> <p>Adjustment of the administrative procedures & bureaucratic support</p> <p>Ensure skills and diploma recognition</p> <p>Learning the needs and challenges of refugees</p> <p>Offering accommodation options</p> <p>Additional funding or waiving tuition fees</p> <p>Legalisation in the role of a student</p> <p>Preliminary preparation of the exiled students</p>
FOCUS ON INTERACTION	Activities aiming at socialising refugees at the universities, also in the process of teaching & learning, e.g. inclusiveness in the broader ethnic and social groups	<p>Support for university methodology</p> <p>Continuous support during the study</p> <p>Staff training</p> <p>Access to university infrastructure</p>
FOCUS ON IDENTIFICATION	Feeling of belonging to the host academic community, participation and engagement in the university life, in the academic self-government, volunteering for the local community, societal engagement, and room for manifesting students' identity	<p>Development of the sense of belonging to a particular academic community</p> <p>Student engagement (student activity)</p> <p>Interaction with NGOs</p> <p>Support for refugees' national self-identification</p> <p>Support for the refugee students' initiatives</p> <p>Stimulate social activity of exiled students in a host community, including connection with the local authorities, social and political organisations</p>

Source: own elaboration.

Thus, **seven key guidelines have been defined as critical for enhancing university responsiveness to refugee crises:**

1. Professionalisation of crisis management

To effectively manage refugee-related emergencies, universities must professionalise their approach to handling the crisis and exiled students' integration by embedding it into institutional strategy, using both general crisis management knowledge (such as the 5 P's crisis management approach⁹, etc.) and best practices from migration studies. Universities should develop more targeted but flexible crisis response structures, solutions and actions, fostering strong and ethical leadership, developing cross-sectoral collaboration, ensuring universities' responses are not only reactive but also sustainable, efficient, tangible and well-addressed to the needs of exiled students.

Guideline: Universities should have a detailed general crisis management framework with a well-defined decision-making process, and crisis team identified, and a crisis communication strategy prepared.

2. Leadership & Administrative Support

Many institutions emphasise the need for a dedicated administrative support system for exiled students through the method "one-stop shop". This includes establishing refugee support offices within universities, simplifying bureaucratic processes (e.g., streamlined admissions and documentation flexibility) and providing a single point of contact for students seeking help.

Guideline: Universities must address exiled students' needs more comprehensively and be prepared to create a central administrative hub to assist exiled students with admissions, documentation, and student services.

⁹ In management studies and practice, the "5 P's" of crisis management is a framework used to manage potential threats/risks according to 5 main actions: Predict, Prevent, Prepare, Perform, and Post-Action and Assessment. See: Mintzberg, H. (1987). The Strategy Concept I: Five Ps for Strategy. California Management Review, 30(1), 11-24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41165263> (Original work published 1987)

3. Financial Assistance

Financial barriers often prevent refugee students from accessing higher education. Universities should offer tuition waivers or reduced fees for refugee students, develop scholarship programs and emergency financial aid funds, and partner with government agencies and NGOs to secure additional funding sources.

Guideline: Universities should find the possibility and sources to establish financial support mechanisms, including scholarships and tuition waivers, to ensure accessibility for refugee students.

4. Language & Academic Integration

Language proficiency and academic preparedness are key challenges for exiled students. Effective strategies include providing free or subsidised language courses tailored to academic needs, implementing mentorship programs pairing refugee students with local students, and offering academic orientation sessions to familiarise students with university expectations and systems.

Guideline: Universities should implement structured language and academic support programs to ensure smooth student integration.

5. Collaboration & Partnerships

Collaboration with external organisations enhances universities' capacity to support refugee students. Many universities highlight the importance of working with local communities to foster integration, NGOs and international organisations (e.g., UNHCR) or networks (e.g., Scholars at Risk¹⁰) to provide additional support, and with other universities to develop joint programs for refugee students.

Guideline: Universities should establish and maintain strong collaboration networks with external partners to enhance educational, employment and professional opportunities for exiled students.

¹⁰ <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/>

6. Legal & Policy Framework

Refugee students often face legal barriers related to legal status, stay documents, visas, and study rights. Universities should advocate for policy changes that facilitate visa and residency processes, offer legal support services to assist students in navigating asylum and immigration procedures, and develop clear institutional policies on refugee admissions and rights.

Guideline: Universities should integrate legal advisory services into their refugee support programs to assist students with legal and immigration matters.

7. Social & Psychological Support

Ensuring the mental well-being and social integration of refugee students is essential. Best practices include providing mental health counselling services tailored to displaced students, organising cultural events and social inclusion programs to foster a sense of belonging, establishing student-led support networks for peer assistance, and initiating innovative citizen engagement tools at various levels. Psychosocial well-being is a crucial element in the system for refugee inclusion.

Guideline: Universities should offer mental health services and social integration tools to support the well-being of refugee students and their integration into a broader society.

Universities must continue to innovate, collaborate, and advocate for inclusive integration policies for exiled students and displaced persons that address both immediate needs and long-term resilience. By doing so, they reaffirm the fundamental mission of education – to empower individuals, foster mutual understanding, value cultural diversity and contribute to a more just and compassionate society.

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