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# Support mechanisms for exiled students in Higher Education

## SLOVENIA

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Abstract:	In this document we present the support mechanisms for refugee students at higher education institutions in Slovenia, according to responses collected through an online questionnaire survey of these institutions. The analysis also mentions the most common difficulties experienced by institutions in their work with this specific audience, as well as their suggestions for more sustainable and continuous work.
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## Consortium



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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

## Executive Summary

In this document we present the support mechanisms for refugee students at higher education institutions in Slovenia, according to responses collected through an online questionnaire survey of these institutions. The analysis also mentions the most common difficulties experienced by institutions in their work with this specific audience, as well as their suggestions for more sustainable and continuous work. In the Slovenian national context, many formal procedures and offered support services are already very well developed, but skills recognition does nonetheless occasionally prove challenging, while also staff awareness about existing resources and measures need to be improved. Further specific suggestions were provided by the respondents to the survey.

### 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 specialises in open recognition systems and social learning.

# 1. Introduction

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## Description of the research<sup>1</sup>

This report was created in the scope of the WP5 of the AGILE project, called “Implementation of Intervention at European universities offering refugee education”. This work package addressed the specific objective of “using digital innovation, social participation and impact assessment to build strong academia-society cooperation for resilience and sustainability” (as stated in the project proposal). It specifically focused on the impact of refugee crises on European HE systems in order to learn from them and take measures to increase resilience of HEIs in Europe in the future.

In order to reach our goal, the AGILE consortium created a questionnaire, which was filled by HE actors across the member countries. After the questionnaire was produced in French (by the partner institutions in Bordeaux, Paris and Hamburg), it was translated into the several languages of the partner universities involved in AGILE, and English. The online implementation was done through the EU survey tool (<https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/home/welcome/runner>) in the different languages. The participants were then contacted by the national coordinators of AGILE and invited to answer the questionnaire in one of the languages of the project. A maximum of 4 answers by institution were allowed, to cover internal diversity of perspectives.

The questionnaire was structured in three parts (see table 1), skills recognitions, capacity building and civic engagement, including open and closed questions. The length of each part was variable.

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<sup>1</sup> This part is common for all country reports in AGILE Project, first prepared by University of Hamburg.



Table 1 Structure of the questionnaire

Section	Description
Skills recognition	8 questions, regarding the mechanisms and tools developed by universities to recognise previously acquired competences (academic, linguistic or other) and the challenges in their institutional implementation.
Capacity building	8 questions about the mechanisms and tools developed by the institutions to support exiled students before, during and after their academic lives in the host institutions. It also included answers related to challenges in the implementation of such mechanisms and tools.
Civic engagement	7 questions on how universities encourage and support exiled students to participate in the academic, civic and community lives.

The questionnaire was introduced by a short text stressing the context of data collection (and protection) and its aims:

*“This questionnaire, designed as part of the Erasmus+ Agile project, aims to gather information on the strategies and practices put in place at your university to support exiled students and make it easier for them to be welcomed and included, both academically and in socio-linguistic terms: recognition of their skills, capacity-building for university staff and facilities, and support for students' civic engagement.”*

This questionnaire is intended for managers and coordinators of courses for learning the language of the host country (DU Passerelle in France), Vice-rectors/presidents for International Relations, Campus Life Department officers, people responsible for the Validation of Professional and Personal Experience (VAPP), and any person working in a Higher Education Institution responsible for welcoming and supporting exile students”.

We got a total of 141 participants, distributed as follows: 38 responses from Poland, 35 responses from France, 27 responses from Germany, 21 responses from Ukraine, 7 responses from Greece and Slovenia each, and 6 responses from Lithuania.

### Research results for Slovenia

For Slovenia, in particular, the responsiveness of national stakeholders was rather low, which was approached by the national coordinators in the second round of invitations personally contacting 57 support offices and contact points relating to the support of refugees. Nevertheless, the number of responses remained limited.

In total, we received 7 replies from faculties at the three main Slovenian universities. The questionnaire was mainly answered in Slovenian language and mainly by senior support staff (head of department, head of office) as well as one vice dean.

In this report, we will only present the answers obtained in the context of Slovenia. All the answers were anonymized. To see the responses from other countries and an overview including the responses from all AGILE members, we suggest consulting the reports available at: <https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/> (section: Results).

## 2. Results

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### a. Skills recognition

The survey found the Slovenian HEI generally have procedures for skills recognition in place, which all answers unanimously provided can be carried out already before refugee students arrive to Slovenia. One respondent clarified that the recognition is a general requirement, of course, and that the procedures are independent of location, i.e. not regarding whether or not the enrolling refugee already reached Slovenia as host country.

The admission for all institutions is taking place through application via an online platform, which allows at all Slovenian HEI for refugee students to continue at the level or study year that they left off from their country of origin. Some respondents again indicate, that this is of course subject to formalized skills recognition procedures and may or may not involve a step of examination or testing to verify the skills level upon enrolment. Depending on the outcome of the procedures, the student is then allocated into the suitable study year. Generally, it was indicated that the enrolment procedure for students don't differ between refugees / exiled students and regular enrollees.

Regarding the language proficiency, all Slovenian HEI require foreign candidates to provide language certificates, which may be obtained abroad already or can be done locally either at the Slovenian HEI or at a private local language center. It is noted, that knowledge of the Slovenian language is a prerequisite at some faculties, while others are offering study programmes also in English language, for which a corresponding English language certificate (min. B1) is required.

Overall, the respondents indicated that the skills recognition procedure is originally regulated at university / HEI level, but can be varied to different degrees at the faculty or study programme levels. These procedures do all assess a variety of skills beyond subject-specific ones; this may include linguistic, personal, transferable and other kinds of skills as well. The recognizable skills are determined through original regulations at university / HEI level.

Respondents of the survey indicated a number of obstacles they encountered despite the standardized procedures, in particular obstacles were related to:

- Verification of foreign certificates,
- Blocked websites of foreign institutions,
- Non-responsiveness of foreign institutions,
- Lack of digitalization of foreign institutions,
- Lack of documents in the possessions the refugee students were able to bring along.

### b. Capacity building

The survey shows that the Slovenia HEI by themselves do not offers specific training courses to faculty and department staff in order to prepare them for welcoming exiled students. Attending such courses would be available via Erasmus+ staff exchange, as one respondent indicated, whereas another respondent misunderstood the question as being about courses intended for the exiled students, not the university staff.

Specific resources are available at all three largest Slovenian universities in terms of staff, that is, a designated office or welcome center. Other kinds of resources, in particular financial ones, are not available though. During their studies, exiled students can benefit from targeted measures and support, however, the survey shows that not all faculty or department contact points for the exiled students are aware of these support measures. Similarly, systems to welcome exiled students and various student life services are generally available at all three universities, including e.g. Administrative support; Educational support / tutoring; Digital support; University library; Community life. However, not all the administrative staff and students' contact points are aware of these. With regards to the support services, the only obstacles identified were given by policies, particularly municipal, regional and national ones. In contrast to the support prior to and during the studies, not all universities have a specific follow-up system in place for exiled students after having finished their studies.

In summary, the following limitations in capacity building were identified:

- Awareness of staff about support measures for helping exiled students
- Awareness of staff about existing systems to welcome exiled students and introduce them to the various available student life services
- Lack of a specific follow-up system in place for exiled students after having finished their studies.

### **c. Civic engagement**

All Slovenian HEI have indicated in the survey that they inform exiled students about the possibility of getting involved in civic and community life. Moreover, all Slovenian HEI recognize civic engagement in the academic career of exiled students. However, there is no particular association or collective in place at none of the Slovenian HEIs, which would provide a network or social environment particularly for exiled students.

Regarding the representation in decision-making bodies, respondents to the survey almost all indicate that exiled students are not specifically represented in the university's decision-making bodies. There is one dissenting reply and it should be generally clarified, that all Slovenian universities include representatives of the students in their decision-making bodies on all levels. Consequently, exiled students are represented as students, albeit not with a special representation for their specific status.

The survey further revealed that all Slovenian universities generally do work with external organisations, those are companies, non-governmental organisation, and civic associations, through which the civic engagement and socio-cultural inclusion of exiled students is promoted. However, again, not all administrative staff or students' contact points were well aware of these collaborations.

Beyond general support of students and their civic engagement, Slovenian HEI indicate that they generally do provide Administrative, Communication/ Dissemination and Financial support to projects (cultural, artistic, academic etc.) proposed by exiled students. The awareness of that support and how to access is lacking at a significant part of the respondents, though.

Finally, it should be mentioned that several respondents commented on the very low number of exiled or refugee students at their institutions.

Based on the respondents' inputs, the corresponding shortcomings were identified:

- Lack of awareness among staff about university's work with external organisations (companies, NGOs, associations) to promote civic engagement and socio-cultural inclusion of exiled students,
- Lack of awareness among staff about university support projects (cultural, artistic, academic, etc.) proposed by exiled students.

Further, the respondents offered the following suggestions for improvements:

- Establishing a network or association specifically for exiled students,
- Ensuring accommodation in dormitories for exiled students,
- Offering more specialised language courses for exiled students,
- Establishing a more wholistic system of administrative and language support already before enrollment, including an overview plan of all available support measures for exiled students.

## 3. Key insights

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The survey, despite limited number of respondents, well represented all major HEI in Slovenia. Across all these universities, it became apparent that the formal and administrative processes are largely set up in a very well-based manner. However, certain shortcomings were identified in all three key areas.

#### **Regarding skills recognition:**

In spite of the well-structured enrollment and recognition process, the verification of foreign certificates was found to include certain issues, mainly on the foreign side. Certificates could not be properly verified due to blocked websites of foreign institutions or the complete non-responsiveness of the foreign institutions. The skills recognition is further hindered by a lack of digitalization of foreign institutions as well as an occasional lack of documents that the refugee students were able to bring along. In some parts, these are overcome through skill verification procedures, whereas base certificates for the access to higher education appear more problematic.

#### **Regarding capacity building:**

With regards to capacity building, many resources and measures are available, but there is a general disconnect of the faculty and departmental staff from the offers at university level. Correspondingly, the awareness of HEI staff was lacking with regards to (i) support measures for helping exiled students and (ii) systems to welcome exiled students and introduce them to the various available student life services. Moreover, at none of the Slovenian HEI, no specific follow-up system is in place for exiled students after having finished their studies.

#### **Regarding civic engagement:**

Although civic engagement is valued and fostered by Slovenian HEI, the survey results showed a lack of awareness among staff members about their institution's work with external organizations (companies, NGOs, associations) as well as their institution's support of projects (cultural, artistic, academic, etc.) proposed by exiled students.



## 4. Suggestions

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This section is based on recommendations and suggestions directly given by the respondents in the survey as reply to the question “Based on your experience, what suggestions would you make to improve the responsiveness of universities in receiving exiled students?” as well as the main identified shortcomings in section 2 of this report.

- **Alignment of digital skills recognition across the EU for simplified verification:** The issues highlighted with regards to skills recognition are to a large degree outside of the national context. While non-responsiveness of foreign institutions in the country of origin of an exiled student will persist as an issue, the issues with digitalization and verification may yet be improved by a unified, digital approach implemented across the European Union.
- **Awareness raising of staff member:** A repeating motive in several section was the lack of awareness by the staff working with exiled students about available measures. These measures included i.a. (i) support measures for helping exiled students, (ii) existing systems to welcome exiled students and introduce them to the various available student life services, (iii) the institution’s work with external organizations (companies, NGOs, associations) to promote civic engagement and socio-cultural inclusion of exiled students, or (iv) institutional support to projects (cultural, artistic, academic, etc.) proposed by exiled students. All these points could be better provided through improved information provision on the institutional website and through a centralized collection of all such relevant information.
- **Establishing a network or association specifically for exiled students:** Easing the arrival of exiled students and their navigating the public administration, finding the right contact points and providing a social net to cushion their experience should be significantly improved by a specific civic society or organization for exiled students. These can further aid in language and other issues along the way, and can act as a network following the conclusion of the studies.
- **Ensuring accommodation in dormitories for exiled students:** Given the limited availability of rooms in students’ dormitories and the tight situation on the public housing market in Slovenia’s largest cities, finding an accommodation can prove particularly hard for refugees and exiled students. However, noting the comparatively low number of exiled students at Slovenian HEI, it is recommendable that rooms reserved for university guests are being made available to exiled students, at least as an intermediate accommodation upon arrival.
- **Offering more specialized language courses for exiled students:** Similar to the specific language courses some Slovenian HEI offer for their foreign research

staff members, it should prove meaningful to organize regular language courses targeting the specific needs of exiled students.

- **Establishing a wholistic pre-enrollment support system:** Although the enrolment and skills recognition systems are well established at Slovenian HEI and can be accessed and run online already before arriving in the country, specific needs of exiled students may be better targeted in this early stage already. It should be noted that some Slovenian universities have provided a central contact point for exiled students upon Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, a more wholistic system of administrative and language support already before enrollment shall prove meaningful, particularly when including an overview plan of all available support measures for exiled students.

## 5. Conclusion

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Evaluating the responses from the online survey conducted by the AGILE project, this report outlined the support mechanisms provided to exiled students at Slovenian HEIs. For this, the questionnaire included on three focus areas: skills recognition, capacity building, and civic engagement. Despite a limited number of responses, the analysis drew a generally positive picture of the situation at Slovenian HEI. However, a few common challenges were identified to ensure the effectiveness of the already existing measures. Most commonly, the flow of information and the awareness about available measures and resources among administrative staff members working with exiled students remain the largest gap.

In the survey, respondents provided a number of recommendations to further improve the existing measures with regards to pre-arrival phase, accommodation provision, embedment into a network of exiled students, and specialized language courses.

In conclusion, the Slovenian experience appears largely positive, with specific points to be improved for a more sustainable and rounded support for exiled students.

## 6. References

## 6. References

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