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# **Policy brief: promoting the transition from refugee settlements to higher education**

## **DOs and DON'Ts**

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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
WP	Work Package

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## Executive Summary

This policy briefing aims at raising social and institutional awareness of the diversity of strategies to facilitate refugee students' enrollment and permanence in HE, and to facilitate the cooperation between formal and informal initiatives on the ground, and between refugee students' and HE institutions. We summarize the main findings of the AGILE project, informing the readers about the current initiatives to welcome exiled students (as synonym for refugee students) in HE in Europe, tackling the main challenges to their integration, suggesting possible options and making recommendations. These recommendations are structured in terms of initiatives to facilitate entry into HE, stimulate permanence while attending and ease the transition into working life.

### **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.

# 1. Introduction



## 1. Introduction

This policy brief was created in the scope of the WP5 of the AGILE project, called “Impact and sustainability”. This work package aimed to “use digital innovation, social participation and impact assessment to build strong academia-society cooperations for resilience and sustainability”. It focused on the impact of refugee crises on European HE systems in order to learn from them and take measures to increase the resilience of HEIs in Europe during refugee crises in the future.

During the 30 months of the AGILE project (December 2022- May 2025), the consortium listened to representatives from various HEIs, in the EU and beyond its borders (including Ukraine, Brazil and Turkey), in order to hear the voices on the ground facing the most pressing institutional needs (Melo-Pfeifer & Gerwers, 2023), such as facilitating enrollment and permanence. In the project, we created spaces where we brought together these institutional voices, also from institutions directly affected by the war (Klos & Klymanska, 2024) and the voices of the refugee students. Both HEIs representatives and refugee students participated in round tables organized by the consortium and in the production of a series of videos (available on the project website). Moreover, we analyzed student voices through the response to a questionnaire survey, to which more than 150 refugee students responded (Lawrance, 2023). The voices of HE integration policy organizations were also heard, thus bringing together the perspectives of academic leaders. Additionally, we investigated institutional co-operation mechanisms at the level of the institutions that make up the AGILE consortium (Lawrance, 2023) as well as initiatives to promote students and civil-society engagement or cooperation between institutions and the private sector (Boichenko, Oikonomou & Zourou, 2025a and 2025b). Additionally, a cross-sectional analysis of the obstacles to exiled<sup>1</sup> students' transition to HE (Melo-Pfeifer, Brinkmann & Gerwers, 2024). Considering Poland's exceptional situation in responding to the intense influx of refugee students of Ukrainian origin, resulting in the invasion of its territory by Russia and the subsequent war situation, a case study was drawn up on the country's support mechanisms (Degtyarova & Kraśniewska, 2025). Finally, institutions, organizations or groups in the HE system that have a connection to institutional reception mechanisms in the countries that make up the AGILE consortium were consulted via a survey, aiming at mapping support and follow-up mechanisms in place. Based on the same questionnaire, we compiled national reports and a synthesis of the results at the level of the seven countries in the consortium (Melo-Pfeifer & Potolia, 2025).

In this policy brief, we summarize the main findings of the AGILE project, informing the readers about the current support mechanisms to welcome exiled students in HE in Europe, tackling the main challenges to the integration of exiled students, suggesting possible options and making recommendations to HEIs and HE policy makers. Importantly, this policy briefing emphasizes the value of cross-sectoral and of inter- and intra-institutional collaborations as a mean to address complex challenges faced by HEIs, at large, and by exiles students, more specifically.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the adjectives exiled and refugee as synonyms to refer the public targeted by the AGILE project.

First, we briefly summarize the results of previous research, highlighting the intersections with the AGILE consortium. Next, we present the main conclusions of the research conducted by the researchers of this consortium (see also Degtyarova, 2025). Finally, based on these conclusions, we make suggestions and propose recommendations for tackling the challenges of integrating exiled students into HE.

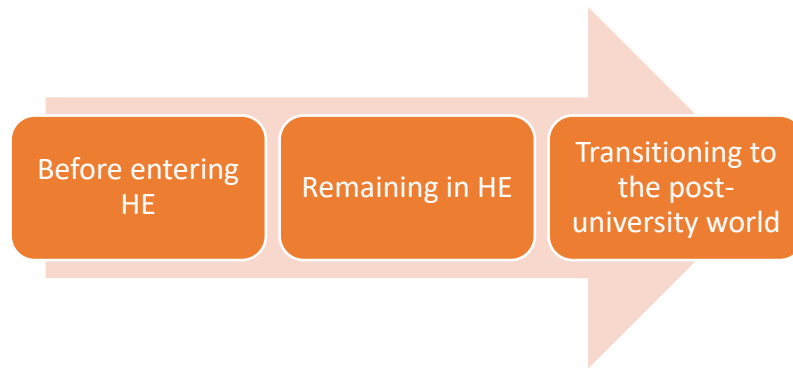
## **2. Research overview**

## 2. Research overview

According to Unangst (2019), the arrival of large numbers of refugees in Europe has pushed both national systems and individual HEIs to create and refine strategies for supporting not only prospective students but also those already enrolled (p. 144). While there is growing academic literature on support structures within HE (Ashour, 2022; Berg, 2019; Friedrich, Ruano & Melo-Pfeifer, 2021; Schröder, Berg & Otto, 2022; Unangst & Streitwieser, 2018), much of it focuses on particular host countries or specific groups of refugees. Moreover, this research often draws on perspectives from institutional actors – such as university staff or counselors – rather than from the refugee students who are meant to benefit from these initiatives. An exception to this trend is found in the work of Grüttner, Berg, Schröder, and Otto (2018), which includes input directly from refugee students.

It is important to consider that, although they share some characteristics and face challenges common to students designated as 'international' by HEIs, exiled students differ in some ways. First, similar to their peers, refugee students do not automatically progress from welcome centers to HE. They are often required to meet certain academic or performance standards, which can be difficult due to challenges such as language barriers, interrupted schooling, disabilities, or the impact of trauma. Second, the transition can be further complicated by institutional policies, practices, or attitudes that create additional hurdles – these might include trouble getting previous qualifications recognized, overly complex admissions procedures, or insufficient support in areas like language learning and housing. Third, the absence of targeted initiatives – such as language programs, academic readiness support, or integration services – can result in disrupted educational paths or increased dropout rates, due to lack of support mechanisms or mechanisms that are enrollment-oriented but not maintenance-oriented. As Naidoo, Wilkinson, Langat, Adonio, Cunneen, and Bolger (2018, p. 157) emphasize, although traditional educational structures can hinder refugee students' transitions (through lack of mechanisms of skills recognition, for example), it's important to understand that transition is an ongoing process rather than a final destination.

The literature has pointed to the need to develop integration processes in HE that involve the whole institution in a holistic and integrated way (Friedrich, Ruano & Melo-Pfeifer, 2021). This means that integration in HE should be thought of as a process and not (just) as an end (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. The need for a continuum of support mechanisms for exiled students in HE.*

When considered as a process, the results of the AGILE project indicate that the integration of exiled students should focus on three temporalities: before entering HE (where usually a linguistic requirement is pursued), during HE (with the transition from Bachelor to Master, in some cases, depending of the students), and during/after the transition from HE to working life. This will be considered in the recommendations presented later on.

## **3. Main AGILE findings**

### 3. Main AGILE findings

The results of the AGILE project, obtained through the round tables and questionnaires (with HEIs and refugee students) show that HEIs and students in the different participating countries may have different but complementary perspectives on the existing (or non-existing) support mechanisms. The AGILE project showed that HEIs and exiled students can benefit from better understanding each other's views, challenges and *modus operandi* (Image 2). On the one hand, HEIs may have and/or seek for the resources and structures to create broad, systematic support systems, in a top-down approach. On the other hand, students can offer valuable insights into the practical, day-to-day challenges they face, bringing a bottom-up approach to address challenges.

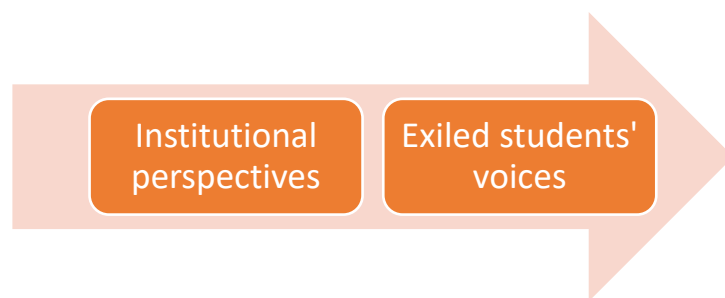


Figure 2. The complementarity between institutions' and students' voices.

More importantly, the AGILE project has shown that resilient reception and support mechanisms need to be conceived collaboratively, collaboratively by an entire academic community by all actors (Degtyarova & Kraśniewska, 2025), at an institutional level (with libraries, such as showed by Jonaitytė, Štuopytė & Tautkevičienė, 2024) and with out-of-university partners (with associations, as showed by Lawrance, 2024 and Potolia, Fialhos & Lawrance, 2025). AGILE demonstrated the added value of integrating the voices of exiled students to institutional perspectives, allowing us to bring multiperspectivity to discussions about the ongoing efforts to facilitate refugee students' integration and permanence in HE (Lawrance, 2024; Melo-Pfeifer, Brinkmann & Gerwers, 2024. See also video series on <https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/Video-series-Building-resilience-post-war-views-from-Ukraine>), and the importance of cooperation at European (Melo-Pfeifer & Potolia, 2025) and even international level (because most exiled students move around the Global South), allowing us to understand and tackle transversalities (Melo-Pfeifer & Gerwers, 2023). Besides collaborations within an institution, cooperation between institutions and sharing of perspectives, the AGILE project has shown that holistic support mechanism can help building up integration and resilience (Melo-Pfeifer, Brinkmann & Gerwers, 2024)

#### Institutional perspectives

HEIs participating in the AGILE project or collaborating with the consortium (through questionnaires, for instance) often focus on creating structured, mainstream, formal support systems like language courses (Potolia, Fiallos & Lawrance, 2025), counseling services, and academic advising. From the data collected at different moments (Lawrance, 2023; Melo-Pfeifer & Gerwers, 2023; Melo-Pfeifer & Potolia, 2025), these institutions' approaches tend to be based on established policies, resource availability, and institutional goals, which are shaped by local or national regulations and practices. Even so, it should be said that institutions seem to have developed mechanisms that combine top-down and bottom-up initiatives (Oikonomou & Zourou, 2023). Institutions show societal responsibility and a responsive attitude to the social and institutional challenges caused by the rapid, unexpected and significant influx of refugee students in crisis situations. The Polish case is very clear in this respect because it describes and explains the procedures of adapting to such an influx (Degtyarova & Kraśniewska, 2025).

With particular reference to language courses in countries such as France, where learning the national language is compulsory for access to university, the work carried out within the AGILE project has enabled us to opt for a revision of the curricula for the DU Passerelle (national diploma for refugee students learning French before entering university). As a result, the new DU Passerelle curriculum (in particular that of the University of Paris 8) opts for a broader conception of French as a second language and as a language of academic integration (cf. Potolia, Fiallos and Lawrance, 2025): enabling students to "take possession" of the university space by, among other things, taking classes in their future subject areas and French classes with international students; using artistic and sensitive approaches in order to promote resilience as much as possible; enabling students, throughout their language learning, to become actively involved in social life through civic engagement or work placements that give them a glimpse of the careers to which their future studies will lead them.

These curriculum revisions are clearly the result of the dialectical approach advocated by AGILE:: by listening carefully to the voices of students, the challenges they face in their "new life," the tactics they have adopted, and the informal networks of support and mutual help they have built, we have learned as much from them as they have from the HEI.

### Exiled students' voices

Exiled students view support mechanisms through a personal lens, shaped by their lived experiences (as students, as exiled students, as newcomers). This is particularly seen through the answers to the questionnaire (Lawrance, 2023) and the drawing of the linguistic biographies (Melo-Pfeifer, Brinkmann & Gerwers, 2024). They report having specific needs that differ from what institutions expect to address, such as emotional support, mentorship, or access to practical resources (housing, financial aid). Therefore, while institutions might focus on structural and systemic solutions, students, because of their vulnerable, unexpected and uncertain situation, tend to prioritize immediate, tangible support that directly impacts their daily lives, the lives of their family members, and their academic success.



In a complementary vein, the set of experiences developed by Web2Learn (Boichenko, Oikonomou & Zourou, 2025b) targeting cooperation between academia and business suggests that exiled students, when given the opportunity and the means, can be empowered into transforming their ideas into actionable business venture and creatively engage in (web-based) solutions to support potential refugee students' entrepreneurship. Despite challenges in setting-up academia-business cooperation projects, these experiences gave students the chance to express themselves and be active and agentive students in the host institutions and in society at large.

## **4. Recommendations**

## 4. Recommendations

The AGILE consortium identified mechanisms already in place to facilitate the access and integration of exiled students into HE (for example, Melo-Pfeifer & Gerwers, 2023; Melo-Pfeifer & Potolia, 2025), also considering a migration studies approach (Degtyarova, 2025). It has also identified areas where these mechanisms do not yet exist or face challenges (Melo-Pfeifer & Potolia, 2025). In this section, we match these challenges with a set of recommendations to make the existing mechanisms more permanent and sustainable and to overcome the gaps identified. Following the previously available research findings, we structure the recommendations around the three following phases: before entering HE, during HE, and after (or in the transition from) HE to job market.

Phase	Challenges or gaps identified	Recommendations
<b>Before entering HE</b>	Difficulties in recognizing diplomas and previous learning paths	<p>Combine standardized welcoming procedures with more personalized and individual ones.</p> <p>Create structures to facilitate enrolment, permanence, and success.</p> <p>Streamline administrative processes.</p> <p>Collaborate with universities in students' home countries to ensure smoother transitions and recognition of prior learning.</p>
	Unclear language policies for entry to HE	Develop and communicate transparent, multilingual guidelines on language requirements for HE entry, including accepted qualifications and support options.
	Focus on the linguistic preparation of students, with an overreliance on the offer of language courses <sup>2</sup> and programs	Opt for comprehensive language learning programs (e.g. Diplôme Passerelle in France) rather than isolated and scattered courses aimed at university integration. In addition to formal language learning,

<sup>2</sup> In the case of France, students on the bridging diploma are eligible for grants. See: <https://reseau-mens.org/presentation-du-du-passerelle/>

		<p>these comprehensive programs will aim to integrate refugees in socio-cultural, socio-academic and socio-professional terms as soon as they arrive at HEIs, by developing students' multilingual and multicultural potential, their multi-level experiential knowledge and their ability to adapt in order to build their resilience.</p> <p>Complement language courses with integrated academic and social support programs. These could help building subject-specific vocabulary and expertise, study and working skills, and real-world communication.</p>
	Missing language courses geared towards academic purposes	Target courses for academic specific purposes, from the very beginning.
	Insufficient administrative, academic and legal counseling support	<p>Provide information on the academic culture, including teaching styles and expected academic performance.</p> <p>Ensure accessible and permanent counseling services for administrative, academic, and legal support tailored to the specific needs of exiled students.</p>
	Insufficient communication about support mechanisms	Implement proactive, multilingual outreach strategies to clearly inform refugee students about available support services through various channels (e.g., websites, orientation sessions, peer mentors).
<b>While attending Higher Education</b>	Interruptions in the linguistic support	Continue to support students in learning the language of study through specialized courses (terminology, types of academic discourse in their field, etc.), tutoring and academic counselling.
	Intermittent funding of support structures, with the potential loss of human	Develop resilient and sustainable welcoming structures, by advocating for stable, long-term funding models to maintain support programs and retain

	resources and therefore institutional know-how	experienced staff, therefore ensuring continuity and institutional memory.
	Insufficient student funding	Create flexible financial aid packages tailored to refugee students' needs (tuition fees, housing, living expenses, health and child care, ...).
	More or less forced and/or imposed breaks in the academic pathway	Establish flexible learning pathways and re-entry programs that recognize prior learning and accommodate interruptions in education, creating systems that recognize non-linear learning journeys and support re-engagement.
	Difficulties in housing exiled students on campus	Partner with local housing providers and NGOs to offer affordable, secure accommodation options and prioritize on-campus housing for refugee students.
	Reduced possibilities for contacts between exiled students at local, national and international level	<p>Create and capitalize on already existing institutional structures (such as libraries) that can nurture exiled students' interaction.</p> <p>Create and support networking platforms, peer mentoring, and exchange programs that connect exiled students locally, nationally, and internationally.</p> <p>Promote the connection between internally displaced students with the exiled students abroad.</p>
	Reduced presence of exiled students in decision-making mechanisms	Establish student advisory boards or committees that include exiled students to ensure their voices are represented in decision-making processes.
<b>Transition from HE to working life</b>	Low number of structures involved in the follow-up of exiled students	<p>Create (student) <i>alumni</i> associations, to nurture the maintenance of contacts after exiled students leave HEIs.</p> <p>Develop and expand collaborative networks between universities, business, NGOs, and community organizations to</p>

		provide comprehensive and continuous support for exiled students.
	Sporadic collaboration with civil society	<p>Create opportunities for civic long-term engagement, by establishing partnerships with NGOs.</p> <p>Enhance open innovation opportunities (e.g. participation in hackathons, fab labs, etc.) for refugee and exiled students to benefit from networking with their peers and forge connections with businesses.</p>
	Sporadic collaboration with the job market	<p>Promote the establishment of links between current and past exiled students, as the last who could facilitate integration into the professional world (either for work placements or jobs).</p> <p>Connect to job market, by establishing partnerships with stakeholders and business that facilitate the integration of exiled students. These might include the creation of internships, mentorship programs, employment opportunities or academia- business cooperation projects specifically designed for exiled students.</p>

As a whole, these recommendations pursue a holistic, inclusive support systems in HEIs designed to ensure the successful enrollment, integration, permanence, and well-being of exiled students. Moreover, local and international students may also benefit from the support systems if academic specific courses or collaborations with the job market and NGOs are open to all of them. Importantly, these support systems seek to ensure accessibility and equity in HE by removing linguistic, financial and administrative constraints to entry, permanence and progression, and success. Additionally, they recognize that HEIs might need to establish longstanding inter- and intra-institutional collaborations, at local, national and international levels.

Following migration studies, which could help illuminate the integration of exiled students in HE, more efficient social inclusion of refugees and internally displaced persons in HE, systemic conditions and legal framework must be achieved. These should be accompanied by institutional policies focused on integration (acquiring language and cultural skills), placement (acquiring of the social/professional status), interaction (socializing of refugees at the universities, also in the process of teaching & learning), and identification (feeling of belonging to the host academic community, and preservation of students' identity) (Degtyarova, 2025,

after Esser, 2001). Keywords for resilient support mechanisms seem therefore to be: institutional communication, accessibility, whole-university approach, cooperation and partnerships, flexibility, and adaptability.

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Lisa Marie Brinkmann is a research assistant at the University of Hamburg, currently writing her dissertation about the use of portfolios in the French classroom (as a foreign language) in school and its impact on German students' investment. She is part of the Erasmus + project BOLD (Building on Linguistic and Cultural Diversity) and AGILE (Higher Education Resilience in Refugee Crises) and coordinated three projects in the "Transcultural encounters in Spanish Teacher Education" series since 2022, funded by Innovative learning and teaching formats of University of Hamburg and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).



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Anthippi Potolia, currently leading the AGILE Erasmus+ Project, is Associate Professor in Language Sciences and Applied Linguistics. She specialises in educational technologies, multilingualism and multiculturalism, language autobiographies and reflexivity, inter- and transculturality. She is co-responsible for a Master's degree in training future language teachers. She is also the academic coordinator of the Diploma of French language for students in exile at the University of Paris 8.