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AGILE

Support mechanisms for exiled students in Higher Education

GERMANY

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Deliverable Factsheet

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Abstract:	In this document, we present the support mechanisms for exiled students at HE institutions in Germany, according to responses collected through an online 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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Disclaimer:

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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

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Executive Summary

In this document, we present the support mechanisms for refugee students at HEI in Germany, according to responses collected through an online survey of these institutions. The domains covered by the survey relate to skills recognition, capacity building and civic engagement. 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 this particular national context, while the dimensions of skill recognition and capacity building seem to have already been developed and implemented in the participant HEIs, there are still gaps in terms of implementing civic engagement mechanisms.

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.

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1. Introduction

1. Introduction

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 varied.

Section	Description
skills recognitions	8 questions, regarding the mechanisms and tools developed by universities to recognize previously acquired skills (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 HEIs encourage and support exiled students to participate in the academic, civic and community lives.

Table 1. Structure of the questionnaire.

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 exiled 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.

In the German case, potential participants in target HEIs (from a list of HEIs in Germany available online[1]) were contacted first in December 2024, with reminders and invitations to additional participants following in January and February 2025. The e-mails were sent directly to 118 e-mail accounts, perceived as connected to HE structures dedicated to support exiled students, or, more broadly, international students. Some emails were immediately returned because the person no longer worked for the organization or received automatic replies with waiting list messages.

27 answers were obtained from 25 different HEIs, given mainly by coordinators of structures in the institutions, such as the "Geflüchtetenbereich", "Academic Welcome Program for highly qualified refugees" or the "Welcome Campus for Refugees", meaning that they have a specialized knowledge of the local realities they work in. Participants responded the survey either in German or English.

In this report, we only summarize the answers obtained in the German context. When necessary, answers provided in German are translated. 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).

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[1] Websites of the institutions were consulted individually with key words as "refugee students", "exiled students" and "international students" to identify specific structures and people.

2. Results

2. Results

2.1 Skills recognition

25 respondents declared that their institutions have procedures for recognizing refugee students' previous qualifications (2 respondents signaled that they don't know), mainly involving the recognition of foreign diplomas (16 answers). 12 institutions declared that they have a platform for specific applications for refugee students. Three institutions declared having testing procedures and one stated carrying out interviews with the candidates. Some of these mechanisms are used simultaneously, with universities declaring one to four mechanisms of recognition of previous qualifications.

Regarding the question "Do exiled students who enroll in your university's various courses continue their studies where they left off, or do they generally have to repeat one or more years?", apart from three participants who declared they don't know, one participant explained that refugee students usually have to repeat their studies one or two years, while the remaining participants declared that it would depend. The reasons provided by participants who declared "it depends" are very diverse, but they are usually related to the disciplinary specificities, to the specificities of the Bachelor-Master transition, the curricular and internal organization of the course at the host university or the already acquired credit points that can be recognized. Institutions refer to the need to enroll in the first year of the study program and then, if possible, see the credits point recognized retrospectively. When recognizing previous competences, recognition needs to be considered not only on the course level, but also at university level (e.g. is the home university recognized).

In terms of requirements for registering exiled students at German universities, Figure 1 shows the total number of the answers, which were selected among the options provided by the survey.
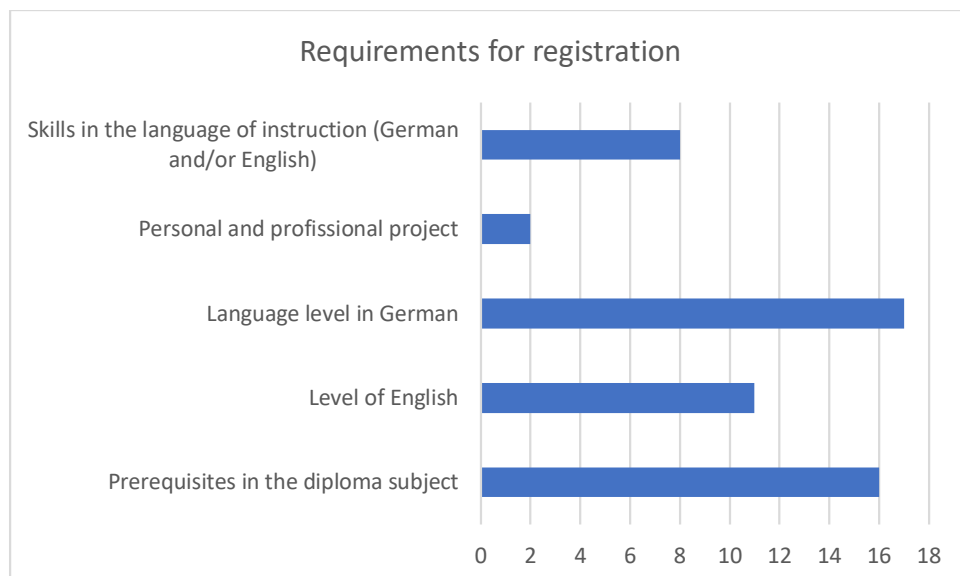

Figure 1. Requirements for registration at German universities.

As we can note, linguistic skills play an important role in the registration process. 18 participants declared that the recognition of those linguistic skills (in German or/and English) is done through a diploma or language certificate issued by a third party, usually at level C1 for German.

In terms of recognition of skills acquired outside the university, Figure 2 shows the percentages of the collected answered.
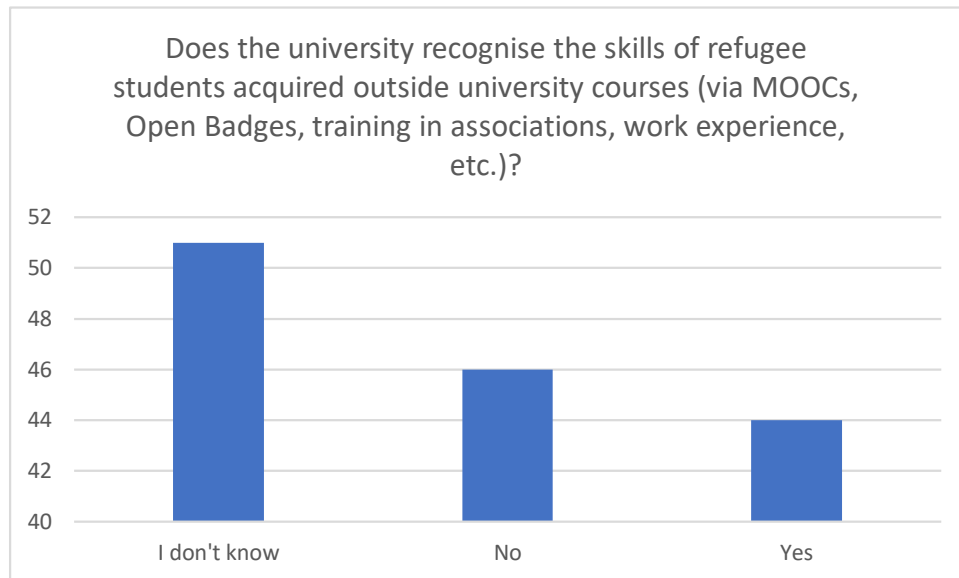

Figure 2. Recognition of skills acquired outside the university.

Another group of questions related to the challenges found in the recognition of exiled students' skills. Figure 3 shows that difficulties are found by half of the HEIs who answered our questionnaire.
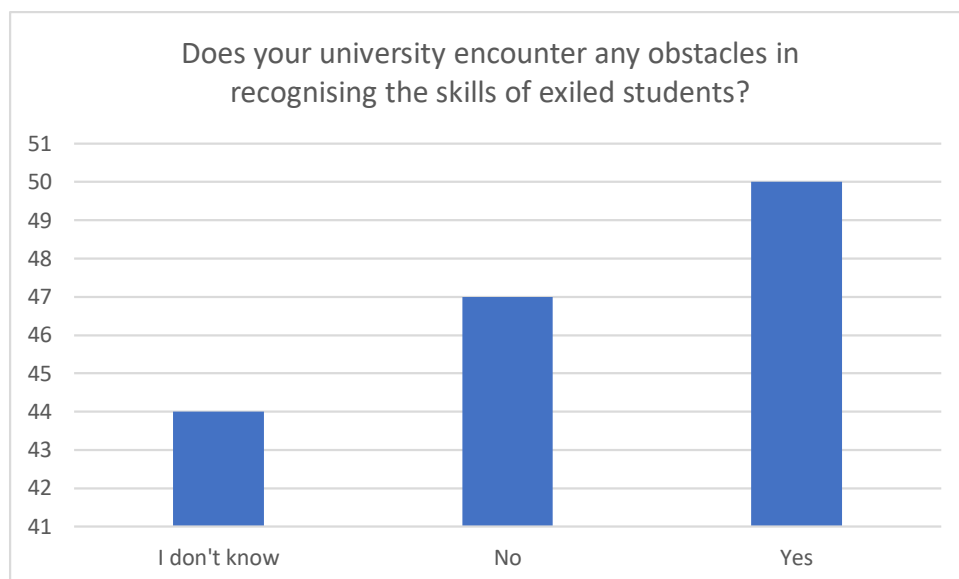

Figure 3. Obstacles in the recognition of skills previously acquired.

These difficulties are very diverse, but are usually related to incomplete documentation due to missing and/or lost documents (usually because of conflict scenarios), as stated by one respondent:

> „Wenn ein Nachweis der HZB aufgrund von fehlenden Dokumenten nicht möglich ist (z.B. da die Dokumente auf der Flucht nicht mitgenommen werden können), ist es in der Regel sehr schwierig, alternative Nachweise zu erbringen."

> [Translation: „If it is not possible to prove eligibility for asylum or subsidiary protection due to missing documents (e.g. because the documents cannot be taken when fleeing), it is usually very difficult to provide alternative proof.'"]

Other times, as one participant declares, "Vocational training or professional experience outside the EU is difficult to recognize and prove".

2.2 Capacity building

As we can see in Figure 4, when asked about training for the welcoming of exiled students, over 60% the institutions offer courses to prepare their staff.
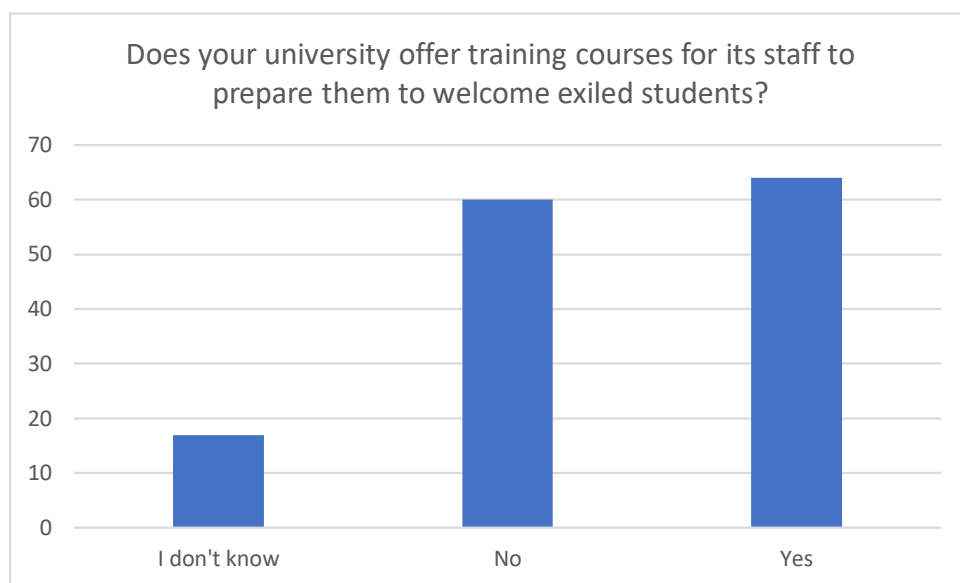

Figure 4. Training courses for staff.

Themes of these courses differ and are usually related to intercultural issues. One respondet specified the themes as follows:

> „z.B. Schulung zum Thema rassismuskritische Beratungspraxis, außerdem Angebot von externen Schulungen (z.B. Fortbildungen des DAAD) zum Thema Anerkennung von ausländischen Bildungsabschlüssen et cetera".

> [translation: "e.g. training on the topic of racism-critical counselling practice, as well as offering external training (e.g. DAAD [German Academic Exchange

service, note by the authors] further training) on the topic of recognizing foreign educational qualifications, etc."]

In terms of specific support mechanisms to help exiled students navigate the German academic culture and environment, Figure 5 illustrates the presence of five support instruments, related to languages, administration and academic life.
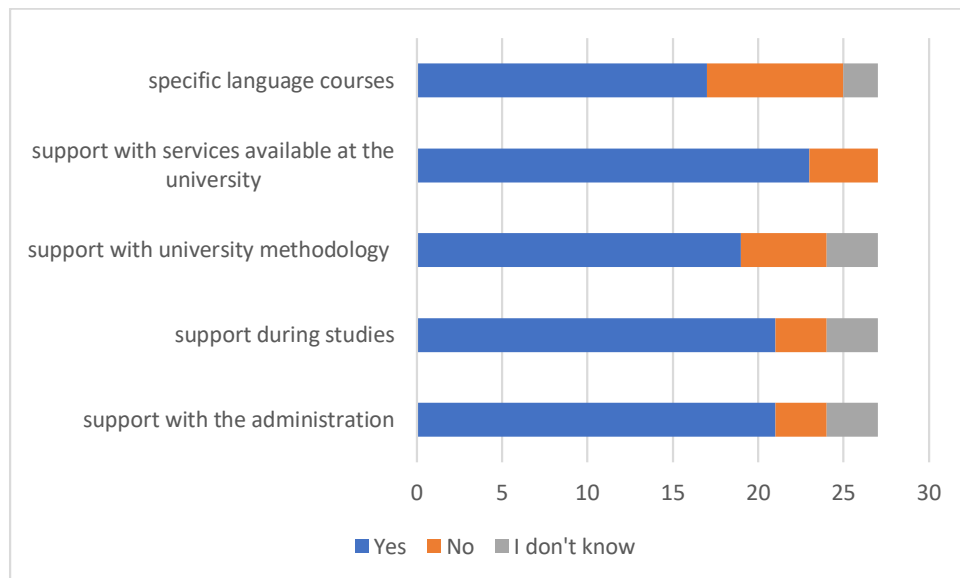

Figure 5. Specific support mechanisms related to languages, administration, and academic life.

Exiled and international students have access to a range of support services designed to help them navigate university life, from enrollment to academic success and integration, according to the answers provided. Structures like the International Student Office and Information Services/Contact Person for Refugees assist all international students with enrollment, insurance, accommodation, and scholarships. Additionally, some HEIs offer a buddy programs to help students with their university applications. Furthermore, the coordination office "Studieren im Asyl", in one institution, provides guidance for those interested in studying. Special Ukraine-Support-Teams have been established in different HEIs to assist students from Ukrainian partner universities transitioning into an orientation semester or directly into a master's program. Support for students from other countries seem to be handled on a case-by-case basis, by some institutions. Several specific structures were named, related to refugee counseling, and some universities declared having a permanent position for exiled students counseling. Some campuses have special welcoming centers and welcoming campus dedicated to support exiled students.

In terms of support mechanisms for exiled students during their studies, 21 participants declared providing some sort of support mechanisms. According to the answers provided, during their studies, exiled and international students benefit from a variety of academic, social, and administrative support services aimed at fostering integration and success. Table 2 tentatively organizes the provided support.

Type of support	Examples
Financial support	• "NRWege ins Studium" scholarship program for students with a refugee background • "Zukunft Ukraine" scholarship program for students who have fled Ukraine
Academic and faculty-based support	• Cooperation with Taras Shevchenko University (Kyiv) • Subject-specific mentoring schemes • Language courses, mentoring, and advising • Faculty-based mentoring programs and initiatives • Campus Engel (Campus Angels), offering direct student support • Buddy programs and mentoring initiatives • ProRef (Program for the Academic Preparation and Integration of Refugees) • Writing training for academic success
Support with academic life	• The International Stammtisch, a monthly international meet-up • The International Service Center and Welcome Center, which provide administrative support and guidance • Student organizations and initiatives, including interpreter groups and tutorial programs • A specific service counter for international students
Further support	• Buddy programs to help students integrate into university life • Language courses at the language center • Legal advising for students needing assistance with administrative or residency matters • Counseling and workshops addressing both academic and personal challenges

Table 2. Support mechanisms for exiled students during their studies at German universities.

In terms of available services, Figure 6 shows their frequency according to the 27 participants. From the number of items reported, it is possible to assert that in most HEIs there are combined offers of several services.
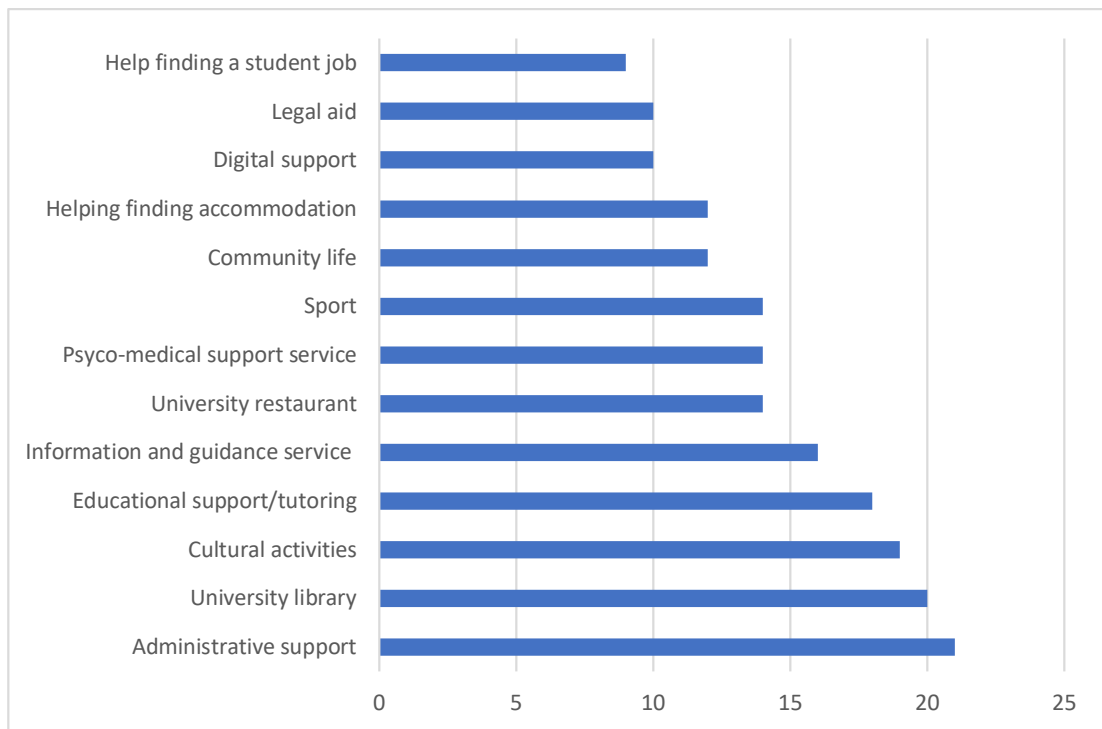
Figure 6. Services available for exiled students.

It should be noted that the facilities available to other students (such as university libraries and restaurants) are also made available to forcibly displaced students. Specific structures directed towards exiled students, related to legal aid, housing and psycho-medical support are less frequently named by the participants. In any case, these services meet some of the needs listed by exiled students who participated in the AGILE questionnaire (see Melo-Pfeifer, Brinkmann & Gerwers, 2024).

Five participants declared no difficulties in setting up support mechanisms for exiled students. The other participants referred to several constrains, particularly: financial (16 answers), organizational (10 answers), related to human resources (8 answers) and political (2 answers). Four participants, that are kept anonymized, provided an individual account of other difficulties:

- "there are obstacles and challenges for all international students!"
- "Due to the end of the Support Project, some courses (e.g. the Intensive German Language Course) are no longer available".
- "Difficult to address students in their mother tongues".
- "Unser Bereich wird leider immer kleiner. Wir hatten bis vor Kurzem Sprachkurse, Workshops und Seminare, was wir aufgrund von finanziellen und kapazitären Hindernissen nicht aufrechterhalten konnten. Auch personell wird der Bereich immer kleiner und auch die Beratungszeiten fallen immer kürzer aus" [Translation: „Unfortunately, our area is getting smaller and smaller. Until recently, we had language courses, workshops and seminars, but we were unable to maintain them due to financial and capacity constraints. The area is also getting smaller and smaller in terms of personnel, and the consultation times are also getting shorter and shorter."].

These statements reveal that support structures and mechanisms face several challenges to meet exiled students' needs, namely financial and linguistic challenges. One participant declared that such difficulties are not specific to exiled students, but common to the welcoming of all international students.

The last question of this section was related to follow-up mechanisms developed by universities and intended for exiled students that have finished their studies. 20 participants stated that they still do not have these follow-up mechanisms and structures, and just three participants responded with "yes". Four participants selected the "I don't know" option.

2.3 Civic engagement

To the question "Does your university inform exiled students about the possibility of getting involved in civic and/or community life?", seven participants answered with "no" and 16 with "yes". The rest declared not knowing about it. Nevertheless, only eight participants declared that civic engagement was recognized in the academic career (open badges, internships, bonus points, certificates, optional/open courses, etc.), while ten declared not knowing about mechanisms to recognize such engagement.

To the question whether or not there is an association or collective of exiled students or for exiled students at the university, only seven answered with "yes", while nine answered with "no". The majority of the participants in the questionnaire reported not knowing (11 answers.)

In terms of the presence and/or representation of exiled students in the university's decision-making bodies, 15 participants declared not knowing about it. Only four participants declared that exiled students were represented in decision-making bodies, while eight answered with "no".

In the answers to the next question, related to collaboration with external organizations ("Does your university work with external organizations (companies, NGOs, associations) to promote civic engagement and/or socio-cultural inclusion of exiled students?"), Figure 7 shows that almost 80%of the HEIs works with third parties.

Does your university work with external organisations (companies, NGOs, associations) to promote civic engagement and/or socio-cultural inclusion of exiled students?
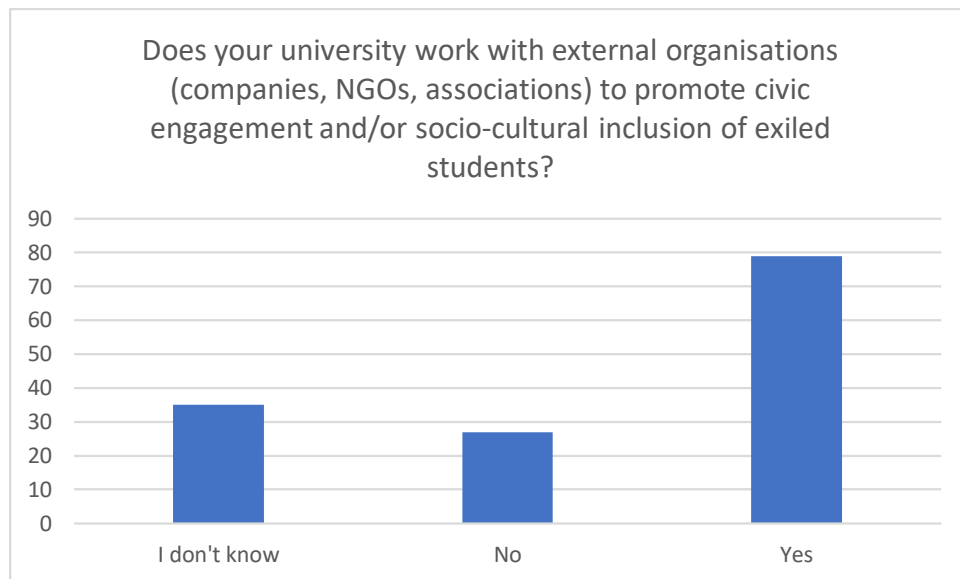
Figure 7. Work with external institutions.

Finally, the participants were also asked about their support of cultural and artistic projects conceived and developed by students in exile. The majority of the institutions answered with "yes", as shown in Figure 8.

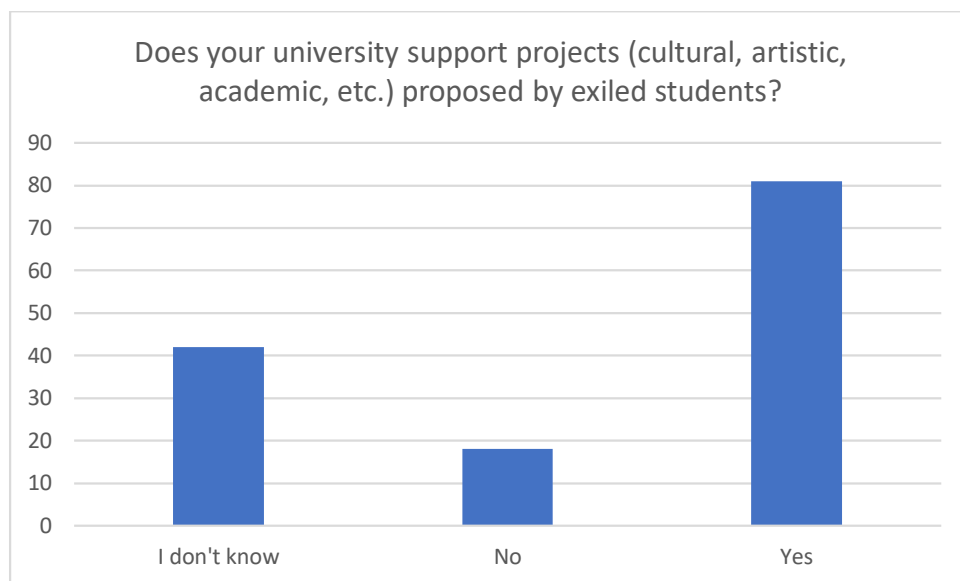**Does your university support projects (cultural, artistic, academic, etc.) proposed by exiled students?**

Figure 8. Support of cultural and artistic projects developed by exiled students.

HEIs help through communication and dissemination of the events, even if some institutions also provide logistical and financial support.

3. Key insights

3. Key insights

One main conclusion to draw from this report is that HEIs in Germany have developed a diversity of mechanisms to support exiled students. They are mostly related to facilitating entering the institution (through skills recognition) and supporting their continuity (through capacity building) rather than helping them transition to the job market or to interact with the society at large (through civic engagement).

In terms of support mechanisms in the three phases of HE entrance and permanence (before, during and after, see Melo-Pfeifer, Brinkmann & Gerwers, 2024), we can observe that most of the support mechanisms in place are oriented towards the immediate accommodation of this student population, and few follow-up measures or actions are named (in terms of diversity and frequency of actions' presence). Indeed, just three participants responded affirmatively to the question of existence of follow-up mechanisms.

If we take into consideration a whole-university approach (Friedrich et al, 2021), we could observe that HEIs make efforts to cover the different dimensions of academic life (Figure 9).

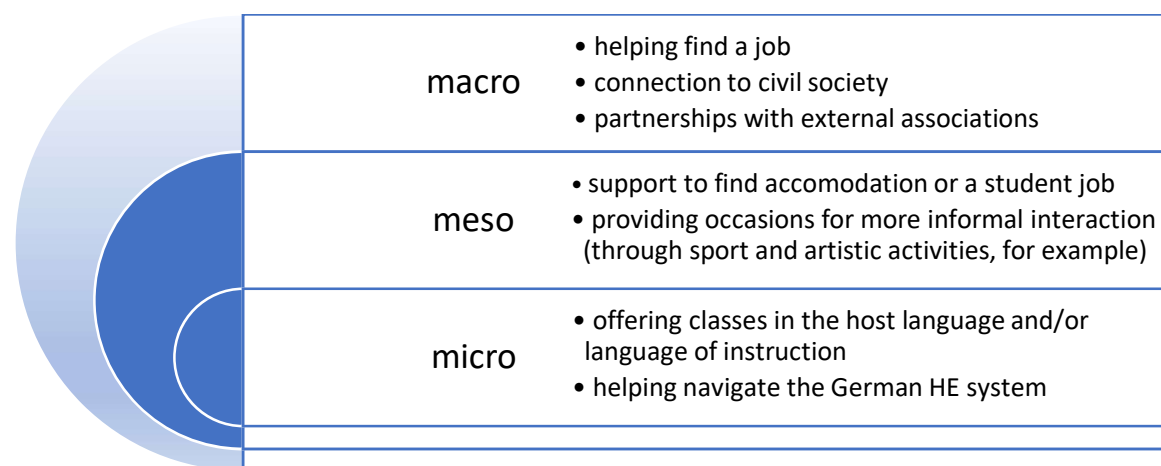|		
macro	• helping find a job • connection to civil society • partnerships with external associations	
meso	• support to find accomodation or a student job • providing occasions for more informal interaction (through sport and artistic activities, for example)	
micro	• offering classes in the host language and/or language of instruction • helping navigate the German HE system	

Figure 9. A whole university approach in place at German HEIs.

Additionally, some of the participants reported some difficulties that allow us to declare that, in the design and implementation of support mechanisms to exiled students, sustainability is the key to successful actions. Indeed, while initial support programs like language courses and workshops may be established, their maintenance might turn out to be problematic, as they require ongoing financial and institutional commitment and human resources. Related to this issue is the fact that financial and human resources limitations might lead to the scaling down of the offers already in place. Such constraints might lead to a loss of knowledge and know-how by key institutional actors that might negatively impact the future response capacity of the institution. The concerned statements of one participant about the shrinking resources makes us consider that the support systems already in place should not

be seem and treated as temporary responses to immediate and short-term issues. Such support structures, the answers about the challenges seen to indicate, are indeed often seen as temporary and even expendable. If sustainability is the key to these structures, they should be supported by long-terms strategic planning, relying in stable funding sources and a competent work force, continuously updated and professionalized. To see these structures in a long-term modus, advocacy and policy makers should be more engaged and exiled students could integrate decision-making mechanisms (a measure still rare in universities in Germany, as reported by the respondents).

4. Suggestions

4. Suggestions

This section of the current report is based on the recommendations and suggestions given by the respondents regarding the last question of the survey. The formulation of the question was: "Based on your experience, what suggestions would you make to improve the responsiveness of universities in receiving exiled students?". This phrasing was chosen to address issues of sustainability and resilience of the structures already in place, an issue that is at the center of the AGILE project.

According to the 24 participants (out of 27) that left suggestions, to improve the situation for all international students, including exiled students, universities must take targeted and sustained action. The following critical areas to improve sustainability and resilience of HEIs were mentioned:

- Securing adequate financial resources andincreasing their funding to include refugee-specific assistance, as suggested by one participant ("Regarding the German specialty that 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 assitance of refugee students."). This is because "Studentenwerke" in Germany play a crucial role in providing social support to students.
- Expanding language support, in the host language and/or language(s) of instruction, and enhancing the offer of English Medium of Instruction ("Ausbau von Studienangeboten in englischer Sprache, Senkung der sprachlichen Hürden" / Translation "Expansion of courses taught in English, lowering of language barriers"). About German, for example, a participant stated that "The biggest problem for refugees is the language. As the job center does not cover the expenses for the neccessary langugage courses and certificates, they are often not able to study".
- Maintaining and expanding support structures (structures developed through DAAD [German Academic Exchange Service] "Integra" and "Welcome" should be sustained and further expanded). One participant expressed their frustration about the interruption of funding in these terms: "INTEGRA-Projektfinanzierung ist ausgelaufen. Im Zuge der Flüchtlingskrise ab 2015 wurden mit dieser Förderung wichtige Projekte zur Sprachförderung und auf soziokultureller Ebene erstellt. Leider ist die Fortführung nicht mehr möglich.".
- Enhancing advisory and support services clearly designated for this purpose, prioritizing the unique challenges faced by exiled students. About this, one participant referred to the need to "raise awareness of the specific necessities of this group". Interestingly, two perspectives collide in this area, as seen in the statements of two HEIs: one sees the need to support all international students equally, to avoid othering ("to make them feel not singled out but part of the greater international community"), and another the need to "develop specific instruments for this community and not only the general ones for all students".
- Activism and awareness campaigns conducted to educate university staff and students on the specific challenges exiled students face. Integrating exiled students

in decision-making structures could be a way forward because, as a participant stated "there is no direct exiled student representation in the university's decision-making bodies" (even if the participant states that they can give their feedback by other means).

- Developing an asset-orientation in the academic welcoming culture, and instead of focusing on the perceived deficiencies of exiled students, consider German HEIs can be improved to become more inclusive. As one participant eloquently stated, "Turn away from a perspective focusing on the deficiencies of refugee students towards understanding them as a resource. The problems refugee students face, especially during the onboarding phase, can tell us more about the deficiencies of our university systems rather than about the student's themselves. It is necessary to put our systems and structures into question to become better in identifying potentials and thus finally more open and accessible also for other groups of 'non-traditional' students".

The recommendations by the respondents underscore the necessity for continued advocacy and institutional commitment to ensuring access, support, and success for exiled students. As HEIs evolve to meet these challenges, they must invest in sustainable solutions that uphold long-term resilience.

5. Conclusion

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This document outlined the support mechanisms provided to exiled students at German HEIs, based on responses from an online questionnaire developed by the AGILE project. The survey focused on three key areas: skills recognition, capacity building, and civic engagement. Our analysis identifies the common challenges these institutions face in serving this specific audience and compiles their suggestions for creating more sustainable and continuous support systems. While the participating HEIs have made notable progress in developing and implementing skills recognition and capacity building initiatives, significant gaps remain in establishing effective civic engagement and follow-up mechanisms.

The recommendations left by the respondents to the survey in Germany highlight key areas for improvement of HE support mechanisms for exiled students, including securing and expanding adequate financial resources, intensifying language support, maintaining and increasing advisory and support structures, fostering a welcoming academic culture, and integrating exiled students into decision-making processes. Additionally, shifting institutional perspectives from seeing refugee students' integration as a challenge to recognizing them as an asset seems to be seen as essential in building more inclusive and resilient HE systems for all (students and staff).

In conclusion, sustainable support for exiled students requires long-term financial, institutional, and human resource commitments. The German experience shows that, while initial programs and structures can be established, they often face scaling down due to financial and human resource constraints, risking the loss of institutional expertise. To avoid treating these initiatives as temporary fixes, universities need stable funding, strategic planning, and greater involvement of exiled students in policy-making roles.

6. References

6. References

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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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