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Support mechanisms for exiled students in Higher Education

GREECE

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Deliverable Factsheet

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Abstract	This country-level report presents key support mechanisms that are put in place by Greek universities to support exiled students. The results of the report are based on the replies of Greek HE staff to an online survey distributed to them.
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Consortium

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2.	University Bordeaux Montaigne	UBM	France	
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Statement of originality

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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.

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

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Executive summary

This report presents support mechanisms that Greek Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) put in place to support refugee students to continue their studies' journey in their host country. The topics covered by the survey relate to skills recognition, capacity building and civic engagement. By leveraging knowledge and understanding on these issues among Greek Higher Education (HE) staff, it emerges that little or sporadic measures of support have been applied by the Greek HE system for the benefit of refugees; measures that are not always visible or widely communicated to Greek HE communities (see section on Results, cf. lack of knowledge and information among Greek HE staff).

The AGILE project

This publication is a result of the Erasmus+-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 the 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 an R&D company (Web2Learn) specialised in open recognition systems and social learning.

1. Introduction

1. Introduction

This report was created as part of Work Package 5 (WP5) of the AGILE project, called “Implementation of Intervention at European universities offering refugee education”. This WP 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 during refugee crises in the future.

In order to reach our goal, the AGILE consortium created a questionnaire, which was filled in by HE actors across the member countries. After the questionnaire was produced in French (by the partner institutions in Paris, Bordeaux and Hamburg), it was translated into English and into the national languages of the partners involved in the AGILE project. The online implementation was done through the EU survey tool (<https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/home/welcome/runner>) in the different languages. The target groups 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 from 4 different stakeholders per institution were allowed.

The questionnaire was structured in three parts (Table 1): skills recognition, capacity building and civic engagement. It included open and closed questions. The length of each part was variable.

Section	Description
Skills recognition	8 questions regarding the mechanisms and tools developed by universities to recognize 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 by the staff of the university. So, in this questionnaire, capacity building targets both students and staff.
Civic engagement	7 questions on how universities encourage and support exiled students to participate in academic, civic and community life.

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 exile students”.

We obtained a total of 141 answers, 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 Greece

In the case of Greece, potential participants in targeted HEIs, with which Web2Learn has forged solid collaborations, were contacted first in December 2024, with reminders and the additional participants following in January and February 2025. The emails were sent directly to HE staff who would potentially be engaged in supporting refugee students, asking them to circulate the questionnaire to other colleagues within their institution also involved in welcoming and supporting refugee students.

Overall, we received 7 replies (questionnaire filled in in English) from 4 Greek HEIs across Greece, provided mainly by researchers and assistant professors who are not directly involved in administrative or field actions for supporting refugee students who study in Greek HEIs.

In this report, we will only present the answers obtained in the context of Greece. 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

2.Results

a. Skills recognition

For the first question: Does your university have procedures for recognizing the qualifications acquired by exiled students before arriving in the host country? Out of the 7 replies, 3 respondents shared that there are such procedures in their institutions, while 4 stated that they are not aware of such procedures (reply: “I don’t know”). With regards to the procedures mentioned by respondents, these include the organisation for the recognition of foreign diplomas through tests, interviews and examinations of exiled students. Moreover, 1 respondent shared the existence of an admission-application platform on the university’s webpage to facilitate qualifications acquired by exiled students.

In this context, it should be highlighted the Greece is a signatory to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Convention, 1997, Council of Europe et UNESCO, 2017), article 7 which states:

“Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence (p. 9).”

Thus, it’s up to each Greek HEI to adopt measures to evaluate refugee and exiled students’ skills and knowledge to be validated to access the Greek HE system.

In the question “Do exiled students who enrol in your university’s various courses continue their studies where they left off, or do they generally have to repeat one or more years?”, 3 out of the 7 respondents stated that they don’t know, 1 shared that they continue from the year they were forced to leave their home-country HEI, and 3 replied that it depends, based on:

- a. "If they have obtained an official recognition of their diploma, they can continue to the next level (from bachelor to a master degree). If they have completed a half bachelor degree, I believe they cannot continue their bachelor in a public university, they would have to apply again. There are some exceptions for students that can attend (the rather rare) English-speaking lessons offered in the Greek Universities, and maybe they can get ECTS recognition. Also, in some cases (i.e. Medicine School in AUTh), Greek origin students from Ukrainian Universities were accepted."
- b. "most of them continue at the level which they left but the majority I think that either repeats some semesters or start anew."
- c. "whether the Degree is recognised officially by the Greek state."

What the replies above show is that a) a significant number of Greek HE staff seem to have a rather limited knowledge on this topic, and b) the official recognition of refugee students' prior educational trajectory (in their home country) by the Greek state and its HE ecosystem is mandatory for the way refugee students can continue their studies in Greek HEIs.

In the question "What are the criteria for registering exiled students at your university?", 3 respondents said that they don't know, while the other 4 mentioned as criteria a) the level of English, b) Language level of the country and/or c) Prerequisites in the diploma subject.

To the question "If proficiency in the local language is a prerequisite for enrolment in one of your university's courses, how does your institution assess this proficiency among exiled students?", we observe that the majority of respondents (4 out of 7) do not know, while the rest referred that it is; this is why specific language tests for this target group are drawn up by each university. 1 respondent, although not sure about its reply, stated that "I believe that a diploma or language certificate in English or Greek (above B2 level) suffice, or in case of Greek origin, the origin certificate suffices. Also, since Greek language lessons are provided in each University for foreign students (i.e. Erasmus students) anyone can attend and by exams they can prove language attainment". As highlighted by the most of respondents (5 out of 7), this is a formal procedure carried out by universities.

In the question “Does the university recognise the skills of refugee students (linguistic, subject-specific, etc.) acquired outside university courses (via MOOCs, Open Badges, training in associations, work experience, etc.)?”, quite all respondents (5) stated they don’t know, while 2 replied negatively (No). This also reflects the lack of effective policies and measurements by the Greek HE system regarding skills obtained beyond university courses.

When it comes to obstacles faced by Greek HEIs in recognising skills of exiled and refugee students, 4 respondents replied they don’t know, 2 stated “No obstacles”, while 1 said Yes, however, without specifying which ones.

By looking at the reality of the Greek HE system, and to remedy the lack of constructive feedback from the questionnaire, we observe key obstacles for Greek HEIs, such as legal and administrative barriers (fragmented or inadequate recognition processes, bureaucracy); language barriers (lack of related services and expert staff at HEIs); lack of documentation and unclear pathways to integration.

b. Capacity building

In the question “Does your university offer training courses for its staff to prepare them to welcome exiled students?”, 4 respondents said “No”, 2 that they “don’t know” and only 1 replied “Yes”, without precising which courses.

When it comes to Greek HEIs’ specific resources, replies are presented below:

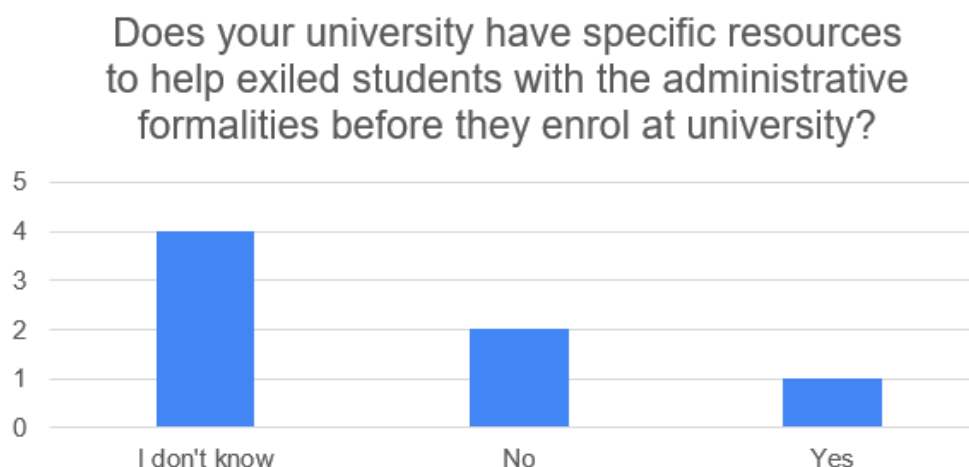


Figure 1. University resources to help exiled students with administrative formalities.

When questioned about “Does your university have any measures in place to support exiled students during their studies?”, 4 out of 7 respondents said they “don’t know”, 1 replied negatively, while 1 said “Yes. Study mentors are in place for all students”.

In terms of language courses, 3 respondents didn’t know if their HEI has put any in place for this target group, while 3 replied positively and one “No”. Additionally, in the question “Does your university offer courses, workshops or support to help exiled students learn about university methodology?”, replies were diverse: 3 respondents said “Yes”, 2 “don’t know” and 2 stated “No”.

To the question of whether there is a system in place to welcome exiled students and introduce them to the various student life services available at the university, there were 3 respondents who replied “Yes”, 3 didn’t know if there is such system and 1 said “No”. Those who replied “Yes”, specified that the system includes: administrative support; educational support/tutoring; digital support; cultural activities; help with finding accommodation; access to the university library and restaurant; access to the information and guidance service of the university; Psycho-medical support service and opportunities for participation in the community life.

With relation to the question “Does your university face any obstacles in setting up support systems for exiled students?”, the majority of respondent didn’t know (4), 1 said “No”, while 2 said “Yes”, stating as main barriers:

- Organisational;
- Policies (municipal, departmental, regional, national)
- Financial
- Lack of human resources.

Finally, in the question “Has your university set up a specific follow-up system for exiled students after they have finished their studies?”, 4 respondents don’t know, 1 stated “No” and 2 replied positively (Yes).

c. Civic engagement

When it comes to the possibility of refugee students getting involved in civic and/or community life, we observe a rather limited information of Greek HE

staff, as most of them either didn't know or replied negatively, and only 1 respondent said "Yes".

To the question "Is civic engagement recognised in the academic career of exiled students (open badges, internships, bonus points, certificates, optional/open courses, etc.)?", we received the following replies (figure 2):

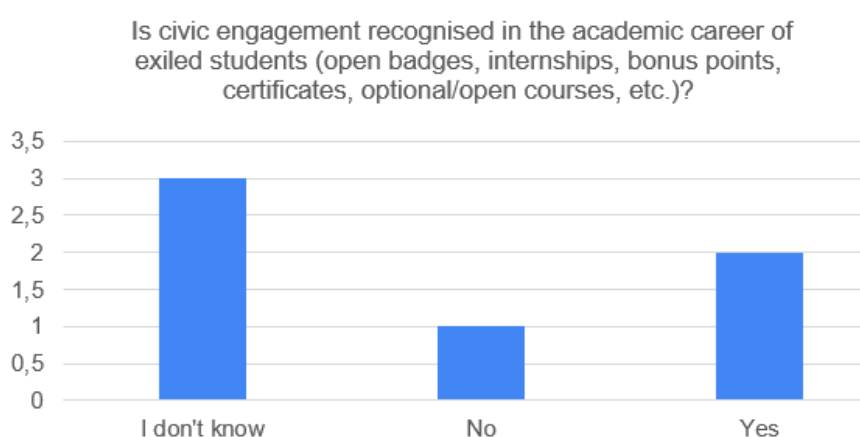


Figure 2. Recognition of civic engagement by Greek HEIs

To the question of whether there is an association or collective of exiled students or for exiled students at your university, 3 respondents said "No", 3 don't know and only 1 said "Yes". Likewise, when it comes to representation of exiled or refugee students in the university decision making bodies, 2 said "don't know", 4 stated "No" and only 1 said "Yes".

In the question "Does your university work with external organisations (companies, NGOs, associations) to promote civic engagement and/or socio-cultural inclusion of exiled students?", 3 replied "Yes" and 4 said that they don't know.

Finally, in the question "Does your university support projects (cultural, artistic, academic, etc.) proposed by exiled students?", the majority of participants didn't know (5), 1 said "Yes" and 1 stated "No". The respondent who replied positively, specified the kind of support projects, namely:

- Administrative;
- Communication/Dissemination of information

3. Key Insights

3. Key insights

One main conclusion to draw from this report is that there is a fragmented and -in some Greek academic communities (HE staff and researchers)- limited information on the measures and policies adopted by Greek HEIs with regards to welcoming and supporting exiled or refugee students. From the replies received and analyses in this report, it becomes evident that most efforts are undertaken by initiative of Greek HEIs, rather than including a common and standardised process for all HEIs. Moreover, since the number of refugee and/or exiled students studying in Greek HEIs seems to be rather limited -in fact, there is a lack of official documentation of their number (Tsitselikis, 2019)-the support measures and mechanisms put in place seem to be known only by HE staff and students who are directly involved in them and not the wider HE community.

When it comes to support measures, Greek HEIs seem to offer language courses to refugee and exiled students as well as digitally-enhanced opportunities to follow courses and expand their skills, such as the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) programme of the University of the Aegean.

Although the questionnaire provided a limited overview of the support system Greek HEIs have put in place for refugee and exiled students, we observe that, once those students overcome the bureaucratic and administrative barriers to their enrollment in Greek HEIs, they are entitled to psychological support as well as in other services offered by universities to their students (e.g. access to the library, restaurant, information desk, cultural and sports activities, etc). Moreover, despite the brief reference by respondents of the questionnaire, thanks to Web2Learn's long collaboration with Greek HEIs, we observe an increasing involvement of NGOs and civil society organisations who collaborate mostly with student associations and communities to host activities and events for the benefit and empowerment of refugee and exiled students (Oikonomou, Zourou, 2023).

Finally, in terms of challenges faced by Greek HEIs in setting up support mechanisms for refugee students, these include primarily:

- a) financial barriers; as limited public funding to tertiary education has affected also HEIs' capacity to effectively respond to the needs of refugee and exiled students;

- b) lack of human resources; from experts to novice people interested in being involved in support services at HEIs, there is a lack of such personnel, mostly due to the lack of funding;
- c) bureaucracy and administrative barriers that slow down the integration and support processes.

4. Suggestions

4. Suggestions

This section includes recommendations and suggestions made by the respondents in the last question of the survey, namely: “Based on your experience, what suggestions would you make to improve the responsiveness of universities in receiving exiled students?”.

All 7 respondents provided targeted recommendations that are summarised below:

- **Adopt a holistic approach to support refugee and exiled students:** 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;
- **HE staff upskilling:** Train personnel for this in an existing administration office, follow protocols and good practices, make absolute priority creating a safe learning and research space, but most of all a safe and inclusive social university space for exiled students;
- **Simplifying skills recognition processes:** If a Ukrainian University has a curriculum based on ECTS according to EU instructions, then Greek Universities should recognise with simpler procedures at a department level all ECTS and let students continue their studies even by attending Greek-speaking lessons. The academic staff could use English as a language of exams (since academic teaching staff at most cases have fluency in English) or facilitate students with written essays or projects in English. In some cases, it would be supportive to pair exiled students with local students to help them.
- **Foster cross-sectoral networks of support with non-academic actors:** Build systems and networks of support to refugee and exiled students (e.g. welcoming and information sessions, workshops, support with courses, student associations).
- **Transferring knowledge from more experienced HEIs to less experienced ones:** The University of the Aegean has a wide refugee and migrant support network. However, refugees seek to meet other

needs and usually leave the island when they are granted asylum. The university is supporting the refugees by all means, through projects and courses, yet they are usually not enrolling as students at the different Faculties.

5. Conclusions

5. Conclusion

This report aimed to bring to the fore the support mechanisms provided to refugee and exiled students at Greek 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.

The analysis of the knowledge and insights shared by Greek HE staff (professors, researchers) is meant to enrich current understanding of best practices, as well as of gaps and challenges faced by Greek HEIs in their effort to welcome and support refugee and exiled students.

Thus, we observe a fragmented HE landscape in Greece, in which some universities are more experienced and prepared to support and integrate refugee students due to their proximity to geographic areas that have been affected by migratory and refugee waves (e.g. Aegean islands), while others are less equipped to face such a reality due to the limited encounter with such issue (Simopoulos & Alexandridis, 2024). As Greece is not a “destination” but a “transit” country for the majority of refugee and exiled students (Pursey, 2015), there is limited data on their integration and support in the Greek HE ecosystem.

Finally, the recommendations provided by the respondents to the survey in Greece highlight key areas for improvement of HEIs’ support mechanisms, including ensuring ongoing funding for such services and simplifying integration processes by reducing bureaucracy and equipping the relevant HE departments with the necessary personnel to undertake such tasks.

6. References

6. References

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