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Support mechanisms for exiled students in Higher Education

POLAND

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Abstract:	In this document we present the support mechanisms for refugee students at higher education institutions in Poland, 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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List of Abbreviations

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

Abbreviations	Description
CRASP	Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools of Poland
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
NAWA	Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange NAWA
UKR	The special status granted to Ukrainian exiled persons in Poland under temporary protection (PESEL UKR)

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Executive Summary

This Report presents the Polish results of the survey conducted online within the Erasmus+ AGILE project on the university strategies and practices to support exiled students in both academic and socio-linguistic terms: recognition of their skills, capacity-building for university staff and facilities, and support for students' civic engagement. Analysis of the collected data from 38 answers from 36 different universities allows to see a more general picture in Poland regarding access and admission of exiled students in Polish universities and the main challenges, as well as universities' efforts in enhancing their capacity to welcome refugees and better respond to their needs before and during the studies. Study shows that the diversity of support for exiled students at most Polish universities covers all the needs within existing support services for international students, without treating them separately which fosters integration but sometimes fails to address specific individual needs related to their status such as war trauma, legal uncertainties, and disrupted education. Institutional preparedness varies, with financial and staffing constraints hindering progress. A strategic, well-funded approach will be essential in ensuring that exiled students not only gain access to education but also succeed in their academic and professional journeys. Based on the research results, we recommend simplifying recognition mechanisms, enhancing language support, increasing awareness of existing procedures, expanding financial and legal assistance, and developing post-graduation career support. While progress is evident, systemic improvements are needed to ensure a more inclusive and responsive higher education system for exiled students.

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

Description of the research¹

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 to learn from them and take measures to increase HEIs' resilience in Europe during future refugee crises.

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 in 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 max. of 4 answers by institution were allowed.

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

Table 1. Structure of the questionnaire.

Section	Description
skills recognitions	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.

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

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.

In this report, we only report on the answers obtained in Poland. All the answers were anonymised. 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).

Research results in Poland

In the case of Poland, potential respondents in target HE institutions (from a list of HE institutions in Poland, members of the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland²) were contacted first in December 2024, with reminders and the addition of participants following in January and February 2025. The emails were sent directly to 118 vice-rectors for studies and students.

We received 38 answers from 36 universities of different types, both public and private, from different cities all around Poland (fig. 1). There are the top five cities where the biggest numbers of respondents come from: Warsaw (8 responses), Krakow (5 responses), Wroclaw (5 responses), Poznan (4 responses), Lublin (3 responses). Then 3 universities from the Silesian Metropolitan Area (Katowice), 2 universities from Gdansk,

² <https://www.krasp.org.pl/en/about-crasp/crasp-member-institution-list>

and 2 Bialystok. Cities like Lodz, Torun, Szczecin, Opole, Kielce, and Slupsk were represented by one university. This map corresponds totally with the development of higher education and the number of universities.

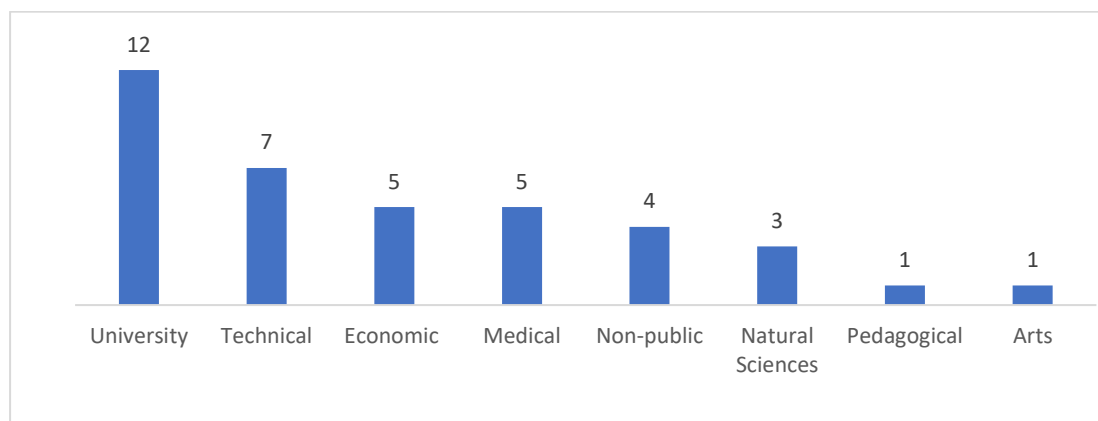


Figure 1. Survey respondents in Poland

The list of respondents includes a diverse group of university officials, ranging from top-level leadership (rectors and vice-rectors) to administrative staff. One-third of respondents were senior leadership: rectors and vice-rectors for student affairs, international relations, education, and development, indicating that key decision-makers overseeing student engagement and international cooperation participated in the survey. A strong presence of senior leaders suggests that the responses reflect institutional perspectives rather than just individual experiences. While leadership positions dominate, there is also participation from mid-level and administrative staff, ensuring a mix of strategic and operational viewpoints.

The other big group of respondents was academic and administrative managers (directors of education support, international cooperation, and student affairs offices) showing involvement from those responsible for policy implementation, as well as admission and recruitment staff. The third group of respondents were general administrative staff who help implement policies on the ground.

The respondent pool is well-positioned to provide insights into university policies regarding exiled students, civic engagement, and institutional support.

2. Results

2. Results

2.1. Skills recognition

Respondents stressed that the admission process for refugee students in Polish universities follows general legal regulations and internal university admission rules applicable to all international applicants but can vary based on the field of study.

The admission process for exiled students in Polish universities depends on the chosen field of study and is regulated generally on the national level by the Law on Higher Education and Science and specifically by each university within its institutional autonomy. Key aspects of the procedure include recognition of prior education, managed by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA)³ and the Ministry of Education, it is important particularly for secondary education documents unless they are automatically recognised. The process of recognition (pol. nostryfikacja – nostrification) is an administrative procedure that verifies the level of education obtained abroad, allowing for further studies in Poland, it applies to all foreigners, including exiled students. If a diploma is not automatically recognised, applicants must obtain a decision from the Local Education Authority (pol. Kurator Oświaty) confirming their diploma's validity for higher education in Poland. Documents must also have apostille or consular legalisation for authentication. However, for refugees there are special provisions: students who hold refugee status, temporary protection (e.g., for Ukrainians with PESEL UKR), or international protection, can have their education level confirmed through an administrative decision, even if they lack formal diplomas. Some respondents mentioned the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. This international tool helps verify qualifications when documentation is incomplete or missing, providing a standardised document explaining the probable level of education achieved.

The collected data highlights the different institutional admission procedures for exiled students in Poland. Application/admissions platform (50%) is the most common method as a standardised online system for processing applications. Tests/Examinations (45%) indicate that many institutions require knowledge or competency assessments. Interviews (42%) show that a significant portion of universities assess exiled candidates through direct interaction. Other (8%) procedures for recognising the qualifications acquired by exiled students before arriving in Poland include demand of the language proficiency certificate/proof, depending on their chosen study program, conducting of

³ <https://nawa.gov.pl/uznawalnosc/kontynuacja-nauki-w-polsce/studia-i-stopnia-lub-studia-jednolite>

the recognition of prior learning, and formal comparison of study programs to assess the applicant's knowledge and qualifications.

The survey data shows that 79% of the surveyed Polish universities have procedures in place for recognising qualifications acquired by exiled students before arriving in Poland as the host country, while 21% do not.

Concerning the level of studies, one-third of respondents (34%) note that exiled students admitted to Polish universities may continue their studies at the same level they finished or were studying at in their home country, showing that a significant portion of students can resume their studies without major disruptions. Only 8% mentioned that exiled students have to repeat one or two years, and 5% indicated that exiled students must restart their studies entirely, which suggests that some students face challenges in recognition of their previous education and cannot transfer their credits. The positive outcome was that no one responded "I don't know," which implies clarity and awareness of the procedures among respondents.

Most responses (53%) that the admission and recognition of prior education for exiled students in Polish universities depend on multiple factors:

- study program specifics and curricular differences: some universities or faculties have different policies regarding recognition, making each case unique. A significant factor is the comparison of study programs between the home and host universities. If major differences exist, students may need to complete additional courses or even repeat a year.
- degree recognition: if a student has already obtained a Bachelor's degree, they can generally proceed to a Master's program. However, the eligibility and required documentation depend on Polish regulations.
- process of transfer of students from foreign universities: if exiled students proceed with this procedure, they may face a process of nostrification (diploma recognition) or subject validation, which determines whether they can continue at the same level or need to retake courses.
- individual assessment: decisions regarding placement in a specific semester or year are often made by faculty deans based on transcripts, subject compatibility, and sometimes additional tests.
- legal and institutional regulations: admission to the first year is based on secondary school completion and compliance with university-specific Senate resolutions.

The results indicate three key requirements for registering exiled students in Polish universities: English language proficiency level (B2), Polish language proficiency level (the

language of the country, B2), and prerequisites in the diploma subject, suggesting that the academic background of the student is important for admission.

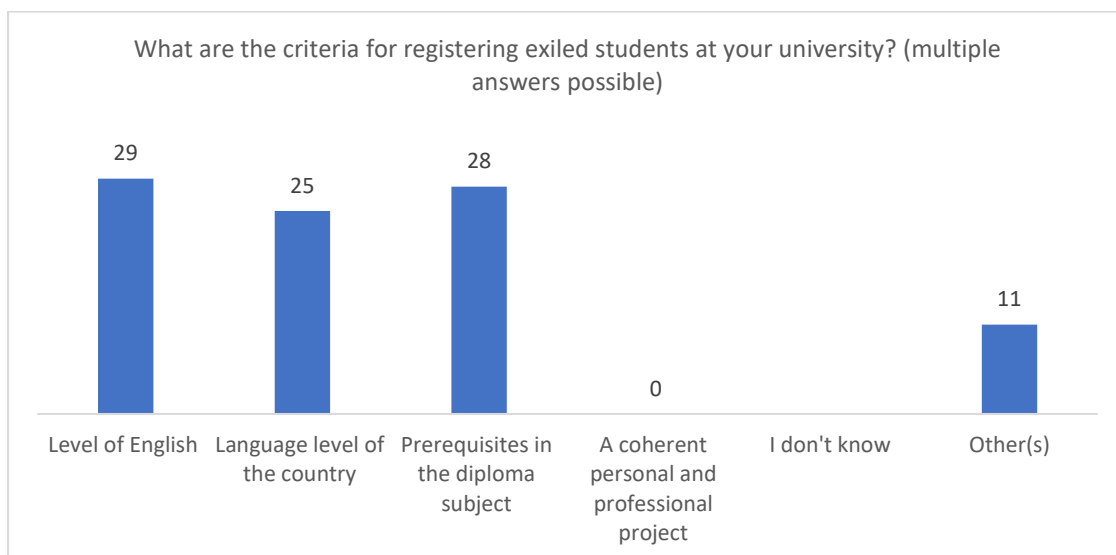


Figure 2. Requirements for registering exiled students

Level B2 of English or Polish (depending on the language of the study program) is verified through appropriate documentation (the majority rely on diplomas or language certificates from third parties, IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge exams, Polish Language Certificates⁴) or to be checked by the University (29% of respondents favour language tests administered by the university, 13% prefer in-house interviews, a more personalised approach, while 10% mention other methods).

However, Polish universities stress the insufficient proficiency in the language of instruction in exiled students/candidates. Universities require students to demonstrate their language skills during the admissions process, but many struggle to meet the necessary level:

Insufficient knowledge of the language of instruction required for studying, which is verified during the recruitment stage. (POL - Niewystarczająca znajomość języka wykładowego niezbędnego do podjęcia studiów, którego weryfikacja następuje na etapie rekrutacji.)

⁴ <https://certyfikatpolski.pl/>

Even when students provide language certificates, these do not always accurately reflect their actual skills required for the studies, because the complexity of academic content presents further challenges for students.

Other requirements include confirmation of the legal status (e.g. temporary protection/ UKR for Ukrainians, refugees, etc.): applicants must confirm their legal status and provide relevant documents, including educational credentials, and documents and education certificates (e.g., secondary school certificates), that may be recognised under international agreements or via Polish recognition authorities. Additionally, some universities may also check personal, cultural skills as a basis for academic and professional success of students.

Exiled students must submit their online applications and meet the deadlines. Financial aspects and study funding options (according to their status) must also be clarified during the admission process.

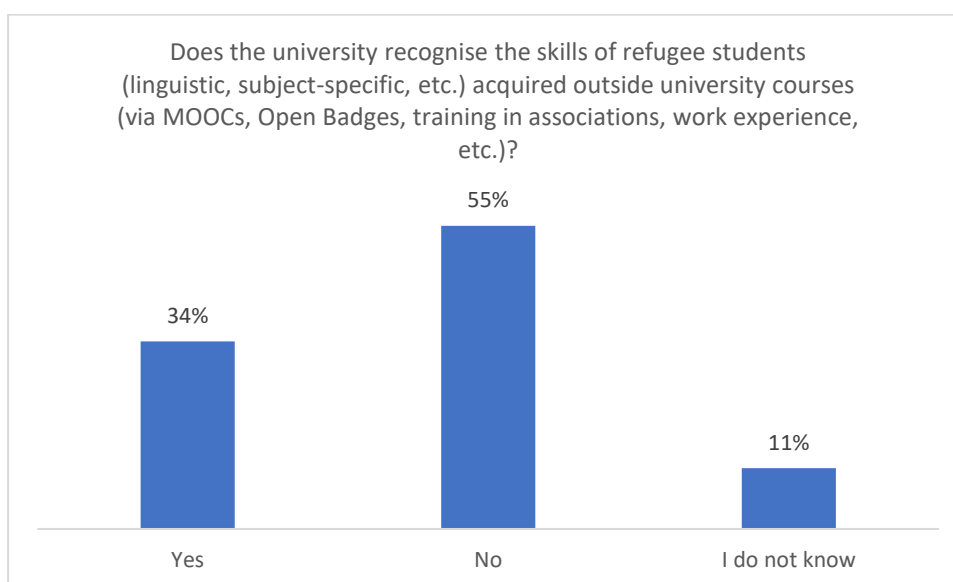


Figure 3. Recognition of skills.

The results of the survey regarding recognition of the skills of refugee students acquired outside of university show a clear trend:

- 55% (21 responses) - a majority of respondents believe that the university does not recognise the skills of exiled students gained through non-university courses or in informal education. This indicates a possible gap in the institution's policies or practices, suggesting that the university may not have a system in place for evaluating and validating skills gained outside of traditional higher education.

settings, particularly for refugee students who may face additional barriers to formal education.

- 34% (13 responses) prove that the university recognises the skills acquired by refugee students through alternative learning pathways, such as MOOCs, Open Badges, training in associations, and work experience. While it's positive that some students' non-traditional learning is acknowledged, the percentage suggests that this recognition is far from widespread.
- 11% (4 responses) - the remaining respondents are unsure whether such recognition occurs. "I do not know" category could imply a lack of clarity or awareness about the university's stance or practices regarding the recognition of skills developed in a non-traditional academic way.

It should be mentioned that universities usually regulate recognition learning outcomes from informal and non-formal education at the institutional level by the Senate Resolution for all students, based on the recognition of prior learning framework, it applies also to exiled students. Respondent mentioned that alignment of any non-formal learning / skills with syllabus and learning outcomes is the most important condition for the recognition process.

"[we can recognise] 1) professional work; 2) business activities; 3) certified training, courses, and workshops; 4) volunteering and social activities; 5) internships and apprenticeships; 6) various forms of self-education). (POL 1) wykonywanej pracy zawodowej; 2) prowadzonej działalności gospodarczej; 3) certyfikowanych szkoleń, kursów i warsztatów; 4) wolontariatu i działalności społecznej; 5) praktyk i staży; 6) różnych form samokształcenia)

"[...] accepts certificates confirming the possession of such skills/activities, however, candidates have to meet general admission requirements. Certificates confirming such skills/activities may be used as additional, supporting documents."

However, this option has not been used widely so far:

The university is prepared for such a possibility, but so far no one has used the procedure for validating learning outcomes (POL - Uczelnia jest przygotowana na taką

możliwość, ale dotychczas jeszcze nikt nie skorzystał z procedury potwierdzania efektów uczenia się)

Polish HEIs defined many barriers in conducting the procedures of recognition of the skills of exiled students, ranging from bureaucratic to financial and linguistic obstacles.

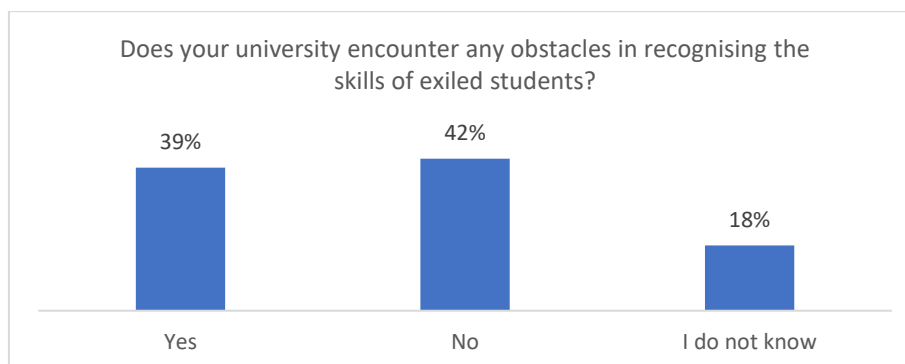


Figure 4. Barriers in skills recognition.

One of the most significant challenges is the lack of necessary documents related to prior education experience, academic achievement, skills and qualifications acquired, and the legalisation problem. Respondents mention that many students struggle with incomplete or fragmented records, making it difficult for universities to verify their qualifications. As one respondent stated:

Lack of documents or possessing incomplete and insufficient documents for nostrification, recognition of secondary education, or confirmation of completed studies at a specific level. (POL - "Brak dokumentów lub posiadanie dokumentów fragmentarycznych, niewystarczających w celu nostryfikacji, uznania wykształcenia średniego bądź potwierdzenia ukończenia studiów na określonym poziomie.")

Universities observe that exiled students have financial difficulties that limit their ability to pay for education, translations, and legal processes. Respondents mention that exiled students often struggle to collect and submit the necessary documents within deadlines, especially with required translations and certifications:

Difficulties for applicants in gathering all required documents (with appropriate confirmations) and their translations within the required timeframe (POL - "Kłopoty osób aplikujących ze zgromadzeniem w wymaganym

terminie wszystkich wymaganych dokumentów (z odpowiednimi potwierdzeniami) i ich tłumaczeń.")

Many respondents pointed to complicated national regulations that create barriers for exiled students and lack of a centralised database for recognition. Additionally, Universities face difficulties navigating unclear legal frameworks and bureaucratic challenges. Additionally, the lack of formal refugee status or documented protection due to external administrative procedures can be a barrier for students.

Lack of formal refugee status/documentated protection due to procedures in external offices. (POL - "Brak formalnego statusu uchodźcy/ochrony potwierdzonej dokumentalnie ze względu na procedury w urzędach zewnętrznych.")

2.2. Capacity building

More than half of the surveyed universities (55%) offered their staff training/workshops to prepare them for welcoming and supporting refugee students. However, a significant percentage of respondents (40%) indicated that no such activities were conducted at their institution, and 5% of respondents were unaware of any such initiatives.

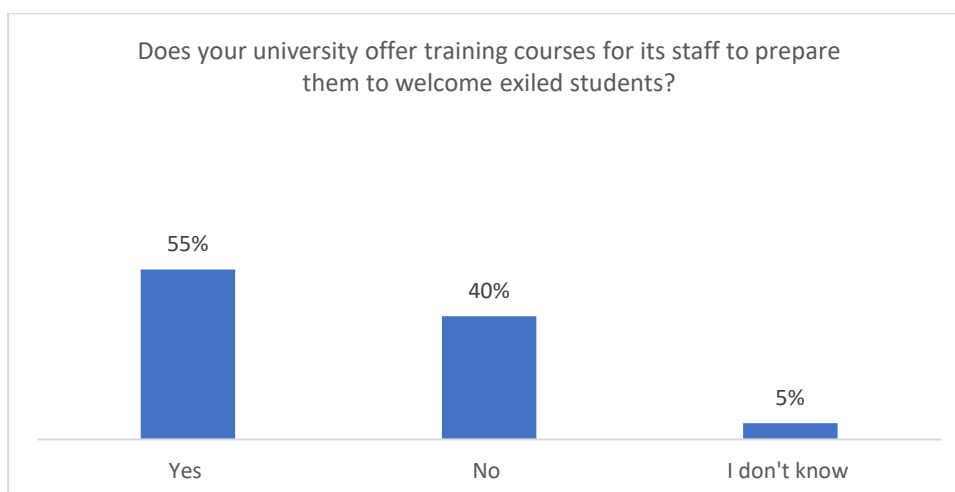


Figure 5. Training courses for staff.

The study showed that to be better prepared for receiving refugees, the university staff participated in training and workshops covering three main areas: language learning and communication methods with foreigners, multicultural management and intercultural competence development, and administrative support for foreigners.

Table 2. Thematic areas of courses for staff.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION	MULTICULTURALISM	ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
<p>language courses (face-to-face and online) mainly in English</p> <p>methods of communication with people with poor knowledge of Polish or English</p> <p>use of modern tools to communicate in a foreign language</p> <p>soft skills and cultural differences as well as communication with generations X, Y, and Z.</p> <p>Module4NCU programme, which can help to obtain certain competences by employees to work the exiled students</p> <p>training as part of Welcome to Poland (NAWA) projects</p>	<p>intercultural communication</p> <p>training on cultural differences</p> <p>cross-cultural competence training</p> <p>addressing discrimination and implicit bias as part of the Equal Opportunities Plan (GEP)</p>	<p>recruitment of international students</p> <p>changes in the regulations on recruitment and service for foreign students in Poland</p> <p>legalisation of stay of foreigners (meetings with representatives of the Voivodeship Office)</p> <p>"EQUAL training for Poland" organised by the Norwegian centre ENIC-NARIC in cooperation with NAWA as part of the "European Qualifications – Refugees and Recognition 4" (EQUAL) project</p> <p>dedicated to the recognition of the education of refugees and other persons who, for reasons beyond their control, cannot submit documents confirming completed education in the recruitment process.</p>

Most of the surveyed universities (68%) offered various forms of support for exiled students to facilitate the completion of administrative formalities before their admission to studies, but in about one-third of the universities, there were no solutions dedicated exclusively to this group. If such assistance was offered at the surveyed universities, it was provided by general organisational units, such as: the Admissions Office, the Centre for International Cooperation, the Student Affairs Office, the International Mobility Department and the so-called Welcome Centre/Welcome Point dedicated to foreign candidates. Administrative support in Polish universities included:

- information in several languages, including Polish, English, Russian, and Ukrainian

- access to electronic information systems and University websites in different languages with virtual tours
- dedicated hotlines or e-mail addresses
- individual advice from the staff
- support in legalising stay and recognition of their education documents.

Most of the surveyed universities (71%) had solutions to support refugee students during their studies, 24% did not foresee such activities, and 5% of respondents had no knowledge in this area. During the studies, Polish Universities provide support for exiled students of different kinds, including financial assistance, organisational and administrative from various university units, adaptation measures and further support to facilitate the integration process of refugee students in the long term perspective (Table 3.)

Table 3. Types of support for exiled students in Polish universities.

Type of support	Examples
Financial support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - social scholarships and social grants for students with special UKR status (at the request of the student), according to the law - Rector's scholarship for students in their senior years - establishing a dedicated scholarship fund - using the financial assistance office or the international cooperation office
Administrative and organisational support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assistance from the University services: Student Affairs Offices, Student Service Centre, Student Support Centre - Dean's offices, faculty employees - Careers services - special support sections for international students within international cooperation departments
Academic life support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Welcome Centre/Point - organisation of adaptation days - training on the students' rights and obligations - accommodation in the Student Dormitory - support from student organisations: Erasmus Student Network, International Students Association, International Student Support (few hours weekly) - Buddy Program - mentoring programs

Further support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mental support: meetings with a psychologist, support groups, psychological workshops - language courses at various levels of advancement - integration meetings - consultations with educational and intercultural counsellors - career counselling - cooperation with non-governmental organisations in the field of integration and adaptation courses
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The surveyed universities pointed out that refugee students were treated on the same terms as domestic and foreign students during their studies, and similar support is provided to all university students.

According to the data, 61% of the surveyed universities offered specialised language courses for exiled students and 58% offered courses, workshops or other forms of support to help refugee students get acquainted with the system of studies and integrate with the host university. Lack of access to such support in one-third of surveyed universities may have made it difficult for refugee students to function effectively in academia and everyday life in the host country.

Most of the surveyed universities (92%) had a welcome program and mechanisms to familiarise refugee students with the opportunities available at the university, and only 8% did not introduce such solutions.

The data in Fig. 6 shows that universities with such solutions (35 out of 38) focused primarily on familiarising refugee students with administrative issues, health services, and the functioning of the university library. There was an emphasis on integration activities involving students in the cultural and social life of the university, but they were less frequent in sports initiatives. On the other hand, a smaller number of universities familiarised refugee students with employment opportunities and obtaining legal aid, as well as social services such as accommodation and food. A low level of information about digital support can be noticed.

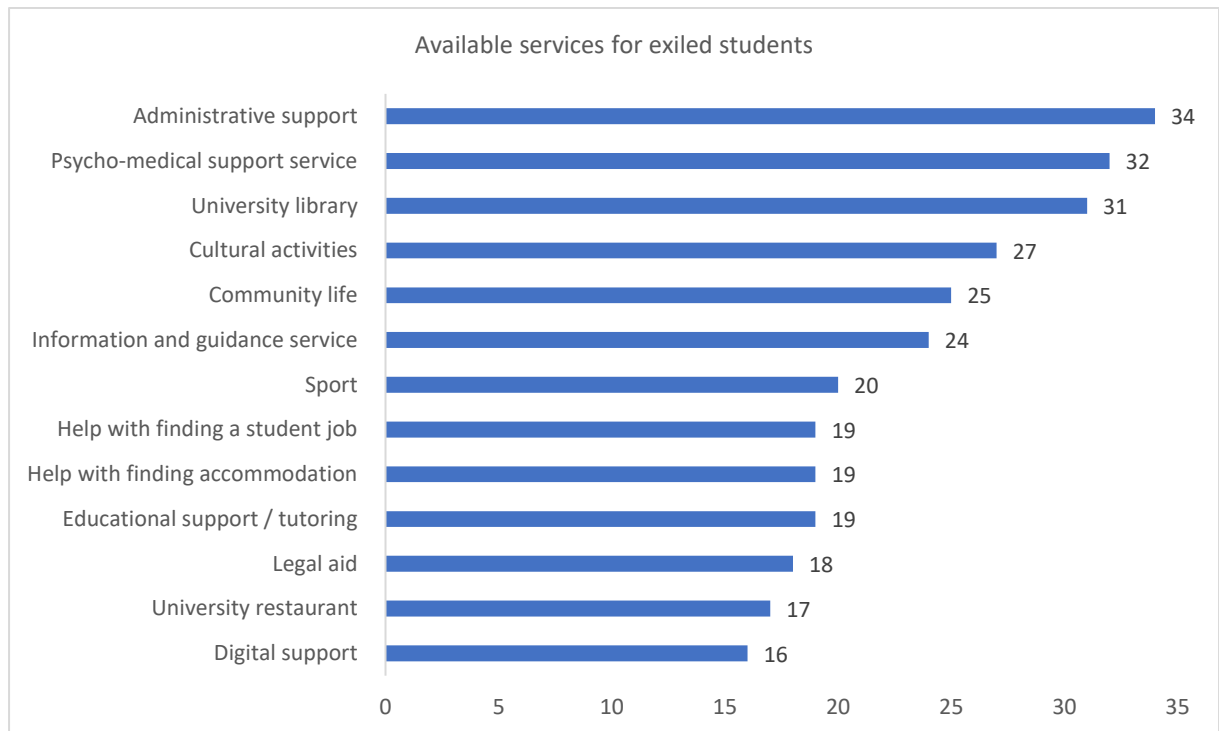


Figure 6. Services available for exiled students.

Polish universities (82%) did not set up special systems of support for exiled students after they graduated. Only a few (16%) decided on such a supporting solution.

The majority of respondents (61%) admitted that they encountered obstacles in creating support systems for refugee students, 24% of universities did not experience these problems, and 16% of respondents did not have enough information (Fig. 7).

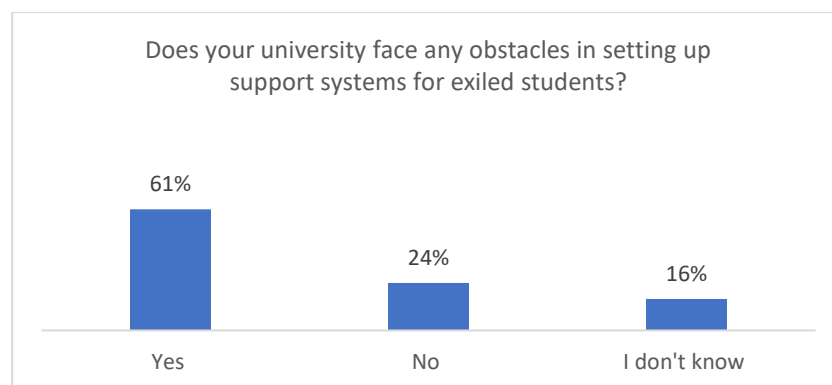


Figure 7. Obstacles in setting up support systems for exiled students at university.

The most frequently indicated obstacle in creating support systems for refugee students was financial constraints (21 universities out of 23). This may significantly impact activities

related to supporting students with refugee experience and their integration into academic life. Staff shortages were indicated by 16 universities. The effective implementation of support schemes may have been hampered by insufficient staffing. Only 8 universities indicated barriers resulting from political and legal regulations at the local, regional or national level. A relatively small number of HEIs (6) reported organisational problems as a significant barrier. This means that in most HEIs their internal structures and procedures have been adapted to the implementation of support programmes.

2.3. Civic engagement

The survey results highlight the level of civic and institutional support available to exiled students at the university. While there are some positive indicators of engagement, there are also significant gaps in formal representation and institutionalised recognition:

- High awareness of civic engagement opportunities: a majority (31 out of 38) of respondents reported that their university informs exiled students about opportunities to participate in civic and community life. This suggests a strong communication channel in place, though a small number (4 respondents) indicated that this information is not provided.
- Weak recognition of civic commitment as an academic activity: while 19 respondents confirmed that civic commitment is recognized in some form (such as certificates, internships, or bonus points), 11 stated that it is not, and 8 were unsure. This indicates that although some initiatives exist, they may not be widespread or clearly communicated.
- Lack of associations for exiled students: only 6 respondents reported the existence of an association for or by exiled students, whereas 24 stated that there is none. This reveals a major gap in student-led support structures, which could hinder the sense of belonging and advocacy for this group.
- Low inclusion of exiled students into the university decision-making bodies: exiled students appear to be largely underrepresented in university decision-making, with only 9 confirming their participation and 23 stating that they are not included. The lack of representation could lead to policies that do not fully address their specific needs.
- Collaboration with external organisations: while 20 respondents acknowledged partnerships between their university and external organizations (NGOs, companies, associations), 9 said no, and another 9 were uncertain. This mixed response suggests that these partnerships may exist but are not highly visible or accessible to all students.

- Support for student-proposed projects: a significant number (25 respondents) indicated that their university supports projects initiated by exiled students, which is a positive sign of institutional backing. However, 6 respondents said no, and 7 were unsure, indicating room for improvement in transparency and accessibility.

Polish universities provide different kinds of support to student-led activities focused on or led by exiled students, mostly by spreading awareness of initiatives, communication activities and dissemination of information (22 votes), logistical support (19 votes), administrative support (17 votes) and financial support (11 votes). Low response to financial support indicates a possible funding gap that could limit the scope and sustainability of student-led initiatives (maybe not only exiled students).

The results showed the need to strengthen exiled student representation, which would not just be a task for university authorities, but for students themselves and student governments. Given the lack of exiled student groups, HEIs could facilitate the creation of support networks or associations of exiled students or associations working for and with refugees. Student governments should take care of the diversity of the student population and work towards including exiled students in decision-making bodies to ensure their voices are heard.

3. Key insights

3. Key insights

The survey results show that overall, while some exiled students can continue their studies with little interruption, for most, the outcome depends on individual assessments and institutional policies. They reflect also that Polish universities have a mix of standardised and personalised admission processes, with some institutions possibly needing to improve accessibility for exiled applicants. Each exiled student's admission and continuation of studies in Poland is evaluated individually, based on program compatibility, prior academic records, and legal regulations. In the admission process of exiled students, the primary focus is on language proficiency (both English and Polish) and academic qualifications.

Polish Universities acknowledge the importance of recognising prior learning and informal education for both exiled students and regular candidates. Recognition mechanisms are diverse, ranging from interviews and supplementary certificates to formalised resolutions and University Senate decisions. While some institutions have established procedures for validating skills gained outside formal education, the actual implementation of these mechanisms remains limited.

In the Polish higher education system various types of prior learning can be considered for academic recognition, including work experience, professional employment, training, volunteer work and social activities, internships and apprenticeships, self-education and independent learning. Some universities conduct interviews to assess prior learning, considering relevant experience in both academic and professional contexts. In cases where prior learning relates to language proficiency, universities may assess students through direct interviews rather than relying solely on formal certificates. Some institutions accept certificates confirming prior learning but require students to meet standard admission criteria. These documents can serve as additional supporting evidence for the admissions process. Beyond technical and academic skills, universities also acknowledge language skills and cultural competencies, including communication skills, understanding of national culture, and competencies aligned with the learning outcomes defined in specific study programs. Recognition of civic engagement for exiled students remains low.

Despite the availability of recognition processes, the uptake of these procedures seems low, possibly due to a lack of awareness, complexity, or communication gaps. It remains supplementary rather than central to the admission or qualification process. More formalised recognition (certificates, internships, academic credits) could encourage higher participation.

To enhance accessibility, institutions should raise awareness among students about existing admission mechanisms and promote the availability of these recognition procedures to refugee students, ensuring they understand how to leverage their informal learning experiences. By doing so, universities can ensure a more flexible and inclusive admissions process that acknowledges diverse educational and professional backgrounds.

The study showed that surveyed Polish universities provided exiled students with comprehensive support that included both the preparation of academic and administrative staff and mechanisms facilitating admission, adaptation and daily functioning of students. Universities provide dedicated training for staff in intercultural communication and improve administrative processes related to student admissions. Nevertheless, the level of preparedness for working with exiled students is quite different. While some institutions had developed advanced support mechanisms, others lacked a comprehensive approach.

Universities highlighted that the support offered to refugee students was often the same as that provided to other international and domestic students. This included participation in the same integration programs, language courses, and administrative support mechanisms. Administrative assistance was generally provided by the same organisational units, such as International Student Offices, International Mobility Centres, or Welcome Centres. Language courses for exiled students were, in most cases, part of the general offer available to all international students rather than a dedicated program tailored to their specific needs.

In terms of academic and integration support, Polish universities focused on general activities such as adaptation programs, open days, and mentoring, without addressing the unique challenges faced by refugees. While integrating refugees into general support systems helped prevent social exclusion, the lack of targeted initiatives could lead to difficulties in education, language barriers, psychological challenges, and problems with acclimatisation to a new environment.

Psychological support was available, but not all universities implemented comprehensive programs addressing the specific experiences of refugees. Although psychological consultations and support groups were offered, the data does not indicate to what extent they were adapted to the needs of this group. Universities also faced challenges in providing specialised assistance, such as therapists experienced in working with individuals affected by war trauma or offering support in refugees' native languages.

Dedicated support for exiled students after graduation is not a common practice in Polish universities as currently, universities focus primarily on recruitment and academic

integration, with less attention given to assistance in entering the job market and broader social integration.

The main difficulties faced by the surveyed universities were limited financial resources and staff shortages, which hindered the development of more extensive programs tailored to refugee students' needs. In some cases, administrative system inflexibility and legal barriers related to admission and refugee status also posed challenges.

The research findings indicate that Polish universities are taking significant steps toward creating an inclusive academic environment. However, the scale and effectiveness of these efforts vary across institutions. A key strength is the willingness to implement new support mechanisms and the engagement of the academic community. However, financial and staffing constraints, along with the lack of consistent long-term support strategies, remain challenges. Further development of support systems requires a strategic approach, stable funding, and better adaptation of existing structures to the specific needs of refugee students.

4. Suggestions

4. Suggestions

To improve the responsiveness of the Polish Universities in receiving exiled students, respondents highlighted the need for greater institutional support, financial assistance, simplified admission procedures, mental health services, and community integration initiatives. On the one hand, it is important to treat exiled students as a separate group from regular international students and recognise the need to develop separate procedures and support systems for them, and on the other hand, ensure equality of attitudes and opportunities for all students.

Based on the analysis of the survey, there are the following ten priority actions for improvement of institutional policies:

1. Universities should make efforts to expand financial support and scholarships

Providing financial assistance for refugee students is a top concern for Polish universities, thus financial barriers were repeatedly mentioned as a significant challenge. Respondents suggested providing targeted scholarships and emergency grants.

"Providing targeted scholarships, tuition waivers, or emergency grants can help exiled students access education without financial strain."

Additionally, there was a call for increased financial resources for the units dealing with refugee students:

"Extra funding for the International Students Support Centre will serve to enhance integration activities for students with fewer opportunities."

2. Universities could implement more flexible admission procedures for exiled students

Many respondents highlighted the difficulties exiled students face in meeting admission requirements due to missing documents or unfamiliar procedures. Universities were urged to simplify the application process and provide flexible document recognition. Bureaucratic barriers should be reduced to ease entry. Formal recognition of non-formal learning could be made more central to the admissions process rather than being supplementary, which would give more weight to skills acquired in non-formal education, particularly for refugee students who may not have formal credentials.

"Simplify application procedures, offer flexible document requirements, and provide a fast-track path for recognising prior learning."

Some respondents proposed the introduction of preparatory programs:

"Universities should have some options for a 'zero' year (under special government scholarships) for refugee students, with more flexible learning systems (hybrid, online), as well as language support."

3. Universities should provide mental health support for exiled students

Better communication and more visibility for support structures at the universities for exiled students would be beneficial, especially psychological support in a short- and long-term perspective, with involvement of professional institutions:

"Many exiled students experience trauma. Universities should offer counselling services, peer mentorship programs, and cultural integration initiatives to ease their transition."

"PTSD and trauma psychological treatment and counselling services are important. It would be better if such a program is implemented by a specialised institution and has long-term character."

4. Universities should establish dedicated support teams and train them

Respondents highlighted the importance of having designated university personnel focused on assisting exiled students and addressing their challenges. Training on crisis communication and refugee support for this staff is highly recommended:

"There is a need to have a dedicated team dealing with information, promotion, and care for exiled students."

"Proper training of academic and administrative staff on how to work with students in crisis situations."

5. Universities should improve access to language courses

When language barriers remain a major challenge, Universities have all resources and professional staff to deliver language training, especially in the Polish language as a part

of their study or adaptation program. Government support for this kind of University activity is needed.

6. Universities should strengthen their collaboration with other higher education and research institutions, NGOs and international organisations

Working with external organisations can enhance support mechanisms and the quality of response targeted to the exiled students. Universities could cooperate more with NGOs, government agencies, and international organisations (e.g. UNHCR) regarding support for refugees in higher education as well as exchange of good practices and mutual learning. This kind of partnership would be important for improvement of the national and local policies:

"Collaborate with NGOs, government agencies, and universities—both locally and internationally—to identify the needs of exiled students and determine how different institutions can provide support."

"We need to gather experiences among universities and national governments, as well as EU bodies, so that the policies and funding would have common grounds and goals."

7. Fostering a sense of community and inclusion is crucial

There was broad agreement on the need to support exiled students in adapting to the academic environment. Recommendations included tutoring programs, career counselling, integration workshops, peer-led initiatives:

"Development of mentoring and tutoring programs from the first year of study could facilitate the adaptation process of refugees and support foreign students in solving academic and personal problems."

"Greater involvement of local student organisations in integration activities for refugee students."

Exiled students should feel welcomed and included. To foster a sense of belonging, respondents recommended initiatives that connect exiled students with the broader university community.

"Social actions to sensitise the university community to the needs of exiles, their presence in the academic community."

"Creating confidence and communication workshops, giving students a voice, and creating a culture of listening."

8. Universities should enhance legal and administrative assistance

Providing legal support would help students navigate their status. Exiled students often struggle with legal and administrative issues, such as documentation and residency requirements. Respondents suggested establishing dedicated legal aid centres at universities:

"Set up local university legal assistance centres, funded by the regional government, to help students navigate formal procedures."

9. Universities should develop bridging and remedial educational programs

Bridging programs can ease students into university education.

"Development of courses to prepare students for the study process and remedial classes in the form of e-learning courses for refugees with learning problems."

Better outreach efforts were seen as crucial in ensuring that exiled students are aware of available resources and support systems.

"Promoting the possibility of getting previous education confirmed, making students part of the community through various inclusion events."

10. Universities should advocate for national policy changes

Long-term solutions require systemic reforms, Universities should raise their voice in implementing necessary changes:

"More flexible national regulations regarding the possibility of undertaking studies in Poland and the recognition of educational documents."

Overall, the systemic improvements are necessary to enhance access to higher education for exiled students in Poland. Universities and policymakers should:

- consider developing clearer recognition mechanisms to assess prior education more efficiently,
- create a centralised database for foreign qualifications to streamline the verification process,
- provide additional language support programs to help students overcome linguistic barriers,
- advocate for more inclusive legal frameworks at the national and EU levels to simplify enrolment processes,
- expand financial assistance to support exiled students with documentation, legal procedures, and language preparation.

Addressing these areas, Polish universities will be able to significantly improve their responsiveness and support for exiled students, ensuring a more inclusive and effective academic environment.

5. Conclusion

5. Conclusion

The study proved that Polish universities are making efforts to support exiled students, but challenges remain in ensuring accessible admissions and tailored assistance. While institutions recognise prior learning and informal education, these mechanisms remain supplementary rather than central. Low awareness and administrative complexity limit their effectiveness, requiring clearer processes and better promotion.

Support services for refugees often mirror those for international students, fostering integration but often failing to address specific needs such as war trauma, legal uncertainties, and disrupted education. Psychological assistance and post-graduation support remain insufficient. Institutional preparedness varies, with financial and staffing constraints hindering progress.

To improve their responsiveness, universities should enhance financial support, simplify admission procedures, expand language and psychological assistance, and foster greater institutional collaboration. Establishing dedicated support teams, bridging programs, and legal aid services would improve access. Greater national policy flexibility is also necessary for smoother admission and integration processes.

While progress is evident, systemic improvements are needed to ensure a more inclusive and responsive higher education system for exiled students. A balanced approach – acknowledging both their unique challenges and the need for equal opportunities – can help universities create a more effective and supportive academic environment.

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6. References

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