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Support mechanisms for exiled students in Higher Education

UKRAINE

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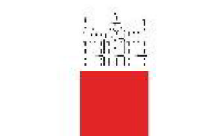
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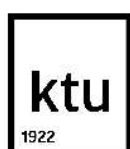
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List of Abbreviations

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
IDP	Internally Displaced Person

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Executive Summary

In this document we present the support mechanisms for refugee student, who are internally displaced persons, at higher education institutions in Ukraine, according to responses collected through an online questionnaire survey of these institutions. The analysis also mentions the most common difficulties experienced by institutions in their work with this specific audience, as well as their suggestions for more sustainable and continuous work. In this particular national context, there is a need to continuously monitor the aspects of skills recognition and effective integration of these students, as well as to adapt these conditions to new challenges and identify gaps in the implementation of civic engagement mechanisms for higher education, in particular Ukrainian universities, which are at constant risk due to the impact of the war.

The AGILE project

This publication is a result of the EU-funded AGILE project (“Higher education resilience in refugee crises: forging social inclusion through capacity building, civic engagement and skills recognition”, <http://www.agileproject-erasmus.eu/>), whose aim is to increase resilience of HE systems to address the ongoing needs of refugees through social participation and skills recognition. The AGILE project aims to enrich HE curricula by proposing new pedagogical designs that encourage grassroots and digitally-enhanced actions in both formal and informal learning environments.

The project is coordinated by the University Paris 8. The consortium is made up of six universities (University Paris 8, Bordeaux Montaigne University, University of Hamburg, University of Ljubljana, Lviv Polytechnic National University, Kaunas University of Technology), one think-tank (Polish Rectors Foundation) and one business partner (Web2Learn) who specialises in open recognition systems and social learning.

1. Introduction

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 during refugee crises 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 in the several languages of the partner universities involved in AGILE and English. For Ukrainian higher education institutions, the questionnaire also contained a clarification of the target group, namely, it focused on students who are internally displaced persons. 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 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 (IDP 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 (IDP students) to participate in the academic, civic and community lives.

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

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

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

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

In the case of Ukraine, the potential participants of the survey were higher education institutions of Ukraine that have been accepting internally displaced students since the beginning of the war in 2022, as well as higher education institutions that have the status of displaced universities¹ (Law of Ukraine, 2016). Representatives of these universities received the first messages in December 2024, and reminders and additional messages were sent in January and February 2025. The emails were sent directly to 45 email accounts, which were either private accounts of the representatives of these HEIs and their participation was agreed upon in direct communication (41 of them), or to official email accounts of higher education institutions that support IDP students or, more broadly, international students (4 of them). Some of the emails did not receive a response because they could have been delayed and not sent by the relevant survey deadline. Also, when analyzing the survey results, it was found that some of the responses that were confirmed as sent were not in the total sample, which can be explained by technical difficulties for Ukrainian respondents to access the survey platform with the need to use a VPN. We also cannot rule out the influence of the crisis situation in Ukraine, caused by the war, on the possibility of timely responses to the survey.

21 responses were received from 10 different universities, mostly from people in leadership positions who are either directly involved in shaping opportunities for the effective integration of IDP students into the educational process or who have the status of a displaced university themselves, which means they have experience and specialized knowledge of the local realities in which they work.

In this report, we present only the responses received in the Ukrainian context. All responses were anonymous. To read the responses from other countries and the general overview, which includes responses from all AGILE members, we suggest reading the reports available at <https://agileproject-erasmus.eu/> (section: Results).

¹ A displaced educational institution is a state, municipal or private institution that, during the period of temporary occupation or the anti-terrorist operation, by the decision of the founder, changed its location from the temporarily occupied territory or from settlements where public authorities temporarily do not exercise their powers to settlements in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian authorities

2. Results

2. Results

2.1 Skills recognition

The section “Skills recognition” is the first part of the survey. 15 respondents indicated that their institutions have procedures for recognizing previous qualifications of refugee students, 4 respondents indicated that there are no such procedures, and 2 respondents indicated that they did not know this information. The majority of these procedures relate to the recognition of foreign diplomas (9 responses, with a clarification to 2 responses about submitting a motivation letter). 3 respondents indicated that tests and exams are used, 1 respondent answered that methods of overcoming academic differences are used when re-enrolling in disciplines of the same content and similar ECTS credits, 6 respondents left this field blank because they are representatives of a displaced higher education institution. Therefore, 5 institutions reported that they have a platform for special applications from refugee/IDP students, 6 institutions have testing procedures, and 3 institutions conduct interviews with candidates. 2 institutions use the method of overcoming academic differences. Some universities use several mechanisms simultaneously, indicating one to two ways of recognizing prior qualifications.

Regarding the question:

“Do refugee students who enroll in different courses at your university continue their studies where they left off or do they usually have to repeat one or more years?”, 12 respondents answered that they continue in the year/level at which they left off, 1 participant answered that he did not know, and 8 respondents explained that it depends on various factors.

The reasons given by those who answered “it depends” are varied and usually related to

- academic difference (for IDPs) or studying from the beginning (for emigrants);
- the certificate of recognition of personal documents from the Information and Image Center of the Ministry of Education and Science;
- the content of the educational program;
- on the level of knowledge of the state language (“At our university, studies are mainly conducted in the Ukrainian language, so students usually have to go through a preparatory department in order to learn the language”).

Most of the responses about additional data on the requirements for registration of IDP/emigrant students in Ukrainian universities combine several requirements. Figure 1 shows their distribution by the main criteria.

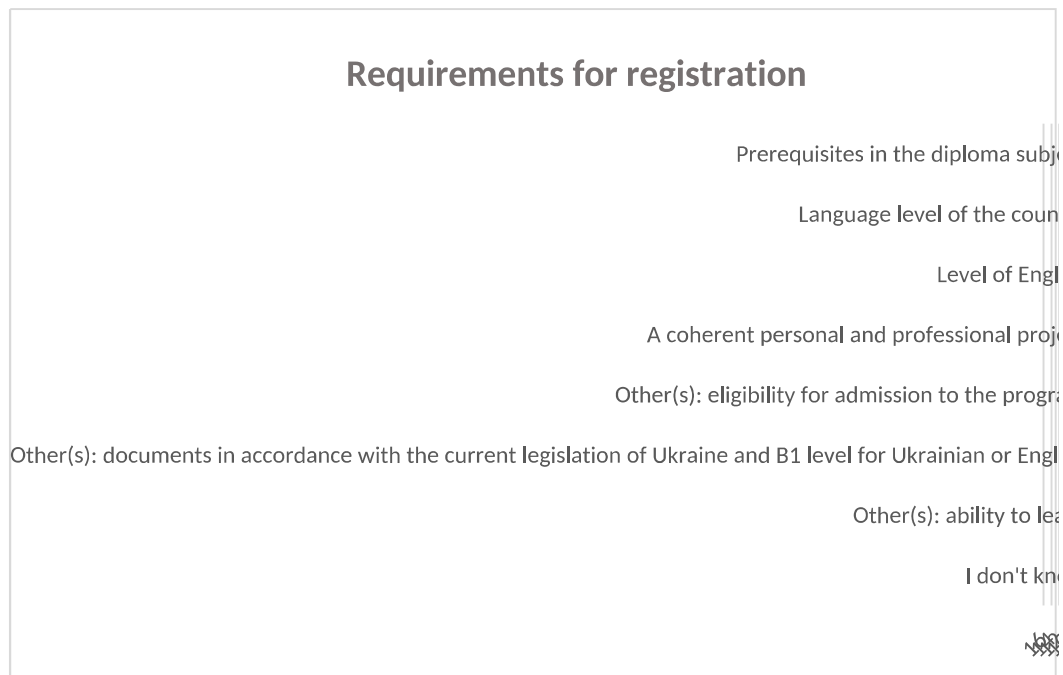


Figure 1. Requirements for registration at Ukrainian universities

As we can note, linguistic skills play an important role in the registration process. 10 participants declared that the recognition of those linguistic skills (in Ukrainian or/and English) is done through language tests drawn up by university, 1 respondent marked Diploma or language certificate from a third party, 3 respondents marked In-house interviews. 12 respondents indicated that this procedure is formalized by the university, 2 respondents indicated that it depends on the various components/departments.

In terms of recognition of skills acquired outside the university, Figure 2 shows the distribution of the answers.

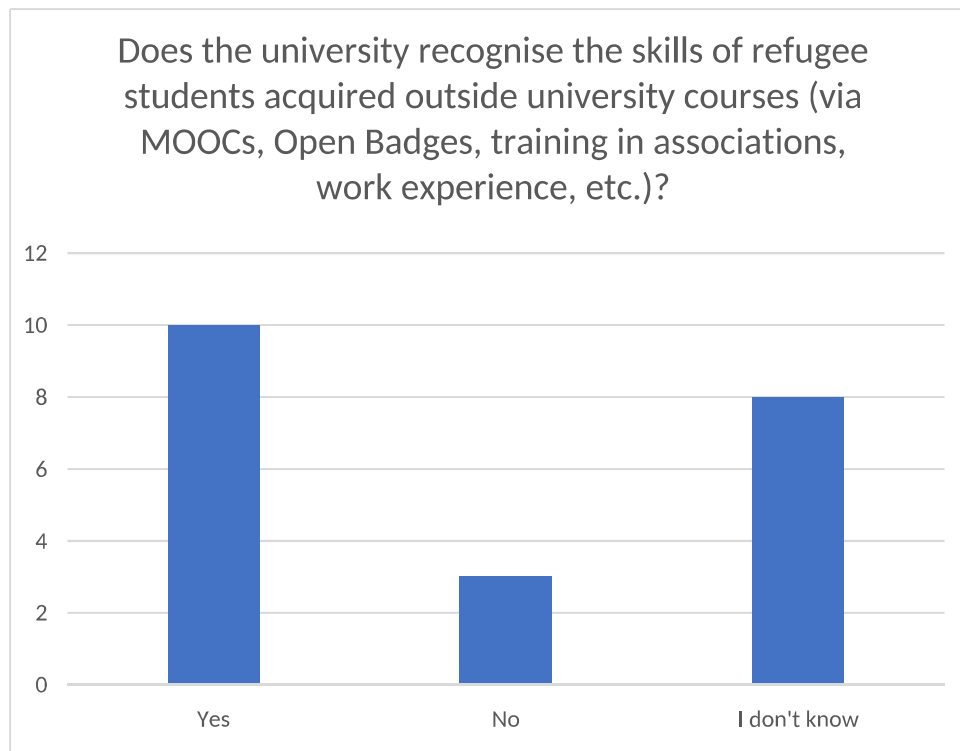


Figure 2. Recognition of skills acquired outside the university.

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

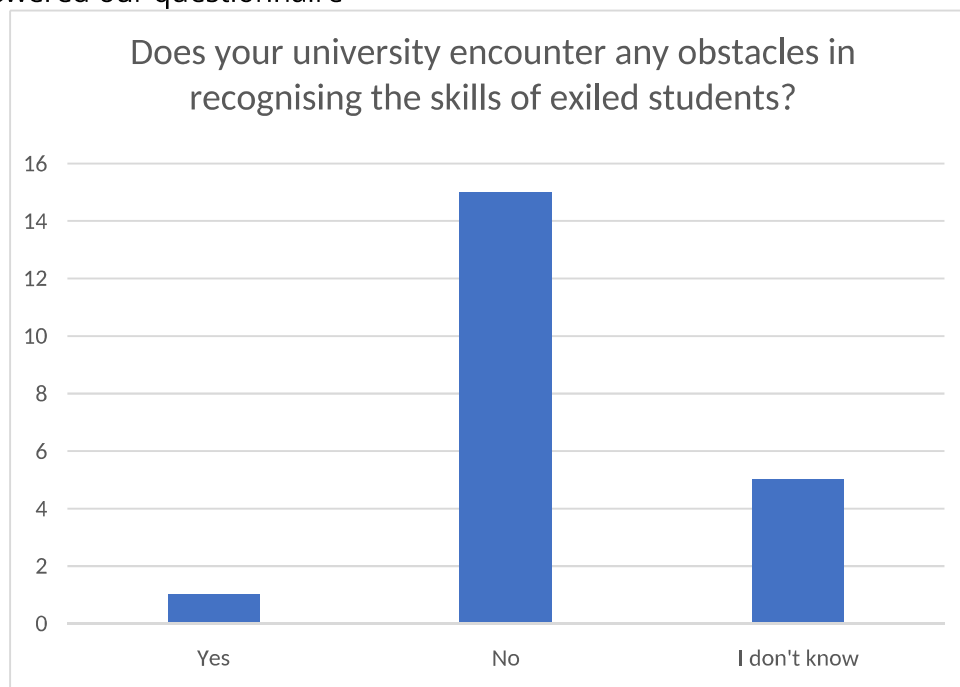


Figure 3. Obstacles in the recognition of skills

Only 1 university indicated that there are difficulties related to the lack of clear procedures and a license to train foreign students:

“Не має чітких процедур, не має ліцензії на підготовку іноземних студентів”

[Translation: „ It has no clear procedures and no license to train foreign students”]

2.2 Capacity building

As can be seen in Figure 4, when asked about preparing to accept IDP students, most institutions offer courses on staff training and the development of modern soft competencies.

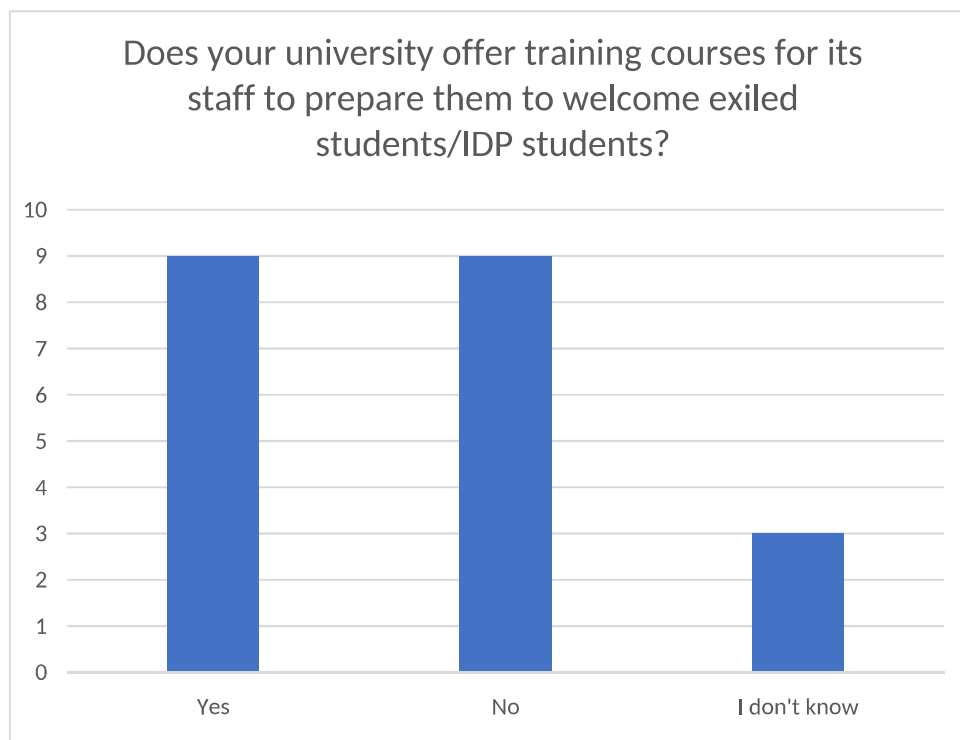


Figure 4. Training courses for staff.

The topics of these courses are very diverse, and are usually related to improving the skills of participants:

- “курси з підвищення кваліфікації, курси психологічної стійкості” [Translation: „ advanced training courses, psychological resilience courses”]
- Formation of key competencies (softskills) of the XXI century

In terms of specific support mechanisms to help IDP students navigate the Ukrainian academic culture and environment, Figure 5 presents the presence of 5 support instruments, related to languages, administration and academic life.

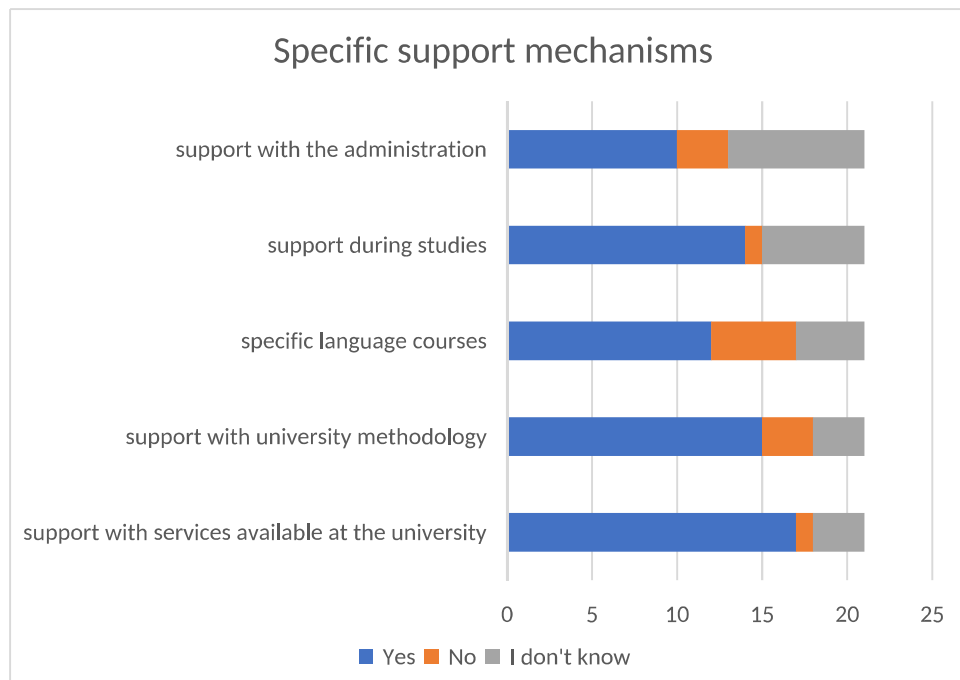


Figure 5. Specific support mechanisms related to academic life.

According to the responses provided by the participants, IDP and international students have access to a number of support services designed to help them navigate university life, from admission to academic success and integration. Relevant university departments and information services/assist all IDP and international students with admission, accommodation, documentation benefits, scholarships. For example, the Student Self-Government Council deals with dormitory accommodation; the methodologists of the relevant dean's office decide on the establishment of academic differences and the appointment of their elimination; the International Relations Department deals with all issues related to the admission of foreign citizens.

Regarding support mechanisms for IDP and international students during their studies, 21 participants declared the existence of certain support mechanisms. According to the responses provided, during their studies, IDP and international students benefit from a variety of academic, social and administrative support services aimed at facilitating integration and success. Table 2 provides a preliminary organization of the support provided.

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

Type of support	Examples
Support with services available at the university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The platform for displaced persons who want to be enrolled is functioning at the University. It is used for consultations and organisation of tests; - Information resources on the website of higher education institutions and departments
Academic and faculty-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Department of International Relations is

based support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - responsible for the admission of foreign citizens - Establishment of academic differences and appointment of their elimination in the university deans' offices - Additional consultations outside the teacher's schedule
Academic life support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meetings at the level of educational and research institutes - Baddies students system - Extracurricular activities, clubs, sections, psychological support
Further support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language courses - Psychological support, student social service - Counseling, information, psychological support. If necessary, legal support - Social and domestic types of support

In terms of available services, Figure 6 shows it frequency according to the 21 participants. From the numbers of item reported, it is possible to assert that most of the HE institutions offers a combined offer of several services.

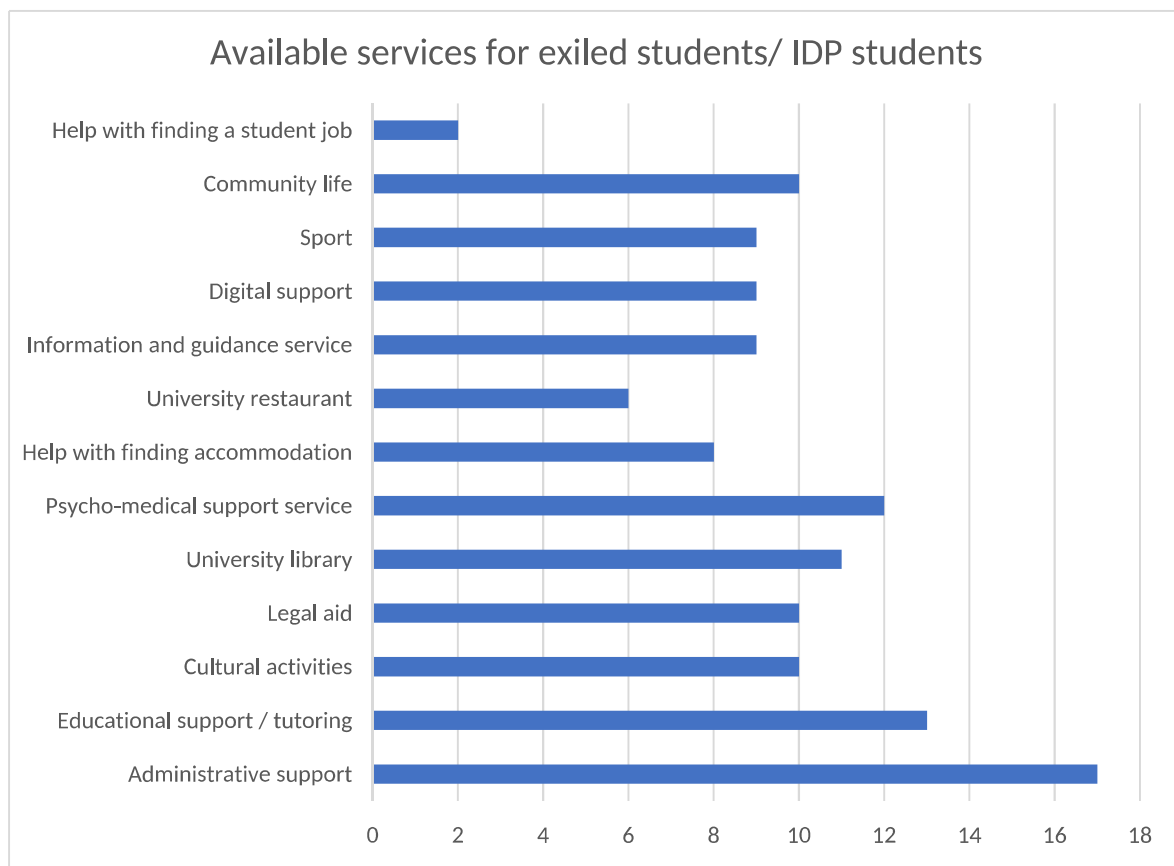


Figure 6. Services available for IDP students.

It should be noted that facilities that help to effectively integrate into a new place of residence are extremely popular among the responses. In particular, the mention of specific structures targeted at IDP students related to legal assistance, housing, and psychological and medical support is quite common. 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).

8 participants stated that there were no difficulties in establishing support mechanisms for IDP students. Other participants indicated some difficulties, including: financial (5 responses), organizational (5 responses), human resources (2 responses) and political (4 responses).

These responses indicate that support structures and mechanisms face a number of difficulties in meeting the needs of IDP students, including financial and organizational.

The last question in this section concerned follow-up mechanisms developed by universities after studying. 7 participants answered positively, 7 participants indicated that they still do not have such mechanisms and structures, and 7 participants chose the option "I don't know".

2.3 Civic engagement

To the question "Does your university inform exiled/IDP students about the possibility of engaging in public and/or social life?" 19 participants answered positively and 2 participants chose the answer "I don't know". Therefore, 13 participants stated that civic engagement is recognized in their academic career (open badges, internships, bonus points, certificates, optional/open courses, etc.), 5 participants indicated that such engagement is not recognized, while 3 participants stated that they did not know about the mechanisms for recognizing such engagement.

When asked whether there is an association or collective of IDP students or for IDP students at the university, only 5 responded positively and 12 responded negatively. Some survey participants said they did not know (4 answers).

Regarding the presence and/or representation of IDP students in decision-making bodies at the university, 8 participants stated that such students are represented in decision-making bodies, 4 participants answered negatively, and 9 participants stated that they did not know about it.

In response to the next question regarding cooperation with external organizations ("Does your university cooperate with external organizations (companies, NGOs, associations) to promote civic engagement and/or socio-cultural integration of exile/IDP students?"), Figure 7 shows that most institutions cooperate with external institutions.

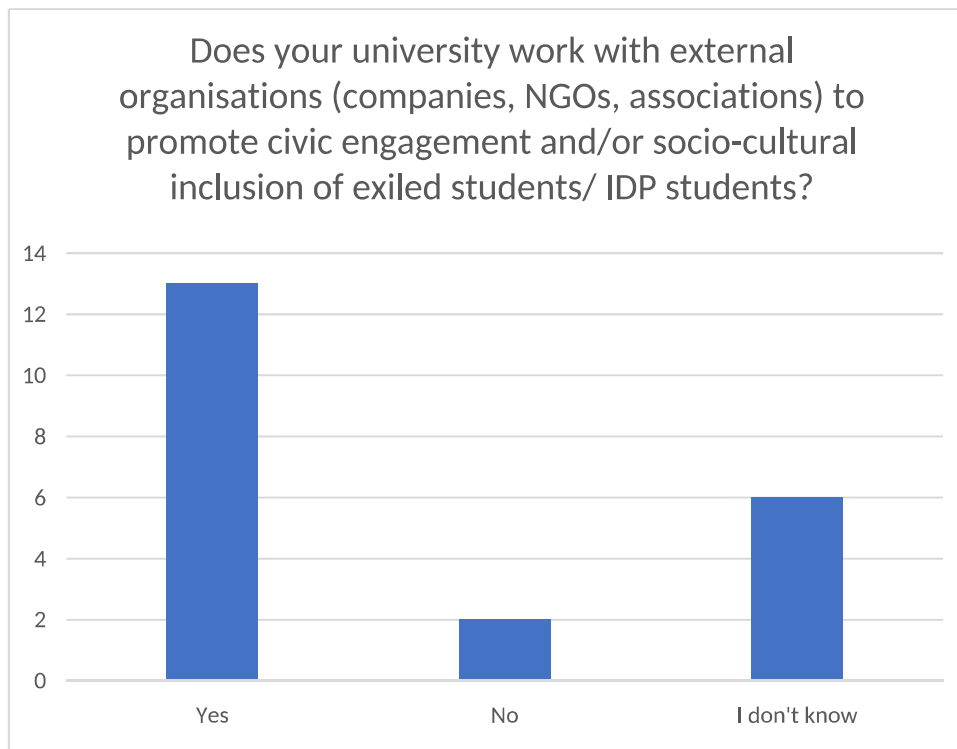


Figure 7. Work with external institutions.

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

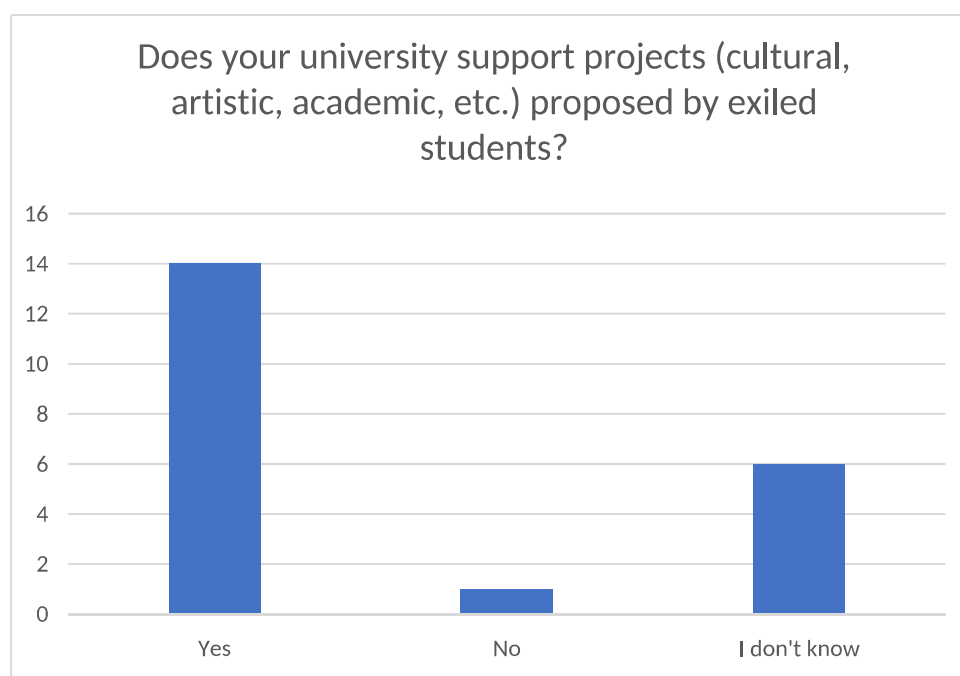


Figure 8. Support of cultural and artistic projects developed by exiled students

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

3. Key insights

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An important conclusion of this report is that Ukraine's higher education institutions are interconnected in two ways, namely, they enroll IDP students and they are displaced structures themselves. But all of them are centers for academic integration of students. That is why they all have a variety of mechanisms to support IDP and migrant students. These mechanisms are constantly being improved to meet the needs of the target audience provoked by the situation of military conflict on the territory of Ukraine. These needs are mainly aimed at facilitating admission to the institution (by taking into account academic differences in related specialties and educational programs) and supporting their further studies (through competence development), as well as integration into society (through civic engagement, involvement in events and inclusion in the academic life of the university, which helps students learn about university methodology).

According to the results of the study, it was found that support mechanisms for IDP/emigrant students are in place and accompany them at different stages of the process of integration into the academic community, including helping exiled students/IDP students with administrative formalities before they enroll at university, supporting exiled students during their studies, offering specific language courses, offering courses, workshops or support to help exiled students learn about university methodology, as well as a specific follow-up system for exiled students/IDP students after they have completed their studies. Higher education institutions do not stop at addressing the already established needs and developed mechanisms, but are flexible in the decision-making process and address new challenges both using their own resources and with the involvement of third organizations (government, NGOs, international).

The support of the target group of Ukrainian universities is also characterized by constant support of participants both during the educational process and outside of it, in particular in everyday life. That is why Ukrainian universities provide support not only in solving administrative issues of adaptation, but also create comfortable conditions for psychological support, as this is also an important aspect for these individuals.

Identifying the needs of the target group and developing appropriate mechanisms should be a flexible process based on already known methods and appropriate measures.

4. Suggestions

4. Suggestions

This section of the current report is based on the recommendations and suggestions made by the respondents in 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 formulation 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 20 participants (out of 21) that left suggestions, to improve the situation for all international students and of exiled students, specifically, universities must take targeted and sustained action. The following critical areas to improve sustainability and resilience of HE institutions were mentioned:

- Continuous monitoring and identification of the current needs of the target group. In particular, some respondents indicated this as «Запровадити систему моніторингу потреб зазначеної групи студентів» [Translation: “Introduce a system for monitoring the needs of this group of students”], «Розробити систему виявлення на ранніх етапах прояви негативних залежностей» [Translation: “Develop a system for detecting negative addictions at early stages”] and “Identify the needs of such students through surveys., та «Identify the needs of such students through surveys»
- Simplification of procedures for recognizing results obtained from previous places of study. One respondent noted that «Для цього слід затвердити перелік можливих документів, які б могли засвідчити такі результати. Це потрібно робити з урахуванням того, що студент може не мати можливості отримання офіційних документів при переміщенні в інший регіон.» [Translation: “For this purpose, a list of possible documents that could certify such results should be approved. This should be done taking into account the fact that a student may not be able to obtain official documents when moving to another region”].
- The need for advisory and administrative support from the government and NGOs and the development of clear policies in this area. Some respondents mentioned «Розробляти чіткі політики і програми підтримки» [Translation: “Develop clear policies and support programs”], “More involvement of NGOs”
- Advisory support and career guidance support.
- Availability of human resources that could deal only with IDP students and be included in administrative processes in parallel and their financial support. Some respondents noted the need for «Достойного фінансування роботи з цією категорією студентів» [Translation: “adequate funding for work with this category of students”].
- Motivating students for successful integration using various methods. In particular, as a participant noted, it is necessary to use «пільги, підвищені стипендії, гарантії працевлаштування за бажанням» [Translation: “benefits, increased scholarships, guarantees of employment upon request”], which in turn can improve the financial situation of such students and give them confidence for further integration and adaptation.

The recommendations of the respondents emphasize the need for continued advocacy and institutional commitment to ensure access, support and success of refugee students. That is why, having the opportunity to work with IDP students, universities should participate in long-term decision-making at various levels and provide expert opinion on specific issues for the target audience.

5. Conclusion

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This report is an analytical recognition and description of the support mechanisms provided to IDP and expatriate students in higher education institutions in Ukraine, based on the responses to an online questionnaire developed by the AGILE project. Skills recognition, capacity building, and civic engagement are key areas of this study. This 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 universities surveyed have made significant progress in developing and implementing skills recognition and capacity building initiatives, significant gaps remain in establishing effective mechanisms for civic engagement and follow-up.

The recommendations made by the survey respondents in Ukraine are based on their extensive experience working with internally displaced students since 2014. The study identifies the main areas for improving the mechanisms of support for higher education institutions for IDP students, which include ensuring and expanding adequate financial resources, continuous support for the target audience both before inclusion in the academic community, the learning process and further support, increasing advisory structures, expert cooperation with the authorities and NGOs, simplifying procedures for recognizing the skills and qualifications of the target audience.

It is also important to note that respondents from Ukrainian educational institutions who are involved in decision-making to develop and effectively implement mechanisms for the integration of IDP students are also constantly in danger while continuing to work in Ukraine. This creates problems of emotional and physical instability and may provoke new challenges and needs.

Overall, sustainable support for IDP students requires long-term financial, institutional and human resources. The experience of Ukrainian universities shows that these factors are the basis for new challenges that lead to the loss of human experience. That is why universities need stable funding, constant support from the government at all levels.

6. References

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