AGILE

**HIGHER EDUCATION
RESILIENCE IN
REFUGEE CRISES**

Principles for institutional change and curriculum design to welcome refugee students in Higher Education

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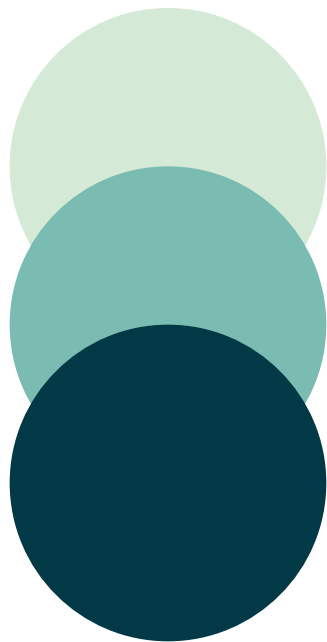(Germany)**

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AGILE

HIGHER EDUCATION RESILIENCE IN REFUGEE CRISES

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Abstract

This document synthesises principles to support institutions in designing curricula and creating resilient structures to welcome refugee students in Higher Education, based on the activities carried out by the AGILE project.

Project summary

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 one business partner (Web2Learn) which is specialised in open recognition systems and social learning.

Consortium

	Name	Short name	Country	Logo
1.	Université Paris 8	UP8	France	
2.	Université Bordeaux Montaigne	UBM	France	
3.	Web2Learn	W2L	Greece	
4.	Universit v Ljubljani	UL	Slovenia	
5.	Polish Rectors Foundation	PRF	Poland	
6.	Lviv Polytechnic National University	LPNU	Ukraine	
7.	Universitaet Hamburg	UH	Germany	
8.	Kauno Technologijos Universitetas	KTU	Lithuania	

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Statement of originality

This deliverable contains original unpublished work except where clearly indicated otherwise. Acknowledgement of previously published material and of the work of others has been made through appropriate citation, quotation or both.

Disclaimer

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Abbreviation	Signification
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
P	Principle

Executive summary

The AGILE project is made up of a consortium of universities and institutions that have come together around the issue of welcoming refugee students into European HE. This issue, which has already arisen in several European countries as a result of migratory movements, asylum and refugee requests in the past, has been challenged once again with the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the subsequent mass flight of students from that country's HE system. European countries hitherto little-confronted with this reality found themselves having to take in large numbers of students in HE.

The richness of AGILE lies precisely in the heterogeneity of the consortium members' experiences in responding to the integration of refugee students, by confronting new and old perspectives on welcoming models, structures and visions.

This document, developed following round tables and events with different stakeholders - both inside and outside Europe - summarises the main lessons learned by the different players involved in reception of refugee and exile students in HE.

1. Introduction

The main objective of the AGILE project is to strengthen the resilience of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in welcoming refugee students. In order to strengthen it, we first have to understand it and figure out what defines and characterises this resilience and therefore how it can be sustained and long-lasting.

This document thus summarises and systematises the topics covered by the activities organised during the first 10 months of the project, namely: the two round tables with representatives of HEIs in Europe and other countries (Brazil and Turkey[1]), the round table with 5 European policy makers in the field of Higher Education (HE), and the two public talks with refugee students organised in University Paris 8 and University Bordeaux Montaigne[2]. Additionally, an international questionnaire was launched[3], allowing 156 refugee students in Europe to share their experience and what hampers and/or facilitates their integration in HE. The aim of these international and cross-continental events was to give different stakeholders a first-hand voice on what characterises their contexts and how they deal with successive new waves of refugee students.

This document will not list the good practices reported during those four events, but rather present their results transversely, as well as the wishes of the different stakeholders' present at the events. They refer concomitantly to institutional change and to curricular design, as both are intermingled.

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1. These two countries, with very different profiles in terms of geopolitical situations, have welcomed a large number of refugees and refugee students from different proveniences, going beyond an Eurocentric perspective.

2. We would like to thank the participants from all the universities, institutions, organisations and all students who took part in our round tables and events. A full account of participants and events leading to these principles are detailed in Lawrance L. (2023).

3. Available under https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/SiEinHE, in 8 languages (English, French, German, Greek, Lithuanian, Polish, Slovenian and Ukrainian).

Institutional change - as well as "institution" *per se* - is not easy to define. We use it to refer to significant and purposeful modifications, transformations, or shifts in the structures, policies, practices, and norms of an organisation or institution. As Micelotta et al. (2027) put it, "institutional change is an outcome of purposeful 'institutional work'" (2027, p. 1886). In the scope of HEI, specially referring to welcoming refugee students, changes might include alterations in departments (such as creating specific divisions), in policies, in the processes and methods used to enrol or certify newly arrived students.

Curriculum, broadly speaking, "defines the educational foundations and contents, their sequencing in relation to the amount of time available for the learning experiences, the characteristics of the teaching institutions, the characteristics of the learning experiences, in particular from the point of view of methods to be used, the resources for learning and teaching (e.g. textbooks and new technologies), evaluation and teachers' profiles" (Braslavsky, 2003). Curriculum design, in this document, is understood as the intentional and systematic process of planning, creating, organising, and assessing the educational program and learning experiences (Beauchamp, 1975; Connelly et al, 2008). It includes identifying goals and learning objectives, assessing needs, designing content and progression, defining teaching methodologies, assessing the outcomes, and planning the personal and material resources needed, among others (idem).

In order to structure our findings, we elaborated a total of 10 principles (abbreviated with a P). As we will see, some are more transversal (P9), others more attuned to different phases in welcoming the students: before, during, and after their enrolment (Figure 1).

BEFORE
- P3
- P4
- P5
- P6
- P9

DURING
- P1
- P2
- P7
- P8
- P9
- P10

AFTER
- P4
- P8
- P9
- P10
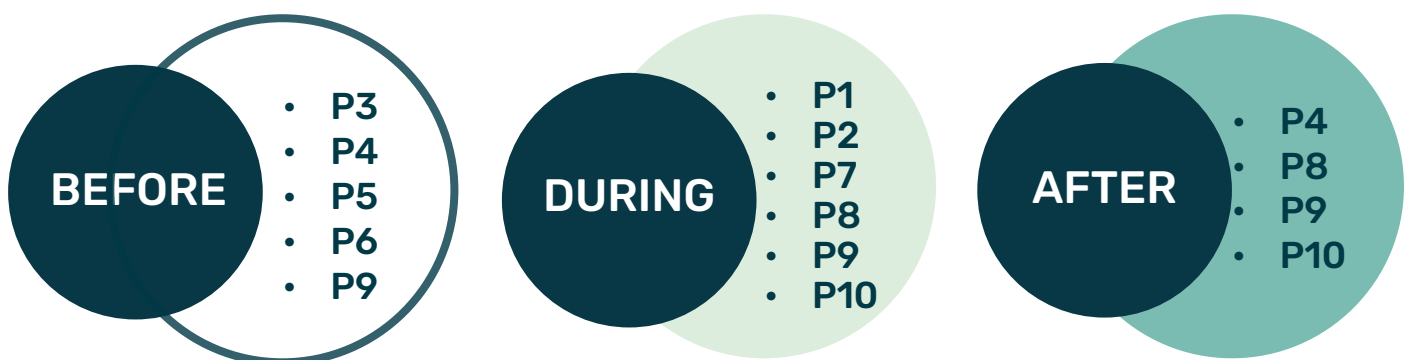
Figure 1. Distribution of principles according to the different phases of students' welcoming in HE.

2. Ten principles for institutional change and curriculum design

In this section, we present the ten transversal principles highlighted by all the participants in the different activities. These principles touch upon structural as well as curricular changes, leading to "reflexive institutions" (see P10). All the principles will be illustrated with short quotes from the AGILE events and the results of a questionnaire given to students in exile in HE.
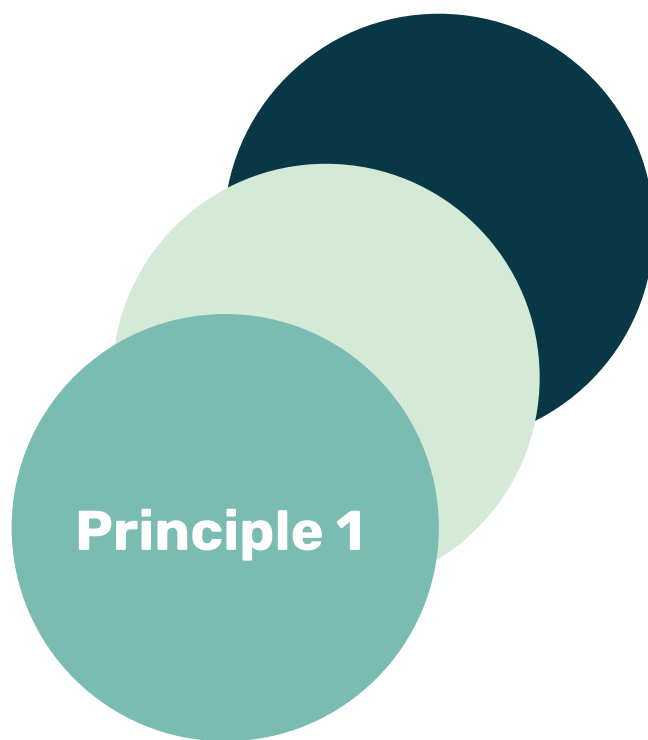
Principle 1

P1. Differentiate the needs of forcibly displaced students

This principle suggests that, when developing university policies for refugee students[4], it's important not to treat all of these students' needs as identical or uniform. Additionally, refugee students have particular needs that make them different from international exchange students. In other words: refugee students are different from other communities and different from each other.

This principle thus emphasises the importance of adopting a personalised, holistic or "whole-person" approach to address the diverse and unique needs of forcibly displaced students. In the context of university policies for refugee students, this statement implies that the policies and support services should be tailored to meet the specific needs of each student, considering their individual backgrounds and challenges. This may involve providing language and administrative support, mental health services, access to financial aid, cultural sensitivity training for staff, and creating a welcoming and inclusive campus environment. By doing so, universities can better support the successful integration and academic success of forcibly displaced students.

The need for this has become especially obvious when asking the students about their needs (through our large-scale-survey), where a lot of different challenges have been reported (such as financial support and mental health issues). While it may be mostly language-related problems for some students, a lot of students also struggle with different mental problems, bureaucracy, xenophobia or cultural differences.

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4. Forcibly displaces students and refugee students will be used synonymously.

Principle 2
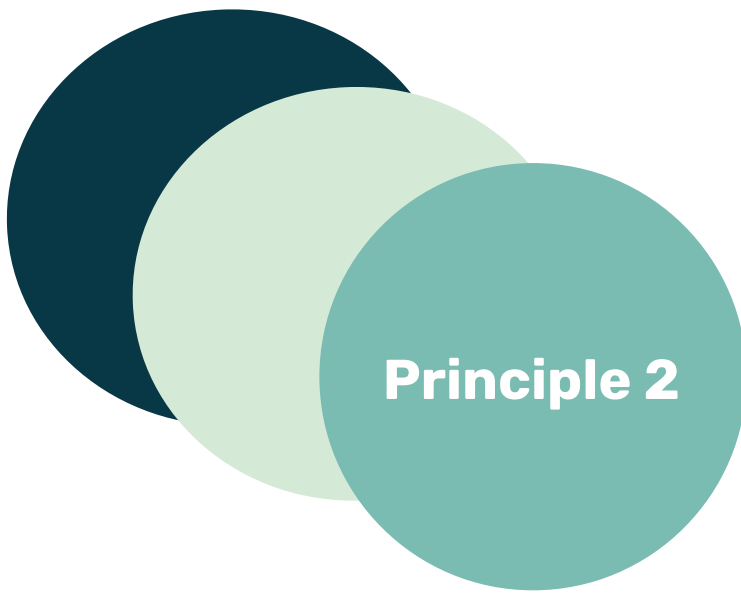
P2. Coordinate top-down and bottom-up approaches to integration in HE

The different stakeholders taking part in our events were unanimous in acknowledging the importance of coordinating top-down and bottom-up approaches to the integration of refugee students in HE, as ways to create effective and sustainable support systems (Table 1).

As we can see, some initiatives are university-led. Others are students-led. In the survey, the students said that not only official language courses and financial aids helped them, but that social contacts and peer support were integral to them for feeling more welcome and empowered.

Top-down approaches	Bottom-up approaches
- Establishment of a diverse coordination team (with psychologists, language educators, and others) - Making a needs assessment, to understand the specific challenges, aspirations, and expectations of refugee students - Development of inclusive and responsive policies, including output by refugee students - Allocation of (financial) resources to support integration efforts, according to diagnosed needs. - Implementation of training programs for all the university stuff. - Planning curricular changes (including language courses and content-sensitive courses); Developing a long-term integration strategy that outlines specific goals and benchmarks for continuous improvement. - Evaluation, documentation and sharing of good practices on a regular basis.	- Creation of instruments and approaches to make a needs assessment coming from refugee students themselves. - Implementation of training programs for and by students themselves, to raise awareness about the challenges faced by refugee students and promote a welcoming and inclusive campus culture. - Creation of mentorship and peer programs where students from the host country can support incoming refugee students in navigating the university environment. - Electing refugee student representatives to advocate for their needs and influence university policies and practices. - Encouraging and supporting exile student-led initiatives that promote cultural exchange, dialogue, and social integration among the diverse student body.

Table 1. Top-down and bottom-up approaches.
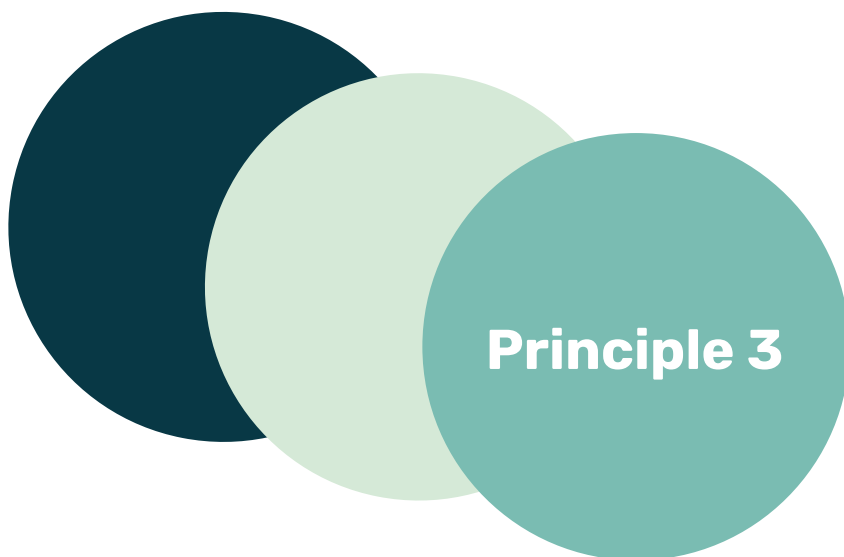
P3. Combine standardised welcoming procedures with more personalised and individual ones

Stakeholders referred to the difficulties of applying standardised enrolment measures to refugee students and referred to the need of both making the institutions more flexible and doing adjustments. The combination of standardising welcoming procedures while incorporating personalised and individualised elements aims to strike a balance between ensuring administrative rigour and fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment, with an assessment case by case. Institutions can thus continue to improve and streamline administrative enrolment processes (so as to foster fairness, transparency, and consistency), which usually have accountability as a basic underling principle, while at the same time offering personalised guidance and tailored support services (including academic advising, career counselling, or specialised assistance for students with unique circumstances, such as family or health issues).

The need for such a combination of standardised and personalised measures also becomes apparent through students' comments in the large-scale survey: While they wish for clear communication, especially in regard to administration processes, a lot of counselling and mentoring and social connections are also sought by the students.
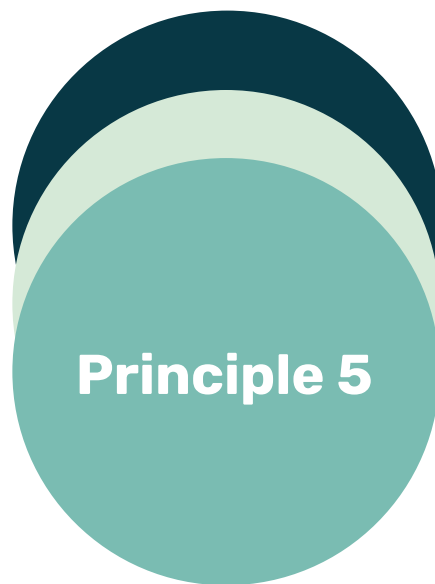
Principle 4
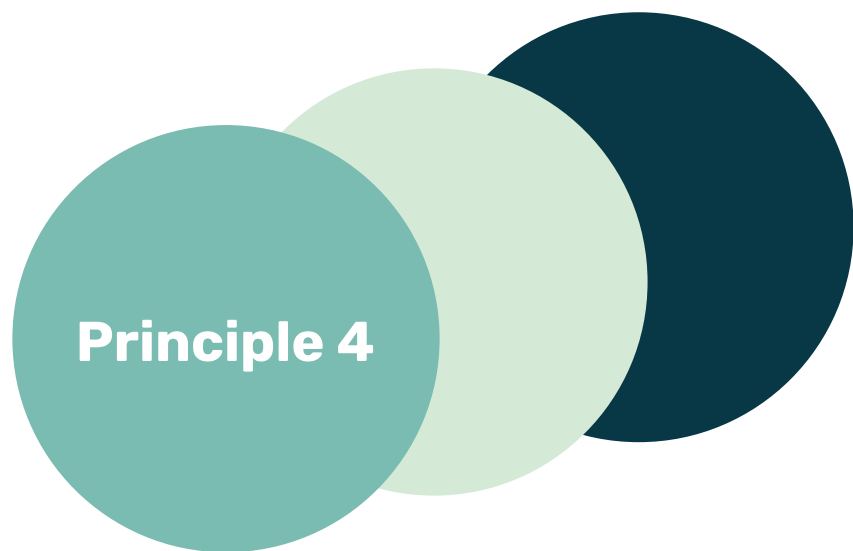
P4. Develop a holistic approach to refugee students' integration

Friedrich et al (2021) defined a whole-university approach, also called "holistic approach, as the one that conceptualises and integrates "several actions aimed at developing various literacies, maintaining health and emotional well-being, legal support, and community outreach, through multidisciplinary work teams and the involvement of student and volunteer educators" (p. 103). A holistic university approach provides comprehensive support in multiple areas, being student-centred and combining research and action both to support the migrant/refugee graduation students and the migrant/refugee society (idem, p. 108). Implementing a whole university approach to integrating refugee students in HE involves comprehensive, coordinated efforts across various departments and levels of the institution.

The means for implementing this holistic approach might involve creating a task force with representatives from different departments and services and the refugee student representatives. Other measures referred in the AGILE events include providing (language) training and assistance, legal and administrative support, financial and housing support, and (mental) health assistance. Stakeholders also referred the need to connect to the civil society and to seek patterns outside the institutions (namely for creating opportunities for internship and employment).

All in all, our participants acknowledged the importance of aligning policies, services, campus culture, and collaboration with different external stakeholders to ensure that refugee students have the resources and opportunities they need to succeed in HE, reducing drop-out rates. As we will see in P10, the whole university approach is dependent on HEI to engage in reflexive-action, to find ways for further development and growing participation (see Friedrich et al., 2021).

Principle 5

P5. Create structures to facilitate enrolment, permanence, and success

Universities can create various structures and support systems to facilitate enrolment, recognise prior education and credentials, and promote academic success while reducing drop-out rates.

Table 2 summarises some key structures and initiatives mentioned during AGILE events.

Facilitate enrolment	Recognise previous education & titles	Promote academic success
Refugee Student Office or Center	Recognition of prior learning, through bureaus specialised in analysing degrees and diplomas from different countries[1]	Academic Advising and Support
Admissions and Administrative Support Team	Implement procedures for credit transfer and course equivalence assessments	Mentorship Programs[1]
Orientation Programs		Financial Aid Office
Diversity and Inclusion Office		Scholarship and Financial Support Programs
Cultural Sensitivity Training for university staff		Peer Support Networks
		Housing assistance
		Crisis Intervention and Mental Health Services
		Constant feedback

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1. An example would be the French body ENIC-NARIC which is a gateway to diploma recognition. More information on https://www.enic-naric.net/page-France.

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1. For example, the University of Hamburg, through the structure UHHHilft (https://www.uni-hamburg.de/uh-hhilft.html), referred to this kind of personal support.

Table 2. Support structures for enrolment, permanence and academic success.

The participants in our events recognised that the creation and articulation of these structures might be difficult because of financial and structural constraints. Another problem is that they tend to have a limited duration, meaning that they are not always created in a sustainable way. Nevertheless, by creating these structures and support systems, universities can help refugee students navigate the challenges they may encounter in HE and increase their chances of academic success while reducing drop-out rates (see also P4). Such measures are important to provide a sustainable support to refugee students.

The data from the AGILE questionnaire shows that, while 74% of the students were able to have their certificates accepted in the host country, there were still some students (8%) whose certificates were not accepted (figure 2). The reasons mentioned by the students for the diploma not having been accepted were that they were either not needed, there were bad political relations, translations were required, the diploma was simply not available or it was in a specific area, e.g. law or medicine.

If you obtained your high school diploma in another country, has your graduation certificate been accepted in your host country?

■ Yes ■ No ■ Not applicable
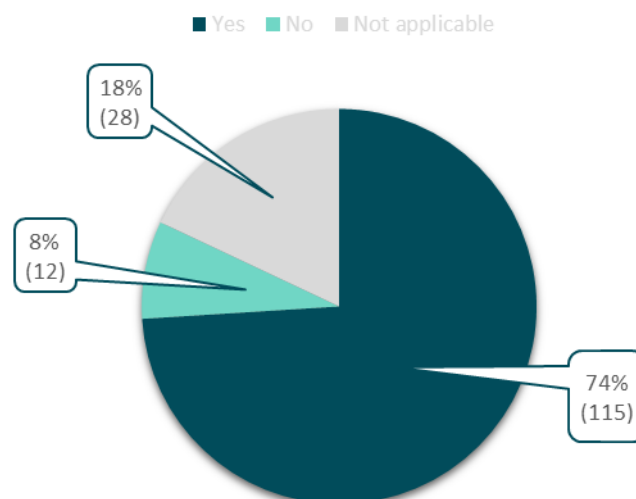
18% (28)

8% (12)

74% (115)

Figure 2. Answers to the question "If you obtained your high school diploma in another country, has your graduation certificate been accepted in your host country?"

When asked which support the students found the most useful, a lot of them named structures facilitating enrolment. Some students specify that financial support is necessary because "it's difficult to study and work at the beginning of moving" or "the support for applying to the university".
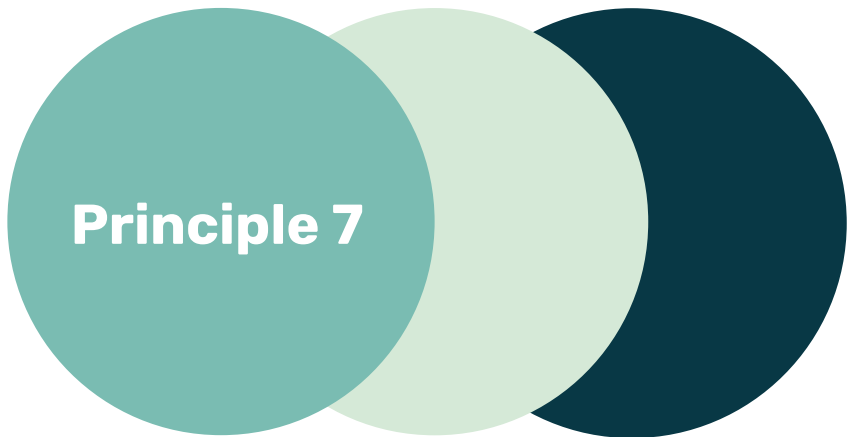
Principle 6
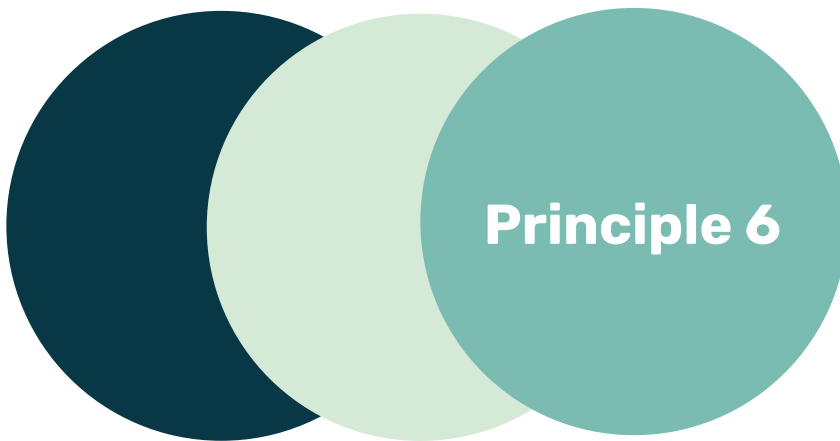
P6. Train your staff to address the needs of refugee students

Some students reported having problems in the beginning because of very different relationships between professors and students and other intercultural barriers, as well as experiencing a lack of empathy for their issues.

Training for effectively welcoming and supporting refugee students should thus promote cultural sensitivity, awareness of refugee experiences, and the development of skills to provide appropriate support, such as:

- intercultural competence training (about values, language, religions, communication styles, and academic traditions, for example),
- trauma-informed (and intercultural) care to respond sensitively to (mental) health issues and connect students with appropriate resources,
- training on legal and refugee issues (in aspects such as visa status, work permits, and documentation challenges and their evolution through time and geopolitical conflicts),
- training on inclusive and anti-discriminatory practices (including multilingual teaching and assessment practices),
- training on conflict resolution

Training for conflict resolution, our survey indicates, also should consider the potential conflicts among groups of refugee students from different countries.

Principle 7

P7. Involve refugee students in curricula and institutional decision-making processes

We previously referred to the need to articulate bottom-up ant top-down approaches to integration of refugee students (P2). More specifically, participants in the AGILE events evoked the idea of involving refugee students in curricula and institutional decision-making processes to create a more inclusive and responsive HE environment. Some ideas included involving refugee students in the development and reviewing of curricula, course materials, and program offerings, and conducting surveys and focus groups (this last idea being aligned to the aims of the AGILE round table with refugee students and creating a European questionnaire). These measures should be anchored in the creation of safe spaces for dialogue, supportive of student-led initiatives, as many students in the survey mentioned difficulties understanding how the academic systems are organised. As can be seen in figure 3, three quarters of the students are willing to help future students in exile:

While the students participating in the survey did not always specify what form this help could take, as there is a lot of willingness, universities could reach out to those students and ask them to also be involved in curricular and institutional decision-making processes, as they know the students' needs best.

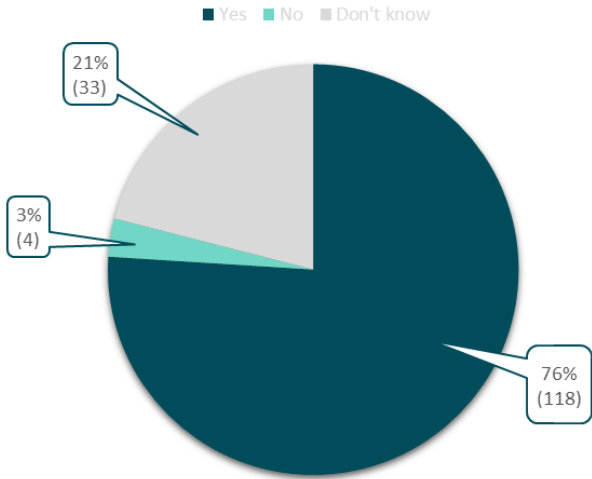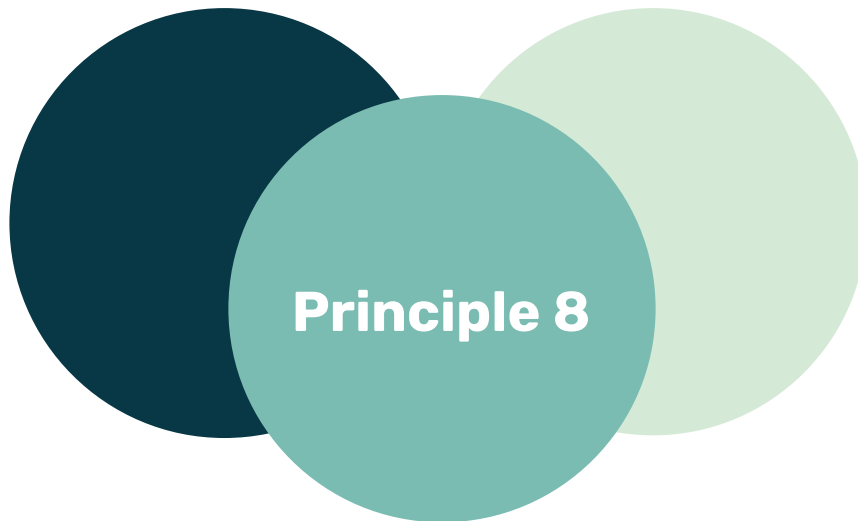### Would you be willing to help other students in exile in the future?

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know

21% (33)

3% (4)

76% (118)

Figure 3. Answers to the question "Would you be willing to help other students in exile in the future?"

Principle 8

P8. Promote partnerships outside academia

One principle that was brought to discussion by our participants was the need to encourage interaction between refugee students and the local community to facilitate integration outside the university campus. Dialogue with social partners beyond academia, including civil society organizations and NGOs, can play a crucial role in facilitating the integration of refugee students in HE. This dialogue can be fruitful to enhance:

- information about and awareness of refugee students' difficulties and achievements,

- advocacy and influence,

- mentorship programs,

- opportunities for intercultural and linguistic exchanges, networking, and social integration,

- psychological support,

- access to job opportunities, especially if it comes to the first job.

The idea behind these collaborations is that the integration of refugee students does not depend solely on the work of the HEI, in isolation from the society in which it operates and is inserted. Integration is, on the contrary, a multidimensional and complex process, organic and ecological, which depends on a network of factors that are constantly interrelated (Castellotti, 2008; see also Cadet, Goes & Mangiante, 2010). During the roundtables, university stakeholders claimed that "successful and intense collaborations with stakeholders from [...] public authorities and civil society enable a steady consolidation of services."

In addition to reaching out to those social partners, it is also important to make those connections visible to the students, according to students' answers in our questionnaire. As Table 3 shows, many students, who filled in the survey, are not aware or do not know if such partners exist (such as associations for students) and do not think of asking for help or counselling there.

Are there associations for students in exile in your host country or university?

	Answers	Ratio
Yes	52	33,55%
No	31	20%
I don't know	72	46,45%
No Answer	0	0%

Table 3. Students' answers to the question "Are there associations for students in exile in your host country or university?"

P9. Develop resilient and sustainable welcoming structures

The goal beyond AGILE is again mirrored in this principle, related to the resiliency of structures and their sustainability. Stakeholders agreed that many of the supporting structures are created in the hic et nunc of the emergency situations, and are not really planned to become permanent. Ideally, the creation of resilient and sustainable welcoming structures at HE for refugee students should be anchored in the establishment of long-term strategies, securing funding sources, and integrating these structures into the institutional framework. As discussed in the roundtables, university policy makers agreed that it would be "useful to have a package with guidelines, access to information, who you can ask what, where to find what" next to stable financing.

To achieve these goals, institutions should have strong and supportive leadership, including welcoming structures in their strategic plans and permanent organisational charts, and institutionalise support (such as fee-based services or courses and specific scholarships and grants). Because these are not always easy to achieve, the idea of collaborating with civil society, NGOs, government agencies, and launching advocacy and fundraising campaigns might help HEI to develop more resilient and sustainable welcoming structures. According to students who filled in the questionnaire, it would be helpful for them to have "a small guide with all important information about city, university and the initial structure of operation principles of administration."

Principle 10

P10. Conceptualise mechanisms of evaluation of the programmes and structures

A reflexive institution is an organisation that engages in self-examination, self-awareness, and critical reflection on its policies, practices, and values, going beyond a utilitarian perspective and aiming at building trust among their partners (Six, 2014). In other words, "it is an institution that learns while it acts" (Dudley & Imbach, 1997, p.2). Reflexive institutions have capacity to adapt, evolve, and improve in response to changing circumstances, feedback, and internal or external challenges (Dudley & Imbach, 1997).

Accordingly, reflexive HEI regularly assess their goals, values, and missions and practices, answering the needs of their contexts and the socio-political and educative challenges in society. Because these contexts and challenges are dynamic, HEI need to be flexible and open to change, reassessing their practices and policies to adapt to unattended influx of refugee students and, hence, to keep attuned to new needs, newcomers' learning cultures, languages, and academic trajectories (see particularly P1, P3 and P5). AGILE round table participants highlighted the need for permanent evaluation and reflection on outcomes, to use this information to refine their strategies. As "demands are sometimes unpredictable", it is important to have effective mechanisms (both top-down and bottom-up, P2) in place in order to be able to react quickly to new crises. Being aware of assessment results also means being open to change and risk-taking, as HEI might have to experiment with new approaches to address previously undiagnosed challenges and opportunities. Reflexivity, resilience, and sustainability (see P9) are closely interconnected, as they both depend of and sustain institutions' long-term vision.

3. Conclusion

The principles to design of improved curricula and institutional change presented in this document make clear the need for communication and collaboration with and across students, policy makers, civil society, and university staff (figure 4).
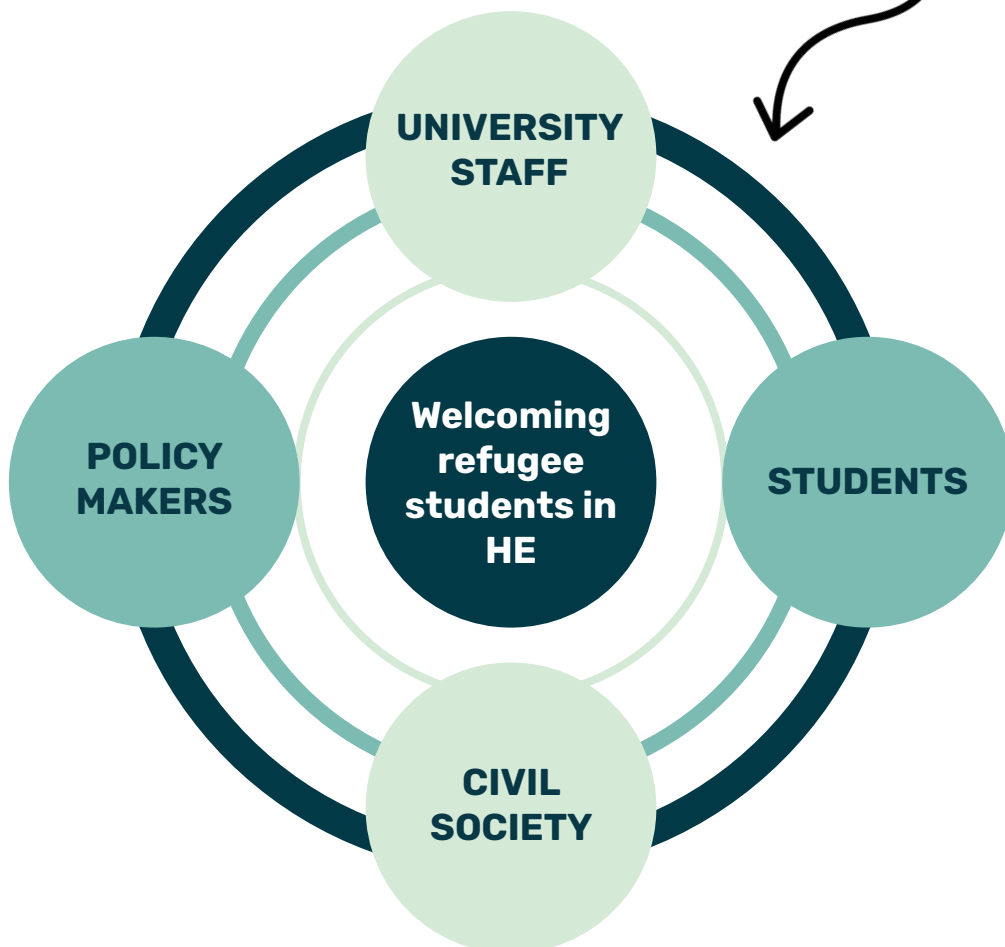
UNIVERSITY STAFF

POLICY MAKERS

Welcoming refugee students in HE

STUDENTS

CIVIL SOCIETY

Figure 4. An integrated approach to welcoming refugee students in HE.

For the benefit of refugee students, multidisciplinary task–forces are necessary to implement both holistic approaches to students' needs (understanding each student individually) and ecological approaches to institutional functioning (understanding each institution as unique). These approaches recognise the individuality of each refugee story and the specificities of each institution and its surroundings. To keep it short:

- each refugee student is a person with individual and separate needs, both from other students, and from other refugee students;

- each institution is unique in its forms of enrolment, supporting and accompanying of refugee students, and cooperating with its partners. HEIs are anchored in specific political, societal, and economic contexts, which offers both affordances and constraints to their actions. This means that each holistic institutional approach is unique.

Importantly, the principles underscore the fact that providing refugee students with language courses, albeit crucial, is not sufficient to cope with issues such as mental health and trauma, problems with housing and financial support, among others. Being a responsible HEI capable of responding to refugee dynamics means creating support mechanisms that don't just focus on immediate reception (and intermittent funding and human resources). Such an institution extends its reception actions over time, monitoring and promoting academic success among refugee students, understanding what causes their dropouts, and promoting their subsequent integration into the labour market and life in the host society. The results presented here also emphasise the need for HEI to seek allies and build a network of cooperation to welcome these allies beyond their walls. Civil society and other existing structures can be key to ensuring better socialisation and a more ecological transition to other contexts of life in the host society.

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