

Declaration from the UNICA STUDENT conference 2017 regarding the role of universities in the integration of refugees

The so called “refugee crisis”, one of the most controversial issues in Europe, has raised many problems and questions related to the education of refugees. At present approximately only 1% of refugees have access to university despite the commitments of many countries to protect their rights as part of the Geneva Convention of 1951 (The UN Refugee Agency, 2017).

Whilst discussing the role of universities in the integration of refugees we first came to the conclusion that the generally accepted definition of “refugee” is inadequate. The definition should be extended to include anyone forced to leave their country of residence due to factors beyond their control, not only those given refugee status in a host country.

We believe that universities are not only spheres for providing access to formal education but also a place to foster integration and build societies. They should acknowledge the importance of key international human rights commitments and be places where the principles contained in these commitments are respected.

We recognize the impact of language on the topic and believe we should move away from the conception of crisis and illegality and instead focus on the opportunities and beneficial outcomes for all involved. We propose to tackle misinformation by developing materials and promoting positive contact between our institutions, the general public and refugees. Everyone’s right to education should be respected, regardless of background or current situation. Therefore, universities should ensure the safety and dignity of their students.

We hereby commit to share, promote and advocate for the solutions outlined in the declaration and the action plan we propose. We appreciate the continued support of UNICA and affiliated partners, as well as student organizations across the continent.

References:

The UN Refugee Agency. (2017). *Left Behind – Refugee Education in Crisis*. [online]. Available at: www.unhcr.org/59b696f44