



WEBINAR

UNIVERSITIES RESPONDING TO FORCED DISPLACEMENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES



25 November 2020
10:00 – 12:00 (CET)



Report

Written by Mimi Deprez, Laura Colo' and Viki Csonka



Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe

At the end of 2019, the UNHCR reported 79.5 million victims of forced displacement ([Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019, UNHCR](#)). Recently, when the media has been overwhelmingly reporting on the spread of the COVID-19 virus, little attention seems to be paid to forcibly displaced people. Nevertheless, even in these difficult times, one may not forget that “migration is the DNA of the European Union” (UNICA President Luciano Saso) and the precarious position of the affected people is not just overshadowed but even deteriorated by the pandemic. To improve the situation of migrants and asylum seekers, [the European Commission](#) has increased its efforts to support their education and research activities through specific actions. In this sense, UNICA and its member universities are also committed to endorse and participate in projects and networks, like “Academic Refugee” and “Scholars at Risk”.

In line with these efforts, the UNICA & the City Working Group organised the webinar “[Universities responding to forced displacement](#)” on 25 November 2020 to share good practices and the experiences of universities about the welcome and integration of displaced students and academic staff. At the webinar promoted by the University College Dublin, the speakers pointed to three, partly overlapping ways: **integration, collaboration and research**. In their welcome addresses, João Mario Grilo, chair of UNICA & the City and Joe Carthy, professor of the University College Dublin, pointed out that universities should not be afraid of starting small in any of these aspects.

Concerning **integration**, institutions like the University College Dublin, provide scholarships and support academic refugees to get back to academia, for instance via the [CARA programme](#), mentioned by [Muireann Ní Raghallaigh](#), Assistant Professor of Social Work at UCD's School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice. Integration can be assured by training, language courses, financial and psychological support, upskilling sessions, and providing support to draft CVs and cover letters. These actions could help a migrant better integrate not only to the academic reality, but to the society as a whole. (The recording of the presentation is available [here](#).)

The integration of migrants can also be endorsed by recognising their previous studies, which can contribute to the realisation of their potential and motivate them to pursue a career. At the same time, the host country also benefits from their workforce, knowledge and much more. As [Amal Alsamman](#) (Reporting & Data Analyst at RIDM, Vrije Universiteit Brussel) highlighted in her personal statement at the beginning of the webinar, this is a sort of win-win process: if the host country or institution facilitates the integration of migrants, it will be mutually beneficial for their environment as well.

By saying so, Amal expressed her gratitude to Belgium and more specifically to the VUB, which offered ten positions reserved for refugees, giving her the opportunity to envisage a tangible future.

Last but not least, according to Juhar Yasin Abamosa, PhD Candidate at the Department of Education of the University of Bergen, governments should adopt a social inclusion discourse in integration and in higher education policies at the national level and allocate funds to the universities to empower refugees and allow them to participate in the academic world (The recording of the presentation is available [here](#).)

But **how can universities promote/adopt an inclusive policy?** An essential source of promotion is **collaboration** by sharing good and bad experiences and to provide coordinated efforts in research on the topic. In this regard, Achim Rohde, Academic Coordinator, gave the example of the Freie Universität Berlin, which has been part of the consortium "Academy in Exile" since 2018 and hosts the project's Critical Thinking Residency Program. Achim pointed out that one of the distinctive features of this new programme is the piloting of a teaching-across-borders initiative and the promotion of joining ongoing affiliated research projects. Achim also introduced the network "Academics in Solidarity", which, by addressing endangered scholars, aims to advance durable research collaborations. (The recording of the presentation is available [here](#).)

Consequently, Marit Egner, Senior Adviser at the University of Oslo highlighted that her institution is a partner in different projects aiming at protecting migrant scholars and students. The most recent one, InSPIREurope, funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, presented its latest mapping report with two major concerns: the shortage of funding for fellowships and the need to improve career development for researchers at risk in academia and non-academic sectors. (The recording of the presentation is available [here](#).)

Ahmad Wali Ahmad Yar, PhD researcher of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, shared the same position and highlighted the example of HumMingBird, a consortium of universities which aims to coordinate efforts in research to improve the understanding of migration patterns. It is essential to define the nature of migration flows, the drivers of migration and how host countries benefit from it. (The recording of the presentation is available [here](#).) Also, as pointed out by Muireann Ní Raghallaigh, collaboration beyond academia, mainly with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations would allow higher education institutions to gain more expertise in migrant issues. Students and student organisations should also be part of this process and involved on a voluntary basis, for example by collecting funds or through other actions.

According to Ahmad, depending on their capacities, universities could collaborate with forcibly displaced people and scholars at risk to better understand their situation, experiences and expectations and take into account their specific vulnerabilities and needs, as well as help them pursue their studies at the European campus. Finally, higher education institutions should collaborate to jointly reach out to governments and increase pressure on policy-makers to consider their recommendations.

Despite the uncountable papers and investigations about migration, **research** still needs to be improved, according to Michalis Spourdalakis (Professor of Political Sociology, Dean of the School of Economics and Politics, National & Kapodistrian University of Athens), given that currently the existing studies are too fragmented and too specialised. To have an in-depth and operative understanding of forced displacement, a comprehensive approach is crucial. The Greek professor proposed two solutions: To adopt a comprehensive multidisciplinary approach (focusing on two main fields, i.e. documenting policy papers and producing well trained experts in the field) and secure a clear commitment of the EU institutions and Member States when designing new programmes to consider the policy papers. (The recording of the presentation is available [here](#).)

In addition, research papers on migration have been conducted by using mostly a quantitative approach, which should change: **Research should be based on quantitative and qualitative data in a more balanced way.** The latter serves to analyse single experiences, specific vulnerabilities, and the state of art to understand how today's migration policy will affect tomorrow's migration patterns. In this regard, the project HumMingBird, introduced above, coordinates the work of universities, NGOs and international organisations to better understand migration flows and the drivers of migration and analyse patterns and motivations. To conclude, migration needs to be better understood, which can also contribute to bridging the widening gap between pro migration and anti-migration sentiments, so that people can better accept that migration is a structural and natural part of any society.

<https://www.unica-network.eu/>