

Unica

Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe

Webinar

Universities Responding to Forced Displacement Challenges and Opportunities

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Beyond Academic Excellence. Contributing to the EU Challenges and the issue of Forced Displacement

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The international rankings of Universities worldwide are becoming the most important factor in evaluating the academic and social performance of these institutions. The National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), the oldest Greek speaking academic institution (est. 1837) has relatively recently made a systematic effort to organize and fulfill the requirements of such evaluations and rankings. As a full faculty University, and despite its structurally poor funding, the University of Athens has displayed an admirable academic performance, which has been recognized in all the European and the international University ranking lists.

In addition to other reservations, one justifiably may put forward¹, the criteria of these rankings unfortunately, pay little or no attention to the presence and contribution of Universities to social issues. However, the NKUA has displayed admirable activity in response to the issue of forced displacement.

It is well known that the forced displacement/refugee flows into this country have been overwhelming, since almost ninety percent (90%) of the people who attempted to cross into Europe have used Greece as their entrance to our continent. The situation was (and is) even more dramatic given that since 2010 the country has been under the strict conditions of the so-called stability pacts, which, among other effects, led to the severe deterioration of the Greek civil and social services.

As soon as the intensity of the problem became clear, the NKUA took a number of integrated initiatives aimed at dealing with the problem in the most humanitarian way possible. Rector A. M. Demopoulos has participated in many related committees (e.g. participation in the Parliamentary Committee, November 9, 2016). In addition, the University went on to establish the “Observatory-network for solidarity and contribution to the refugees”. The observatory has taken three-dimensional actions:

- a) At the academic – research level, it surveys and studies the conditions of the refugees, and it introduced classes into the university curriculum aimed at increasing awareness of the issues involved.
- b) At the education level, it initiated a series of internships that benefited both students and refugees.
- c) At the ground level, it has an active presence and makes contributions to all voluntary structures at the local, peripheral and central government levels.

Most of these activities were services and comprehensive interventions in the medical field (preventative and treatment). In addition, a number of other initiatives were undertaken which had to do with the facilitation of the cultural and linguistic settlement of refugees in both temporary and permanent settlements. The Schools of Humanities and Education coordinated these. Finally, there have been a number of initiatives (eg

¹ See for example E. Gadd, “University Rankings Need a Rethink” *Nature*, Vol. 587, 26 November, 2020, p. 523.

seminars, conferences, etc.) made in order to facilitate university studies for refugees.

All the above have been organized and administered by special Project Groups (PG) which served the following particular needs:

Collection of information and communication,
Psychological intervention/support,
Training and education
Recording and attestation of image and speech,
Medical and pharmaceutical intervention/support,
Logistics support,
Dental care,
Cultural activities,
Co-ordinated liaisons with government and local administration.

According to NKUA records, a number of projects were completed and/or developed, which did not of course solve the unprecedented problem. However, it has not only shown the university's alertness to humanitarian crisis of forced displacement but has also underlined the social concern of the academic community that stood tall in accordance with its academic excellence.

These are:

1. The Postgraduate Program «International Medicine - Health Crisis Management» of the School of Medicine of the University of Athens, in collaboration with the NGO «Médecins du Monde», has formed mobile units providing health services to refugees and immigrants.
2. The establishment of a Coordinating Service under the auspices of the National Centre for Health Operations, which will supervise all organizations/initiatives involved. Among these, there will be the Graduate Program in the School of Medicine of the University of Athens entitled «International Medicine and Health Crisis Management».
3. This same Graduate Program entitled «International Medicine and Health Crisis Management» has organized several training seminars on the islands where refugees are welcomed when entering our country.
4. Specialized tutors from the Faculties of Education at the University of Athens offer support to children hosted in Accommodation Centers of Attica. They have also organized various creative activities on a regular basis, in order to keep children creatively occupied.

5. Expert staff from the Faculty of Music Studies organize musical activities and games for children hosted in special centers for refugees.
6. The Second University Clinic/Department of Anesthesiology, in cooperation with the Fourth University Clinic/Department of Surgery have carried out a basic educational program for the urgent handling of ventilators life support and the transport of severely ill or injured persons. The program has been carried out by 120 nursing employees from the Northern Aegean, mainly from the islands of Lesbos and Chios. Furthermore, a new equivalent program for watercraft personnel is being organized.
7. The First University Clinic/Department of Psychiatry has already activated a project for helping refugee children, training Hosting Center staff and offering psychological support to all refugees.
8. A group of multi-lingual university students-volunteers has already been formed in order to serve the refugees' communication needs.
9. There is an on-going collection of medicines and primary necessities.
10. The University Administration has proposed to the European University Association (EUA) the subsidized integration of academics and students with refugees in Greece into the scholarly/scientific context of the European Union.
11. An online platform registering both volunteers and their proposals is being prepared.

Judging from the activities of the NKUA, Universities can take a number of initiatives especially at the regional and/or the national levels. However, it is difficult for them to provide a more comprehensive plan on the issue, which by definition requires the widest possible interdisciplinary analysis and understanding. It is obvious that the growing phenomenon of forced displacement cannot simply attributed to war or famine or climate change. After all, the history of the social composition of all advanced capitalist societies is to a great extent the history of immigration. Nor can the forced development be limited to the question of dealing with the pressing issue of the arrangements required in the host countries. There are a number of distinct issues involved in this complex issue and unless they are approached in a comprehensive fashion, it will be difficult to produce a comprehensive and operative understanding of forced displacement.

However, for the moment it seems that the various studies are fragmented, or to generalize, or to overspecialize. These are partially the result of the ever-increasing specialization of the university fields and programs. This, in some ways is very difficult to overcome if one leaves it to the internal dynamics of the academic community. The dedication of most members of the community to the specificities of their research usually allows little room for a comprehensive and effective contribution to the issue beyond to the normative orientation of each one of us.

To break this deadlock, we need policy initiatives that simultaneously promote two things: a) educational and research programs between various universities at national, regional and EU levels which focus on a comprehensive, multi-interdisciplinary approach on the issue. New academic initiatives that aim at both well documented policy papers and well trained experts and b) the clear commitment of the EU institutions and the EU member states governments to use both these experts and consider seriously these policy papers.

Therefore, we must understand that the phenomena and the flows of forced displacement are going to be with us for the visible future, and that the policies in the field cannot continue to be solely the outcome of political considerations. Furthermore, we need to recognize that the response cannot follow the logic that “one size fits all” and that policies should be custom made for the individual countries. Finally we must realize that the need of interdisciplinary expertize on this kind of issue can only be performed by a widest-collaboration among universities and research centers. Only then can there no doubt that the effective impact of the universities should consider this strategy seriously.

In other words, in order to finally break the dead-end of generally ineffective and in particular socially ineffective political actions, this is the only way that academics can use the knowledge they have acquired in their “ivory tower”. And this is the only way that political bureaucracies can turn seriously in the direction of that “ivory tower”.