

Invitation: third EARIN event

'Access to higher education for forcibly displaced students and scholars'

On-line event, Wednesday 6 December 2023, via Teams ([access link here](#))

Context

Refugees, asylum-seekers and other forcibly displaced people do not have the same level of access to education as the general population. Data from over 70 countries reporting into [UNHCR's annual education report](#) shows that average gross enrolment rates for refugees stands at 38 per cent for pre-primary, 65 per cent for primary, 41 per cent for secondary, and 6 per cent for tertiary education.¹

These figures show the magnitude of the barriers faced by refugees and other forcibly displaced people to access higher education. Globally, [the average gross enrollment rate](#)² in higher education stands at 39%, which means that refugees and other forcibly displaced people are more than six times less likely to enter higher education.

Barriers to higher education

Forcibly displaced people face multiple barriers to accessing higher education, creating a '[super-disadvantage](#)'.

In a [recent policy paper](#), UNESCO and UNHCR explain that "*The most critical barriers facing refugees include a **scarcity of opportunities to complete secondary school**, limited access to **reliable information, financial needs, language requirements, legislative restrictions on education access, and difficulty in validating prior education credentials and documentation.***

*These barriers compound circumstantial or situational challenges such as the host country situation, newcomer factors, **psychosocial challenges** associated with forced displacement, and physical barriers of encampment. Of course, these barriers do not operate in isolation. For example, refugee students are typically less familiar with higher education benefits and available support systems because they are new to the country and do not understand the functioning of the higher education system.*

Without specialized guidance and support, these conditions can compound difficulties navigating and accessing financial aid or scholarships."

¹ Note that this global average is based on reporting of over 70 countries, but it does not take into account people displaced as a result of the Ukraine crisis in Europe.

² Gross enrollment ratio for tertiary school is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in tertiary education regardless of age by the population of the age group which officially corresponds to tertiary education, and multiplying by 100, see <https://databank.worldbank.org/metadataglossary/world-development-indicators/series/SE.TER.ENRR>

Policy and resource challenges

In the European context, policy makers and other stakeholders have taken many initiatives to address these barriers and facilitate access to higher education of refugees and other forcibly displaced people,³ but they are often faced with a **lack of resources**. In some cases, know-how on how to build a support system for displaced students on campuses is lacking, too.

Moreover, **key policies** on recognition of prior learning, administrative, language and financial barriers to higher education are in many cases lacking in refugee hosting countries. International and regional legal frameworks have generally evolved in very positive ways. In many countries and regions access to higher education of displaced students enjoys strong legal guarantees. However, many countries still maintain local legal and administrative provisions that create or maintain barriers to higher education.⁴

The Europe region has also historically suffered from a **lack of accurate data** on higher education of refugees and other forcibly displaced people. Most higher education institutions in Europe are legally prevented from registering data on the legal status, nationality or other personal characteristics of those who enroll. Data is often not comparable, incomplete or scattered. This has made it in many cases impossible to make accurate assessments of the needs of refugee student population across the region.

Solutions to address the challenges

The higher education sector in the Europe region has, to its great credit, often been at the forefront of finding solutions to the many challenges refugees and other forcibly displaced people face.⁵

These solutions range from consistent **inclusion of refugees and other forcibly displaced population in national or local higher education policies**, measures to address **language barriers** (cf. preparatory years for aspiring students that do not speak the language of instruction), introduction of **flexible mechanisms for recognition of prior learning and qualifications**, opening of opportunities to **finance studies** (cf. through scholarships or complementary pathways), **student-led and peer support** to refugee and other forcibly displaced students, and many other.

Many of these initiatives have been led and financed by individual higher education institutions, higher education stakeholders, national and local education authorities, aid organizations and inter-governmental organizations such as the European Union and United Nations agencies.

Moreover, many stakeholders have **pledged** to take initiatives to support higher education for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons through the Global Refugee Forum and its pledging mechanism and by supporting UNHCR's global 15by30 target to get 15% of refugees globally to access higher education by 2020.

³ See among other the European Union support programmes <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/higher-education-for-migrants-and-refugees>, support initiatives by higher education institutions and other stakeholders <https://eua.eu/101-projects/541-refugees-welcome-map.html> and student-led initiatives, for example <https://togethermovingforward.eu/> and <https://esu-online.org/help-for-ukraine/>

⁴ See chapters 3 and 4 of UNESCO and UNHCR's policy paper <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381505>

⁵ See among other chapter 5, ibidem footnote 4.

Objectives of this EARIN event

1. This EARIN on-line event will offer an opportunity to take stock of the many challenges facing refugee and other forcibly displaced students and will have as its primary objective to **prioritize a limited set of challenges in education of refugees or other forcibly displaced people** that can be addressed in the informal setting of the EARIN network, where stakeholders from the higher education sector could benefit from cooperation with UNHCR and other leading organizations supporting the displaced.
2. EARIN will explore which stakeholders are willing to lead an **EARIN work stream on access to higher education** which will focus on finding practical solutions to some of the challenges set out above (cf. development of preparatory programmes at universities, mapping local and regional legal and administrative barriers to higher education and how to solve them, ...).
3. Participants will work towards definition of **concrete follow-ups and outputs** of this work stream. The idea is not to create yet another initiative in parallel to existing networks and initiatives working on access to higher education, but rather to look for concrete complementary initiatives that link the humanitarian sector with the higher education sector (which is the case in, for examples, some of the complementary pathways programmes that have been developed in Europe in recent years⁶).

Agenda

Wednesday 6 December (all times CET)

- **13:45** - Participants log on to the session on Teams using [this link](#).
- **14:00 - 14:10** - Welcome by Lilian Tsourdi, EARIN chair
- **14:10 - 14:20** - Presentation of key challenges in higher education from the UNESCO / UNHCR policy paper by Frederik Smets, Education Officer, UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe.
- **Short break**
- **14:30 - 15:30** - Discussion with three objectives:
 - Narrowing down the major challenges to some that can be worked on by EARIN
 - Brainstorm on concrete outputs of this work stream
 - Action: discussion of who will follow up and how

End

NOTE - this invitation can be sent on to any relevant stakeholders invitees think can contribute to the discussion.

⁶ See among other UNICORE in Italy <https://universitycorridors.unhcr.it/> and UNIV'R in France <https://services.unhcr.org/opportunities/education-opportunities/couloir-universitaire-pour-les-refugies-vers-la-france-programme-univr>

BACKGROUND

What is EARIN?

European Academic Refugee Interdisciplinary Network (EARIN) is an informal network of academics and stakeholders in academia working together to advance teaching and research on forcibly displaced and stateless populations and to foster solidarity and develops support initiatives for displaced students and scholars.

The EARIN is the European regional offshoot of the [Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network \(GAIN\)](#). GAIN was established by the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), adopted in December 2018 by the UN General Assembly, which stated that “*a global academic network on refugee, other forced displacement, and statelessness issues will be established, involving universities, academic alliances, and research institutions, together with UNHCR and other relevant stakeholders.*” ([paragraph 43](#)).

GAIN facilitates specific deliverables on three objectives:

- **Research** in support of the four objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees: i) ease the pressures on host countries; ii) enhance refugee self-reliance; iii) expand access to third-country solutions; iv) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.
- **Teaching training and knowledge sharing** to advance knowledge sharing on refugee, forced displacement and statelessness issues
- **Solidarity of the academic community with forcibly displaced scholars and students** through concrete support (e.g. scholarships)

The EARIN aims to bring these three objectives into practice in Europe, or in projects that have a link with Europe, with European academic stakeholders, or with stakeholders that have a link with Europe.

Who is in EARIN?

The EARIN had its first meetings in late 2022 and has an open and informal membership. It is chaired by Assistant Professor [Lilian Tsourdi](#), a legal expert on refugees and migration at the University of Maastricht (Netherlands). So far two on-line events were organized by EARIN, one on international cooperation in the field of asylum and migration law, and one on pledges made by various stakeholders in support of refugees at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF).

More information? Contact Frederik Smets at UNHCR smets@unhcr.org