

ESAANZ Essay prize winner

## The challenges surrounding recognition of prior learning for refugees in European universities

WILL DOMVO

University of Melbourne

[pwdomvo@student.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:pwdomvo@student.unimelb.edu.au)

### Abstract

*Since 2015, Europe has experienced an influx of refugees, many of whom aim to commence or continue their higher education studies in Europe. European countries are generally favourable to the inclusion of refugees in their universities, however the policies and processes currently in place are not adequate to facilitate access. The challenges that refugees face when accessing universities in Europe often relate to the level of language required, administrative status, tuition fees, and recognition of prior learning. Recognition of prior learning is a major hurdle for refugees because they often arrive without their education documents, and their prior education systems are different from the European ones. This article analyses the policies and processes surrounding recognition of prior learning for refugees in European universities and calls for a better coordination of the numerous initiatives currently in place.*

**Keywords:** Europe; inclusion; policy; recognition of prior learning; refugee; university

### Introduction

Since 2015, Europe has seen a surge in refugees and asylum seekers as a result of the war in Syria and conflicts in the Middle East. The sheer amount of people displaced due to these conflicts, coupled with the region's lack of preparedness to welcome them has engendered what is now called the *European Refugee Crisis* (Talay, 2017). The refugees that have entered Europe since the beginning of this crisis are mostly young, well educated, and eager to attend university (Toker, 2019). However, many barriers prevent them from successfully transitioning to higher education in their host country. This article addresses one of these barriers by analysing the processes and policies surrounding recognition of prior learning (RPL). The first part of this article explains why promoting access is valuable and identifies the barriers that refugees face when trying to access higher education in Europe, with a focus on RPL. The second part uses the multi-level multi-actor theoretical framework to analyse what policies and processes have been developed to address this RPL issue.

## Theoretical framework

In this article, Europe is conceptualised through its higher education policy boundaries rather than its geographical boundaries such as the European continent, or its political boundaries such as the European Union. Chou (2016) refers to this area as the *Europe of knowledge*. Multiple frameworks support policy cooperation and coordination across European higher education systems, such as the Bologna Process, which encouraged the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA was formally launched in 2010 and comprises 48 countries that span Western Europe all the way to Azerbaijan in the east. Examples of policies are drawn from various countries that take part in this policy framework.

European higher education systems constitute a complex organisational field in which policymaking and coordination involves a multitude of actors at multiple levels of governance. Actors at each level of governance, local, regional, national, supranational, and global have the ability to develop or influence higher education policies. The multi-level multi-actor theoretical framework allows for an analysis of the dynamics between actors at various levels of governance to understand how their agency and power relationships shape policymaking (Chou et al., 2017). It goes beyond the vertical and horizontal axes of policy analysis and accounts for the complexity of policymaking in European higher education systems. This theoretical framework is used to understand how the policies, understood as “text and actions, words and deeds” (Ball as cited in Yorke & Vidovich, 2016), and processes surrounding recognition of prior learning (RPL) have been developed and implemented across Europe to facilitate refugees’ access to university.

The 1951 Geneva Convention defined a *refugee* as a person who left their home country due to persecutions based on their race, religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political affiliation, and who is not able to return to their country as they believe they would not have enough protection against those persecutions (Marcu, 2018). An asylum seeker can be defined as a person who has left their country for the same reasons and is now awaiting a response on their request for international protection. The term refugee is used throughout this article to encompass the various administrative situations of both refugees and asylum seekers.

## The benefits and challenges of accessing university

More than 1 million refugees entered Europe in 2015 (Toker, 2019). Most of these refugees were originally from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, and 50% were between the ages of 18 and 34 (Marcu, 2018). As many of these refugees are eager to continue or commence their studies in Europe, promoting access constitutes a pertinent challenge for European countries.

Promoting access to university is valuable for refugees, for the host societies, and for humanity as a whole. Scholars and organisations explain that refugees who access university enjoy greater economic, social, and humanitarian benefits. Some argue that it is key to successful resettlement as it allows refugees to have better job prospects (Marcu, 2018). Others demonstrate that it reduces marginalisation, improves health and wellbeing outcomes, enhances social cohesion, and reduces xenophobic views in the host population (Borsch et al., 2019). In addition, accessing university can be considered a human right, meaning that promoting access is necessary to respect human dignity (Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018).

The refugees who have fled their country to resettle elsewhere since 2015 have been well educated and have a strong desire to participate and succeed at university (Lenette, 2016). However, according to a report from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), only 1% of refugees managed to transition into university in 2016 (Streitwieser et al., 2019). Many issues arise when refugees try to access university, such as a lack of competency in the relevant language, a lack of information regarding administration processes and available pathways, the unaffordability of tuition fees, a lack of social and academic support, and issues around RPL.

## **Recognition of prior learning, a major hurdle**

RPL is one of the main barriers preventing refugees from successfully transitioning into university in Europe (Marcu, 2018). Along with language proficiency and administrative status, RPL is a necessary process for admission into a course, as students must demonstrate that they have attained a level of education sufficient to pursue their studies at university.

Two main issues arise when refugees go through the RPL process. Firstly, many refugees fled their country hastily and did not take their education documents with them, so they are unable to provide a proof of qualifications. This creates issues for European universities, as many higher education systems do not have adequate processes in place to manage such cases and are therefore unable to recognise refugees' prior learning, making the admission process complicated. Secondly, even when they can provide supporting documentation, European institutions do not readily accept these, so refugees must often go through complex administrative processes to have their prior qualifications recognised. Universities generally compare the qualifications obtained in a different country to the qualifications they deliver in their own system so as to ensure that they are equivalent and can grant access to a course. Moreover, in some countries such as Spain, refugees also need to have their qualifications recognised by governmental authorities. The Spanish governmental recognition is a lengthy and tedious process that sometimes takes up to three years, making admission to a course impossible in the meantime. The overall complexity and length of RPL and admission processes coupled with the scarcity of information and administrative support for refugees contribute to the lack of university accessibility (Marcu, 2018).

Although it has been exacerbated by the refugee crisis, the issue of RPL for refugees is not new. The array of European and international treaties and conventions attest to its significance. As early as 1951, the United Nations Refugee Convention legislated that countries should recognise refugees' prior learning and qualifications to the same extent as they would recognise that of other migrants. However, this Convention

assumed that refugees would be able to provide the relevant documents to prove their prior learning, which is not always the case. In addition to the Refugee Convention, the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention regulated that the Parties should develop processes and policies to recognise prior learning in a fair and quick manner even when refugees are unable to provide supporting documents. Unfortunately, data shows that most European countries have not fully implemented these recommendations so far (Spadina, 2018).

At the height of the refugee crisis, it became clear that the failure to adequately assess RPL was a widespread issue for European universities. As such, the European Commission called for action through the 2015 Yerevan Communiqué and the 2016 meeting of the Committee of the Recognition of Qualifications in the European Region (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). However, due to the complexity of the European higher education governance structure, this issue has not been addressed in a uniform and coordinated manner yet.

## **An uncoordinated approach**

The various frameworks that shape the Europe of knowledge, such as the Bologna process and the EHEA, have impacted the higher education landscape by creating a vast area where countries have standardised policies and governance structures to accommodate the circulation of staff, students and ideas (Chou & Ravinet, 2017). These frameworks make it simple for European students to move from one university to the other across different countries and to transfer their credits through the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) (European Commission, 2021). This means that a student who completed a Bachelor in one university in France can easily get this degree recognised to study a relevant Masters in Germany for example. The process of RPL is therefore smooth and well designed for European students, but it is not appropriate for refugees.

Despite the frameworks and agreements presented above, RPL remains one of the main barriers restricting access to higher education for refugees. In 2021, the European Commission stated that the “monitoring of national implementation of commitments in the field of recognition [was] a high priority” (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018, p. 142). In other words, the development and coordination of policies is still lacking and more needs to be done to alleviate this well-documented issue. This part of the article analyses the different approaches taken by European actors to address this issue. The literature surrounding policymaking for RPL distinguishes two main types of approaches, bottom-up and top-down approaches (Jungblut et al., 2020).

## **Bottom-up approaches**

Bottom-up approaches refer to policy-making that emanates from actors at the local level (Vukasovic, 2017). In this context, they consist of institutions’ initiatives to develop alternative RPL processes for refugees. Many examples of these bottom-up approaches can be found across Europe.

In the northern region of Belgium, Flanders, individual institutions have developed RPL processes and alternative admission pathways. For example, the Vrije Universiteit Brussels completed a comparative study of the Syrian and Iraqi education systems and compared them to the Belgian system (Vukasovic, 2017). With clear comparisons, university staff were more confident when processing RPL for refugees coming from these countries as they understood the various qualifications. In the meantime, the University of Leuven focused on organising events and information sessions to discuss RPL processes and provide suitable pathways to refugees who are unable to provide supporting documentation.

On the other hand, if a higher education system is quite elitist, it is difficult for institutions to justify the need to promote access for refugees (Goastellec, 2018). For instance, in a Swiss canton where only a small amount of the local population has access to higher education, universities were reticent at the thought of promoting access to refugees as it was difficult to justify. This type of barrier is very context-dependent, as in another Swiss canton where access to higher education is more democratised, a junior academic developed an alternative admission program for refugees. In that canton, refugees without supporting documentation have the possibility to provide a description of their prior study, and if the university is satisfied with the information provided, refugees may gain access to a degree based on their prior qualifications.

These examples demonstrate the local actors' agency in regard to policy development and implementation. However, the lack of cooperation between institutions resulted in a plethora of programs, policies and processes developed independently from each other (Helme, 2018). Moreover, although bottom-up approaches tend to be more responsive and adequate to their contexts, they generally require coordination from the higher levels of governance in order to be consistent and sustainable.

Local actors have been key in developing innovative RPL processes, while actors at the regional and national levels have been distant; they observed the local initiatives and came in afterwards with the intent to coordinate the local efforts rather than providing guidance at the onset of the crisis (Goastellec, 2018). In addition, the dearth of policy evaluation means that there is insufficient data to measure the outcomes of the various local initiatives (Helme, 2018). This limits Europe's ability to compare the different policies and processes, to adjust where required, and to attempt implementing the successful ones in other systems.

Nonetheless, despite universities' agency and their willingness to facilitate access by adjusting their policies and processes, it is important to consider the broader environment. Universities do not operate in a vacuum, but are largely influenced by their socio-political context, as demonstrated by the Swiss example. The inclusion of refugees is a contentious issue that involves multiple policy domains such as immigration laws and social policies, and not all governments are favourable to inclusion.

The cases of Poland and Hungary provide examples where governments can ignore European higher education recommendations and stifle inclusion initiatives at the local level by promoting anti-immigration policies (Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018). The right-wing parties leading these two countries have refused to welcome refugees as part of the *Relocation scheme*, an agreement where European countries were

supposed to welcome quotas of refugees, and have tightened immigration policies instead (Stivas, 2018). This sent a negative signal to universities. Unfavourable political climates undoubtedly curtail the universities' ability to develop bottom-up approaches with a strong sense of agency. Without support in terms of funding, guidance, or positive messaging in the media, universities tend to put their efforts on hold and refugees remain marginalised.

## Top-down approaches

Top-down approaches refer to the policy-making that comes from the regional or national levels in the form of rules and regulations (Vukasovic, 2017). To palliate to the issue of RPL in higher education, some governments took a more proactive approach.

For example in Germany, the issue of refugees' access to higher education was seen as a national priority at the onset of the crisis, and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research developed programs and allocated funding to assist refugees (Goastellec, 2018). However, since Germany is a federal country, processes such as RPL are not coordinated nationally (Steinhardt & Eckhardt, 2017). Process implementation can vary from one German Land to the other, which creates bureaucratic confusion for refugees. Although in 2015 the different Länder ministers collectively promoted an alternative way to assess RPL for refugees who were unable to provide supporting documentation, the implementation of this alternative process was not uniform across institutions. As such, refugees still experienced difficulties finding information relevant to their specific situation in their Land.

Nonetheless, Norway was the only European government to take a strong proactive stance with a top-down approach to facilitate refugees' access through alternative RPL processes even before the beginning of the crisis (Toker, 2019). Norway realised early that leaving the responsibility to recognise undocumented prior qualifications to local actors was not a successful strategy, as many deplored the lack of consistency and efficiency of the processes. Therefore, in 2013 the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) developed an alternative process called the UVD procedure, which translates to the Recognition Procedure for Persons without Verifiable Documentation. This alternative procedure involves two steps: an interview and the collection of any relevant documentation such as course guides and syllabi, and a second interview to compare the prior learning to the Norwegian standards. Three years later in 2016, Norway decided to go further to ease RPL processes for refugees by developing the *Qualifications passport*. This new process filled the gap for the candidates who were unable to complete the UVD procedure due to a lack of language proficiency, a lack of permanent residence permit, or because they had not finished their qualifications earlier.

The new Qualifications passport process was so successful that the Council of Europe decided in 2017 to scale up this initiative to a *European Qualifications Passport* (Spadina, 2018). The European Qualifications Passport is a document obtained through an alternative process of RPL based on interviews with applicants to gather information on their level of language, skills, and prior qualifications. When issued, this document is valuable for refugees and European countries, as it allows refugees who are unable to provide supporting documents to demonstrate their skills and abilities, and to show that these have been assessed and recognised by European standards. However, the European Qualifications Passport is not a legal document. The information displayed on this document is only informative and does not grant access to higher education; it can only support an application.

The European Qualifications Passport is currently the most coordinated approach for RPL in Europe, and it follows the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. However, only nine countries have implemented this process as of 2021 (Council of Europe, 2021). Moreover, robust evaluations would assist in understanding what challenges higher education systems face when implementing it, and how other countries may adjust their approach accordingly (Helme, 2018). In the meantime, top-down approaches remain scarce in Europe, which means that most governments provide little guidance for their higher education systems and let the local actors manage the crisis.

## **Other approaches**

Local institutions and governments have strong agency in terms of higher education policymaking (Klatt & Milana, 2020). In contrast, stakeholder organisations and supranational bodies have more of an advisory capability; they are only able to influence policymaking through soft policy instruments such as recommendations, comparisons, and information collection.

Stakeholder organisations such as university associations or student associations have realised the need for alternative RPL processes and policy coordination early on. For example, in 2015 the Conference Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRSU), a Spanish association of universities, voiced its willingness to make Spanish universities accessible for refugees through easier RPL and admission processes (Marcu, 2018). In addition, the European Students' Union (ESU) called for more equitable RPL processes for all refugees in Europe (ESU, 2016). Unfortunately, these recommendations have fallen short of their intended objectives. Two years after the CRSU's declaration, data showed that only 11 universities had implemented their recommendations. This is an underwhelming number given that 76 universities are part of this association. Moreover, from 2015 to 2017 the ESU repeatedly published policy briefs in collaboration with expert academics to engage governments and universities in developing and coordinating policies for RPL processes, and to deplore the persistent lack of action (ESU, 2016; 2017). These examples show that the influence of stakeholder organisations is limited and often undermined.

In this complex organisational field, supranational entities such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) do not have legal power to enforce policies either. The EHEA can only suggest, monitor, and evaluate policies, and it relies on soft policy instruments such as Communiqués, working groups, and indicators to coordinate and influence policymaking. However, countries have sovereignty over their higher

education policies and have been “notoriously resistant to the influence of Europeanization” when it comes to social policies (Héritier as cited in Klatt & Milana, 2020, p. 31). In other words, countries do not necessarily implement all policies recommended at the supranational level, especially when these do not align with their own priorities. For instance, the EHEA stated in the 2015 Yerevan Communiqué that one of their essential goals was to make the higher education systems more inclusive and to widen the opportunities for access to students from disadvantaged background (ESU, 2016). However, the fact that monitoring policy implementation was high on their priority in 2021 demonstrates that these recommendations have not been followed and implemented (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). The resistance to Europeanisation is also evident with the European Qualifications Passport, as only 9 out of the 48 EHEA countries currently participate in this initiative (Council of Europe, 2021).

By design, supranational bodies have access to large pool of data across Europe, which allows them to gather and collate data and repackage it in an informative way. For example, the European Universities Association (EUA) created a *Refugees Welcome Map*, which catalogues the different organisations that have taken action to support refugees’ access (EUA, 2021). This constitutes a valuable source of information for refugees who are able to find the various institutions that have policies and processes in place to facilitate their access (Marcu, 2018). However, with more than 350 different initiatives catalogued, the Refugees Welcome Map unintentionally highlights the lack of European coordination in regards to promoting access to universities, as there are more than 350 different initiatives catalogued.

It is also important to acknowledge the global level when discussing local issues (Chou & Ravinet, 2016). The globalising forces in education policy underpinned by neoliberal principles put pressure on higher education systems and coerce them in pushing an agenda that is more aligned with the values of excellence and internationalisation, than with the values of equity and social justice (Rizvi & Lingard, 2011). Although these values are not mutually exclusive, policy-makers tend to hierarchise and arrange those values in different ways depending on their objectives. The current neoliberal assemblage of values could help explain why most governments provided little guidance regarding RPL processes, as they might have been more focused on internationalising their markets and displaying academic excellence rather than promoting access for the most vulnerable.

## Conclusion

The multi-level multi-actor theoretical framework allows for an analysis of the complexity of policymaking and policy coordination in the European higher education organisational field (Chou et al., 2017). The issue of RPL is a significant barrier for refugees’ access to university, and solutions have been developed in an uncoordinated manner across Europe. To facilitate access, local initiatives have been valuable, responsive, and targeted. Meanwhile, actors at the regional and national levels have been slow to respond and generally tried to coordinate the initiatives coming from the bottom-up rather than developing policies and guiding from the top-down (ESU, 2017). The European Qualifications Passport initiative is promising, however, the lack of evaluation makes it difficult to clearly demonstrate its value at the local level, and only a few countries participate (Council of Europe, 2021). Moreover, although stakeholder organisations and supranational entities have made multiple

recommendations to encourage policy development and coordination, data shows that their influence was limited (ESU, 2017). To make RPL an equitable process, the various actors at the different levels of governance should cooperate and collaborate to develop strong policies and processes. These initiatives should be coordinated and evaluated in order to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and to adjust implementation across Europe accordingly. With the ever-changing world and the unpredictability of migration flows (Napierala et al., 2021), European countries should strengthen their policies to prepare for various scenarios. As such, ensuring that adequate RPL policies and processes are in place for current and potential future refugees remains a relevant challenge.

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