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A Multi-Level Governance of Resilience: Civil Society, Universities and Local Governments for the Support of Refugee Students in Italy

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Abstract

A multi-level governance of resilience is fundamental in creating supportive spaces for the defense of human rights. Starting from the concepts of inclusive city and the right to education, this article will explore the support for refugee students in academia, with examples of best practices from Italian universities. Universities, as places of culture, knowledge dissemination, and cultural defense, on one hand, and as public institutions rooted in the community, on the other, have a duty to strive to improve the very societies they inhabit. Creating supporting activities for the integration of refugees into the university system falls not only within the so-called Third Mission of universities: it also responds to one of the goals set by UNHCR for 2030, which is to achieve 15% of refugees enrolled in university. This article will highlight how universities as public institutions have a moral duty to defend human rights, and promoting the access of refugees to the higher education system definitely works in this direction. However, universities alone cannot succeed in ensuring a truly successful path for such fragile users: it is essential to create a multi-level supporting network with other entities at both local and national levels.

Keywords: refugees, higher education, civil society, multi-level governance

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Introduction

The article is based on two fundamental concepts: on one hand, the right to education as a basic human right¹, and on the other, the concept of multi-level governance of resilience². These two concepts are briefly analysed and subsequently connected, with a particular focus on the inclusion of refugees within the higher education system. Starting from those two core ideas, the article will present concrete examples of actions aimed at promoting the inclusion of refugees in the higher education system. The objective is to underscore how true inclusion is achievable only through actions rooted in multi-level governance and networking beyond academia.

This article represents an original contribution to the debate on human rights, as most research in the field focuses on access to university³ - namely the initial phase concerning the recognition of prior qualifications and the provision of scholarships. What follows is a significant example from the EHEA⁴ latest Communiqué, announced in Tirana in May 2024:

‘Globally, the number of refugees and displaced individuals seeking shelter has been increasing, including students and academic staff. Europe is one of the safe destinations, and higher education plays a key role in their integration into our societies. To support refugees and make best use of their skills and potential, we will intensify our efforts to ensure the recognition of their qualifications and to remove barriers to their enrolment in higher education, including through the use of the guidelines developed by the ENIC-NARIC networks, of the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPR) by the Council of Europe, and of the 2017 Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.’

Instead, this article focuses on the aspect of *inclusion*, which is essential for a refugee student to successfully complete their educational journey. The research question is: how can universities implement multi-level governance to support the inclusion of refugee students?

¹ See for instance: Gilchrist 2018, Dryden-Peterson and Horst 2023, and the UNESCO website <https://www.unesco.org/en/right-education> (accessed: 30/04/2025).

² See for instance: Bache and Flinders 2004, Papisca 2011, Lazzari 2015, Petrovic 2018, Borgonovo Re 2022, Gallo, Poggio and Bodio 2022.

³ See for instance: Streitwieser, Loo, Ohorodnik and Jeong 2018, Tarozzi and Vittori 2024, UNESCO 2023, UNHCR 2024.

⁴ The European Higher Education Area is composed of 49 countries and the European Union. Retrieved from the EHEA website: <https://eha.info/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

The methodology is mainly desk research, taking advantage of the author's extensive experience in the higher education sector. This experience includes holding leadership roles at two major universities in Northern Italy, which allowed her to work closely with international and refugee students and get a strategic vision on the implementation of universities policies.

The article begins with an overview of the context concerning refugee students in academia. The discussion will then focus on the concept of *super disadvantage* and provide concrete examples of best practices of multi-level governance from the Italian university system. In the conclusions, the importance of multi-level governance will be highlighted as a key factor for the success of refugee inclusion projects within the university system, as is clear from the Italian examples analysed in the text.

1. Refugees in the Higher Education System

Education's role in combating marginalization and abuse, as well as its ability 'to enable individuals to enhance their lives, and to become leaders and role models in their communities or upon return home' (Martin and Stulgaitis 2022), is emphasized in Agenda 2030, particularly through Sustainable Development Goal 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'⁵. While UNESCO and UNHCR play pivotal roles in advancing this objective, the primary responsibility for ensuring refugees' access to education lies with local governments, international NGOs, and, especially for higher education, with charities, the private sector, and specialized university programmes in the Global North⁶. The reception of refugees in universities of the Global North began to be a subject of scientific study in 2015, the year of the Syrian crisis (DAAD 2015; Crea 2016; Cremonini 2016). This interest saw a subsequent peak at the end of 2021 with the Afghan crisis and in early 2022,

⁵ 'The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in September 2015, provides an impetus for action on refugee education, recognizing that education is both a goal in itself and a means for attaining all the other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Refugee education is implicitly supported by the SDGs' promise to "leave no one behind" – the acknowledgement that the goals will not be met unless they are met for the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030.' (UNESCO 2019).

⁶ This article focuses on reception in the Global North, however, as Ergin well states: 'We should be fair and state that the real refugee burden is carried on the shoulders of developing countries' (Ergin 2020). It is important to keep in mind that 85% of the world's displaced people are hosted in low and lower middle-income countries (World Bank and UNHCR 2021).

with the conflict in Ukraine. Encouraged by the European Union⁷, Western universities launched various solidarity initiatives to support the Ukrainian population, creating an unprecedented support network⁸. At the same time, initiatives by UNESCO and UNHCR to promote refugees' access to higher education have expanded, within a global context that has seen a constant increase in the refugee population worldwide⁹. In 2019, UNHCR launched the 15by30¹⁰ campaign, aiming to raise the number of refugees enrolled in universities to 15% by 2030. Prior to this, most initiatives focused on ensuring access to primary education; from that moment on, universities have been called upon to serve the public good, with the ultimate goal of contributing to a better world. They can mitigate the impact of displacement, providing refugee students with a renewed sense of belonging and a reassuring routine; by empowering refugees, higher education institutions are, as a matter of fact, contributing to peacebuilding.

Access to education as a human right¹¹ was affirmed already in 1948, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26), and a few years later in the 1951 Refugee Convention, which constitutes the foundation for the work of the UNHCR. From the UNHCR website¹²:

'Education is a basic human right, enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Education protects refugee children and youth from forced recruitment into armed groups, child labour, sexual exploitation and child marriage.

Education also strengthens community resilience.

Education empowers by giving refugees the knowledge and skills to live productive, fulfilling and independent lives.

Education enlightens refugees, enabling them to learn about themselves and the world around them while striving to rebuild their lives and communities.'

Various initiatives support this objective, including, by way of example, the DAFI programme, as well as public awareness and education initiatives, such

⁷ The reference is the "Implementing Decision (EU)" n. 2022/382, dated 4 March 2022.

⁸ The reference for Italy is Law n. 28 of April 5th 2022, containing urgent provisions regarding the crisis in Ukraine, with article 5 addressing initiatives related to the academic sector.

⁹ According to the latest UNHCR report (2024), there are 120 million refugees worldwide.

¹⁰ Considering the age group between 18 and 24, the global percentage of individuals enrolled in higher education exceeds 40%. This figure drops to 7% for the refugee population within the same age group (UNHCR 2024).

¹¹ While tertiary education may not hold the same legal status as primary education, it should nevertheless be progressively made free and universally accessible, without discrimination.

¹² Retrieved from the UNHCR website: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

as the exhibition “*Becoming Who You Are - Studying Despite Displacement*”¹³ organized by UNHCR in Berlin in 2024.

The DAFI (*Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative*)¹⁴ scholarship programme offers talented refugee students the chance to pursue a bachelor’s degree in their host countries. Supported by the governments of Germany, Denmark, and the Czech Republic, along with UNHCR and a network of private donors, the programme has enabled over 26,000 young refugee men and women to earn bachelor’s degrees since its inception in 1992. The scholarship covers tuition fees, books, transportation, accommodation, and other essential costs. To further support students’ academic success and skill development, the programme provides tailored academic and language preparation classes, as well as mentoring and networking opportunities. Active DAFI student clubs and alumni networks in various countries contribute significantly to the communities that host them. As the world’s longest running and largest higher education scholarship programme, DAFI currently operates in 59 countries¹⁵.

Thanks to DAFI and other actions¹⁶, the numbers show a decidedly positive trend: the percentage of refugees enrolled in a university¹⁷ increased from 1% in 2019 to 7% in 2023 (UNHCR 2024). However, as extensively highlighted in literature (Ager and Strang 2008; Lambrechts 2020; Sontag 2021; Berg 2023), this population faces numerous challenges within academia. Facilitating access and providing scholarships alone do not suffice as functional support for successful integration into a new environment, especially when

¹³ Retrieved from the following online paper: <https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/en/schede/Becoming-Who-You-Are-Studying-Despite-Displacement-exhibition-in-Berlin/543> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

¹⁴ Retrieved from the UNHCR website: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/higher-education-and-skills/dafi-tertiary-scholarship-0> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

¹⁵ Countries where DAFI operates: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Colombia, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Egypt, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mexico, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Rwanda, Senegal, Serbia, Slovakia, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Togo, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

¹⁶ Among these, it’s important to cite EOTO (Each One Take One), retrieved from the UNHCR website: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/higher-education-and-skills/each-one-take-one> (accessed: 30/12/2024) and the creation of education pathways, retrieved from the UNHCR website: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/complementary-pathways/education-pathways> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

¹⁷ The estimate takes into account national university enrolment figures, UNHCR tertiary education scholarships (DAFI), TVET programmes, connected higher education initiatives, and complementary pathways for admission to third countries.

considering the diverse needs of these students, compounded by the complex circumstances of trauma and the heavy sense of responsibility they often bear on their (frequently young) shoulders (Elwyn, Gladwell and Lyall 2012; Jack, Chase and Warwick 2019; Arar, Kondakci and Streitwieser 2020).

2. The Concept of Super Disadvantage

The initiatives designed to achieve the 15by30 goal are undoubtedly commendable. However, they reveal several critical challenges which, while applicable to the broader international student population, assume particularly significant dimensions in the case of refugee students.

Although scholarships provide invaluable support, refugee students often lack the foundational resources and assistance that are typically taken for granted in daily life in Italy. Their challenges extend beyond financial aid and include a range of structural and social issues that can hinder their academic success and overall well-being.

First, linguistic barriers present a significant obstacle. While many academic programmes are offered in English, navigating everyday life in Italy requires a working knowledge of Italian. This linguistic gap becomes especially problematic when seeking internships or part-time employment, where proficiency in the local language is often essential.

Second, the cost of daily living poses a serious concern. Essential expenses such as clothing, books, and medicine are frequently overlooked. Refugees usually arrive with few personal belongings and may require immediate medical or dental care. Meeting basic needs, such as acquiring seasonal clothing, paying for public transport, or purchasing a bicycle, can become a considerable burden.

Third, social isolation remains an often underestimated issue. During holiday periods, when university services and offices close and most students return to their families, refugee students are left alone without a support network, which can deepen feelings of exclusion and vulnerability.

Fourth, psychological support is crucial. Notable progress has been made in recent years, particularly following the pandemic, with many Italian universities now offering free counselling services. At the University of Padua, for instance, such services are available in multiple languages. Nevertheless, the growing demand for psychological support far outpaces the resources currently available.

Fifth, access to the job market presents another layer of difficulty. While challenging for all students, refugees face heightened pressure due to the absence of family financial support. As a result, they are often compelled to

enter the workforce quickly and independently. In this context, linguistic competence once again emerges as a key factor for success.

Addressing these challenges is imperative to ensure the successful integration and well-being of refugee students within the academic and social environment.

The examples listed above form what Al Hussein and Mangeni (2022) refer to as ‘systemic disadvantage’ and Lambrechts calls ‘super disadvantage’. A term proposed by Lambrechts and then used by other authors, the *super-disadvantage* is created by the inter-relation and exacerbation of the different barriers lived by refugees in higher education: ‘the term is not meant to set up a hierarchy of disadvantage – to indicate a disadvantage greater in relative terms to that experienced by other individuals or groups – but to foreground the complexity, gravity and compound nature of the problems faced’ (Lambrechts 2020).

One of the first difficulties is the problem of data collection on refugees enrolled in universities, both because refugees rarely disclose their status and because categorising such students poses its own challenges:

‘Domestic students with migrant backgrounds are arbitrarily separated from international students, while those who are undocumented, stateless, members of transborder Indigenous nations or otherwise not easily classified, challenge domestic-international binaries. Meanwhile, asylum-seekers and recently resettled refugees may be considered *domestic* students, yet they require *international* student services, further complicating student affairs and funding models. We believe this messiness is partially due to a lack of a nuanced analytical approach to international student mobility’s entanglement with migration’ (Brunner, Streitwieser and Bhandari 2024).

The issue of data collection adds complexity to the creation and design of intervention policies, both local and national: without a clear understanding of these students’ identities, universities struggle to accurately assess their actual circumstances and often classify them primarily as international students (Stevenson and Baker 2018), overlooking the unique challenges these students face.

Unfortunately, it often happens not only that refugees are not adequately *seen* in their condition of extreme disadvantage, but also that there is a lack of information about the services available to them at the university.

‘For refugee students, [...] the university can be a culturally alienating place’ (Stevenson and Baker 2018). In the ‘uncaring academy’, often refugee support projects are sustained solely by the passion and dedication of the staff, however, ‘this labour is not recognised in workload allocation models or legitimised’. Apart from a few exceptional individuals, universities

typically overlook the challenges faced by refugees. The daily struggles refugees endure to lead a basic student life are almost unimaginable. The resilience they have developed through their long, often dangerous and invariably complex journeys undoubtedly supports them. However, to better understand the social-psychological support they need, it would be beneficial to adopt a ‘trauma perspective’ (Rundell, Sheety and Negrea 2018): ‘This means shifting from the traditional approach of charity to a restorative lens of humanistic and inclusive perspective while supporting and empowering those who are in need’. To do so, multi-level governance is central: in the next paragraphs, we will see how.

3. The Importance of Multi-level Governance

Multi-level governance is fundamental in creating supportive spaces for the defence of human rights. As Papisca well explained:

‘starting from human rights and the idea that the “city of human rights” is a territory but not a boundary, hence an “inclusive city,” there is a growing belief that the winning strategy for the democratization of glocal space is one that promotes the creation of increasingly organic and operational alliances between territorial institutions at various levels, organized civil society formations, including universities, schools, and small and medium-sized enterprises, i.e., among significant territorial and functional components of subsidiarity: these actors contribute to the construction, interconnection, and democratization on a global scale of “public spaces,” as meant by Hannah Arendt.’ (Papisca 2011)

Bache and Flinders (2004) provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of multi-level governance, identifying its key characteristics after reviewing various contributions on the topic and examining its different dimensions. They describe it as a system in which ‘decision making at various territorial levels is characterised by the increased participation of non-state actors. [...] the role of the state is being transformed as state actors develop new strategies of coordination, steering and networking [...]’ (Bache and Flinders 2004). Similarly, Daniell and Kay define multi-level governance as involving ‘systems of continuous negotiation: where authority is not only dispersed vertically between levels of administration but also horizontally across different sectors of interest and spheres of influence, including non-government actors, markets and civil society’ (Daniell and Kay 2017).

Petrovic argues (2018) that multi-level governance in the context of integration is unavoidable, noting that ‘although the integration policies for third-country nationals remain a national competence, in many EU countries

it is the local authorities that are the main guarantors' (Petrovic 2018). Local authorities play a pivotal role as they directly oversee reception policies and manage cultural diversity. Gallo, Poggio and Bodio (2022) further emphasize the significance of localities, particularly cities, in immigration management. They highlight that 'cities, in particular, are recognised as active agents in addressing the challenges related to diversity accommodation and in developing policies that can influence state-based models of governance.'

This is true also for the higher education system and its policies for refugee students: forming alliances that extend beyond academia is essential. Universities, local governments, social workers, non-governmental organizations, and refugee charities must collaborate to address these sensitive and complex challenges collectively (Jungblut, Vukasovic and Steinhardt 2018; Marcu 2018; Estrada Moreno and Palma-García 2020; Sontag 2021; Kalocsányiová, Bilici, Jenkins, Obojska and Carignani 2022).

'With particular reference to the complex situation of refugees, it is evident that the ambitious goal of the 2030 Agenda – *No one will be left behind* – requires a shared and collective commitment both at the international level and within each state, to be effectively achieved' (Borgonovo Re 2022).

Universities, as places of culture, knowledge dissemination, and cultural defence, on one hand, and as public institutions rooted in the community, on the other, have a duty to strive to improve the very societies they inhabit. This falls under the so-called *Third Mission* activities, defined by ANVUR¹⁸ as 'engagement with the socio-economic context through the valorisation and transfer of knowledge'¹⁹.

Universities, as integral parts of the societal fabric, have a responsibility to address power imbalances, inequality, and injustice in society. As Cantat, Cook and Rajaram (2022) argue, 'people in universities have often been reticent in forming transformative alliances beyond the institution, but we assert that it is folly to pursue transformative change solely from inside the university; indeed, there is no inside within the university in splendid isolation from an outside.'

Building and maintaining such expansive networks is undeniably challenging, as organizations with vastly different missions and operational methods must find ways to communicate and collaborate effectively, often overcoming significant differences in language and tools. Moreover, establishing transformative partnerships beyond the institution involves

¹⁸ ANVUR is the Italian National Agency For The Evaluation Of Universities And Research Institutes. Retrieved from ANVUR website: <https://www.anvur.it/en/homepage/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

¹⁹ Retrieved from ANVUR website: <https://www.anvur.it/en/activities/third-mission-impact/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

engaging in activism, which may pose risks for both the university and refugee students. It is therefore essential that universities and other stakeholders remain attentive to the specific vulnerabilities of these students, ensuring their protection and safety - for instance, by safeguarding their privacy.

Nevertheless, the formation of multi-level networks remains crucial. As AACRAO (2019) notes, 'Increased institutional and cross-sectoral collaboration at the global level is needed to best support vulnerable student populations. It is important to engage with NGOs and non-profit organisations, many of whom provide dedicated, long-term, one-on-one support.' In this regard, universities should assume a central role, as institutions responsible for promoting and coordinating effective and fruitful engagement with the local territory.

In the next part of this article, this theory will be connected with practical cases from two Italian universities: the University of Trento and the University of Padua.

4. Civil Society, Universities and Local Governments: Best Practices from Italy

In 2019, UNHCR Italy invited Italian universities to endorse the *Manifesto on an Inclusive University*²⁰, a formal declaration aimed at fostering a more inclusive environment for refugee students. The Manifesto 'arises from the awareness that the cultural, technical, and intellectual experiences gained by refugees in various parts of the world can be a great asset for Italy' (source: UNHCR website). By 2023, the Manifesto had been signed by 59 universities²¹, laying the foundation for the development of concrete initiatives to support refugee students. Among these, the UNICORE²² project (*University Corridors for Refugees*), the first example of education pathways in Italy, and a great example of multi-level governance and networking outside academia, since it requires each university to sign both a national agreement coordinated by UNHCR Italy, and a local agreement with NGOs and local institutions to offer a complete support to the selected refugee students.

²⁰ Retrieved from the UNHCR website: https://www.unhcr.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2022/12/Manifesto-on-an-Inclusive-University_UNHCR.pdf (accessed: 30/12/2024).

²¹ The list of partner universities is detailed here: <https://universitycorridors.unhcr.it/universities/> (accessed: 30/12/2024). Among them, there are the University of Padua and the University of Trento. Universities interested in joining the programme can endorse it with a resolution of the Academic Senate / the Board of Directors and with the designation of at least one focal point. UNHCR will review the application and support the university in the process.

²² Retrieved from the UNICORE website: <https://universitycorridors.unhcr.it/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

Among the universities to be highlighted as examples of best practices are Trento and Padua: two markedly different contexts, yet both equally committed to openness, hospitality, and inter-institutional collaboration, as will be detailed in the next paragraphs. Both universities endorsed the Manifesto on an Inclusive University and are part of the UNICORE programme.

4.1. The University of Trento

The University of Trento is a young, medium-sized institution. Established in 1962 as the Higher University Institute of Social Sciences, it became a state university in 1983 and now comprises 11 Departments with a total enrolment of 16,500 students²³. The context is distinctive: the Province of Trento is governed by the Special Statute of the Trentino-Alto Adige/Süd Tirol Region, which grants significant legislative, administrative, and financial autonomy to the provinces of Trento and Bolzano²⁴. This autonomy allows the Province of Trento to manage key areas such as education, healthcare, transport, and environmental policies independently from the central government. Financially, the province retains about 90% of the taxes collected locally, enabling substantial investment in public services, infrastructure, and education. The University also benefits from this autonomy: the financial resources provided by the Province ensure steady funding for research, scholarships, and infrastructure, fostering a high-quality academic environment. Trento's autonomy also supports the university's ability to design programmes tailored to the region's needs and establish partnerships with local businesses and research institutions.

In this positive context, the University of Trento has implemented various initiatives to support refugees and asylum seekers. In 2016, the University and the Autonomous Province of Trento signed a formal agreement²⁵ to support access to the university for 5 refugees / asylum seekers every year - a good example of the operational alliances between territorial institutions called by Papisca (2011). The Province pre-selects individuals interested in the project, identifying them among asylum seekers or holders of international protection supported by local reception services, and refers them to the

²³ Retrieved from the website of the University of Trento: <https://www.unitn.it/en/ateneo/151/university> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

²⁴ Retrieved from the website of the Council of the autonomous province of Trento (Italian version only): <https://www.consiglio.provincia.tn.it/istituzione/l-autonomia/peculiarita-storiche-e-giuridiche/Pages/momenti-storici-significativi.aspx> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

²⁵ See attachments (in Italian language only) in the University website, retrieved from the website of the University of Trento: <https://www.unitn.it/en/ateneo/60469/asylum-seekers-to-university-project> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

university. The university assesses the candidates' educational qualifications and their eligibility for university admission. Subsequently, the university organizes a meeting to evaluate the candidates' motivations, with particular attention to gender policies and equal opportunities.

This collaboration, which involves not only the university and the Autonomous Province of Trento but also Cinformi²⁶ and Opera Universitaria²⁷, has led to the creation of a dedicated programme for refugees and asylum seekers already residing in Trentino, named FUTURA (*Formazione Universitaria per Rifugiati e richiedenti asilo*²⁸). FUTURA²⁹ is a scholarship programme designed to support five refugees and asylum seekers. Participants will initially undertake a one-year foundation course and, upon successful admission, will proceed to enroll in a Bachelor's or Master's degree programme. Through an extensive support network, beneficiaries of the scholarship will receive numerous advantages, including: exemption from tuition fees, accommodation and meals, Italian and English language courses, mentoring, psychological and legal support, access to sports activities, public transportation, and a monthly stipend. FUTURA began as a pilot project during the second semester of the 2015/16 academic year and has now reached its ninth edition. It stands as a clear example of success in multi-level governance and networking beyond academia: beneficiaries receive comprehensive, 360-degree support, thanks to the diverse expertise contributed by the stakeholders involved in the project's management.

Another interesting and impactful initiative is 'SuXr'³⁰, an acronym for 'Students for Refugees', aimed at fostering awareness within the student community about the pressing issue of forced migration. Launched during the 2015/2016 academic year, the project is still active. Its primary goal is to create meaningful connections between students and local volunteer organizations through a hands-on, learning-by-doing approach, thus following Cantat, Cook and Rajaram's suggestion (2022) of opening the university from their isolation. Available to all the students of the University of Trento, the programme offers a unique opportunity to engage in social responsibility and community support while gaining practical experience.

²⁶ Cinformi (Information Centre for Immigration) offers various services to migrants living in Trentino. Retrieved from CINFORMI website: <https://www.cinformi.it/eng> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

²⁷ Retrieved from the website of Opera Universitaria Trento: <https://www.operauni.tn.it/en/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

²⁸ Translation in English: University Training for Refugees and Asylum Seekers.

²⁹ Retrieved from the website of the University of Trento: <https://www.unitn.it/en/equitadiversita/98573/futura-2021-2026> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

³⁰ Retrieved from the website of the University of Trento: <https://www.unitn.it/en/ateneo/98309/suxr-and-other-initiatives> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

Participants begin their journey with a series of training sessions designed to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge, combining theoretical lessons with testimonials from experienced volunteers and partner organizations. Following this, they engage in volunteering activities with one or more local organizations. Students who actively participate in at least 60% of the training sessions and complete a minimum of 75 volunteer hours are awarded 3 ECTS. SuXr represents a dynamic platform where students can make a tangible difference in the lives of refugees while gaining invaluable personal and professional experience. The initiative not only highlights the University of Trento's commitment to social responsibility but also fosters a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers. SuXr remains a testament to the power of education, community engagement, and collaboration in addressing global challenges.

4.2. The University of Padua

The context of Padua is markedly different: a major city in the Veneto region with a population of just under 210,000, Padua is distinguished by the strong presence of its university. This large institution, with 32 Departments and over 70,000 enrolled students, boasts a long and prestigious history, having been founded in 1222, making it one of the oldest universities in Europe³¹. Drawing upon its long-standing tradition³² of welcoming individuals, the University of Padua has not only participated in the UNICORE programme since its inception in 2020³³, but has also developed its own initiatives to support refugees and 'students at risk'³⁴. These include UNIPD 4 Afghanistan³⁵ in 2021, supporting the Afghan population; UNIPD 4 Ukraine³⁶

³¹ Retrieved from the website of the University of Padua: <https://www.unipd.it/en/university-padua> (accessed 30/12/2024).

³² The University's motto, "*Universa Universis Patavina Libertas*", reflects a long-standing tradition of welcoming exiles and those persecuted, culminating in its resistance to the fascist regime. The University of Padua is the only Italian university to have been awarded the Gold Medal for Military Valour in 1945. Retrieved from the website of the University of Padua: <https://www.unipd.it/en/history> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

³³ The first edition of the programme, launched in 2019, was piloted by the University of Bologna and LUISS University Guido Carli. In the following year, it was opened to participation by other universities.

³⁴ Unlike refugees, *students at risk* are individuals arriving from contexts of persecution or situations where returning to their home countries is currently unfeasible. However, despite these circumstances, they choose, for various reasons, not to seek asylum. As a result, they cannot be classified as refugees, as they are not formally recognized as such.

³⁵ Retrieved from the website of the University of Padua: <https://www.unipd.it/en/unipd-4-afghanistan> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

³⁶ Retrieved from the website of the University of Padua: <https://www.unipd.it/en/unipd-4-ukraine> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

in 2022, aiding Ukrainians; and UNIPD 4 Myanmar³⁷ in 2023, focused on the Burmese population. Given the positive reception of these initiatives and the unfortunate rise in global conflicts, the University subsequently decided to establish a unified scholarship programme for students at risk³⁸, which reached its second edition in 2024. This programme removes the geographically specific focus of earlier initiatives: admitted students are no longer restricted to certain countries, unlike previous scholarships reserved for Afghan or Ukrainian students.

In parallel, starting in 2019, the University began restructuring its international relations service, reshaping its activities to implement significant international student recruitment efforts. Consequently, the international student population in the city has grown considerably³⁹, bringing both challenges and opportunities.

Within this otherwise highly positive context, a critical issue arises, one shared by many European cities⁴⁰: a severe housing crisis driven by increasing demand and limited supply. Local institutions have launched several initiatives to address this crisis, which affects not only the student population but the wider community as well. Among these are the intergenerational cohabitation⁴¹ project promoted by the Municipality of Padua, now in its second edition, and the Arrupe⁴² Project, developed by the Popoli Insieme ODV Association⁴³. Named after Father Pedro Arrupe, a

³⁷ Retrieved from the website of the University of Padua: <https://www.unipd.it/en/sites/en.unipd.it/files/Selection%20notice%20to%20award%20scholarships%20for%20international%20students%20from%20Myanmar%202023-24.pdf> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

³⁸ Retrieved from the website of the University of Padua: <https://www.unipd.it/en/students-at-risk> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

³⁹ Retrieved from the website of the University of Padua (Italian version only): <https://www.unipd.it/dati-statistici-immatricolati> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁴⁰ Retrieved from the website of the European Economic and Social Committee: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/finding-together-solution-growing-housing-crisis-especially-vulnerable-groups-and-young-people> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁴¹ The project connects the housing needs of non-resident students with the availability of local residents aged 65 and above. Its aim is to address not only the ongoing housing crisis but also the desire for participation and engagement expressed by the elderly population. Retrieved from the website of Progetto Giovani Padova (Italian version only): <https://www.progettogiovani.pd.it/coabitazione-intergenerazionale-nel-comune-di-padova/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁴² Retrieved from the website of the association Popoli Insieme ODV: <https://www.popolinsieme.eu/en/uncategorized-en/arrupe-project-applications-are-open-for-2024-25/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁴³ The Association *Popoli Insieme ODV* was created in 1990 in Padova to support migrants arriving in the city. Since 2001 it has been part of the Astalli Network. Retrieved from the website of the association Popoli Insieme ODV: <https://www.popolinsieme.eu/en/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

Jesuit and founder of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)⁴⁴, the Arrupe Project was launched in 2022 with the dual aim of expanding housing options for refugee students and fostering educational pathways centred on interactions between these students and the university and local community. Father Arrupe believed education should serve as a tool for social empowerment, and this concept of solidarity, expressed through the active participation of Italian residents in the housing facilities, lies at the heart of the project and distinguishes it from traditional housing solutions. Every year since 2022, the Association Popoli Insieme ODV selects a few refugee students admitted or enrolled in the university and offers them accommodation with Italian students, at a reduced fee. The project includes compulsory Italian language courses and activities with Italian students. It involves different stakeholders: refugees, Italian students, the association, the residences, the university, the Municipality and private donors. Each part involved in the project is essential for its success, giving a real example of multi-level governance and networking outside academia, as suggested by, among others, AACRAO (2019) and Borgonovo Re (2022).

Another example of collaboration between institutions is provided by the Refugees Welcome Association⁴⁵. In 2024, the Padua branch of the Association offered the Municipality the necessary support for the creation of the 'Registry of Hosting Families'⁴⁶, a formal procedure to gather individuals and families willing to support pathways toward autonomy and assistance for migrants and refugees. The initiative, already existing in other Italian cities⁴⁷, began as a pilot project under the EU-funded 'Embracin'⁴⁸ initiative. It expanded in response to the Ukrainian crisis, becoming a significant

⁴⁴ Founded by Father Arrupe in 1980, the Jesuit Refugee Service has since operated internationally to support refugee populations. Retrieved from JRS website: <https://jrs.net/en/home/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁴⁵ *Refugees Welcome Italia* is a third-sector organization and a member of the international network *Refugees Welcome International*. Its mission is to work with a multidisciplinary approach to promote the inclusion of refugees. Retrieved from Refugees Welcome website (Italian version only): <https://refugees-welcome.it/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁴⁶ 'The Registry is a policy tool adopted by some local administrations to manage the practice of domestic hosting. It records the availability of resources within the territory to assist social services in delivering support. To date, the Registry of Hosting Families represents a potential strategy to mitigate the shortage of housing.' (Bassoli and De Matteis 2024). Press release from the Municipality of Padua (Italian version only) retrieved from the website of the Municipality of Padua: <https://padovanet.it/notizia/20240926/comunicato-stampam-nasce-%E2%80%99C%E2%80%99albo-delle-famiglie-accoglienti%E2%80%99D-colonnello-unulteriore> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁴⁷ Bari, Bergamo, Bologna, Ravenna and Rome.

⁴⁸ The name of the project stands for 'Enhancing Migrants Bottom-up Responsive And Citizen-led INtegration in Europe'. Retrieved from EMBRACIN website: <https://embracin.eu/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

experience involving civil society, third-sector organizations, and public institutions.

Moreover, Refugees Welcome coordinates the project ‘Community Matching’⁴⁹, created with UNHCR and CIAC⁵⁰ and funded by the Italian Buddhist Institute⁵¹. The project is active in Bari, Bergamo, Bologna, Milan, Naples, Padua, Palermo, Parma, Rome and Turin. The Community Matching programme aims to foster a supportive environment for refugee integration by engaging local communities and strengthening social cohesion. A buddy is a volunteer who offers free, personalized support to a refugee, assisting them in their personal growth and integration journey. This includes helping with daily challenges, providing guidance in decision-making, supporting educational or professional pursuits, and encouraging social engagement. Buddies build relationships by sharing leisure activities, introducing refugees to local places and people, and promoting their overall well-being. Refugees Welcome collects the applications both from the buddies and the refugees, offers training programmes and proposes the match. The programme begins with a minimum commitment of six months, during which the relationship is built, and the programme team provides ongoing support throughout the process. This programme is a good example for the centrality of non-state actors (Bache and Flinders 2004).

Another interesting example of multi-level governance in Padua is given by the agreement between the Municipality of Padua and the University of Padua to support access to higher education for refugees, signed in July 2024. The aim is formalising the cooperation between the two institutions to guarantee more support to refugees wishing to enrol at the university. With this agreement, the Municipality commits to update and share information about the university via its websites, events and meetings with refugees, while the University commits to support refugees and asylum seekers with information material and promotional events about the enrolment procedures and both institutions commit to promote the agreement and invite more institutions and civil society representatives to join it. It may seem trivial, but the formalization of such a commitment by two highly structured and important entities required several months of work. Achieving this result involved numerous offices, driven by the determined efforts of the Municipality

⁴⁹ Retrieved from the UNHCR website: <https://buddy.unhcr.it/en/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁵⁰ CIAC (*Centro immigrazione asilo e cooperazione onlus*) was founded in Parma in 2001, as a place where migrants and refugees can find different kinds of support (legal, mentoring, networking). Retrieved from CIAC website (Italian version only): <https://ciaconlus.org/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

⁵¹ Retrieved from the Italian Buddhist institute website: <https://ottopermille.sokagakkai.it/en/> (accessed: 30/12/2024).

Department for Integration and Social Inclusion, and it represents a concrete example of the role of local authorities in integration activities (Petrovic 2018). The agreement reflects the commitment of the Municipality of Padua, formalized in 2024 with its endorsement of the UNHCR document 'Charter for the Integration of Refugees'. Developed in collaboration with UNHCR, the Charter for the Integration of Refugees was drafted and signed in 2022 by six major Italian cities (Bari, Milan, Naples, Palermo, Rome and Turin). In 2024, the cities of Brescia, Bologna, Genoa, Padua and Ravenna joined the Charter. The Charter seeks to enhance cooperation between cities in integrating individuals under international protection by encouraging the sharing of practices, experiences, and tools, while improving existing local services. Municipalities play a leading role in welcoming and integrating refugees. By facilitating access to local services, education, and employment, they foster social inclusion and help build a better future for refugees. Acting as pivotal players, they serve as hubs of innovation and best practices for integration and are therefore essential partners of UNHCR. Through their commitment to the Charter for Integration, participating municipalities emphasize that refugee inclusion is a source of enrichment and harmonious growth - an essential value that merits collective dedication and effort.

Conclusions

The article underscores the profound social and moral responsibility of higher education institutions to support refugees in academia, by answering to this research question: how can universities implement multi-level governance to support the inclusion of refugee students?

As public institutions, universities are uniquely positioned to uphold and defend human rights, making the promotion of refugee access to higher education an integral part of this mission, as shown with the cases of Trento and Padua. Such efforts reflect a commitment not only to academic inclusivity but also to the broader goal of fostering equality and justice within society, as well represented by the examples of the Registry of Hosting Families and the Community Matching in Padua. However, as also demonstrated by the formal agreements with other institutions signed by the two universities of Trento and Padua, ensuring a successful and meaningful academic journey for refugees requires a collaborative approach that extends beyond the universities themselves. A comprehensive, multi-level support network involving local and national entities is essential to address the complex needs of these vulnerable individuals. As Lazzari (2015) aptly points out, integration 'can – and must – be built by focusing on the individual and

appropriately considering the relationships that exist between the individual and the social institutions with which they interact, with an awareness of the many interdependencies both local and global.’

Universities hold a dual role: they are both centres of culture and knowledge dissemination and public institutions rooted in the communities they serve. This dual identity gives them the unique responsibility to actively contribute to societal improvement. Culture has the power to inspire and elevate; thus, fostering cultural and academic growth requires action. In this context, action means addressing contemporary injustices, including the challenges faced by refugees. Providing refugees with access to education is not just an act of inclusion but also a step towards empowerment: a stable educational routine can help displaced individuals rebuild their sense of belonging, offering them a foundation for a more secure future, as happens in the case of the FUTURA programme of the University of Trento. In doing so, universities not only aid individual refugees, but also contribute to broader goals of peacebuilding and social stability.

The concept of the moral and social responsibility of higher education institutions has been extensively discussed in academic literature. Universities are often seen as agents of public good, with their ultimate aim being the creation of a better, more equitable world. This role becomes especially significant in the context of displacement and forced migration. Refugees face immense challenges, including the loss of community, identity and stability. Higher education institutions can serve as a critical bridge in this process, helping refugees regain a sense of purpose and direction. By integrating refugees into academic environments, universities foster mutual learning and cultural exchange, enriching their campuses while addressing global inequalities; a good example is provided by the SuXr programme in Trento University, an interesting training about forced migrations offered to the whole students’ community, that should be taken as reference and extended to other universities.

Moreover, empowering refugees through education equips them with the skills and knowledge needed to contribute to their host societies, making them active participants in the process of rebuilding and growth.

Future research could explore these themes in greater depth, particularly by examining the best practices highlighted in this article. Conducting interviews with both beneficiaries and stakeholders would provide valuable insights into the diverse perspectives and experiences involved. Such research could shed light on areas where current initiatives succeed and identify opportunities for improvement. Additionally, future studies might explore other innovative practices from cities participating in the UNHCR’s ‘Charter for the Integration of Refugees’ project.

In summary, universities have a moral imperative to address the challenges of our time, including the displacement of refugees. By providing access to education and fostering a sense of belonging, they play a pivotal role in creating a more just and inclusive society. However, achieving these goals requires collaboration, innovation, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Through their efforts, universities not only transform individual lives but also contribute to the broader mission of peace and stability, affirming their place as key actors in the global pursuit of justice and equality.

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