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REVIEW



# What works to facilitate displaced and refugee-background students' access and participation in European higher education: results from a multilingual systematic review

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## ABSTRACT


This article reports the results of a systematic review on displaced and refugee-background students' transitioning and (re-)integration into European higher education (HE). A total of 7082 studies have been assessed for eligibility in six languages. Forty-four empirical studies conducted in 14 countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) between 2014 and 2021 met the inclusion criteria. Evidence from these studies has been extracted, appraised for quality, and synthesised to advance our understanding of how best to support refugee-background students' HE aspirations. The main contribution of this article is a comprehensive review of support measures and recommendations in nine key areas that were identified as having particular relevance for successful HE participation: recognition of qualifications, entry requirements, reach and relevance of educational offer, costs, precarity and vulnerability, language, transitioning and skills mismatch, resource poverty, and (un)welcoming environments. The reviewed evidence is relevant in varying degrees to higher education institutions across the EHEA and can inform the delivery of targeted responses to refugee-background students' needs on both HE entry and throughout their educational journey. The article also exposes important knowledge gaps that should be prioritised in future research and highlights some common lessons regarding cross-sector collaboration, long-term planning and support, and the need for a continuous monitoring of student pathways. A novel aspect of this systematic review is also its multilingual search strategy which was designed to correct for the geographical bias toward research produced in Anglophone countries which is often a by-product of English-only search strategies in education research.


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## 1. Introduction

Only an estimated 5% of displaced and refugee youth go to university (UNHCR, 2021), and there is a growing body of literature which suggests that, even if displaced people access higher education, there are many challenges to their successful participation (Bjorklund, 2018; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Widening education participation and social inclusion have been central concerns in higher education policy for more than two decades. Displaced and refugee students' re-integration into tertiary education is also high on the European agenda (Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNHCR, 2019a). The recent crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine have also prompted a renewed interest in the topic.

The purpose of this systematic review is to map the post-2014 peer-reviewed literature on displaced and refugee-background students' transitioning and re-integration into European tertiary education and to draw together evidence about what works to promote their participation in higher education (HE). We focus on the post-2014 period and the EHEA region specifically for three reasons:

- First, the literature up to Europe's refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2015) has been extensively covered, for instance, by the systematic review of Bjorklund (2018) and the meta-scoping study of Ramsay and Baker (2019);
- Second, since 2015 there has been an upward trend in research investigating displaced and refugee-background youth's access to higher education (Arar, 2021), particularly in EHEA countries;
- Third, all recent reviews on the topic (Arar, 2021; Bjorklund, 2018; Mangan & Winter, 2017; Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018) have discussed primarily, if not exclusively, outputs from Anglophone regions – principally, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom – without considering the wealth of research produced in other major refugee hosting countries such as Turkey, Germany, or France.

This systematic review also fills an important gap in knowledge by synthesising evidence about support measures and recommendations. Previous reviews have mainly focussed on barriers and challenges (Arar, 2021; Bjorklund, 2018; Ramsay & Baker, 2019), student experiences (Mangan & Winter, 2017) and acculturation processes (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018) without systematically discussing support measures and initiatives which can widen access and keep refugee-background students on track to HE graduation.

### 1.1. Background

Over the last decade Southern and Eastern Europe have become the entry point for a large number of individuals and families fleeing war, conflicts, and persecution in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ethiopia and South Sudan. Europe has received millions of refugees since 2014, many of whom have been looking to access higher education. This created a new set of challenges for educational institutions and policy makers to ensure a smooth educational transition and the HE integration of these populations.

Most EHEA countries have recognised the instrumental role of HE in allowing refugees to secure employment, escape poverty and thrive in their countries of resettlement. The

right to higher education is also increasingly considered a human right and social justice imperative (see UNESCO, 2021): “to deny someone with capacity access to higher education is to deny them their full dignity and potential as a human being” (Gilchrist, 2018, p. 647). The process of integrating displaced and refugee-background students into existing HE programmes at European universities has, however, been challenging, and the number of displaced and refugee-background students who access higher education is still far below the global average of HE enrolment among non-refugees (UNHCR, 2021). Refugee-background students are also prone to dropping out of university study programmes due to negative experiences of linguistic and educational transition, on top of the often-competing and pressing obligation to work to support their families. As a result, very few complete their higher education after resettlement (Arjona Soberón et al., 2017).

## 1.2. Definitions

**Displaced and refugee-background students:** The 1951 Refugee Convention defined a refugee as: “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” The use of the term “displaced and refugee-background students” in this systematic review is meant to acknowledge both refugees and people who are forcibly displaced due to factors that are not spelled out by the 1951 Refugee Convention (e.g. conflicts, natural or environmental disasters, famine, broader human rights violations, and development projects). The inclusion of displaced people more broadly is also justified by current HE practices in which institutions that offer sanctuary scholarships tend to accept applications from both refugees and asylum seekers, holders of humanitarian protection statuses, undocumented migrants, and others with precarious forms of immigration status (e.g. discretionary leave to remain in the United Kingdom or subsidiary protection in France).

**Higher education (HE):** in the context of this systematic review HE refers to all post-secondary education, including preparatory programmes delivered by universities that are meant to equip individuals with HE aspirations with the academic background and language skills needed to succeed in a degree programme.

## 2. Methods

This systematic review follows a six-step process which has encompassed the definition of research question(s), development of a multilingual search strategy, study selection, data extraction, quality appraisal and synthesis. The research process has been documented using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines ([www.prisma-statement.org](http://www.prisma-statement.org)) and was guided by the following review question:

What measures and recommendations for action can be derived from empirical studies of post-2014 refugee education initiatives within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)?

**Table 1.** Search strategy used in Scopus.

Search within: All fields	Search terms
Search 1	"refugee" OR "refugees" OR "refugee background" OR "forced migrant" OR "forced migrants" OR "displaced" OR "displaced student" OR "displaced person" OR "forcibly" OR "asylum seeker" OR "asylum applicant" OR "exiled" OR "newcomer" OR "undocumented" OR "irregular"
Search 2	AND "university" OR "higher education" OR "HEI" OR "tertiary education" OR "tertiary school" OR "college" OR "academy" OR "polytechnic" OR "graduate" OR "undergraduate" OR "postgraduate" OR "bachelor" OR "master" OR "PhD" OR "doctoral" OR "post-secondary"
Search 3	AND "support" OR "preparatory" OR "foundation" OR "preparatory program*" OR "foundation program*" OR "scholarship" OR "initiative" OR "course" OR "preparatory course" OR "language course" OR "academic writing" OR "training" OR "inclusion" OR "inclusive" OR "access" OR "online learning" OR "e-learning" OR "online education" OR "online training" OR "online course"

Note: The above search terms have been translated (and adapted where necessary) into German, Turkish, French, Italian and Spanish. The translations are available upon request.

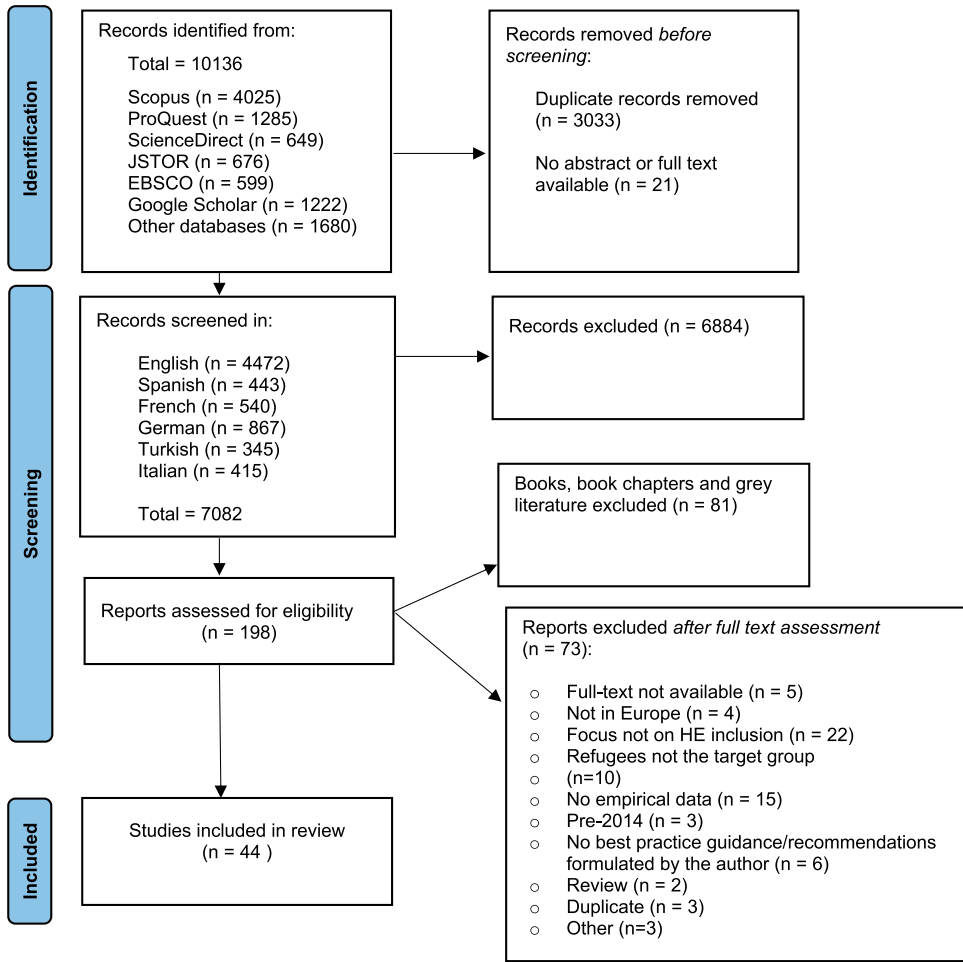
## 2.1. Search strategy

The searches and screening were conducted in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Turkish to record research produced in Europe's top refugee-hosting countries post-2014. We searched several electronic databases from 1 January 2014 to 31 March 2021: Scopus, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, and EBSCO Education Research Complete. Studies were also sought in country- and language-specific databases, including Dialnet, ÍnDICES-CSIC, Deutsche National Bibliothek, Deutscher Bildungsserver, GBV.de and CAIRN.INFO. We further searched Google Scholar and the reference lists of prior systematic reviews and included studies.

The search syntax – which combines core concepts and terms related to the population of interest and higher education – was developed in English and refined through several preliminary searches. Table 1 lists the complete search strategy used in Scopus. The search terms in the other languages are available upon request. For databases where advance search options were not available, a combination of simplified search terms was used, e.g. refugee\* AND higher education AND integration. The results were then sorted by relevance and the first 50 references were screened for each search term combination. After removing duplicates ( $n = 3033$ ) and inaccessible records ( $n = 21$ ), 7082 references were retained for screening and eligibility assessment.

## 2.2. Screening and eligibility criteria

For the first level of screening, the research team screened the titles and abstracts to identify relevant records. Publications were included if: (1) they reported empirical research – qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method studies – conducted after 2014; (2) the focus was on refugee-background and displaced students' participation in higher education; (3) the institution(s) providing education was based in the EHEA; and (4) the study was published in a peer-reviewed journal. Studies were excluded if: (1) they took place prior to 2014 and/or outside the EHEA; (2) did not report any empirical data; (3) the target group were not refugees or students in refugee-like situation; (4) the focus was on primary or secondary education; and if (5) no examples of good practice or recommendations of what works were derived from the research. The first level of screening was completed using Rayyan QCRI (<https://www.rayyan.ai/>), a web-based



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram.

reference manager system for collaborative systematic review. For each review contributor, a 10% sample was selected at random and checked for accuracy by the lead author or other team member. There was an 84 percent or higher agreement for each review contributor; disagreements were resolved via discussion to reach a consensus.

During the next phase of screening, full text articles ( $n = 198$ ) were assessed for eligibility. Where full text was not available ( $n = 16$ ), the corresponding authors were contacted. If an answer was not obtained following a reminder and a 3-month waiting period, the study was excluded ( $n = 5$ ). Grey literature, book and book chapters, commentaries and perspective articles were also excluded at this stage. Figure 1 shows the study selection process, including the reasons for exclusion after full-text assessment.

### 2.3. Data extraction and synthesis

The included studies ( $n = 44$ ) were split among the research team for data extraction and quality appraisal according to the contributors' expertise and the language of publication.

The following data were extracted: author(s), year, country, setting (e.g. preparatory course, study-orientation programme, undergraduate programme etc.), aims and objectives, participant characteristics, theoretical framework, study design, results, limitations, and key findings relating to good practice in promoting refugee and displaced students' HE participation. These details are summarised in English in Tables S1 and S2 of the [Supplementary Material](#), which were reviewed by each contributor to ensure the accuracy of data extraction. As a method of analysis, we used thematic mapping and synthesis to bring together the findings from the eligible studies and to draw conclusions about how to best support refugee-background and displaced students' HE inclusion based on the reviewed body of evidence. Similar to thematic analysis methods used in primary research, thematic synthesis involves data categorisation and coding, development of descriptive themes based on code groupings and generation of higher-order themes and key messages (Nicholson et al., 2016). Due to the heterogeneity of the retained studies, meta-analysis (i.e. a quantitative estimate of the impacts and outcomes of an educational intervention) and meta-synthesis for qualitative data were not possible.

## **2.4. Quality appraisal**

The quality of reviewed studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018). An overall quality score has been calculated for each retained study according to a method recommended by the tool authors<sup>1</sup> – the overall scores are reported in Table S2 of the [Supplementary Material](#). Due to language restrictions, quality appraisal could not be carried out by two independent reviewers in parallel; however, a 15% sample was independently reviewed by the lead author. Where results differed (3 disagreements of 50 assessments), consensus was reached through discussion. A detailed summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the reviewed literature is provided in the next section.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Descriptive results**

Our database searches yielded 7103 references after removal of duplicates, of which 44 articles met the inclusion criteria. The majority of studies discussed in these articles were carried out in Germany (Eisenächer et al., 2019; Grüttner, 2019; Grüttner et al., 2018; Jungblut et al., 2020; Kreimer & Boenigk, 2019; Merkt & Eisenächer, 2019; Sontag, 2019; Streitwieser et al., 2017; Streitwieser et al., 2018; Streitwieser & Brück, 2018; Witthaus, 2018) and Turkey (Akkaya Yaralı et al., 2018; Arar et al., 2020; Atesok et al., 2019; Başaran Alagöz & Geçkil, 2017; Cin & Doğan, 2021; Fincham, 2020; Gül & Şaşman Kaylı, 2020; Harunoğulları et al., 2019; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018; Tanrikulu, 2020; Usta et al., 2017; Ünalp Çepel et al., 2021). Other study locations included the United Kingdom (Jack et al., 2019; Lambrechts, 2020; McKenzie et al., 2019; Student et al., 2017), Switzerland (Crettenand & Reusse, 2019; Sontag, 2019), France (Diop, 2019; Sontag, 2019), Spain (Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020; Marcu, 2018), Austria (Bacher et al., 2020; Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018), Poland (Bacher et al., 2020; Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018), Belgium (Jungblut et al., 2020; Rassart et al., 2020), Italy (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019; Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020), Portugal (Goldberg, 2020), Greece (Saiti & Chletsos,



**Figure 2.** Distribution of studies by country.

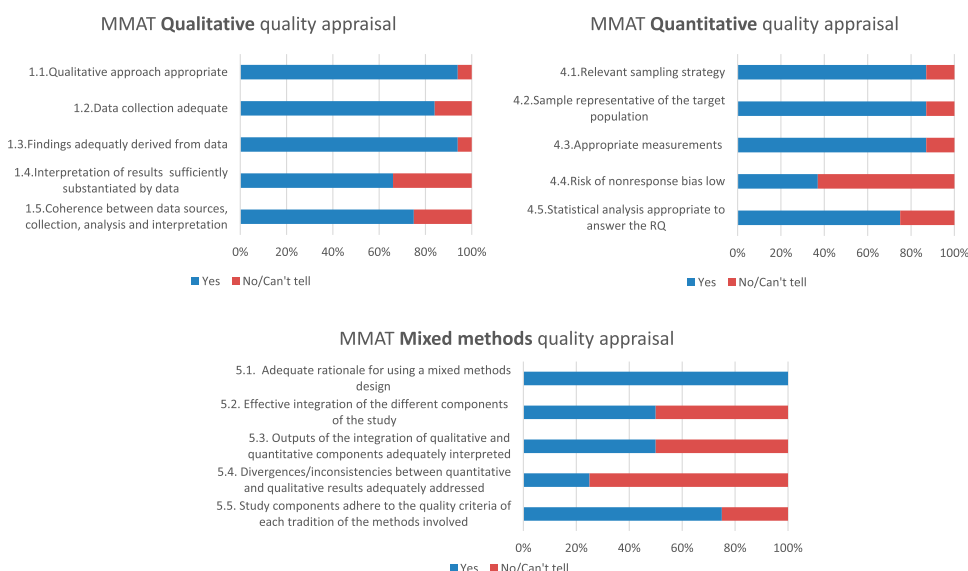
2020), Ireland (Brunton et al., 2019; Farrell et al., 2020), Norway (Toker, 2020), and Sweden (Alaraj et al., 2019). Five studies contained a comparative analysis of at least two different countries (Bacher et al., 2020; Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020; Jungblut et al., 2020; Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018; Sontag, 2019) and three assessed online initiatives (Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Reinhardt et al., 2018; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018) that recruited refugee-background students from around Europe and the world. Figure 2 shows the geographical distribution of studies in more detail.

Twelve articles were published in languages other than English. The reviewed studies relied on a broad range of theoretical perspectives to explain the barriers and enablers that influence refugee-background students' inclusion and success in HE, from organisational theory and campus crisis, through language ecology to sustainability. This heterogeneity in the theoretical approaches, definitions, and concepts illustrates that this field of inquiry has attracted contributions from various disciplines including anthropology, policy studies, psychology, management, education and (inter)cultural studies, and migration to mention but a few. From a methodological point view, the studies relied predominantly on qualitative methods ( $n = 32$ ), mainly interviewing and focus group discussions. Eight studies used quantitative methods, and four were mixed methods. Participant numbers ranged from one in an auto-ethnographic study (Student et al., 2017) to 2402 (Başaran Alagöz & Geçkil, 2017) – they included students from refugee backgrounds, both in HE and aspiring to access university-level studies, as well as academics, administrative and management staff, and representatives of migration services, ministries, and non-profit organisations. The main characteristics of each study, including participants' backgrounds and the specific study settings, are summarised in Table S1 of the [Supplementary Material](#).

### 3.2. Quality appraisal results

Overall, the quality of the 44 retained and reviewed studies was acceptable and they used adequate methods to address the research questions/aims proposed by the study authors





**Figure 3.** Results of quality appraisal.

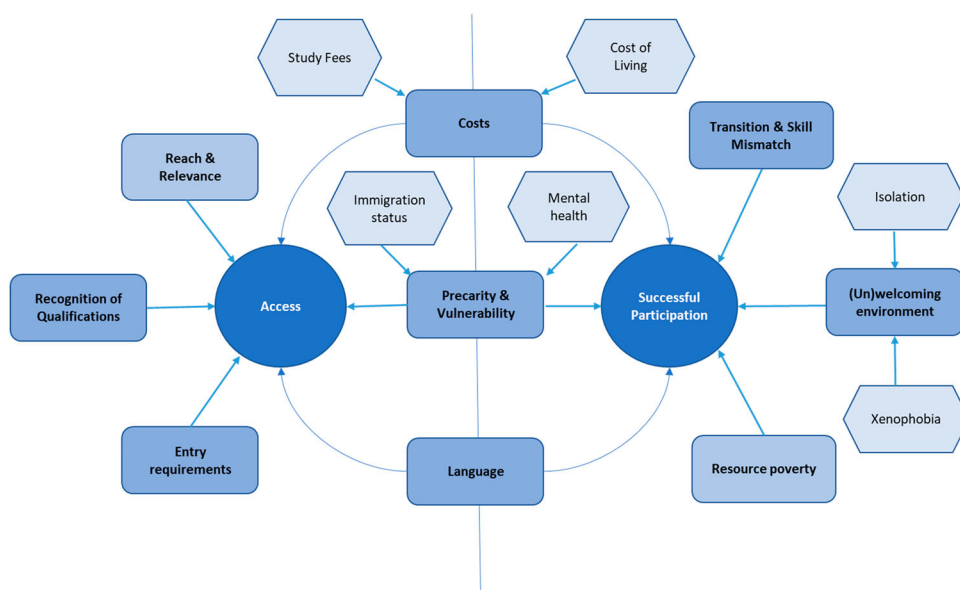
(see Figure 3). The qualitative studies had the highest overall quality, even though a small number of studies failed to report the data collection methods or their interpretation of results was not sufficiently supported by the data. Some studies also lacked coherence between data sources, collection, analysis, and interpretation. The overall quality of the quantitative studies was also high, with most studies using a relevant sampling strategy and measures. Shortcomings were related to the robustness of the statistical analysis and the studies' vulnerability to non-response bias. The mixed method studies mainly failed to effectively integrate different study components and their outcomes, and to address divergences/inconsistencies that may have occurred between the quantitative and qualitative results. In total, 18 studies met all the quality criteria for their study type. For two studies (Crettenand & Reusse, 2019; Eisenächer et al., 2019), MMAT was not a suitable tool to perform a quality appraisal.

### 3.3. Results of the thematic mapping and synthesis

#### 3.3.1. Supporting refugees to access HE

Refugees face multiple barriers to accessing HE in Europe with the most common being language barriers, lack of certainty over immigration status, difficulties around validating previous qualifications, entry requirements, and reach and relevance of the offer. A full thematic map of barriers to displaced and refugee-background students' access and participation in European higher education is shown in Figure 4.

**Recognition of qualifications.** The recognition of qualifications is a precondition to academic mobility, and as such also one of the biggest barriers to HE for displaced and refugee-background students, who often face a double disadvantage – given the extreme circumstances under which they were forced to flee and the subsequent arduous journey, many of them do not possess the documents that prove their



**Figure 4.** Barriers to access and successful participation in European HE.

qualifications of prior learning, and even if they do, the place where they apply for HE admission may not formally recognise these. Despite international commitment to facilitate the recognition of refugees' qualifications under the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe, 2017), in many contexts, refugees continue to struggle to get their prior qualifications validated. These struggles were documented by Atesok et al. (2019), Başaran Alagöz and Geçkil (2017), Goldberg (2020), Lambrechts (2020) and Marcu (2018) who proposed a number of policy measures to reduce this barrier, including granting students' access to scholarships and HE before/parallel to having their degrees validated (Arar et al., 2020; Marcu, 2018), establishing ad-hoc recognition committees by higher education institutions (HEIs) and assessing applications on individual bases (Atesok et al., 2019; Marcu, 2018), and recognising the assessment of foreign qualification as a right rather than a requirement imposed upon refugees who wish to study or work (Goldberg, 2020). The latter may potentially eliminate the fees associated with the application process for recognition/homologation, while increasing the support available for refugees to apply for and succeed in this process.

The most comprehensive discussion on the topic of (non-)recognition of qualifications was offered by Toker (2020) who explored two novel qualification recognition procedures that had been established in Norway for refugees and other persons without a verifiable documentation. The first is an interview-based procedure in Norwegian or English that both maps the applicant's background and uses expert evaluations to feed back to the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. Although still considered complex and expensive by researchers, half of those assessed in 2014 using this procedure entered a Norwegian HEI or the labour market within 6 months of a positive decision (Toker, 2020, p. 110). The second alternative discussed by Toker (2020) is a Qualifications Passport issued on the basis of both a document reconstruction and an interview conducted in the applicant's mother tongue. The passport was piloted in February-

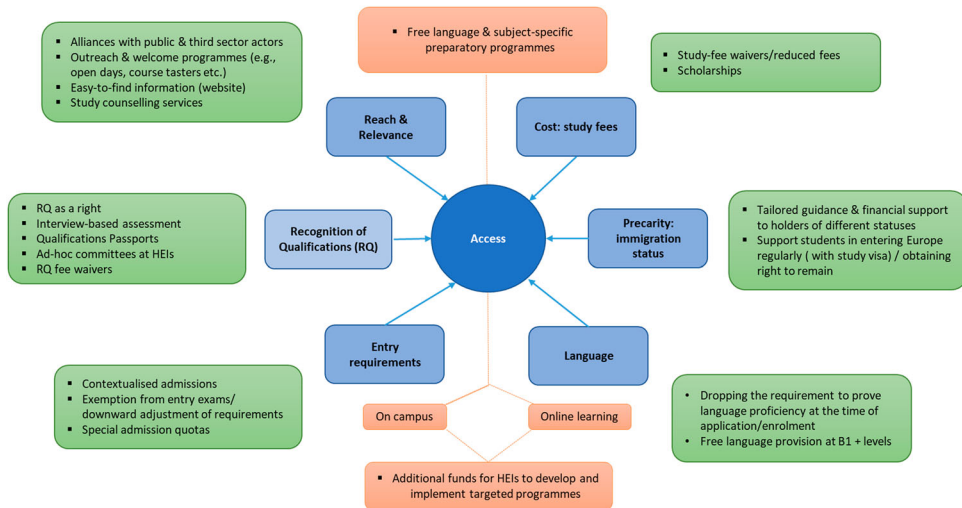
May 2016 and led to Norway recommending the introduction of a European Qualifications Passport for Refugees.<sup>2</sup> Although not legally-binding, the qualification passport allows newly arrived refugees to obtain a proof of skills and experience when applying for further studies.

**Entry requirements.** University admission processes that apply equal requirements to all potential students may also create an insurmountable barrier for displaced and refugee-background students wishing to access European HE, as documented for instance by Grüttner et al. (2018), Lambrechts (2020) and Sontag (2019). Downward adjustments to general university entry requirements such as exemption from entry exams (Arar et al., 2020), dropping the requirement to prove language proficiency at the time of enrolment (Sontag, 2019) and contextual admissions, along with other affirmative measures such as special admission quotas for refugees (Atesok et al., 2019) are all considered in the post-2014 research literature as potential tools for including this disadvantaged group of learners in HE.

Their implementation is not without challenges, however, as many HE systems/institutions are faced with tensions between upholding highly competitive, merit-based admission requirements for domestic and international students and providing access to disadvantaged groups such as refugees (Sontag, 2019; Streitwieser et al., 2017), or as Kontowski and Leitsberger (2018, p. 266) put it, tensions between “the force to welcome and the force to deny access”. Arar et al. (2020) and Gül and Şaşman Kaylı (2020) highlighted in this regard both the restorative nature of HE as well as conflicts and stereotyping that students had suffered on campus, reportedly, due to the preferential treatment they received compared to local students.

**Reach and relevance.** One of the main findings emerging from the accounts of displaced and refugee-background students wishing to enter HE was the lack of timely, transparent, and accessible information (e.g. Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020; Lambrechts, 2020; Marcu, 2018). Students in refugee-like situation are often unaware of their rights in relation to HE participation, and the social workers, charities and voluntary sector organisations that support them day to day often lack the capacity or expertise to advise prospective students on HE opportunities or to direct them to relevant sources of information (Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020; Lambrechts, 2020). Similarly, universities often fail to effectively communicate about opportunities created specifically for this group of disadvantaged students (e.g. sanctuary scholarships or preparatory programmes). According to the aforementioned authors, this informational barrier cannot be overcome without universities engaging in outreach work (Lambrechts, 2020), collaborating with local refugee organisations to recruit students (McKenzie et al., 2019), and developing support programmes jointly with social workers and third sector actors who specialise in migration and refugee integration (Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020; Ünalp Çepel et al., 2021).

In addition, universities could provide on their web pages information specifically for students in refugee-like situations – including requirements for recognising foreign qualifications, preparatory programmes, fees, and scholarship opportunities – and offer study counselling services (Grüttner et al., 2018; Streitwieser & Brück, 2018). The high cost of higher education (discussed in more detail in the next section) will probably still deter many refugee-background students as they need to weigh carefully their HE ambitions against competing and often more pressing obligations to work (UNHCR, 2019b).



**Figure 5.** Measures to tackle access barriers.

Granting students the opportunity to actively shape their learning path (Merk & Eisenächer, 2019) and offering popular modules such as public service interpreting or enterprise start-up already in preparatory programmes (McKenzie et al., 2019) may nonetheless encourage hesitant students to move forward with their HE application. In this connection, the work of Streitwieser et al. (2017) sheds light on the importance of additional grants for universities, so that they can fund the development of language- and subject-specific preparation programmes as well as peer mentoring schemes for refugees and displaced students. The key role of welcome and preparatory programmes in refugees' linguistic and academic preparation has also been emphasised by Bacher et al. (2020), Crettenand and Reusse (2019), Grüttner et al. (2018), Grüttner (2019), Eisenächer et al. (2019), Merkt and Eisenächer (2019) and Rassart et al. (2020) and Streitwieser et al. (2018).

An overview of access-related support measures is shown in Figure 5.

### 3.3.2. Measures tackling barriers to access and success

The studies in this review have also shed light on some concerns that permeate every stage of displaced and refugee-background students' journeys through European HE, including precarity/vulnerability, high cost of HE, and language difficulties. Recommendations and measures to tackle these are discussed in the next sections.

**Precarity and vulnerability.** Drawing on the lessons of the MORE initiative in Austria, Bacher et al. (2020, p. 958) identified several groups for whom HE integration is likely to be particularly challenging, including refugee and asylum-seeking women, refugee-background students without recourse to an ethnic community and students with uncertain immigration status. Students from a forced migration background in Europe are often accepted only temporarily by the migration system and the different statuses conferred on them (e.g. asylum-seeker, refugee, holder of humanitarian protection/entitlement to remain) grant differential rights to residence, education, (student) loans and social

welfare. These create a new stratification and hierarchies which impact equal access to HE (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018).

Understanding how intersecting immigration statuses and rights function as enablers, or on the contrary, barriers to displaced and refugee-background students' HE aspirations (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018), providing tailored guidance and financial support to holders of different immigration statuses, calling on governments to move away from temporary statuses to stable solutions (Gül & Şaşman Kaylı, 2020), and assisting students in refugee camps to enter Europe regularly with a study visa (Sontag, 2019) are some of the most important measures discussed in the post-2014 literature. Most authors, however, also recognise that while European HEIs can offer assistance, they have little to no influence on the asylum process in their corresponding countries. Aspiring students thus continue to find themselves in what Sontag (2019, p. 75) termed as an "inverted situation", that is, having full academic support, while their basic residential and financial needs are unmet.

Another common and often invisible form of vulnerability among displaced and refugee students relates to the distress and traumatic experiences they often carry when entering HE. Counselling and wellbeing services for domestic and international students are increasingly available at universities; however, the stigma attached to mental health in many refugee communities is still a major barrier to help-seeking. There is a small but growing literature that has considered the impact of displacement and forced migration on students' psychosocial wellbeing and academic progress (Harunoğlu-ları et al., 2019; Jack et al., 2019; Sontag, 2019; Streitwieser et al., 2017).

While evidence on this topic is limited, some recommendations have emerged, including psychological counselling offered in languages relevant to refugee populations (Streitwieser et al., 2017) and investments into health and wellbeing services that are outward-facing, promoted through and embedded in the HE curriculum, as well as cognisant of the diversity of refugee students' backgrounds and experiences over the life-course (Jack et al., 2019). Breaking the stigma and making the information about available help accessible to refugee students is however only the first step, as support services, including the ones offered by HEIs, must also be relatable. In the view of Jack et al. (2019, pp. 60–61) this could be achieved by working with counsellors/therapists who are "culturally equipped" and "versed in the complex issues likely to be faced by refugee students".

**Cost.** Study-fee concerns and lack of financial resources are widely recognised barriers to refugees' HE participation. The cost of HE is high in comparison to primary and secondary education (Fincham, 2020). In addition, displaced and refugee background students are often handled as international students, meaning that they are subject to tuition fees that put HE practically out of their reach (Atesok et al., 2019; McKenzie et al., 2019; Sontag, 2019). To tackle this hurdle, many EHEA universities have offered reduced enrolment fees, fee waivers and scholarships to fund the direct costs of HE, however, these are usually not sufficient to cover students' essential living costs during their studies (Cin & Doğan, 2021; Lambrechts, 2020). Displaced and refugee-background students are therefore likely to experience financial difficulties even in European countries where HE is free or highly subsidised.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on mostly qualitative evidence, the post-2014 research suggests a clear need for a comprehensive support structure which combines fee waivers, low income bursaries

and maintenance support, with affordable housing close to the campus, financial support towards study material, food and transport expenses (Gül & Şaşman Kaylı, 2020; Lambrechts, 2020; Usta et al., 2017), contributions to childcare costs (McKenzie et al., 2019) and assistance in finding part-time employment (Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018). These measures are particularly relevant for involving students with uncertain asylum status in HE, who, unlike holders of a refugee status, often cannot apply for student loans, are housed in remote, isolated locations, and may not be allowed to work while their cases are being considered.

**Language.** (Forced) migration is a profoundly transformative experience – as individuals move across borders and educational contexts, their linguistic repertoires adapt and evolve. This however does not happen from one day to the next, and skills in the language(s) of instruction and/or familiarity with academic writing and literacy demands are often a turning point for displaced and refugee-background students' educational trajectories. Not surprisingly, language is an often-cited concern in the post-2014 literature (e.g. Akkaya Yaralı et al., 2018; Arar et al., 2020; Başaran Alagöz & Geçkil, 2017, Crettenand & Reusse, 2019; Kreimer & Boenigk, 2019; Reinhardt et al., 2018) which offers policy and course content recommendations as well as the evaluation of some pedagogical strategies.

Policy recommendations included dropping the requirement to prove language proficiency at the time of application/enrolment (Sontag, 2019), in-service training for HE staff on how to involve and support speakers of other languages in their teaching (Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018), hosting of socio-cultural activities between local students and refugee youth to boost language acquisition (Harunoğulları et al., 2019), and funding language skills development beyond state-subsidized language courses for newcomers and/or one-off language courses in preparatory programmes (Reinhardt et al., 2018). At a course content level, this review suggests a need for comprehensive language provision at B1 level and higher (as per the CEFR criteria), subject-specific language training and support along academic modules (McKenzie et al., 2019; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018), and an active and contextualised teaching of academic skills like note-taking, reading of complex texts, oral presentations and debating (Crettenand & Reusse, 2019).

Several of the reviewed studies (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019; Diop, 2019; Tanrikulu, 2020; Witthaus, 2018) also considered specific pedagogical strategies and methods to foster language acquisition in aspiring refugee HE students. Research on performative didactics using process drama (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019), digital storytelling (Tanrikulu, 2020), intercultural pedagogy (Diop, 2019) and the use of multimodal resources (e.g. supplying transcripts or subtitles to recorded lectures) (Witthaus, 2018) demonstrated promising results, however, the feasibility and long-term impact of embedding these pedagogical strategies in HE is yet to be seen.

### **3.3.3. Other measures for successful participation**

**Transition and skills mismatch.** Refugees' transitioning into HE through online education (e.g. the Kiron Open Higher Education initiative) is another area that received a great volume of attention from researchers following the 2014–2015 refugee crisis (e.g. Brunton et al., 2019; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Reinhardt et al., 2018; Witthaus, 2018; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018). A growing number of initiatives for free digital learning has emerged over the past years to support displaced and refugee-background

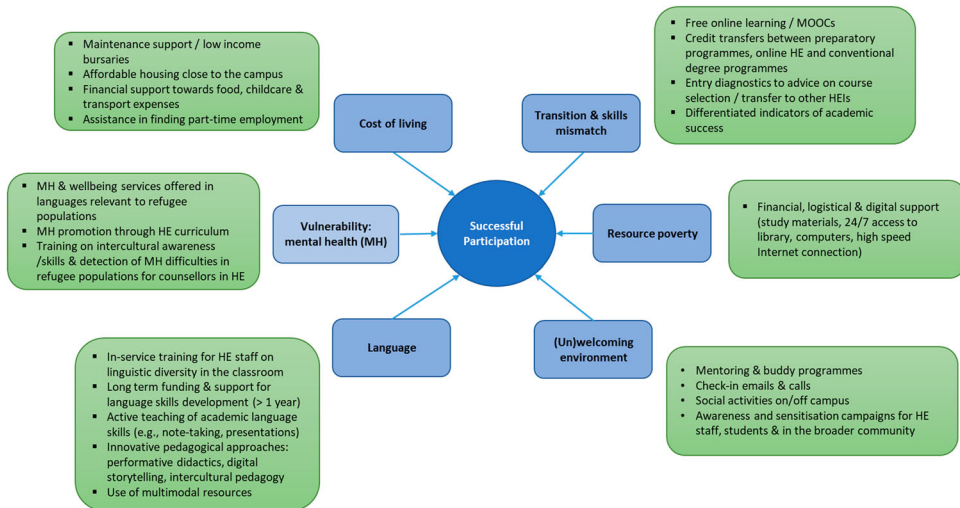
students in continuing their (interrupted) education. Overall, the reviewed studies suggest several benefits (e.g. flexibility in time and space of studying, less administrative hurdles, low thresholds for admission, reduced/no tuition fees), however, the results are mixed, and the low completion rates of online courses (see Halkic & Arnold, 2019) along with the digital poverty some refugees and asylum seekers face (Reinhardt et al., 2018) questions the promise of online education as an easy and straightforward means to widening refugees' HE participation.

To tackle the high drop-out rates, Reinhardt et al. (2018) and Halkic and Arnold (2019) recommend strengthening the links between online HE and traditional education, embedding massive open online courses (MOOCs) in regular curricula with an in-built possibility of gaining credits towards academic degrees, and developing transfer processes between online and traditional HE. Additionally, the social component in online education should also be strengthened through for instance online orientations to the virtual learning environment, regular check-in emails and phone calls, pastoral support and a greater use of blended formats (Brunton et al., 2019; Reinhardt et al., 2018). High dropout rates among refugee-background students, both in online and conventional HE, also likely relate to a mismatch between study content and students' skills and preferences. Entry diagnostics on the basis of which refugee students receive individual recommendations regarding course selection/transfer to other HEIs (Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018), personalised feedback on strengths and weaknesses (Witthaus, 2018) along with the development of more differentiated indicators of academic success (Reinhardt et al., 2018) are some of the measures proposed in the reviewed literature to mitigate this problem.

**Resource poverty.** Online education, just as conventional HE, can easily become impacted by inequalities in resources like access to reliable internet connection and learning spaces, study materials, and computers to mention but a few (Brunton et al., 2019; Halkic & Arnold, 2019). There were no studies specifically addressing the scarcity of educational resources some refugee-background students may face in Europe, but the work of Brunton et al. (2019) demonstrates that pre-entry and on-entry support with financial, logistical, digital, and programme-specific actions targeted at the early stages of the study life cycle can augment student success.

**(Un)welcoming environments.** Displaced and refugee background students are also vulnerable to loneliness and isolation from the larger university community (Merkt & Eisenächer, 2019). Although often overlooked, loneliness constitutes a severe problem as it has been associated with an increased risk of physical and mental health problems and can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. According to Streitwieser et al. (2018), the infrastructure for refugee students' inclusion in HE needs to go beyond language and subject-related preparatory courses ("cold support") and encompass additional programming such as mentoring, buddy programmes, sports, and social events ("warm support") which create opportunities for new relationships to form. The importance of social activities on campus and in the community was also underlined by Bacher et al. (2020), Brunton et al. (2019), Cin and Doğan (2021), Gül and Şaşman Kaylı (2020), Farrell et al. (2020), and Usta et al. (2017) in their exploration of the topic. Similarly, Grüttner (2019) showed that course belonging can be a source of resilience for displaced and refugee background students while also providing a buffer against (worries about) xenophobia and discrimination.





**Figure 6.** Measures to tackle barriers to successful participation.

In many EHEA contexts, the political and societal discourse about refugees has increasingly become fuelled by emotions, xenophobia and even racism. To prevent and tackle exclusion, (racial) harassment and prejudice in HE contexts, several researchers underlined the importance of awareness and sensitisation campaigns on campus for both students and staff (e.g. Grüttner, 2019; Gül & Şaşman Kaylı, 2020). Kontowski and Leitsberger (2018) went even further arguing that universities had the capacity and expertise to engage in public outreach (e.g. through organising diversity weeks and open debates) in order to raise awareness and counter prejudice against refugees in the wider community.

An overview of participation-related support measures is shown in Figure 6.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Transferability and common lessons

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that HE institutions across Europe have been open to receiving displaced and refugee-background students. In their efforts to accommodate this target group, HE institutions often relied heavily on existing solutions that had been put in place to support international and disadvantaged students (Jungblut et al., 2020; see also the systematic review of Arar, 2021). This partly reflects the assumption criticised by Morrice (2013), that once displaced and refugee-background students have satisfied entry requirements they face the same challenges as non-refugee students. Whilst commonalities with other under-represented groups in HE certainly exists, many inhibiting factors to HE access and success are unique to refugee populations (Lambrechts, 2020). Their inclusion in HE therefore necessitates policy changes, re-assessment, and targeted long-term support (Arar, 2021; Kreimer & Boenigk, 2019; Lambrechts, 2020).

With regard to the transferability of the reviewed measures across EHEA countries and to other parts of the world, we could not complete a formal assessment as this was



beyond the scope of the systematic review. We do recognise that there are important differences across EHEA countries in terms of study fees, HE admission procedures as well as asylum processes more broadly, however there are several recommendations that probably hold equal relevance and power regardless of refugee students' specific backgrounds or their country of resettlement. These include:

- downward adjustments to general university entry requirements, including dropping the requirement to prove language proficiency at the time of HE enrolment;
- free and accessible language- and subject-specific preparatory programmes;
- credit transfers between preparatory programmes, online HE and conventional degree programmes;
- in-service training for staff on intercultural awareness and the management of linguistic diversity in HE contexts (including the use of multimodal study materials);
- fee waivers and financial support towards housing, food and transport expenses, study materials and childcare costs.

Studies have also shown that displaced and refugee-background students are more prone to dropping out of university study programmes than traditional students (Kreimer & Boenigk, 2019; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018), and while open days, course tasters and preparatory programmes lead to increased awareness and aspirations, they seldom translate into regular HE enrolment and participation for refugees. This warrants two observations. Firstly, widening participation for refugees is a long-term process often spanning multiple years – transition programmes and other actions should be planned and funded accordingly (Kreimer & Boenigk, 2019). Secondly, robust monitoring of students' pathways and outcomes is needed for intervening with adequate support where warranted and keeping refugee-background students on track to HE graduation (Streitwieser & Brück, 2018; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2018).

Universities are important actors in refugees' social integration (Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020; Harunoğulları et al., 2019; Usta et al., 2017), but to fulfil this role educators need to be trained and receive the necessary knowledge and support to include refugee students effectively in their classes and the broader university community (Arar, 2021; Kozikoğlu & Aslan, 2018). There are also calls for awareness-raising about the reality of refugees and other forcibly displaced people among students, non-teaching HE staff and the wider society (Gül & Şaşman Kaylı, 2020; Kontowski & Leitsberger, 2018; Marcu, 2018). In this regard, Jack et al. (2019) noted a lack of awareness surrounding refugee students' distinct mental health needs, most of which are not met through current institutional formats. Additionally, in some HE contexts, there has been a backlash against refugee students, reportedly, due to the preferential treatment they received compared to local students (Arar et al., 2020; Gül & Şaşman Kaylı, 2020). Whilst this problem may not be very common at present, it is still important to work towards programmes and policies that will prevent future instances of discrimination and racial harassment from occurring.

Finally, widening participation also requires HE institutions to collaborate with actors across multiple sectors, including local governments, social workers, non-governmental organisations and refugee charities (Estrada Moreno & Palma-García, 2020; Kreimer & Boenigk, 2019; McKenzie et al., 2019; Streitwieser & Brück, 2018). Forming alliances with

these groups early on can help overcome informational barriers, understand displaced and refugee-background students' distinct needs, and support their transition from disrupted education into preparatory programmes, and from preparatory programmes into (post)graduate studies.

#### **4.2. Knowledge gap**

Based on the reviewed literature, we have identified five key areas where additional evidence is needed. First, much of the current research concentrates on perceptions of students and HE stakeholders (e.g. Arar et al., 2020; Grüttner et al., 2018; Marcu, 2018; Saiti & Chletsos, 2020 to name but a few), while there is an evidence gap on the impact of different measures on actual enrolments in HE and/or completion and dropout rates among students from refugee populations. Second, there is not enough research examining the specific ways in which gender impacts on displaced people's access to and experiences of HE. This gap was highlighted by several authors (e.g. Bacher et al., 2020) as well as our analysis. Very few studies looked at gender differences in HE participation (an exception is Cin & Doğan, 2021) and none investigated initiatives aimed specifically at female or LGBTQ students. Third, much of the current evidence concentrates on refugees wishing to access HE or students in preparatory programmes. Given that many of the difficulties refugee-background students face on HE entry will likely persist, more evidence is needed on the later stages of their HE journey.

Similarly, digital solutions to refugee education are still an under-researched area. While there is evidence on the challenges and benefits of online education for this target group (e.g. Brunton et al., 2019; Halkic & Arnold, 2019; Reinhardt et al., 2018; Witthaus, 2018), most research took place before the Covid-19 pandemic and therefore could not consider recent improvements to online and blended learning environments. Finally, the pandemic likely had a significant impact on displaced and refugee-background students' HE access and participation considering the widespread disruption in education and support services Europe-wide and deep technology inequalities both in terms of skills and access to digital resources. The magnitude and long-term implications of this impact are yet to be investigated.

### **5. Conclusions**

The aim of this article was to map and review recent literature on displaced and refugee-background students' transitioning and re-integration into European HE. The review appraised and synthesised evidence from 44 studies conducted in 14 EHEA countries after 2014. It looked at a large body of material (7082 records screened and 198 assessed for eligibility), which varied substantially in terms of research participants, intended outcomes, methodology and quality. Overall, the breadth of ongoing activities is encouraging as it reflects the commitment of HE institutions to help refugee-background students progress through their education. This article expands the current evidence base in the field by providing a comprehensive review of measures and recommendations in nine key areas determining HE access and successful participation (see Figures 5 and 6), including the recognition of previous qualifications, HE entry requirements, reach and relevance of study offer(s), vulnerability of students, cost of HE,

language difficulties, transitions and skills (mis)matches, resource poverty and the broader HE environment.

The review has several strengths. First, the multilingual search and screening strategy implemented in this study enabled us to identify and retrieve evidence from 12 non-English publications. We encourage also other researchers to engage with knowledge produced in different languages and educational contexts. If reviews of education research remain monolingual, important findings and insights will go unnoticed hindering knowledge exchange, creativity, and innovation in HE and beyond. Second, to our knowledge, this is the first review to systematically discuss measures, recommendations, and approaches to tackling the under-representation of displaced and refugee-background students in HE. Most systematic reviews to date focussed on barriers and challenges rather than concrete steps policy-makers and institutions can take toward including more refugee-background students in HE. Third, the review also included a quality appraisal of the methods used in the current literature.

Several limitations also warrant consideration, most notably the exclusion of grey literature<sup>4</sup> which may have provided a more complete picture of the support being offered by HE institutions across Europe. Another limitation relates to potential inaccuracies in eligibility assessment, data extraction and quality appraisal. Different approaches were adopted to minimise these, including the establishment of rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria as well as an independent assessment of a sample of screened/extracted data. Notwithstanding, given the number of languages involved in this review, screening, full-text review and data extraction in duplicate were not possible for all studies. Finally, this review does not include studies conducted in European countries that have only recently faced a large flow of refugees such as Poland, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia to mention but a few.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these limitations, the review provides a new evidence-base to drive targeted responses to refugee-background students' needs beyond initial study-fee concerns and language barriers in HE. Future efforts should establish the impact of the discussed measures and recommendations for HE enrolment and study completion, while continuing to consider the voices, perceptions and input of refugee-background students and other stakeholders. There is also a need for more robust research into support mechanisms in later stages of the HE study cycle. Most research to date has failed to look beyond welcome and preparatory programmes, even though many of the disadvantages refugee-background students face are likely to persist throughout their HE journey.

## Notes

1. <http://mixedmethodsappraisaltoolpublic.pbworks.com/w/file/140056890/ReportingtheresultsoftheMMAT.pdf>.
2. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications>.
3. In their analyses of the Greek refugee and HE contexts, Saiti and Chletsos (2020) contest the market model of HE and argue for free access to HE for all students to support social integration.
4. For grey literature records where the full text is available in English the reader may consult table Table S3 of the [Supplementary Material](#).
5. Searches conducted on OSF preprints (<https://osf.io/preprints/>) – a platform which aggregates search results from over thirty preprint providers – did not return any manuscripts focused on the HE integration of recent arrivals from Afghanistan and Ukraine.

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