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Seminar
**Social inclusion of refugee students
and their role in intercultural dialogue**

European Youth Centre, Strasbourg
10-16 July 2016

Conclusions by the Participants¹

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Refugee students face various challenges in accessing and affording education, integrating in the social and cultural environments and enjoying their rights to freedom from discrimination, expression or association, to name only a few. The recent influx of refugees from Syria has drawn some attention to the harshness and magnitude of these challenges – and their impact on the academic and living environment of the students. For the Council of Europe sector, it is important to reach out to refugee students and to identify ways to advocate for their rights and support their social integration through youth work and youth policy projects based on participation and citizenship.

The Youth Department of the Council of Europe took the initiative to organise the seminar *Social inclusion of refugee students and their role in intercultural dialogue* within its Youth for Democracy programme in order to discuss challenges, identify needs and possibilities for the inclusion of refugee students in Europe and support their role as agents in intercultural dialogue. The seminar adds to various projects and initiatives of the youth sector of the Council of Europe in relation to young refugees, notably those on unaccompanied minors and minors in transition to adulthood, and in the spirit of the [statement of the Joint Council on Youth](#) about the refugee crisis.

¹ These conclusions represent the outcome of the proposals and discussions by the seminar participants. They do not represent the opinion of the Council of Europe or the organisations partners in the seminar.

The participants were refugee students themselves and representatives of youth and students organisations as well as foundations working with refugee students.

The seminar was organised with the *Global Platform for Syrian Students* and in cooperation with *Kiron - Open Higher Education* and *Voice of Young Refugees in Europe*. It received financial support from CIRCOM (*European Association of Regional Television*). More on the seminar at <http://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-peace-dialogue/inclusion-of-refugees>

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Education is a Human Right

Education is a universal Human Right. Everybody, regardless of their status, is entitled to it. Education is the most powerful tool to create a better society and its importance becomes even more crucial when it comes to refugees. It is important that the needs of students to continue their studies be taken into account from the outset in any emergency situation.

By engaging in an educational path, young refugees can start to feel like any other student. Universities, on their side must promote a culture of welcome, inclusion and mutual trust among all students in order to ensure the inclusion of refugees in education.

Refugees²

There are many refugees in Europe who become students every year, our title in the university is 'refugee student'. As students we are longing to be a real part of the community, and want to participate positively in building the future of the country which is hosting us as well as building our own future in that country. Many of us had great dreams before we fled our countries and most of us have maintained those dreams and future plans and even raised our expectations: "We can't become what we want by remaining what we are" (Max De Pree).

We have experienced extremely poor conditions, we have been witness and victim to all kinds of danger. After our arrival in Europe we are more determined to make a change, full of hope and optimism. The term 'refugee student' maintains the vision of us as victim, the action of referring to us as simply 'student' will support our integration and the normalcy of our lives and how we are treated and seen by others.

The Rise of Populism in Europe

In today's Europe there is a distorted view of refugees in society, populist and nationalist movements are encouraged by currently rising right-wing parties in many European countries. At this time, populist and nationalistic discourses, sometimes supported by many governmental bodies, unconsciously or consciously, lead society to having negative attitudes towards refugees resulting in the stereotyping of refugees as something bad for society and creating a refugee phobia.

As a result, there are those who take advantage by offering inhuman practices such as low salaries and poor working conditions. These practices must be condemned by both Government and civil society. Such practices create further inequality between refugees and non-refugees. At international level, a lack of cooperation and clash of ideologies worsens polarised societies negative actions towards refugees. Governments must react more strongly against those exploiting the refugee situation.

We propose that there are more and better educational programmes at the European level, raising awareness of the challenges faced by refugees in hosting societies. These programmes must include refugees themselves, so they can promote intercultural dialogue and encourage all young people to play an active role in decision making processes. We want to see greater support given to unbiased media who can play an important role in any polarising society. We as young people want the international community to value human dignity no matter how they systematise their political agenda.

² "Refugee" refers to all people seeking asylum, migrants, refugees, those applying for refugee status, and coming from conflict regions and emergency situations.

Social Inclusion and Participation in Local Societies

We define social inclusion as treating people with dignity and respecting their Human Rights. We recognise the importance of human rights values, including tolerance, equality, justice, empathy, motivation, effort, and respect. For young refugees to experience social inclusion and participation in their local reality the support of all government institutions, at international, national and local level, is needed.

The situation regarding the reception and integration of refugees in different European countries varies radically – this is in terms of both legislative and bureaucratic approaches. This lack of harmony among the European countries, and within the countries themselves, creates a basis for refugee Human Rights violations. In many instances across Europe the procedures for claiming refugee status are not accessible or understandable for many refugees. This results in additional hardship for refugees and hinders their integration and participation in hosting countries. In some cases, refugees are left without any clear guidance on how to get integrated in their new communities or even how they can sustain themselves.

We propose that the Council of Europe apply its capacity to advocate for a more unified approach to refugee-related issues among its Member states. It is necessary to harmonise the procedures and practices of refugee status determination across Europe, especially regarding the length of time and the rights of individuals during this process. In order to increase refugee integration efficiency, it is necessary to develop a common policy on the formation of welcoming personnel within relevant state and interstate agencies.

In order for social inclusion and participation to be fully enjoyed by all young refugees in the local realities in which they live and are hosted, they need to have the opportunity to be involved in all parts of society. This includes volunteering, being involved in organising activities and taking part in decision making.

Social inclusion and participation rely on both refugees and hosting societies knowing about and understanding Human Rights and the role of civil society. We therefore propose the:

- Establishment of a framework for the welcome and orientation centres, that are an umbrella for all stakeholders – government, NGOs, local authorities, etc.
- Training of Young refugees as agents for dialogue and change
- Encouragement of refugees to participate in and establish civil society organisations, through ensuring access to information about local civil society;
- Launch of intercultural dialogue programmes in hosting communities;
- Establishment of welcoming programmes run by local communities for new-comers.

Bureaucracy

Currently, refugees experience unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles in many state bodies, their freedom of movement is limited, and document-issuing and acknowledgement in many cases takes an unnecessarily long time. In order to reduce bureaucratic obstacles for refugees, it is important that a common European policy on the issue is established and implemented at all levels. This can be supported through the establishment of a platform for the sharing of the good practices across all the Member states. Such a platform must involve all stakeholders, including youth and social workers as well as the refugees themselves.

The assignment of specialists with a focus on refugee issues would support this process. These specialists would need to be provided with appropriate training on refugee legislation. They would need to be aware of all possible and potential issues and problems that refugees face in order to tackle them efficiently and effectively. Their role would be to assist all relevant stakeholders. It is also necessary to engage refugees themselves and train them to become the specialists and support workers. Capacity building of existing staff of refugee agencies and organisations with use of best practices of the different agencies is necessary.

In some (or all) countries when a person arrives as a refugee they have to hand over all the official documents of their country of origin. After this they no longer have access to their original documents. The new travel documents in most cases are not valid for travel to many parts of the world. If someone receives a temporary job offer, for example in a Gulf State, in

order to accept the employment, they would have to claim back their original documents and as a result they would lose their refugee status. We ask the Council of Europe to raise this issue with its Member States and work to find an acceptable solution to allow people access to their original passports and other papers under certain circumstances.

Accessible Education

Some universities provide a large amount of information for young refugees on student life, including in one known case a one-year preparatory course for refugees. However, too many other universities do not provide anything and indirectly prevent young refugees from accessing their right to education.

Refugees have to be welcomed into universities with information not just pertaining to the chosen course but also on university life as a whole, from information related to accessing the library to social events and activities to life in the local reality. Universities must provide a safe space for refugees and other students to meet, share stories, food and study materials. Many cultural activities like movies, theatre, cooking events of typical food, and living library story-telling activities have already proven to be effective as tools for social inclusion. Student unions and associations can play a crucial role by including refugees in the activities they already do – if provided with the right means – and through developing new ones especially targeted on intercultural dialogue and offering bureaucratic help for refugees. We ask that the Council of Europe advocate for these matters and actively promote them to the Rectors of Universities across Europe and to the student unions and associations.

Universities can also be a conduit to promote meetings between refugee students and local people who can engage in hosting programmes. This can be useful for the mutual teaching of languages and promoting cultural understanding.

Recognition and Equivalence issues

Young refugees who have attended university and have diplomas or courses work toward their degrees have to go through a tough equivalence procedure. This procedure not only differs from country to country but also from university to university. Where the system works poorly many students or potential students experience a huge amount of difficulties. Too many give up their dreams of gaining their degree and the profession they were aiming for. This serves to further isolate them from society.

We recommend that:

- Equivalence procedures be harmonised between universities and states where this is not the case;
- The equivalence procedures are developed to become more efficient;
- Equivalence applicants be informed in a clear way about the estimated time needed for the processing of their applications and also about any unexpected delays;
- Where positive decisions have already been made, these cases must be used as precedent;
- Where the NARIC of the hosting country is not familiar with a particular refugee diploma, they should network across Europe to find a similar or same case somewhere else (a refugee diploma should be treated the same across all member states).

Language

Access to language courses – availability, quality, and affordability – are indispensable for supporting young refugees in accessing education. Good examples do exist in some countries; all refugees in Europe should have the right to take quality language courses. We ask the Council of Europe to advocate for:

- Access to language courses for all refugees in all countries;
- A guarantee on the quality of language courses for refugees, so that they can reach the required levels to enter higher education;
- Language courses to be maintained at affordable prices, taking account of the financial situation of the refugee;
- Language tests to be available as soon as refugee status is applied for;

- A reasonable level of expectation to be set regarding the language proficiency a refugee has to reach before starting higher education;
- Maintaining access to language learning to education within higher education programmes to further improve language skills while studying;

And with regards to translation services:

- The limiting of waiting times for translation of documents into official languages of the host country;
- Translation services to be maintained at affordable prices, taking account of the financial situation of the refugee;
- Greater provision of information and of services for refugees in both Arabic and English languages;

The understanding and learning of languages also includes profession-based languages/terminologies is vital for professionals to be able to communicate in professional language. Language courses aimed at the terminology of specific fields should be provided.

Blended Learning

Regarding the difficulties many refugees face in accessing higher education, different and alternative approaches need to be sought. Blended learning paths for refugees should be explored more and current good practices of KIRON, SPARK and other education based organisations promoted and encouraged.

Scholarships

Scholarships, and especially their requirements, must be tailored to the specific needs of refugee students to ensure their participation. Many scholarships have an age limit. We ask that this kind of criteria be challenged as many refugees have lost years of studies due to conflict and therefore come back to higher education older than many of their peers. We ask that ways be sought to support and include refugees over 30 years of age. We call on the Council of Europe to support the platforms providing scholarships and to advocate among the Member States for an increase in financial support for existing and new scholarships.

Post-Graduation

A key element to the integration of young refugees into society is the facilitation of them into the labour market. During studies students must be granted access to work permits. We propose the introduction of employment preparation courses such as how to write a CV, how to prepare for an interview or how to approach people in companies.

The introduction of accessible short term paid internships and long term traineeships would help young refugees gain confidence and experience. Professional online platforms, operated at national level, linking skills of refugees with employers would support both employers and refugees to fulfil their employment needs. The promotion of and support for entrepreneurial ventures would serve both refugees and the business sector, for example; SPARK Entrepreneurial Development Programme in the Middle East region and the 'Worker' programme in Germany. We ask for the creation of programmes in different specialisations for refugees who have already graduated.

In respect of Syrian refugees, in order to end the crisis, the participants from Syria stress that young people be included in any democratic changes and actions which will be taken for their country to fulfil the aims of the Syrian people. They urge the Council of Europe to put all efforts to supporting talks to end the war in Syria and restore peace and security in the country.