



REFUGEE EDUCATION IN EUROPE: LEARNING AFTER LOCKDOWN

Education Policy Brief | Regional Bureau for Europe
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Young asylum-seekers from Afghanistan take a break from class at a non-formal education school, on the Greek island of Chios, Greece, October 2020

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

Syrian refugee Hanan, 34, shows her university degree in biomedicine from Syria. She is studying and plans to convert her Syrian qualification to be able to practise biomedicine in Sweden.
Stockholm, Sweden, May, 2021. © UNHCR / Max-Michel Kolijn

Overview

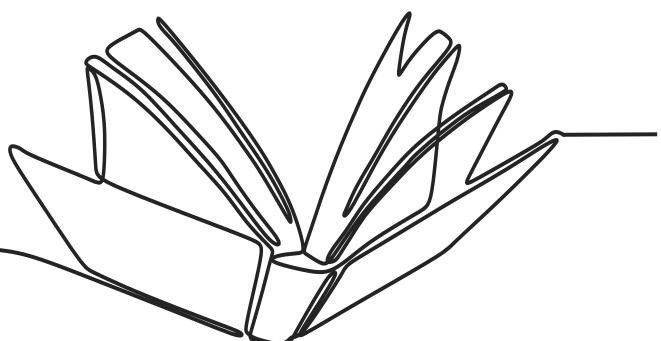
Schools and higher education systems worldwide are finishing their third academic year under disruptions caused by COVID-19. The pandemic has had unprecedented effects on education. During peak infection periods, many countries mandated school and university closures for weeks or months, forcing hundreds of millions of teachers, parents, children and students around the globe to stay at home and switch to alternative forms of learning such as home schooling, distance learning and on-line lectures.

Emerging evidence, as well as UNHCR's recent operational experiences in Europe, suggest that vulnerable groups like refugee, asylum-seeking, internally displaced and stateless children have been disproportionately affected by closures of educational institutions.

As is the case for local host populations, long-term effects on academic performance, development and well-being of refugee, asylum-seeking, internally displaced and stateless children and youth can be expected, exacerbating existing gaps and challenges in education of displaced learners.

[This policy brief outlines some the main challenges in education of displaced learners in Europe](#) as the region emerges from the pandemic. UNHCR also provides a series of recommendations for policy-makers and civil society at regional, national and local levels to mitigate the particularly strong effects the pandemic disruptions are having on education of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and stateless people.

Inevitably, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee education will interact with the effects of the refugee emergency in Ukraine. The crisis has caused hundreds of thousands of children and youth to flee to European countries since 24 February 2022. While the situation is still fluid, it is already clear that the unprecedented movements of Ukrainian refugees into European countries will bring important new challenges to education systems across the region. In the post-COVID education landscape, these new challenges may exacerbate and complicate the existing ones in important ways.



Context: education during the COVID-19 pandemic

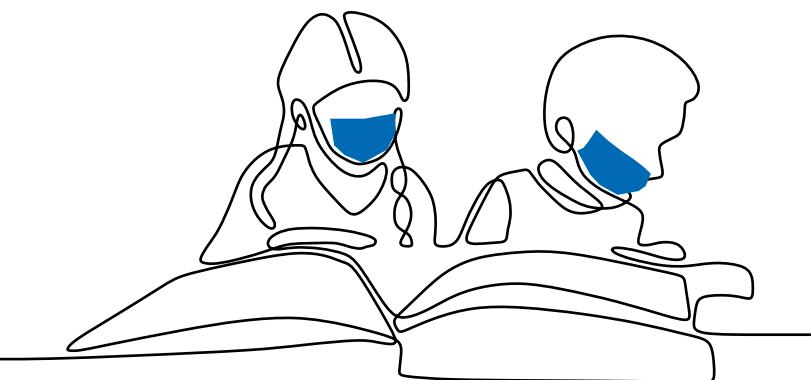
At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, school closures affected some 1.6 billion learners in 190 countries representing 94% of the world's school-going population.¹ The global number of learners affected by school closures went down to 156 million in June 2021. Halfway through the school year, in February 2022 that number still stood at around 43.5 million.² In higher education, some 220 million students were affected by closures of universities and other higher education institutions.³

UNHCR declared a global emergency for COVID on 25 March 2020 and mobilized its entire network to assist refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and stateless persons during the health emergency.⁴ In refugee-hosting regions like Europe, where hundreds of thousands of children have entered national school systems and higher education since the peak in arrivals of refugees and migrants in 2015-2016⁵, UNHCR stepped up advocacy for the inclusion of refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons in response plans to COVID-19. This included advocacy for inclusion of displaced children and young people in education response plans,

such as provision of distance-learning, health and hygiene measures in schools, school medical care and prevention, as well as pedagogical and psycho-social support to vulnerable families.

The epidemiological situation in many European countries has improved since the April 2020 peak period as a result of vaccination campaigns, hygiene and prevention, travel and contact restrictions and other measures. As of May 2022, most school systems in Europe are fully open, but local closures and quarantine measures still occur from time to time as new COVID variants such as Omicron continue to lead to disruptions in education. This volatility and uncertainty has the potential to cause negative effects on displaced learners, their parents and teachers for years to come.

Despite this 'new normal', education systems have shown great creativity and resilience in finding solutions to problems brought by closures of schools, universities and other educational institutions. In many cases, the pandemic has brought positive change, such as the introduction of more flexible learning arrangements and use of digital tools.



Effects of COVID-19 on displaced learners in Europe

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing problems and has caused a staggering amount of new problems in education. In most cases, these problems have hit vulnerable populations, including UNHCR's people of concern, comparatively harder than learners in host communities, widening existing divides and inequalities.⁶

Learning losses

According to UNESCO projections, some [100 million learners globally are at risk of falling below minimum proficiency levels in reading](#) due to school closures.⁷

The effects of the pandemic have been most pronounced in South and West Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, where over 5 million students of the total population of children and young people from pre-primary to tertiary are at risk of not returning to school following COVID-19 school closures. In Europe, where disaggregated data on displaced learners in national school systems is not usually available, evidence is growing too. A recent assessment by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) concludes that

[“conservative’ estimates for a few selected EU countries consistently indicate that, on average, students will suffer a learning loss”.](#)⁸

Ongoing participatory assessments with preparatory class teachers and other refugee educators carried out by UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe⁹ confirm that [many displaced learners have suffered](#)

[learning losses](#), with often very pronounced effects on those who are still learning the language of their host community. Many had to repeat grades or are struggling when they transition to regular classes where they are instructed in the host community language only. Similar effects are reported in higher education and non-formal adult education.

Those who missed out on parts of their education during forced displacement and who are in [catch-up programmes for basic literacy and numeracy are particularly hard-hit](#) because they usually learn in intense face-to-face settings in small groups. School lockdowns have made such classes virtually impossible because they do not transfer well to on-line learning.

The learning losses and the reduced time spent learning in school are known to have [long-term, if not permanent, detrimental effects on academic performance of students](#) and reduces their chances of successfully concluding secondary and higher education.

Moreover, these effects are typically more pronounced in vulnerable groups, including refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children. The youngest learners are most

vulnerable since education disruptions often affect acquisition of [foundational skills like literacy and numeracy](#). The JRC concludes that

“this crisis may (...) lead to a larger achievement gap between native students and migrant students. It is quite possible that more disadvantaged students will experience a significant learning loss especially in mathematics.”^{10 11}

Drop-outs

Long periods of being unable to go to school during the pandemic have caused some children and youth to [leave school or abandon their studies entirely](#). UNESCO estimates that globally some 24 million learners are at risk of dropping out of school as a result of closures.¹²

[Barriers hampering access of children to on-line or distance learning during lockdowns](#), such as lack of resources and a suitable home environment for on-line learning have demotivated displaced learners to a point where they give up.

[Emotional and psychological stress](#) as a result of being forced to constantly live with family or peers and pressures to start earning or contribute to family resources in other ways push many to leave school, too. Girls and teenage boys are at particular risk of early school leaving, ending up in irregular employment, forced marriages and reverting to negative coping mechanisms. This is particularly the case in environments where the economic impact of COVID has been severe and where social welfare systems struggled to cope with the effects of the pandemic.

Comprehensive post-COVID data on drop-outs is not yet available, but plenty of local and sub-regional evidence has emerged

showing that in many European countries, a portion of vulnerable students, including refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and stateless persons, are dropping out of school during the pandemic.¹³

Digital divide

The pandemic has [exacerbated the existing digital divide between refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children and their peers in host communities](#).

Many displaced learners live in families or under guardianship with [little to no access to computers, laptops or tablets](#) to follow lessons on-line. Many also live in shared accommodation or sub-standard housing with inadequate connectivity to the internet,¹⁴ which may make it impossible to participate in forms of distance learning.

Cramped [living conditions at home](#) may make it impossible to study on-line. Often, lack of a space to study and the continuous presence of siblings or parents is too disruptive to allow for effective learning.

Other factors have widened this digital gap even further. Most [teachers](#), including those who work with refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children intensively, had to switch to on-line learning and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) overnight. Most had [no training](#) for such abrupt and fundamental changes in pedagogical approaches. Many with vulnerable students struggled to keep contact with their pupils in virtual learning setups.¹⁵

Many parents and refugee, asylum-seeking, internally displaced and stateless children also lack the technical skills, training and language skills to adequately switch to on-line and virtual learning in a host school system.



Feruz, from Eritrea,
playing in the Education
Room at the Emergency
Transit Centre (ETC) in
Timisoara, Romania,
February 2021

© UNHCR/STEFAN LORINT

Stress and psycho-social effects

Long periods of lockdown and school closures have left many displaced learners stressed, isolated and, in some cases, added to the trauma of displacement. School closures and contact restrictions caused limitations to very important contacts with classmates, friends and teachers.

This social disruption affected socialization and peer learning processes known to have positive effects on well-being, academic performance and long-term integration prospects of displaced learners.¹⁶ Many lost their sense of ‘belonging’, with negative effects on social integration.

In many cases, school closures also led to the - temporary - collapse of essential psycho-social support services (school social

workers, psychologists) and interpretation services in support of these school-based services.¹⁷

Many refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children and young people have also been exposed to increased risks of domestic violence and life with stressed family members in their home environment.¹⁸

Many vulnerable families have also experienced disruptions in their livelihoods. Some parents were unable to work as a result of school and child care closures, or lost their jobs, leading to additional financial and social pressures. These, in their turn, translate into additional pressures for children and young people to become financially independent as soon as possible and additional psycho-social stresses on families.

Existing gaps in education of displaced learners

The effects of the pandemic on the education of displaced learners come on top of existing gaps and challenges they are facing in access to education. UNHCR, with its UN sister agencies IOM and UNICEF, outlined these gaps and challenges in a 2019 inter-agency advocacy brief.

Legal and administrative barriers to education

These can include excessive administrative requirements for enrolment in school or higher education institutions (cf. requiring original documentation where copies or temporary substitutes would be equally valid), lack of recognition of prior learning and skills, inflexible enrolment deadlines, excessive language requirements, inflexible application of age brackets for compulsory education and variability in assessment and enrolment rules between regions.

Practical and financial barriers to education

These can include lack of school transport, unaffordable tuition fees and unavailability of spaces and equipment to do homework. Frequent moves of asylum-seekers from one reception facility to another is another often cited problem, as well as living in sub-standard housing.

Lack of psycho-social support service

Many education systems in Europe still lack psycho-social support systems for socially vulnerable children and young people and are often not prepared to face specific challenges related to the presence of

displaced learners (cf. availability of school psychologists with adequate knowledge of stress and PTSD resulting from forced displacement).

Lack of language support and cultural mediation services

School interpreters, cultural mediators and language support systems in higher education are essential to make pedagogical, psycho-social and administrative support services in education possible, but they are often not available or there are long waiting lists.

Lack of training and resources in education institutions

Many schools and higher education institutions in Europe do not have enough resources to adequately support displaced learners. In recent years, many schools lacked space in classrooms and on campuses to host newcomers. Existing teacher shortages often resulted in acute shortages of specialized teachers for language classes and other forms of preparatory or transitory education to prepare displaced learners for their transition to regular classes. In higher education in Europe this lack of resources is also prevalent.

Lack of additional support to UAC and other vulnerable groups

Displaced learners who arrive without their families (unaccompanied children, UAC) or those arriving in their late teens with little to no time left to spend in compulsory education are at greater risk of dropping out of education. They have less support from families or guardians and usually spend less time in national education systems, with poorer academic outcomes and educational prospects as a result.

Additional educational support is often not available when these vulnerable groups ‘age out’ and reach an age where they are no longer under compulsory education, in some cases as soon as they reach the age of 15. Another problem is the lack of access of displaced children to pre-primary education and child care.¹⁹

Stereotypes and judgment

Many refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children are subject to stereotypes, negative attitudes, mobbing or other forms of abuse.²⁰ These negative behaviours by host community members are often driven by ignorance, and fanned by messaging in media, politics and pre-existing prejudices. They can have detrimental effects on the learning environment, both in compulsory education and in higher education.²¹

Many, if not most, of these challenges have been [exacerbated by the pandemic and school closures](#). Schools had to reallocate resources to cope with the health emergency, often at the expense of existing support systems for displaced learners, and [legislative and regulatory changes](#) to address structural problems in education have been put on the backburner.^{22 23}

As Europe continues to struggle with the effects of the pandemic and large new flows of refugee children and youth, UNHCR expects to see that part of the progress made in addressing gaps and challenges with regard to education of refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons in the region may have disappeared, if not regressed.

This illustrates the need for renewed efforts to ensure refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children and young people are fully included in education systems in host countries in Europe.

The framework for inclusion of displaced learners in Europe

Context in Europe: inclusion in national school systems²⁴

The vast majority of States in Europe have rules and regulations in place that guarantee access to national education systems for refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons and children and young people with similar statuses. Most displaced minors in Europe are therefore included in national education systems. There are disparities, however, in how regulatory frameworks are being put into practice.²⁵

International Conventions and Guidelines

The right to education is included in several international conventions and guidelines.

It is guaranteed in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights²⁶ and in Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.²⁷ The fundamental right to education for displaced learners in host countries is included in Article 22 of the 1951 Refugee Convention²⁸ and its 1967 Protocol. The same right for stateless persons and internally displaced persons is included in Article 22 of the 1954 Statelessness Convention and Principle 23 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

Inclusive education is part of the United Nations' 2030 agenda, particularly in Sustainable Development Goal 4.²⁹

UNHCR Refugee Education Strategy 2030

The principles of all relevant international conventions and the goals of SDG 4 are fully reflected in UNHCR's 2030 Refugee Education

Strategy,³⁰ which focuses on “equitable and sustainable inclusion” of refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons into national education systems, fostering safe and enabling learning environments and the use of education towards sustainable futures.

Inclusion of displaced learners in national education systems is a policy priority for UNHCR in Europe. This strategic goal pertains both to primary, secondary and higher education.

Global Compact and GRF pledges

Following the 2016 adoption of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants,³¹ the United Nations General Assembly affirmed the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees.³²

In the Global Compact, States and relevant stakeholders commit to providing resources and expertise to facilitate access to primary, secondary and tertiary education, to strengthen training and preparedness of education systems and to work toward removal of barriers to education.

Another goal is to limit out-of-school time of refugee children to maximum three months after arrival in a host country.

In the wake of the Global Compact, a first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) was held in Geneva in 2019. This resulted in States, civil society and a wide variety of stakeholders to make some 1,700 pledges to date for initiatives to deliver long-term solutions for refugees, forcibly displaced and stateless people and their hosts. 252 of those pledges are related to refugee education, of which 86 originating from the Europe region.³³

Refugee students defy the odds to begin new life at university in Italy through the UNICORE scholarship programme. Italy, September 2021

© UNHCR/ALESSANDRO PENSO



Focus on higher education: UNHCR's 15by30 objective

For higher education UNHCR and its partners have committed to achieving 15% enrolment of refugee learners by 2030.³⁴ Currently, the global enrolment rate of refugees in higher education stands at an estimated 5%, which means the vast majority of displaced learners will not have a chance to go to university or graduate school.

There is no conclusive data quantifying the gap between host communities and displaced learners in Europe,³⁵ but there is evidence that displaced learners get tracked more often to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) early in their school career and are facing other challenges in accessing higher education, such as language barriers, financial and administrative barriers and difficulties with regard to recognition of prior learning and skills.³⁶

To improve the situation, UNHCR is working toward a 15by30 Roadmap³⁷ based on five higher education pathways (inclusion in national higher education systems, promotion of access to technical and vocational education and training, connected higher education programmes, scholarships and complementary pathways to higher education).

Focus on Germany: UNICEF and UNHCR analysis of access to education for asylum-seeking children

Estimates show that Germany's education systems are by far the largest hosts of refugee and asylum-seeking children in the European Union.³⁸

UNHCR Germany and the German Committee for UNICEF recently published a comprehensive report³⁹ on the challenges in access to education for displaced learners ages 6-13 who are staying in initial asylum-seeker reception facilities.⁴⁰

Interviews with school management, teachers, school workers, parents and refugee and asylum-seeking children were carried out in asylum reception centres and other locations in seven of the sixteen federal States in Germany. A questionnaire was also sent to educators and other stakeholders on specific challenges with regard to education of displaced learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis of UNHCR and UNICEF showed that the German government and the many local authorities involved in education have put great efforts in supporting displaced learners in schools, but that some challenges remain while new ones have emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To name one example, access to education in some German federal States still only starts when asylum-seeking children and their families are allocated to a municipality under the German system of geographic distribution of asylum-seekers and receive an official residency permit. This can delay schooling of children by three to six months. UNHCR and UNICEF recommend that children can be enrolled regardless of their residency status, in order not to delay schooling.

Both organizations recommend legal remedies to make sure displaced children are enrolled within the three-month limit set by European law and to limit the amount of time children spend in non-formal education in asylum-centres, or in education that separates them wholly from attending regular schools and classes for too long. UNHCR and UNICEF also recommend that any non-formal or formal preparatory education provided in asylum-centres be reinforced and provided by qualified and correctly paid teaching personnel.

The UNHCR and UNICEF surveys in the seven federal States included in the analysis also show very clearly that the pandemic has had a disproportionately large effect on asylum-seeking and refugee children's education. As was the case in other countries, many displaced learners did not have the internet connectivity, electronic devices and separate spaces to learn in an effective way in asylum-seeker accommodation or other residences. UNHCR and UNICEF recommended that initiatives be taken in German school systems and asylum-centres to make sure equal access to education is guaranteed, even if schools or education providers switch to - partial - distance learning, such as making available high-bandwidth WiFi and electronic devices to displaced learners where needed.

European Union

The legal framework with regard to access to education of displaced learners in the 27 Member States of the European Union is well developed. The fundamental right of access to education of refugees in host countries has been translated into European Union law (for European Union and EEA Member States).

In the European Union, Article 14 of the so-called ‘Reception Conditions Directive’⁴¹ obliges EU Member States to ensure [minor children who have applied for asylum are enrolled within three months of registration](#). It also prohibits withdrawal of secondary education “*for the sole reason that the minor has reached the age of majority*”.

Importantly, the EU Directive also introduces an [obligation to organize preparatory classes in primary and secondary education](#) where displaced children typically get intensive language education before they move on to regular classes, where they are instructed in the local language with other children.⁴²

Application of the legal principles enshrined in the Directive is, however, variable across the EU depending on the size of the refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless child and young people population, resources available to education authorities to organize appropriate inclusion and integration measures and local legal frameworks.

Other European countries

European countries outside the EU mostly have legislation in place allowing access of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and stateless persons to their local education systems, but there are [vast differences in inclusion and integration practices](#).

Most non-EU countries in the Europe region host relatively small numbers of displaced learners and generally face the same challenges as EU countries with respect to integration in education.⁴³

Notable exception in this respect is [Turkey](#), which has topped the global list of refugee-hosing countries for many years. As the number of refugees arriving in the country from Syria grew, it had to open Temporary Education Centres for the very large number of Syrian refugee children on its territory, even though Syrian children have access to local public schools.⁴⁴

While providing them with the necessary education right from the start of the emergency by offering education mostly in Arabic, the TEC’s also created a language barrier if those children then continued their education in the Turkish system. In 2016, the Turkish government therefore decided to gradually integrate the Syrian children into the local education system, in an effort to avoid continued segregation of the refugee children from their host communities.

Education of displaced learners: the numbers problem

One of the greatest challenges in policy work and programmatic support work to displaced learners in Europe is the lack of data.

Populations of displaced learners. Most European countries do not collect data on the legal status of refugee, migrant or stateless children and youth when they enrol in schools or higher education institutions. This makes it almost impossible to determine exactly how many refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless children and youth there are in any given education system in Europe.

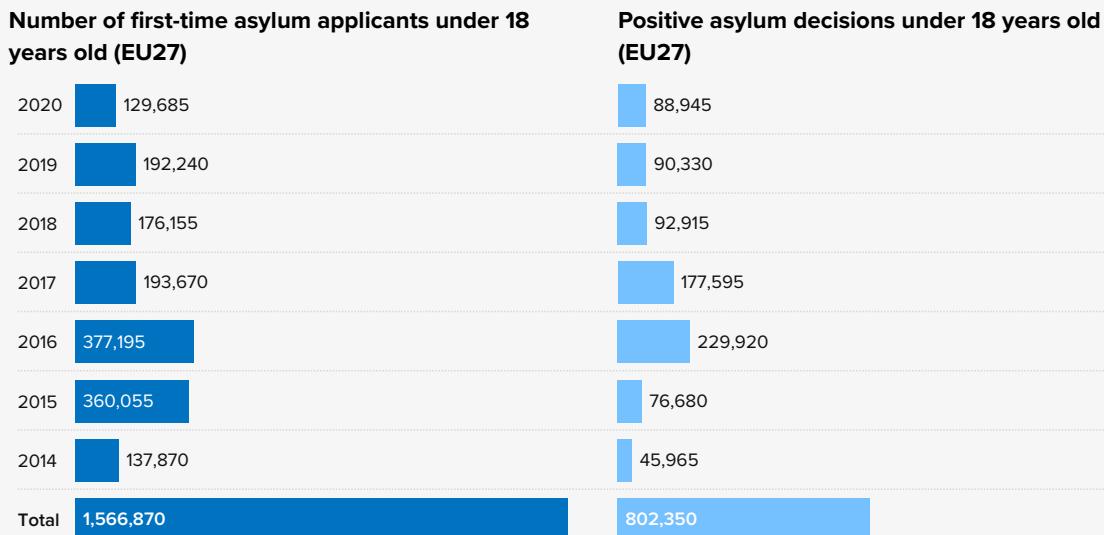
This is mostly due to privacy and census legislations in place, lack of capacity of authorities to collect relevant data, in some case high turnover of populations, and other factors. Education Management Information Systems in European countries also do not provide the detail needed to make precise and detailed analysis. As the OECD observes in a recent report,

“even if refugees access education, their educational achievements and needs remain invisible, as they are no longer captured in their home country’s Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) and not yet included in their host country’s EMIS.”⁴⁵

Academic performance. Data on academic performance of displaced learners is scattered mostly over local or regional administrative data or academic studies. Coordinated, uniform and longitudinal data on learning outcomes and career prospects exists mostly for migrant populations that arrived a longer time ago.⁴⁶ UNHCR and other stakeholders providing assistance to displaced learners therefore often have to rely on non-comparable local data, participatory assessments with refugee children and youth and educators and approximate data, for example asylum figures.

This qualitative data and approximative quantitative data shows very clearly, however, that the number of displaced learners in Europe has grown exponentially since the 2015-2016 peak in arrivals (see Eurostat figures below). Since 2014, over **800,000** young people under the age of 18 received refugee status or another protective status in the EU27⁴⁷ alone. Assuming that most of these children are, or were, in compulsory education, it is safe to assume that hundreds of thousands of displaced learners are currently in education in Europe. Many hundreds of thousands more are expected to arrive as a result of the Ukraine crisis.

Young people receiving international protection in Europe | 2014-2020



Source: Eurostat

Beyond the pandemic: recommendations for moving forward

As Europe's education systems are emerging from the most disruptive period of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that schools, universities and other educational institutions remain open and prepared for the medium and long-term impact of pandemic-related challenges. As illustrated in this policy paper, many educators, parents, students and other stakeholders have learned a lot from school lockdowns.

The pandemic is also creating opportunities to address long-standing and structural challenges in education of displaced learners in Europe, which may be addressed when States, regions and other relevant authorities do their education planning for the next academic years.

General recommendations

[Include refugee, asylum-seekers and stateless children and youth in post-COVID recovery plans in education.](#) Make sure any additional COVID mitigation measures affecting education in months to come include adequate support to vulnerable learners, including refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern to UNHCR. This includes providing displaced learners with adequate means and support to switch to distance learning whenever needed, to inform them and their parents on hygiene and other measures in place in schools, universities and other educational institutions, and to prioritize teachers and to include children and youth in vaccination programmes.⁴⁸

[Remove administrative and practical barriers to access education at all levels.](#) This could mean making document requirements for enrolment more flexible (cf. by accepting temporary or substitute documents), legislate to allow access to education system benefits outside of compulsory school age brackets, include displaced learners in child support

schemes, school meal schemes, and school transport and putting in place fair and transparent assessment procedures to place displaced learners in the correct grade and education track.

[Include displaced learners in education planning.](#) Hosting displaced learners in primary, secondary and higher education requires resources. These need to be included in school planning. This includes financial planning and human resources, as well as planning for provision of more specialized services such as preparatory classes, language learning support and teacher training and recruitment.

Recommendations for primary education

[Ensure access of displaced children to early childhood education and pre-primary child care.](#) Many European countries still exclude displaced learners from integration and inclusion programmes for very young children that have not reached the age of compulsory education yet. Including children as soon as

possible in pre-primary education and programmes will benefit their integration, accelerate their adaptation to local cultural norms and customs, and increase their academic performance in later stages of education because they learn foundational skills as well as the host community language.

[Ensure integration of displaced learners into host community classes as soon as possible.](#)

For young learners in lower and upper primary, providing separate language lessons to learn the local language is important, but they should not be separated, or only for a very limited time, from classes with local children.

Recommendations for secondary education

[Ensure correct assessment and evaluation of displaced learners, even after COVID disruptions.](#)

Most European school systems have assessment methods in place to determine whether a displaced learner needs to go into a preparatory language class, or can immediately attend regular classes, usually with some form of assistance. Assessments are also used to determine in which grade or educational track the pupil will be placed. Great care needs to be taken to avoid placing displaced learners in an incorrect grade or track because this can deeply affect their academic prospects. The skills and competences of the displaced learner need to be valued correctly.

Evaluation of academic performance can be adapted if education disruption occurs (cf. letting pupils pass to a higher grade more easily even if they have missed out on a couple of weeks of classes, to avoid demotivation). Care should be taken, however, to avoid passing pupils into grades that are not sufficiently compatible with their skills.

[Ensure integration of displaced learners into host community classes as soon as possible.](#)

Similar to the recommendation for primary education, it is important that displaced learners be integrated, even if only partially

when they first transition, into regular classes with children of the host community.

[Ensure access to education for displaced learners who have 'aged out' of compulsory education.](#) Compulsory education ends at relatively low age in some education systems in Europe. In many cases displaced learners can no longer benefit from support once they have 'aged out' of compulsory education. This leads many to drop out of education with little or no language education and with no diplomas or certificates that may give them access to higher education and certain professions. It is therefore recommended that access to education support services to displaced learners is maintained up and until displaced learners can obtain a diploma or certificate, even when they are over the age of compulsory education.

Recommendations for higher education

[Remove administrative and financial barriers to higher education.](#) As is the case in the other levels of education, care should be taken to avoid excessive documentation requirements for displaced learners when they wish to enrol in higher education (cf. accepting temporary or substitute documentation).

[Recognition of prior learning and skills should be made more flexible](#), or if this is not possible, be complemented with appropriate skills and language assessments that would provide the possibility to enrol.

[Displaced learners need to be included where possible in existing social and financial support programmes for students](#) (scholarships, reduced tuition fees, possibility to do student work) to remove some of the financial barriers they may face.

Middle schools in Normandy welcome the Inter'Act Tour 2021 organised by UNHCR and partners.
France, October 2021

© UNHCR/BENJAMIN LOYSEAU



Benjamin : son document de composition familiale

« Benjamin était soldat en Angola. Il a fui son pays lorsqu'il a eu peur d'être tué. Bien qu'il ait toujours peur d'y retourner, il a réussi à retrouver sa maison.

« Si je devais me fuir à nouveau, le document de composition familiale et la photo seraient la chose la plus importante pour prouver que j'étais réfugié », explique-t-il. « Sans cela, je pourrais être arrêté et les autorités pourraient me faire expulser, ou leur mère les renvoyer au Congo. Ce document prouve que mes enfants sont belges. »

The Most Important Thing : sa machine à coudre

« Benjamin pose derrière sa machine à coudre. « C'est ma vie, c'est mon sang. Je l'utilise pour pouvoir acheter de la nourriture pour ma famille », explique-t-il.

À Batanga, en République démocratique du Congo, il gagne de l'argent en réparant les vêtements des réfugiés et des habitants.

Benjamin a fui après avoir vu un combattant Seleka tuer un marchand à la suite d'une dispute, dans la zone portuaire de Bangui, la capitale de la République centrafricaine. Il a couru vers son village d'origine, Monga, pour chercher sa femme et ses enfants. Mais l'endroit était vide. Il a alors attrapé la machine à coudre puis est allé chercher ses proches. Ils ont été trouvés sur le terrain de sa famille.

Le lendemain, ils ont traversé la rivière Oubangui pour se réfugier en RDC à Batanga.

UNHCR
L'Agence des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés



Promising practice in Europe

Germany

Funding integration of refugee students in higher education. The Integra programme of the DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service is a funding line with which universities can set up a variety of integration measures for refugee youth at universities, for example through language learning and subject-specific preparatory classes. It is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

Learning how to read in asylum-centres. The initiative “Lesestart für Flüchtlingskinder” (“Reading Start for Refugee Children”), financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, runs different activities in initial reception centers to encourage reading.

In Hamburg, the local initiative Schlaufox runs a project called Ankerlicht, which provides tutoring and one-on-one mentoring support to asylum-seeking and refugee youth between the age of 13-20 years. Volunteer mentors support them with learning German and other subjects and to navigate the educational system.

Facilitating access to education when documents are missing. Germany implemented the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region and is offering refugees the opportunity to have their qualification recognized, even in case documents are missing.

Training refugee teachers. The University of Potsdam runs a Refugee Teachers Program, providing training to refugees who have already worked as teachers in their countries of origin. Refugee teachers can complement their prior qualifications, enabling them to obtain full professional qualification standards in Germany.

Teaching materials for use in welcome classes. The Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb), which offers citizenship education, provides educational materials for teachers of ‘Welcome Classes’ working with asylum-seeking and refugee children.

The Netherlands

Mapping of education challenges during pandemic. A working group on children in reception centres led by NGOs and the state agency for reception centres (CAO) carried out a survey in 45 schools attended by refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children. This monitoring exercise documented lack of connectivity, language barriers and other problems with distance learning in asylum-centres.

Belgium

Bringing laptops to vulnerable children during the pandemic. Several schools and local charities have provided laptops to vulnerable children, including refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children. The service club Inner Wheel has bought 20 laptops for elementary school Athena Drie Hofsteden in Kortrijk, including for ‘welcome class’ students.

Luxembourg

Mental health support over the phone. A dedicated coronavirus hotline was created by the Ministry of Education and offers educational and psychological guidance. It is available in over 20 languages. Clients indicate their preferred language and Ministry workers will call them.

Providing hardware for children to access education broadcasts. UNHCR worked with the Ministry of the Interior to provide laptops and a television set to school children and UASC in reception centres so they can follow on-line lessons and education broadcasts.

Croatia

GRF pledge. UNHCR's advocacy resulted in Serbia's pledge to push forward inclusion of refugee youth in higher education.

Serbia

Synergies with academia. UNHCR established cooperation with several faculties of Belgrade University to promote topics of asylum and protection among the local students and academic public, shed light on young refugees' potential, expedite inclusion and combat xenophobia.

First ever refugees studying in Serbian language in public faculties enrolled the academic year 2021/2022 under the same conditions as nationals. UNHCR included the students in DAFI scholarships.

Tailor-made mental health coaching. Parenting education sessions with interpretation were organized for refugee parents by the psycho-education team at the Emergency transit Centre in Timisoara as of 2020. A set of tailored techniques coupled with information on child's psychological evolution enabled parents to develop skills and knowledge to provide adequate protection and care for child development.

Romania

Facilitating access to education and work by adapting documentation requirements. Romania's National Center for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas in favor of refugees, decided to accept, as an alternative to presenting the diploma in original format (high school or higher education), in order to access the labor market or to access a qualification course, a simple copy of the document, when the original cannot be presented for objective reasons.

Financial and housing support to refugee students. UNHCR has developed partnerships with top universities in Romania and developed the Refugee Full Study Scholarship Programme. Through this programme, refugees can receive free accommodation in the student dorms, exemptions to pay the tuition fee and a social allowance to cover their living expenses, for the duration of their bachelor (3 years) or master (2 years) degree.

Training teachers. Since 2018 UNHCR Romania has facilitated the training of over 300 teachers country-wide on the use of UNHCR's Teaching About Refugees teaching materials. During the Covid-19 Pandemic UNHCR Romania continued to deliver the trainings in an online format

Digital buddying. The digital learning platform weiterlernen.at by the Ministry of Education includes a partner initiative on matching children with 'digital buddies' for learning support, called 'Talently'. Children can connect outside school hours to study and interact with a digital buddy.

Multi-language mental health support over the phone. The School Psychology Service of the Ministry of Education of Austria has increased its multi-language counselling services, including the languages of the largest refugee communities in Austria. The Ministry's website lists the languages and the mobile phone numbers parents, teachers and students seeking help can contact directly.

Offering learning spaces during lockdown. During the lockdown, the City of Vienna cooperated with hotels, restaurants and the start-up www.book-your-room.at/ to offer children and families rooms for learning who did not have the peace and quiet or the necessary infrastructure, such as internet, at home, free of charge.

Training refugees to become teachers in Austria. At the recommendation of UNHCR, the University of Vienna launched a training programme for refugee teachers. Graduates of the course can subsequently teach at schools in Austria through special contract arrangements. The course will be continued in 2021-2022 for about 30 teachers with refugee background.

Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into Turkish Education System (PIKTES) Project. PIKTES (Project on Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System) is a European Union funded project implemented by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). The project aims to increase the integration of Syrian children and their access to quality education and has the overall objective of increasing the enrollment and attendance rates of Syrian children. The project has activities in 20 areas including but not limited to provision of Turkish language courses, transportation, awareness raising, social cohesion activities, catch-up training.

University fee waiver policy for Syrians under temporary protection. The Government of Turkey (GoT) has created an enabling policy environment which has facilitated access to higher education of Syrian refugees through waiving academic tuition fees for fulltime, degree programmes and by adapting several administrative procedural flexibilities (i.e., university enrollment without documentation).

The fee waiver policy enabled high enrollment rates of Syrians under TP. The policy, which was announced in 2013/2014 academic year, was cancelled as of 2021/22 academic year.

Training teachers using drama and theatre techniques. Since 2015, UNHCR Greece has been working with the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-GR) to implement a large scale experiential learning and teacher training project using drama as a teaching tool on human rights, refugee protection and diversity in the classroom. From 2015 to mid-2021, the programme provided training and support 14,000 teachers of primary and secondary education around Greece, reaching almost 31,000 students in 560 schools throughout the country.

Filling a language learning gap with textbooks. UNHCR Bulgaria financed the creation of Bulgarian language handbooks for refugees together with Caritas Bulgaria at level A1 and A2. The Bulgarian Red Cross updated the handbooks with level B1. Currently, they are all offered with annexes in Arabic, English, Persian and French and are used for language learning to refugee youth in diverse settings.

Bulgaria

Teaching *about* and *for* refugees

Teaching About Refugees for primary and secondary

Since 2017, UNHCR has been publishing free-of-charge teaching materials on its [Teaching About Refugees web page](#). The materials have been updated in 2021 and include a new [Guide for teachers](#), a new section with facts and figures materials, a couple of new video exercises and a new [educational video game](#) which can be played on-line in a simple web browser. Some of the new teaching materials have been developed by refugees from Syria living in Europe.

Teaching For Refugees: UNHCR's training tools for educators

UNHCR has completed development of a set of on-line and so-called *blended learning* training tools for education professionals working with refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children and youth in primary, secondary and higher education. The training tools are hosted by Eurekos, a provider of on-line learning software.

The training tools can be translated and tailored to specific trainee profiles. They are available as a free resource to ministries of education, school boards, teacher training institutions, continuing professional development providers, universities, graduate schools and other education and training providers.

[Teaching For Refugees: Building Knowledge](#) is a UNHCR training course aimed at primary and secondary school teachers who want to teach about the subject of refugees, asylum and migration and who may be welcoming refugees in their classroom. The course is available in English in a self-paced form which allows trainees to do the course in their own

time without an instructor. The blended learning course is more elaborate and is led by an instructor.

Contact UNHCR to set up a course at your school or in your country or region. Trainees will learn basic concepts and facts and figures on refugees, asylum-seekers, internal displacement, refugee rights and other subjects. They will also compose their own lesson plans. The course was co-developed by the [Carey Institute for Global Good](#).

[The UNISTAR training for university staff](#) is a training course aimed at any university staff members who may be working with refugee students, whether they teach or work in support roles on campus.

The UNISTAR training teaches trainees the basics on refugees, asylum and migration. It covers barriers to education of refugee and asylum-seeking students and how to build a support system for displaced learners at a higher education institution. It also teaches staff members the basics on mental health and well-being, as well as inclusive pedagogy. It also offers some theoretical perspectives on teaching in diversity.

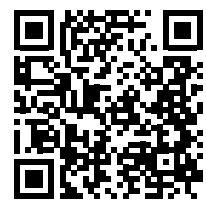
The UNISTAR course will be available as a free resource starting in the academic year 2022-2023. UNISTAR is an Erasmus+ project co-financed by the European Commission and is led by VUB university of Brussels, Belgium, in close cooperation with the [European University Foundation](#) and UNHCR.

Contact UNHCR's focal point at smets@unhcr.org if you want to organize a training.



[Teaching About Refugees web page](#)

This page contains a collection of UNHCR teaching materials on refugees, asylum and migration for primary and secondary education, as well as some guidance for teachers working with refugee children in the classroom.



Endnotes

¹ See the UNESCO COVID school closure monitor <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#schoolclosures>.

² See the UNESCO monitor (footnote 1).

³ See among other https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NESET-AR4-2020_Full-Report-1.pdf, figure quoted is gleaned from World Bank data, see <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/621991586463915490/The-COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Supporting-Tertiary-Education-for-Continuity-Adaptation-and-Innovation.pdf>.

⁴ See https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/COVID-19%20progress%20report%20-%202004.10.20%20-%20FINAL.pdf#_ga=2.227420573.18284089571626264054-8337049691623311055.

⁵ See among other UNHCR's global call on <https://www.unhcr.org/coronavirus-covid-19.html>, and UNHCR's specific call to the European Union <https://www.unhcr.org/europeanunion/covid-19/>; Eurostat figures show that, in the period 2014-2020, some 874,000 persons under the age of 18 received refugee status or another protective status in the EU.

⁶ For a global overview of effects on education, see The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/media/111621/file/%20The%20State%20of%20the%20Global%20Education%20Crisis.pdf%20.pdf>, UNESCO <https://en.unesco.org/news/one-year-covid-19-education-disruption-where-do-we-stand> and the UN policy brief https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf - for recent European Union analysis, see <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC121071>, and on higher education specifically, see https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NESET-AR4-2020_Full-Report-1.pdf.

⁷ See <https://en.unesco.org/news/one-year-covid-19-education-disruption-where-do-we-stand>.

⁸ See <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC121071>.

⁹ To date, UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe has carried out a few dozen interviews via video conferencing and gathered additional qualitative data from educators in primary, secondary and higher education participating in UNHCR trainings (covering among other Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Spain and the United Kingdom). This qualitative data gathering will continue throughout 2022. For an analysis on asylum-seeking children in Germany, see https://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2021/08/Empfehlungen-von-UNHCR-und-UNICEF_Einzelseiten_web.pdf.

¹⁰ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC121071>, p. 29; pp. 8-9. Note that the European Commission's definition of migrants includes refugees and asylum-seekers.

¹¹ See also <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/04/30/closing-schools-for-covid-19-does-lifelong-harm-and-widens-inequality>.

¹² See UNESCO's advocacy paper of 30 July 2020 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373992>.

¹³ See examples from, among other, Greece <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/back-school-refugee-children-greece-denied-right-education>, Italy <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/26/world/europe/italy-schools-covid-dropouts.html>, Ireland <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/sign-on-zoom-in-drop-out-covid-19-sparks-fears-over-early-school-leaving-1.4480245>, France <https://www.euronews.com/2020/05/09/lockdown-learning-french-school-closures-will-have-a-catastrophic-effect-on-an-entire-gene>, the United Kingdom <https://www.bbc.com/news/in-pictures-52370968>. Note that there are several definitions of drop-outs and truancy, and criteria to formally consider children truant vary from country to country and region to region.

¹⁴ See among other <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intdossier/immigrant-housing-in-europe-overview> and a recent analysis by UNHCR Germany and the German Committee for UNICEF, see https://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2021/08/Empfehlungen-von-UNHCR-und-UNICEF_Einzelseiten_web.pdf (in German).

¹⁵ One survey showed that around two thirds of teachers had never taught classes on-line before the pandemic <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/surveys/survey-on-online-teaching.htm>. All educators included so far in UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe participatory assessments spoke of lack of technical knowledge of and training for distance learning; the same challenges emerged in the UNHCR/UNICEF report in Germany https://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2021/08/Empfehlungen-von-UNHCR-und-UNICEF_Einzelseiten_web.pdf (in German).

¹⁶ See also chapters 2.2 and 2.3 of the JRC's report.

¹⁷ This was also confirmed by most participants in UNHCR's ongoing participatory assessment on education and the impact of COVID, and by an earlier participatory assessment carried out in March 2020 in six schools in Berlin, Germany.

¹⁸ See <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/4/5e998aca4/displaced-stateless-women-girls-heightened-risk-gender-based-violence-coronavirus.html>.

¹⁹ For an overview on the vastly different age brackets for compulsory education in Europe, see https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurdice/content/compulsory-education-europe-202021_en.

²⁰ This was also mentioned by teachers and migrant and refugee pupils in a participatory assessment carried out by UNHCR in Berlin, Germany in March 2020 and by a UNHCR visit to a technical and vocational training school with preparatory classes for refugees and migrants in Belgium in 2019.

²¹ To name a stark example, opposition to refugee reception classes in local schools even led to hate speech prosecutions of local officials and litigation of parents against establishment of these classes in Greece, see <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/back-school-refugee-children-greece-denied-right-education>.

²² Crul et al. (2019) conclude in a 2019 comparative analysis of primary and secondary schooling of Syrian refugees in six countries that what “many countries consider to be a “refugee problem” is really a problem of institutional arrangements ill prepared for immigrant children. Many countries still seem to handle the issue ad hoc, a problem which needs to be addressed by temporary measures for a limited amount of time”, see <https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40878-018-0110-6#Sec8>.

²³ A 2019 report on integration of asylum-seekers and refugees in higher education in Europe concluded that “the majority of countries have no specific policy approach to integrate asylum seekers and refugees into higher education. Moreover, only a handful of countries have introduced higher education policy measures in response to increased numbers of refugees, and a similarly small number of countries monitor the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into higher education institutions.”, see <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f1bfa322-38cd-11e9-8d04-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-88265520> p.24.

²⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the regulatory framework in the EU, see UNHCR and UNICEF’s joint report on access to education of asylum-seeking children https://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2021/08/Empfehlungen-von-UNHCR-und-UNICEF_Einzelseiten_web.pdf (in German).

²⁵ See, for example, Crul et al. (2019) <https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40878-018-0110-6#Sec8>.

²⁶ See <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

²⁷ See <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention> and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

²⁸ See <https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>.

²⁹ See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>.

³⁰ See <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>.

³¹ See <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>.

³² Only six out of some 38 European education systems analyzed in this Eurydice paper do some form of high-level monitoring of the numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers entering their higher education systems, see <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f1bfa322-38cd-11e9-8d04-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-88265520> pp. 22-23.

³³ See Koehler & Schneider (2019) <https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40878-019-0129-3>.

³⁴ See <https://www.unhcr.org/605a0fb3b>.

³⁵ See https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/1.

³⁶ See https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf (paragraphs 68-69 in particular).

³⁷ Pledges can be tracked and filtered for theme and regional focus on <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/channel/pledges-contributions>; note that a significant proportion of pledges made by European entities are aimed at improving access to education of refugees in emergency operations (cf. in the Middle East and Central Africa).

³⁸ Eurostat figures show that some 409,000 persons under 18 years of age received refugee status or another protective status in Germany in the period 2014-2019. A significant portion of these status holders are subject to compulsory education.

³⁹ For the full report in German, see https://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2021/08/Empfehlungen-von-UNHCR-und-UNICEF_Einzelseiten_web.pdf

⁴⁰ These include the Erstaufnahmeeinrichtungen and the so-called AnkER-Zentren (Ankunfts-, Entscheidungs- und Rückkehr-Einrichtungen).

⁴¹ Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast). For UNHCR’ comments on the Directive, see <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5541d4f24.pdf>.

⁴² See Koehler & Schneider (2019) <https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40878-019-0129-3>.

⁴³ See <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/9/5d774dbb4/unhcr-unicef-iom-urge-european-states-boost-education-refugee-migrant-children.html>.

⁴⁴ Both Turkey and Greece had such systems in place for a while for Syrian children but are now both putting considerable effort in integrating those children in their local school systems. See Crul et al. (2019) <https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40878-018-0110-6> and [https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP\(2019\)11&docLanguage=En](https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP(2019)11&docLanguage=En).

⁴⁵ See [https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP\(2019\)11&docLanguage=En](https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP(2019)11&docLanguage=En) pp. 14-15.

⁴⁶ Almost all the academic literature quoted in this policy brief contains a disclaimer on data limitations.

⁴⁷ Source: Eurostat – figures include all current EU Member States excluding the United Kingdom.

⁴⁸ These recommendation are in line with the *Framework for Reopening Schools* from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, the World Food Programme and UNHCR and more recent post-Covid recovery recommendations by UNICEF, see <https://www.unicef.org/documents/framework-reopening-schools> <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/press-releases/all-schools-europe-central-asia-should-remain-open-and-made-safer-covid-19-say-who>, and <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/no-excuses-keep-schools-open-children-cant-wait>.

REFUGEE EDUCATION IN EUROPE: LEARNING AFTER LOCKDOWN EUROPE

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