Utrecht Network Refugee Staff Week 2018

From 12-15 June 2018 Inclusioon hosted the first edition of the Utrecht Network Refugee Staff Week in Utrecht. The training has been organized in the framework of the Utrecht Network Staff Training weeks, aimed at strengthening and sharing experiences and good practices among member institutions.

The participants.
23 participants coming from 17 universities of The Utrecht Network and LERU universities gathered in Utrecht to discuss the state of their refugee admission programs. Coming from all corners of Europe, these initiatives represent the huge diversity of refugee admission programs existing within the EU. The issues faced by countries situated at the far borders of Europe (e.g. Greece, Malta, Czech Republic, Serbia etc.) differ from the issues of countries located in the center or in the north of the EU where the influx of refugees is more regulated (e.g. Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Finland, Sweden, etc.). The variety of all the programs led to debates and a lively exchange of different points of view.

The program.
Participants got engaged in discussions through lectures, workgroups, a field visit to the asylum seekers’ center at Plan Einstein in Utrecht and attended the Inclusioon conference at the end of the Staff Week. During the first part of the training week the group identified challenges and problems. During the second part of the training they focused more on the practical solutions for welcoming and integrating refugees into academia.

The challenges.
After having introduced their programs through presentations on the first day, participants worked in groups and reflected upon the challenges that they have to deal with at their institutions. Despite the great differences between programs and approaches, the participating universities listed the main common challenges they experience. Here is a short selection:

1. **Admission and academic qualifications.** When evaluating admission requests university staff is facing problems like: great differences in study programs and in the accreditation thereof, insufficient levels of refugees’ academic education, disrupted studies, lack of documents.
   Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s) also experience a lack of flexibility from admission officers, besides they are faced with the absence of specific procedures and regulations for refugees’ applications at their institutions.

2. **Access to information.** Information about study opportunities seems to be lacking or when available, difficult to access because of language barriers, lack of computer facilities or overload of information. There also seems to be little coordination and a mismatch in strategies among institutions in charge of refugees’ welcome programs. This leads to a waste of resources leaving the problems unsolved.

3. **Preparatory programs** unfortunately don’t always grant admission to study programs or offer a too narrow focus. Therefore they do not always prepare refugee students adequately. Cultural aspects don’t always seem to be part of the programs’ curriculum leaving these important issues unaddressed.

4. **Language acquisition** programs don’t always lead to an adequate academic preparation, because they are tailored for a more general target group and don’t always address the needs and requirements of an academic environment. Programs are not always available because they are too expensive, take too long or because of scarce availability of fast-track
courses. Refugee students also have to learn the local language, besides having to master English at an academic level.

5. **Access to the job market.** HEI’s seem to struggle to support refugees in finding access to the job market. Refugees often have to deal with prejudices, lack of relevant networks, cannot prove qualifications, experience high pressure to accept low-profile positions and have difficulties in preparing for job applications (draft their own cv, write motivation letters, conduct job interviews, etc.). The adverse economic circumstances in some of the participating countries make participation on the job market a difficult goal to achieve.

**Action plans.**
On the third day participants worked on interventions and action plans based on the challenges identified the day before. They particularly focused on:

1. **More flexibility regarding admission procedures and qualifications’ assessment.** The creation of a common framework and guidelines for exceptions and exemptions would help HEI’s to deal with nonconforming admission requests, relieving admission officers from having to take decisions they are not allowed to take and resulting therefore in a more flexible, efficient and fair decision-making process. Besides, HEI’s should also reflect upon the meaning of the concepts ‘qualifications’ and ‘competencies’ applied to the refugee students’ situation and what exactly HEI’s want or should test when assessing admission requests.

2. **Better access to information about university study programs.** Lots can still be done in order to improve HEI’s communication strategies and platforms’ efficiency to provide the right information to the right audience. A more personal- and less standardized approach in reaching out to refugee students would be more desirable and effective. Refugee students are overall less familiar with digitalized environments and prefer face-to-face contact upon email contact. Furthermore, a better coordination among stakeholders and education providers would prevent an overload of information, improve its quality and access to it.

3. **Increase employability.** HEI’s could contribute to bridging the gap to the labor market with the creation and support of internship programs. Such programs would also enormously benefit from the involvement of the HEI’s career services’ departments.

4. **Preparatory language programs** should be offered for both the local and the English language. Language classes organized by volunteers should receive more funding, support and recognition. The validity of their work should be more valued by accreditation authorities and admission should be guaranteed when criteria are met.

**Evaluations.**
Participants evaluated the week as ‘inspiring’, ‘illuminating’ and ‘informative’. The quality of the content was considered “very high” and the issues addressed were found “interesting and relevant”. Lectures have been rated as “very motivating” and “speakers really inspiring”. All participants found the overall organization “excellent” and all unanimously agreed that their expectations have been met.

**Inclusion Conference 2018**
During the last afternoon of the Staff Week, refugee students from the Inclusion program literally took the stage during the Inclusion conference “The road to integration through higher education”. They talked about their expectations, experiences and struggles as students at Utrecht University. The students also reflected on the importance of education and its role in improving their prospects for successful integration in Dutch society.
Second edition in 2019?
The 2018 edition of the Refugee Staff Week was a great success and marked the first step in assessing each other’s policies and programs. All participants expressed the desire to organize a follow up meeting in 2019 to see how the integration of refugees into higher education progresses. The refugees’ issue is transitioning into a different phase where issues such as integration and participation in society will play a major role. How will HEI’s respond to these pressing challenges? What role are they willing to play in the future? These are questions that could be addressed during the second edition.

The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUT) has expressed the preliminary intention to organize the second edition of the Refugee Staff Week. Discussions at AUT are under way to verify the feasibility of the plan which has to be submitted to the Utrecht Network before 1st November for final approval. AUT has a leading position in Greece in terms of refugee welcome programs. In addition, the AUT coordinates the EU-funded SUCRE program ‘Supporting University Community pathways for Refugees-migrants” together with the University of Cologne and with the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.