Think Tank briefing paper:

the role of Public Research Universities in the inclusion of Refugees in Higher Education

Coordinated by the Media Governance Lab, University of Vienna, Austria and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Thessaloniki and Vienna, June 2021

Refugee Education Initiatives:

Open Learning Initiative OLIve Programs Thessaloniki and Vienna

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Focus on the Public Research University

When considering the educational needs of people of refugee status and in conditions of forced migration, the public debate stops short of addressing the spectrum of Higher Education availability for these populations. On the one hand, policy focus is placed largely on addressing the needs for basic education, as a matter of social policy priority and as a matter of human right. This task is invariably taken on by the public sector and the state, where public basic education is provided for children and minors, as well as occasionally as necessary to all those who need to complete it. The right to education is the right of every child and these efforts need to remain focal points of public policies of integration and inclusion, as well as policies of social mobility and further of democratic political stability and justice. In addition to the efforts of integrating education as a cornerstone of belonging and prosperity for everyone in society, and in particular for those considered 'outsiders', attention is put in recent years to the role of Higher Education in enabling the development of higher skills and levels of knowledge among refugee populations, as a vehicle for inclusion, welfare and belonging. Higher Education plays an important role for those social groups whose aspirations, interest and qualifications were interrupted and cut short by historical events which forced them to seek refuge 'some place else'. Given that in the European context, it is the predominantly the public education sector from kindergarten to Doctorate education that shapes the field of knowledge and addresses educational and developmental needs of societies, it is important to pay special attention to the role of the Public University as a core historical European institution in supporting refugees in their host, transition or other new home countries to re/assume a sense of 'normal' personal and communal development.

The Refugees Education Initiative, right from its inception in 2016, but also specifically in its 2019-2021 phase through the Open Learning Initiatives programs, has relied significantly on the presence of large historical public research universities. It is important to note that public universities entail historically public investment and a public good service mission, are regulated by the State and are assessed by peers and other professional bodies in terms of labor laws, quality of teaching and research as well as the completion of their Third Mission. The latter concerns the direct relation of university and society

through the form of educational transfer, skills and technology or knowledge transfer but also activities and programs that aim to foster evidence based and information, especially knowledge derived from scientific and scholarly research and which can inform public policy for the benefit of society.

The University of Vienna, founded in 1365 as the oldest German speaking University in the world and The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, founded in 1925, have over 90000 and 80000 students respectively, 9000 and 4000 of which are at a doctorate level, also respectively. The two universities play an important role not only in their local and national societies, but also in European societies and globally through the research and international exchanges of their staff, students and scholarly work. The Think Tank meeting and subsequent paper aims at providing a more detailed account and evaluation of the experience of REIs and attempt to provide points of reflection and policy recommendations for more generally the role of Public Research Universities in further addressing the societal need of supporting and making most of refugees' skills development in Europe.

Specific features of public universities regarding refugee education

Universities have a duty to hark the social needs. Public universities therefore act as pioneers, most often than not under financial and resource pressures, in an effort to advance a new participatory model of paedagogy that not only treats education as a fundamental human right but also paths the way for policy dialogue, knowledge sharing and capacity building for those in need. Prerequisite for the success of this integration initiative is the preparation for future studies or a relevant career while undertaking language training and building cultural competencies.

Due to the fact that both the University of Thessaloniki and the University of Vienna are funded from public budgets and are under forms of central responsibility and supervision by the relevant ministries, there are certain constraints regarding their ability to design autonomous programs or to address admission questions, such as language level, and so to facilitate refugees' participation in higher national education. In that respect, the desired progress of and for REIs participants who could have entered degree level study under more flexible administrative requirements has been met with challenges and hurdles. Nevertheless, both universities have facilitated the possibilities of auditioning courses, attending events, pursuing MA studies where flexibility in decision-making is broader, and have been welcome by student and inter-university and inter-faculty societies and groups which pursued social and university related activities of integration and inclusion. The Universities offered skills programs, support programs and academic non-degree programs for REIs participants as well as tutoring and informational support in how to enter Higher Education. Importantly, the programs in both universities offered political education and advocacy skills in the field of knowledge about the political systems, human and civil rights and liberties, labor rights, health and gender and sexuality education and equality. Further, it is crucial to highlight that despite any shortcomings deriving from slow institutional cultures and administrative environments, the Universities of Vienna and Thessaloniki provided support in *safe environments* throughout.

Our experience shows that institutional change takes time, however both flexibility and adaptability on behalf of teaching and research staff are present, along with a multidisciplinary paedagogical and research approach, the true essence of a University Educational environment. Moreover, it should be noted that the public character of our universities guarantees that higher education is a public good- fully supported by the state and no discrimination should take place between students.

By taking a critical look at what has been helpful and what has proven challenging, and responding flexibly, we may be able to improve the lot of thousands of students and colleagues in higher education whose lives and careers are in danger, through no fault of their own.

Lessons learned for the University, its staff and the REIs participants

This project has been a valuable learning opportunity for all its participants, the university staff and the university itself. It has stimulated widening circles of discussion, awareness, and action. Those who have been involved in the project have learned many valuable lessons that could be useful in other contexts where public universities are thinking of undertaking similar efforts.

- OLIve programs succeeded in creating a safe and cooperative environment among diverse audiences in the public Universities of Thessaloniki and Vienna.
- They also serve a psychosocial purpose by supporting refugees in regaining a sense of value and self-confidence and by being addressed as students and not as refugees.
- The COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to further draw on the e-learning, by exploring the potential of forming the so-called "blended learning" in which students gather as a learning community in one resource center, but learn online, with their studies supported by provision of laptops, a local facilitator and visiting lecturers, as well as academics online.
- The pandemic addressed by specific public policy measures of social i.e. physical distancing showcased unintentionally the power and weaknesses of online learning where social inequalities became the reasons of inclusion and exclusion from online learning. Here the public university utilized its resources to maximum degree through online platforms, hybrid lesson formats, asynchronous and synchronous teaching and learning and flexibility in technological platforms adjusting to the capabilities of OLIve students.
- Networking with the NGOs in the sector of asylum and refugee support has been essential for the dissemination of information about the programs, so as to reach all the specific and marginalized target groups.
- The certification of the programs is an area universities should turn their focus on in order to both provide stronger motivation and quality assurance but also to provide a sense of and formal recognition of the efforts of university staff.
- Preparation of instructors in trauma management and intercultural communication is also an issue a program such as this should further develop and devote more time and effort.
- OLIve is a program which offered not only academic knowledge but also mentoring and pastoral support.

Recommendations

Regarding content and pedagogy:

- Design classes and use pedagogical tools that are engaging and awaken enthusiasm.
- Start from the level of education and knowledge of the student building up slowly to more demanding levels.

- Cover short material "bites" and make sure that each learning area and each objective is complete and covered within the each session because students may not be able to attend the following/next session.
- Vocabulary and language should be accessible to be comprehensible. The aim is to encourage further learning.
- Human Rights and women rights as well as equality and gender issues, anti-discrimination should be offered as core and obligatory modules in all programs.
- Information about the social support system, ie. the respective available social services and counselling (NGOs) especially for migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, youth, men and women should be actively introduced to all the students on such programs.
- Former OLIve students can be the future instructors bridging cultural gaps and showing more empathy.
- -Universities should focus on designing short and tighter courses.
- Courses should be spread throughout the week and not on a single day.
- Women should be offered the opportunity for separately classes, in addition to the main classes, in order to encourage more free participation of women and in order for women to utilize such spaces as safe training public participation grounds, if they so wish.

For universities, authorities and state

- Programs such as OLIve necessitate low-threshold application procedures and admission criteria, so that a wider range of refugees, asylum seekers or third country nationals are able to apply.
- The issue of education has a significant influence on the development process and access to education is absolutely a fundamental human right.
- Real development calls for improved educational opportunities and access for all citizens without any discrimination.
- Facilitate forms of certification for the learning taking place in bridging programs.
- Provide further testimony of participation of students as this is often useful as proof of integration for authorities.
- Recognize work of staff on these programs vis a vis their existing workload, especially of staff faculty members. OLIve programs are not 'seminars' or 'workshops' but constitute full programs with their own curricula, syllabi, instructors, assessment and progression methods and feedback processes, just like formal degree programmes.

Refugee Education Initiatives 2

Think Tank Meeting

Organized by Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the University of Vienna via Zoom

Monday 17 May, 2021

Title: The role of Public Universities as leaders in sustainable Higher Education for Vulnerable Groups/ The case of OLIve
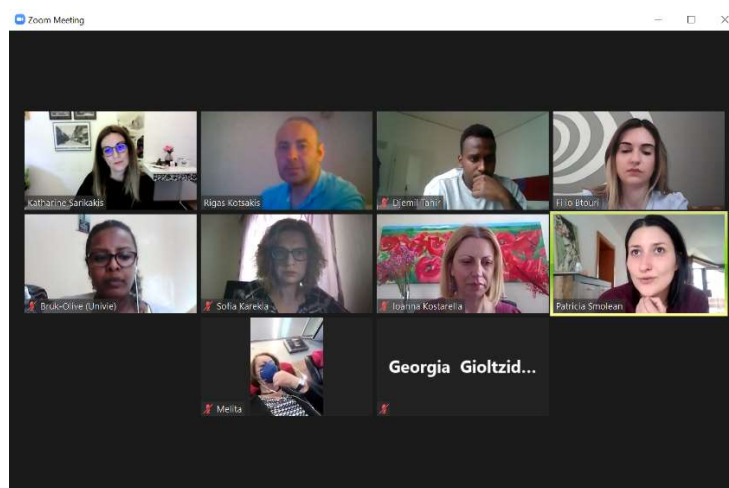

Description

The University of Thessaloniki and the University of Vienna organized a one-off think tank meeting to discuss policy recommendations for public universities in the field of refugees and Higher Education and as a closing stock-taking event from REIS2.

Our intention has been to provide a synopsis with recommendations that will be helpful to the public universities in Europe and elsewhere taking into account their modus operandi and challenges. The meeting took place on Monday 17 May 2021 at 10am CET via Zoom. Participants to this meeting were the director of the Rei2 program in Vienna, the manager of the Rei2 program in Thessaloniki, lecturers, former participants, and a journalist and former spokesperson at the UNHCR.

Agenda

1. Reflections on the experiences, challenges and outcomes

2. Recommendations for universities, authorities and state

Participants: Katharine Sarikakis, Director OLIve UniVie, Ioanna Kostarella, Manager OLIve AuTh, Sophia Karekla, admin assistant OLIve AuTh, Bruktwait Kassa, instructor UniVie, Georgia Gioltzidou, instructor AuTh, Djemil Tahir, former participant UniVie, Rania Konsta, instructor AuTh, Rigas Kotsakis, instructor AuTh, Patricia Smolean, instructor Univie, Filio Mptouri, instructor AuTh, Melita Sunjic, member of the Advisory Board.

The outcomes of the think-tank meeting can be summarized in the following thematic sections:

* **INFORMATION & APPLICATION**: Such promising programmes like OLIVE necessitate low-threshold application procedures and admission criteria, so that a wider range of refugees, asylum seekers or 3rd country nationals are able to apply. Moreover, networking with the NGOs in the sector of asylum and refugee support is essential for the dissemination of information about the programme to reach all the specific and marginalized target groups.

* **ADDITIONAL OFFERINGS**: Information about the social support system, ie. the respective available social services and counselling (NGOs) especially for migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, youth, men and women should be actively introduced to all the students of such programmes.

* **SEPARATION OF THE PROGRAMS FOR CREATIVE SOFT SKILLS AND FOR STRICT ACADEMIC AMBITIONS:** Normally the illiterate people of refugee status receive a lot of support in education and learning new professions, but the high educated ones are mostly left behind, which can lead to frustration, depression etc. The OLIve program closes the gap, it has a psychosocial function while giving people their value and self-confidence back but also tries to be a highly professional academic program. We have concluded that it is of advantage if the REi program is divided into a program which helps in terms of integration and fulfils more the psychosocial component while fostering the creative and soft skills and a second program which enhances the academic path, where participants learn methods and come back to the academic world. This will lead to more commitment from side of the participants. OLIve UP is rather the academic program. OLIve Women and Youth are two new programs, which create a space for people to get in contact to University, so rather the soft approach.

* **OLIVE WOMEN**: After opening this program, female participants which were before in mixed groups felt more freely to talk in a separate space. Since many female participants are also family caregivers the program should be held on weekdays.

* **ADVOCACY LABS**: Human & Women Rights as well as Equality and Gender Issues, Anti-discrimination should be offered as basic and obligatory modules in all programmes.

* **CREATIVE SKILLS LABS**: We felt the necessity to include several creative skills workshops (creative writing, blogging, visual storytelling, production of podcasts) since some migrants and asylum seekers feel a high necessity in sharing their personal stories. We created this space for them to creatively open up without any kind of judgement. This led to a stronger bond with the participants. The tangible frame for their work, the visible results created also a bridge between the students with non- and traditional background at the university.

* **INSTRUCTORS:** OLIve instructors should receive, before teaching people with refugee status, pre-sessions by professional trainers on how to deal with people with traumatas. The program also gains added value and sustainability, if former participants are engaged as future instructors.

* **SPACE AND TIME:** The OLIve program should take place during the working hours of a university for several reasons: the infrastructure, the visibility of the participants for students with traditional background, which is a small step towards inclusion, but also of positive aspect for the university because alone the exchange between these two groups of students can be of great impact.

* **IT-Tools:** The program should have computer-based tools at its disposal, which are necessary for students to learn, to practice the languages, to take the IT knowledge to a higher level.

* **CERTIFICATIONS AND OTHER POLICY ASPECTS:** At the moment the program is not able to give any official certifications besides of the language courses because of the rigid university structures.

Certifications are for the course participants very important for entering the job-market and for pursuing further higher education. Furthermore, asylum seekers face in Austria the problem that authorities stop the funds when they enter higher education. This has to be changed and the Rei2 program does at the moment pioneer work and advocates already on these policy aspects.