

Welcoming Refugee, Migrant and International Students

An illustrated training booklet
for academic and professional
services staff working
with refugee, migrant and
international students, as well
as student allies...



Students from refugee, migrant and international backgrounds form an important and valued part of our diverse student community. They are a rich and multifaceted addition to our universities and their inclusion helps to put our institutions on the global map. However, there are particular challenges and opportunities in integrating these students into university life.



This booklet seeks to offer practical guidance on how to welcome them. It has been compiled based on primary research with staff and student experts with experience across five European universities who are part of the **EuniWell European University for Well-being**. It features six themes facing refugee, migrant and international students, illustrating examples of their lived experiences and best and worst practices. All content is based on direct student experiences in a spirit of co-production.

This illustrated training booklet will be of use to academic and professional services staff working with refugee, migrant and international students, as well as to student allies wishing to understand more about the experiences of their peers and how they can best support them to feel welcome in our universities.





Theme 1: Accessibility and Speed of Access to Information

Lived experience:

* Often international and refugee students **can't find accessible information that's tailored to their experiences.**

* Bureaucratic processes can be very **slow.**

"I spent a year finding the information." (Refugee student)

"I have seen a lot of friends of mine who have applied for a student visa. They have been given an appointment after nine months... And after nine months, they will be given a document which will expire in just one or two months. This affects the mental health of the student."

* Bureaucratic processes can be very **complicated** to understand especially for those seeking scholarships.

"Universities should simplify the procedures for refugee students. We already have so much paperwork going on with our asylum cases." (Refugee student)

* University **websites are hard to navigate;**

* Universities can use **jargon and academic language** that is not easy to understand.

"...you arrive here and then you are let go and you don't know where to find things, you don't know how to speak well." (International student)

* Universities may **lack a central hub for information.**

* Differing immigration statuses across European countries can make it **hard for students to find information specific to their exact status.**

* Students are **passed around various university administrative offices** – no one seems to have the right information.



"You feel like a number." (International student)

* Students may require **specialised assistance** from legal professionals depending on their immigration status.

* The situation of asylum seeker students may change during their studies requiring additional follow-on assistance once they have begun their studies.

* Students should feel reassured the university has their back and can direct them to appropriate services locally.

Best practices:

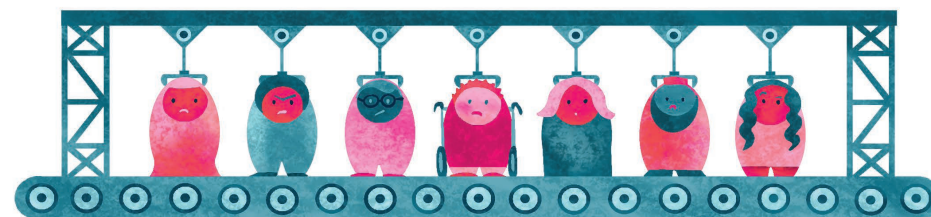
* The university has a **focal point of contact** for international and refugee

students which is able to direct them to appropriate information and provide **wrap-around support.**

The Meeting Point at Leiden University is a drop-in meeting place to help students find their way in the Netherlands and in the university. It offers a welcoming space to provide assistance for refugee students, first-generation students, and students from Suriname and the Caribbean region of The Netherlands. Support offered includes language tuition, mentoring and a one stop practical information shop for navigating the university including admissions procedures, study choices, finances and careers advice.

* **Information is presented in an accessible way** and clearly disaggregated by different types of immigrant student status.

* **Ongoing support is provided by legal professionals** for students whose immigration status changes, on behalf of the university or by external services to whom they are referred. This includes asylum seeker students who may gain refugee status or become refused asylum seekers during their studies.



Theme 2: Having Someone to Guide and Listen

Lived experience:

* Without a **focal point of support**, international and refugee students find themselves adrift.

"We face more difficulties than other students here, who often come with scholarships or financial support."

(Refugee student)

* It can be difficult to know who to turn to. Administrative staff help with paperwork, academic staff help with academic affairs, welfare helps with mental health but some issues span these areas and **more joined up support is required**.

* University welfare services are often **ill equipped to have the intercultural understanding and skills** necessary for support.

* International and refugee students face a specific **range of challenges which require knowledge of their situation** that many university staff and fellow students do not have.

* International and refugee students want to feel just **as important and valued** as other students.



"Sometimes international students need someone to talk to. They just want to be heard even when they know that university staff cannot solve all their problems" (Academic staff)

An asylum seeker is studying French and because of the conditions of their paperwork they cannot go on their year abroad. 'What do you mean you can't go abroad? Just get a passport?' replies an academic who does not understand they cannot travel while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim.

* Students reach out for support and are sometimes met with a wall of **misunderstanding**.

* An asylum seeker student goes to welfare and is assigned a counselor. When she reveals she is having panic attacks at the prospect of being sent back to Sudan the counselor is dismissive and says, 'that won't happen, focus on the now.' She feels dismissed and unseen.

Best practices:

* Students are assigned a **personal tutor, lecturer, facilitator, mentor or buddy who has training** in supporting international and/or refugee students.

"We had a meeting among refugee students with some staff and it was very good for us because we got to talk about our history and people listened." (Refugee student)

* Staff and students have **the opportunity to take training** on supporting international and/or refugee students and gain some form of accreditation as an 'ally'.

"When I arrived someone very nice from the Student Union was nice to me, she guided me and felt my heart." (International student)

* There is a specific role for mentors who understand the experiences of asylum seeker and refugee students. **Culturally appropriate welfare support** should be made available to these groups. This includes an understanding of the trauma and ongoing difficulties; unresolved asylum claims, periods of long waiting, fear for family members back home, unresolved trauma from the journey and racism in their new country.

Example: a student finds out her father has been detained to be deported. She doesn't know who to talk to at first but confides in her academic tutor who works with her to find support through the university counseling system. She also helps her to get an extension on her dissertation. She stresses that she cannot understand what it must be like for her but she is sympathetic and listens.



Theme 3: Difficulties with Language



Lived experience:

- * Language problems affect many areas in life – making friends, obtaining information, finding a job, etc.
- * It can be hard to focus on studying while learning a new language.

"Of course, the language is the first obstacle." (Refugee student)

- * Fellow students or teachers may **speak too quickly and not be sympathetic**.
- * Native peers may use **slang** that is hard to understand.
- * Language problems can be especially difficult when **working 1:1 with academic supervisors**.
- * Students may feel **embarrassed** to explain they don't understand.
- * Students may face **micro racism** or **aggression** when they have communication problems.

"Sometimes the people in the offices, they are not patient when they see that we don't speak well, they sometimes don't give the right answers." (International student)

- * International and refugee students can feel **excluded from the popular culture** of their peers and the slang they use.

"I try to talk to British classmates, but I find it very challenging. British people speak really fast and what I know and what they know (common interests) can differ greatly." (International student)



Best practices:

- * Bespoke language programmes.

The Birmingham International Academy runs special academic language programs and provides extra support to international students. It's a central hub where they can go for support explaining assignments and working in the new language.

- * Tutors who use **accessible language and subtitles** at zoom events.
- * Fellow students who **support their peers learning the new language**.

"I started to integrate when I met other students, both international and national... I also started studying the native language and reached a higher level and now I feel a bit more confident." (Refugee student)

"One tutor explained to me that speaking another language was also a strength as I could bring literature from my country into my dissertation and do a comparative study. This felt really good to see that knowledge valued rather than seen as an obstacle." (International student)



Theme 4: Lack of Interaction with National Students

Lived experience:

- * International students can become **segregated** into groups by language or cultural background.

"...it turned out that there aren't many national students on my course, and international and national students don't blend or talk to one another. I am very interested in sharing culture with local students, and I think being able to get to know them in informal small group settings would be very helpful." (International student)

"In the classroom, British and international students do not sit together." (International student)

- * Home students may not make **efforts** to talk to international students or invite them to local events.

"Sometimes it feels like there are two **bubbles on campus.**" (International student)

"(We) are lacking joint activities with **local students.**" (International student)

- * Some staff and students may have **racist or preconceived ideas** about students from certain backgrounds.

Example: a professor assumes a student will have poor English because they are Chinese and speaks very slowly. The student responds fluently, and the professor is surprised.

- * In group work international students are segregated into groups by nationality **and not encouraged to mix** with national students.

- * Often international students may want to learn about the local culture and make local friends **but feel shy.**

Best practices:

- * International students are encouraged to **mix with home students through group work in the classroom.**

- * International student societies work with other student societies to **host joint events.**

- * Home students are friendly and welcoming to international and refugee students and recognize they may need help settling in. They **invite them to local events and parties.**

- * Professors and university staff **see each student as an individual** and refrain from making generalizations based on their background.



Theme 5: Being Able to Build Networks and Make Friends

Lived experience:

* Often international and refugee students arrive at their new university **without established networks and friends.**

* Without informal networks it can be **hard to access certain information** such as where to go for certain services.

"For me it sounds silly but a real issue is I needed to know where I could go to get my braids redone. In the end I reached out to the university Afro-Caribbean society and asked a girl with similar hair who directed me to a local hair salon off campus." (International student)

* International and refugee students can feel **overwhelmed and lonely.**

* They may **not be familiar with common cultural norms** for greeting people and making new friends.

"In order not to do anything stupid, I preferred not to talk, not to do something, I preferred to play it safe." (International student)

* The sense of social isolation they feel within the university can extend to the wider community context where they have **no pre-existing networks.**

"I joined a church and met lots of people through that. It was nice to also have a community of friends outside of the university to learn about the new society." (International student)

* The campus can feel like a **segregated space.**

"Having a range of international food outlets on campus and an international food fair helps to feel more integrated." (International student)



Best practices:

* **Student societies and clubs** can be a great way to socialize and meet new people with common interests.

"I feel like being part of the athletics team made me feel like more than a 'refugee student'. I proudly wore the university sweatshirt and felt like I belonged. I also won a 5km race and felt proud representing my university." (Refugee student)

* The university can also **host events that promote socialising** among new students, including diverse events, for example, for those who do not consume alcohol or who eat halal food.

"It's good to get to know other refugee students who may be going through similar things. Not everyone finds it easy to share their stories. However, a shared space would be really helpful." (Refugee student)

"I went to the University LGBTQ Pride celebration which was a great experience." (International student)

* Students who are more familiar with the place can reach out to international and refugee students to **talk or to invite them to social events.**

"The first time I was invited for a drink after class I was surprised how much my classmates drank but they teased me in a supportive way that I didn't have to keep up with them! I can only drink one pint and I'm not used to social drinking like this where I come from but it meant so much to be invited." (International student)

* Universities can provide students with resources letting them know about **communities of belonging outside the university** such as NGO's or sports or arts spaces.

"Our university distributes a welcome pack for international students which has a directory of local services including for things like where to go for certain types of food from our countries as well as practical things like medical help." (International student)



Theme 6: Promoting Empathy

Lived experience:

* Often staff and students may not appreciate the **difficult circumstances** refugee and international students face in their personal lives.

"When we read the news it's not just something happening to other people. We worry about our friends and family back home constantly and feel guilty sometimes that we are the lucky ones who were able to escape." (Refugee student)

"While I was teaching my module, there were some students who were challenging. They were consistently late with assignments and arrived late to every lecture. I asked them, 'Is everything OK?' One girl, from Pakistan, explained, '...I have to take my little brother to a special school in the morning.' I had no idea. Once I understood her situation, I ceased to feel irritated and became very supportive. Over the years, I have learned that many of my students, particularly those from minority backgrounds, face far more challenges than other students who appear to be perfect students."

(Academic)

* The specific circumstances of students going through the asylum system are often poorly understood including long delays and periods of uncertainty when the student is scared about their future. They may not have the right paperwork (ie. showing proof of previous qualifications) because they were forced to flee with nothing.

"As an asylum seeker I was refused asylum but then I had the chance to appeal. Some of my tutors wrote letters of support and I have a friend I met through my course who came to my asylum appeal to speak as a witness and that meant so much to me." (Refugee student)

* Students may feel that, because of their foreign status, their stay in the country is time limited and find it **hard to imagine a professional future**.

* International students and refugee students can be seen as a homogenous group without people realizing they have **individual strengths and needs**.

Best practices:

* Universities can host public events to show solidarity with refugees and to celebrate the diversity of their student body.



"Our university has a society that supports refugees and they held a whole week of events for Refugee Week to show solidarity and increase visibility of refugee students on campus and the diversity of our students." (Refugee student)

* Universities can recognize that students may not have evidence of prior qualifications and organize alternative ways of assessing their suitability for a particular course such as an interview.

* It is important to recognize that support needs differ across age. The needs of a mature student who is 34 will be very different to those of a 19 year old.



Welcome Re-Course is a collaborative project by a network of researchers, students and teachers across several European Universities who are part of EUniWell, the European University for Well-being. We inform inclusive research, pedagogy and practice around the welcome and inclusion of students from refugee, migrant and international backgrounds, supporting EUniWell's core mission to improve well-being within universities and society.

For more information on EUniWell, please see our website:
www.euniwell.eu

This training resource is available in English, French, German, Swedish, Italian and Spanish. It is available for download in all featured languages at the following website:
www.euniwell.eu

