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RICERCHE

L'accoglienza dei rifugiati all'Università di Bologna. Facilitazioni procedurali canalizzate come modello di accoglienza.

The reception process of refugee students at the University of Bologna. Funnelled procedural facilitations as a reception model.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO
Lo studio esamina il processo di accoglienza all'Università di Bologna per studentə con un passato di migrazione forzata, analizzando criticamente le iniziative volte a creare una base di conoscenza condivisa utile per futuri sviluppi e il confronto con altre università. Utilizzando il metodo della Grounded Theory, sono state condotte sei interviste con sette informatori chiave e un'osservazione sul campo. L'analisi rivela che l'Università adotta diverse procedure amministrative per semplificare la burocrazia e permettere agli studentə di iscriversi a corsi di laurea o singole attività. Tuttavia, la diversificazione delle procedure, "Facilitazioni procedurali canalizzate" sovraccarica il personale e limita lo sviluppo di nuove iniziative. Concludiamo che le iniziative dell'Università di Bologna per l'inclusione degli studentə con un passato di migrazione forzata rappresentano un processo di ammissione più che di accoglienza, poiché il supporto strutturato si limita alla fase di candidatura.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT
The study examines the structure of the reception process implemented at the University of Bologna for students with a history of forced migration. It critically analyzes existing initiatives to create a shared knowledge base for future development and comparison with other universities. Using Grounded Theory method, six interviews with seven key informants and one field observation were conducted. The analysis shows that the University employs various administrative procedures to simplify bureaucracy, enabling students to enroll in full degrees or individual courses. However, this procedural complexity, termed "Funnelled procedural facilitations", leads to staff overload limiting the capacity for further initiatives. In conclusion, we argue that the initiatives at the University of Bologna to promote the inclusion of students with a history of forced migration represent an admission rather than a reception process, as structured support is limited to the application phase.

Introduction. An emerging field of research

Events in recent years have exacerbated the interconnectedness of the world we live in and the fragility of human beings in the face of natural disasters and conflicts.

The Covid 19 pandemic and its yet to be known consequences, the climate disasters, the effects of military escalations (in Ecuador, in the Red Sea, in the Gaza strip some recent

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examples) and the continuing prospect of world economic collapse (De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2022) are reshaping the world geopolitical order and human mobility. Parallel to that, the growing acceptance of nationalist and extremist political parties (and their repressive policies towards minorities) contribute to fostering fear, trampling human rights and creating societies that distinguish among "us" and the "others".

In this paper we examine the initiatives implemented by the University of Bologna addressed to students with forced migration background. As a first step, a historical excursus through UN documents that have increasingly drawn attention to the issue of university education for students with a forced migration background is provided. This first phase of analysis shows how this issue has recently come to the fore as a result of the increasing and protracted nature of conflicts. Suffice it to say that the UNHCR has calculated that the number of displaced people increased by 60 million between 2013 and 2023.

Secondly, a review of the literature on refugee education is proposed, showing that much of it still focuses on the difficulties of access and the benefits of such participation. However, a body of literature is emerging that questions the student experience and critically analyses the work of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Finally, the results of a study on the reception process of students with a history of forced migration at the University of Bologna are presented. Over the years, the University of Bologna has shown itself to be at the forefront and, in some cases, a true pioneer in this field, facilitating access and providing support services since 2015. From that moment, a series of initiatives have been implemented in collaboration with the Regional Unit for the Right to Study (ER.GO), a multi-year collaboration that has enabled both the dedicated university and ER.GO staff to acquire technical and human skills of absolute value. However, we argue that the picture that emerges from the analysis of the data collected with key informants reflects more an admission process than a real reception. Specifically, *in itinere* support and job placement initiatives appear to be uniformly designed for the entire student body, without adequately addressing the distinct needs and challenges faced by students with a forced migration background.

According to United Nation High Commissionaire for Refugees – UNHCR, worldwide more than 117 million people are forced to live far from their homes, cities and nations because of war, persecution and climate change. 117 million displaced people means 1 in 69 people, of whom more than 31 million have been granted international protection under UNHCR mandate, almost 7 million have applied for it and almost 6 million have been recognised refugees under UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East - UNRWA mandate (UNHCR, 2024). The distribution and reception of refugees and displaced people is a natural consequence and an urgent challenge, given the growing scale of the phenomenon and the fact that the burden of reception is not evenly distributed and low- and middle-income regions continue to bear a disproportionate responsibility (UNHCR, 2022).

Between 2015 and 2016, there was a marked increase in the number of displaced persons, particularly as Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans sought refuge from protracted conflicts, leading to a significant influx at the borders of the "Global North". This surge

has prompted attention from both civil society and the international political community, with the issue of displaced persons becoming a central focus of the United Nations' mandate since 2016.

Fundamental steps in this process were the "*New York Declarations for Refugees and Migrants*" (UN, 2016), which emphasised the need to adopt long-term solutions and a multistakeholder approach, and the "*Global Compact on Refugees*" (UN, 2018), which had the main goal to ease the pressure to low- and middle-income countries hosting refugees and emphasised the need to ensure that complementary pathways (safe and legal pathways to access to third countries including family reunification, humanitarian visas, private and community sponsorship, educational pathways, and others) are made available in a more systematic and sustainable way (UN, 2018 p. 38).

Both documents also acknowledged the powerful role that education at all levels plays in the context of displacement. Still, the *Global Compact on Refugees* went further asking for the establishment of a *Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network* (established in 2019) and a more comprehensive range of educational opportunities for refugees (including women and girls) through scholarships and student visas (UN, 2018).

However, these documents were not the first attempts to raise awareness on the issue of refugee education. Indeed, UNHCR (2012) published the *Refugee Education Strategy 12-16*, a document that, for the first time, recognised education as a key component of UNHCR's mandate. It set out targets and indicators to enhance access of the refugee population at all levels of education and Goal 4 aimed to improve access to higher education opportunities through the provision of scholarships, open access and accredited e-learning courses (UNHCR, 2012).

These key documents were followed by other UN publications, including *The Global Education Monitoring Report 2019. Migration, Displacement and Education: Building bridges not walls* (UNESCO, 2018), which consider formal education a key resource for ensuring, facilitating and supporting the integration and inclusion of young migrants within host societies and the *Refugee Education 2030: a strategy for refugee inclusion* (UNHCR, 2019), which set the goal of reaching the 15% of refugee population enrolled in university in 2030. All these crucial documents, declarations and strategies contributed to shed light on the issue of refugees in higher education, driven in part by the attempt to achieve SDG 4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Simultaneously, the breadth of academic publications in this field has expanded, driven by the commitment and passion of scholars such as Dryden-Peterson (2010, 2011, 2016) and Linda Morrice (2007, 2009, 2013), among others, along with their research teams and colleagues. Their critical engagement has shifted the emphasis from the numbers to the lived experiences of individuals, contributing to the development of a field of research that not only explores how to enhance access to higher education but also examines the living conditions and real experiences of those benefiting from these interventions.

Refugee and Higher Education

The formal definition of a "refugee" is set out in the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Geneva Convention), which defines a him/her as a person who has a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (Art 2). This definition contrasts with that of "asylum seeker", which refers to a person who has applied for international protection but whose application is still pending.

Despite this and other legal distinctions, the field of research that can be defined as refugee education, often "*refer(s) to all refugee, asylum seeker, returnee and stateless children and youth and their hosting communities, including the internally displaced*" (UNHCR, 2019). Thus, in this study, we refer to "refugee students", as otherwise specified, as students who have experienced forced international migration, going beyond the legal framework provided by the 1951 Geneva Convention.

While the research on refugee education in primary and secondary school has a rather solid tradition (see UNHCR 1994; Crisp et al 2001; Sommers, 2001), the academic focus on investigating aspects of tertiary education for refugees is relatively recent (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; UNESCO, 2018). International research before 2016 mostly focused on English-speaking countries and on access to primary and secondary education (Berg, 2018), it represented isolated and sporadic responses to emergencies (Sherab & Kirk, 2016) and only recently it gained more coordination. In this scenario, scholars have largely focused on reducing barriers to wide access and the positive effects that such participation can have (Berg, 2018; Berg, 2023), while less is known about the experiences of refugee students in higher education (Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

At the European level, a significant milestone is the launch of the Bologna Process (1999). The agreement aimed to build the European Higher Education Area (EHAE) based on shared principles such as academic freedom and institutional autonomy, public accountability, free mobility of teachers and students and openness to collaborations with educational systems worldwide. In order to make the EHAE concrete, over the years, numerous ministerial meetings took place resulting in declarations. These include the London Communiqué (2007), which reaffirms the principle that "*students should be able to complete their studies without obstacles arising from their social and economic conditions*" (EHEA, 2007, p. 5), and the Yerevan Communiqué (2015), which reaffirms the willingness and commitment to ensure "*mobility opportunities for students and teachers in areas of conflict*" (EHEA, 2015, p. 3).

Despite this commitment and the increasing attention worldwide, according to UNHCR (2023) the refugee population with access to higher education is only 7%. This is a significant increase from 2019, when it was 1%, but still not enough if it is compared to the global average for the non-refugee population, which stands at 40%. Taking into consideration that the data can vary depending on the context, it is evident that a huge effort still must be made to face a significant social justice issue.

As previously mentioned, many scholars in the last decade focused on the benefit of accessing HE programs that do not simply affect the individual sphere but also have a positive impact on the community. However, given the limited opportunities available for students within the camps, the existing literature mainly focuses on refugees who have resettled in other countries (Crea, 2016) or on students enrolled in English online courses offered by Western Universities. Sherab and Kirk (2016) have pointed out how participation in university programmes reduces marginalisation and abuse, acting as a means of protection, as also argued by UNHCR and UNESCO (2016), and a way to foster social relations and build up social networks (Ma et al., 2016). Others have pointed out that the opportunity to participate in university courses increases the sense of hope (Barakat & Milton, 2015), broadens perspectives and increases self-awareness (Crea, 2016) and fosters redemption (Palumbo & Proietti, 2022). Some scholars have focused on the health benefits associated with access to tertiary education, demonstrating improved psychological well-being (Bajwa et al. 2019), while recent studies show how such access can provide safe and regulated entry into a third country (Gatta, 2018; Borraccetti & Veltri 2023). Furthermore, the qualification gained enables students to become agents of change and peacebuilders (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2012; Coffie, 2014) both in the home and in the host country.

Notably, Jana Berg's research, encompassing two literature reviews conducted five years apart (2018 and 2023), analysed publications on refugee education up to 2019. Berg observed that most studies published before 2016, which primarily addressed barriers to access, originated from English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA. However, during the period from 2016 to 2019, Germany emerged as the dominant contributor, with significant input also coming from Turkey (Berg, 2023).

While the challenges considerably vary depending on the political and cultural context (Berg, 2023; Ramsay & Baker 2019; Naylor et al. 2021), it is possible to identify some that are cross-cutting in nature. These include the limited access to secondary schools (Dryden-Peterson & Giles 2012; UNHCR, 2019), the forced educational disruption associated with long breaks in educational experience (Morrice, 2009), the recovering from traumatic experiences (Earnest et al. 2010), the recognition of qualification (evaluation, recognition and equalisation) and financial constraints (Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Ferede, 2014). In addition, in many cases, acquiring proficiency in the local language (or English in the case of online courses) is one of the first challenges, as well as understanding and gathering information about the new education system (Streitwieser et al. 2019). This is combined with a generally reduced access to technology (Ferede, 2018), not forgetting that refugee students often go through the process of stigmatisation, discrimination and misrecognition (Morrice, 2013).

A representation of the barriers and challenges faced by refugee students has been proposed by Naylor and colleagues (2021). Recognising the limitations of an approach that makes general assumptions about a very heterogeneous group, the authors used the structural inequalities framework to examine the barriers to accessing tertiary education in Australia, arguing that they face both vertical and horizontal inequalities. Vertical inequalities (related to financial constraints, language skills and acculturative stress) are

manifested in lower participation rates than in the general population, although no higher than for other equity groups, and even lower for women. Horizontal inequalities are manifested in lower participation rates in elite universities and very high participation rates in non-awarded courses. Finally, the authors point out that the presence of refugee students is on the rise at institutions that provide specific support programmes, which may indicate that through clear governance policies, some barriers can be overcome (Naylor et al., 2021, pp. 2152-2154). Although not highlighted in the study, it could be argued that in some contexts, such as refugee camps, students also face internal inequalities, with far fewer opportunities to fully benefit from their qualifications. Indeed, a number of studies have already shown that refugees living in camps have limited opportunities to access the job market or continue their studies (Crea, 2016; Mwoma & Chege, 2021) despite being highly qualified.

At a time when students from refugee backgrounds are not deliberately excluded but do continue to face barriers, discrimination and inequalities (even within HE institutions), a more critical approach to this field of study is needed. Scholars have argued that the academic community has too often approached the issue of refugees in higher education with a one-sided approach (Streitweiser et. al. 2019) or providing "unidirectional and monothematic" programs (Unangast & Crea, 2020, p 230). Such approaches run a twofold risk. On the one hand, they unwittingly reproduce a general picture in which refugees are perceived as a source of social problems (Morrice, 2013). On the other hand, they tend to make one story become the only story (Adichie, 2009), failing to represent the nuanced identities and lived experiences of refugee students (Duran and Jones, 2019).

The Eurydice 2019 report, developed to assess how EU national education systems are responding to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers living in EU countries, shows that Italy has adopted both specific policy strategies to promote the access and inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in higher education and measures for the recognition of qualifications, language courses and fee waivers (Eurydice, 2019). However, the political and regulatory approach is limited compared to other EU Countries (Eurydice, 2019) and the measures adopted are often delegated to individual universities (Piazza & Rizzari, 2019). These aspects must be considered in a national context where the number of asylum applications is set to rise from 2021 onwards; the phenomenon of over-qualification of non-EU citizens is increasing (a phenomenon that in terms of numbers is second only to Greece); and Italy is one of the EU countries issuing fewer permits to non-EU citizens as students and researchers (only 803 out of a total of 441,000 in 2022) (Eurostat, 2024).

The literature on measures taken by Italian universities to provide access and support for refugees, asylum seekers and displaced students is limited and only recently developed. De Maria and colleagues (2023) carried out an initial mapping of the initiatives provided in Italian universities, offering a notable distinction between “education system inclusion projects”, “reception, social and cultural inclusion projects” and specific projects aimed at the Ukrainian population (our translation). The researchers identified 170 projects, of which only a few were completed, revealing a "varied and complex" picture (De Maria et al., 2023, p. 208).

Given the lack of both specific research on the Italian territory and political action, in addition to the call for the sharing of good practices to inform the evolving structure of refugee education (Ungstand & Crea 2020), it seems particularly relevant to study how the process of reception of refugee students is implemented in the Italian universities. Thus, because of its size and its pioneering role among Italian universities and its large-scale commitment to refugee education, the University of Bologna was chosen as a case study with the aim of identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as key steps in the reception and support process, in the hope of contributing to the creation of a common knowledge base useful for future developments and comparisons with other universities.

Hence the formulation of the research question that guided the present study is the following: How is the reception process of refugee students at the University of Bologna structured in order to ensure full access and support?

Methodology

This explorative study aimed to get insights into the views and experiences of people involved in the process of reception and support of refugee students at the University of Bologna. Due to the nature of the research question, it was appropriate to adopt a qualitative research methodology, namely a Grounded Theory (GT). A constructivist approach was chosen (Charmaz, 2012; Tarozzi, 2020), in which the analysis of objective data is intertwined with the analysis of the meanings that participants give to their actions and the contexts to which they refer, producing results that are understandable and useful to those working in the area under investigation (Tarozzi, 2008).

The research included a preliminary analysis of national and regional legislation, as well as University of Bologna's policy documents. Data collection took place between August and December 2022, when six (6) in-depth semi-structured interviews, each averaging 45 minutes, were carried out with seven (7) key stakeholders: the rector's delegate for refugees, administrative staff responsible for the reception of international students, refugee students, and members of the regional body. All the interviews were audio- and video-recorded with the interviewees' consent, conducted online via the Teams platform, although an in-person meeting was offered, and then transcribed verbatim. In addition, a field observation lasting approximately 4 hours took place at the Bologna University International Desk.

Following GT procedures, data analysis carried out simultaneously with data collection and consisted of three coding steps:

1. The *Initial coding* brought attention to the smallest sections of the texts. In this phase, 632 codes were created and then grouped into 12 proto-categories.
2. The *focused coding* led to a further theoretical leap. By comparing and contrasting the 12 proto-categories with new and emerging codes (created as a result of two further interviews and the field observation), three main dimensions of the university's reception process emerged, labelled "*Admin overload*", "*Funnelled procedural facilitations*" and "*Cooperative admission*".

3. The Theoretical coding. Once the three macro-categories had been identified, the analysis moved to a deeper level of conceptualisation that produced a theoretical model explaining the essential functioning of the refugee student's reception process. Thus, the category *Funnelled procedural facilitation* was identified as the core category, linking the three different concept areas. Final interviews confirmed these findings.

Findings

The concern of the University of Bologna (UNIBO) for the issues of refugee students in a broad sense is stated in the University's Statute, article 2.6 "*The University is committed to ensuring respect for the constitutional principle of equal opportunities in access to studies*" (our translation). Attention and commitment are also demonstrated by the presence of the delegate for *International Agreements and Networks and University Corridors for Refugee Students*.

Over the years, the University of Bologna has established agreements and networks with the local authorities and universities of Emilia-Romagna in order to share knowledge, address issues and ensure an increasingly better experience for students who have experienced forced migration. Fundamental are the agreement between the Alma Mater Studiorum and ER.GO for the management of students holding international protection, signed in 2018; the *Memorandum of Understanding* signed by the Emilia-Romagna universities and ER.GO to experiment a homogeneous reception and study support model; the support to the *Manifesto dell'Università Inclusiva*, the participation in the piloting edition of the *UNICORE - University Corridors for Refugees* project and the role of founder of the *Scholars At Risk Italia* network.

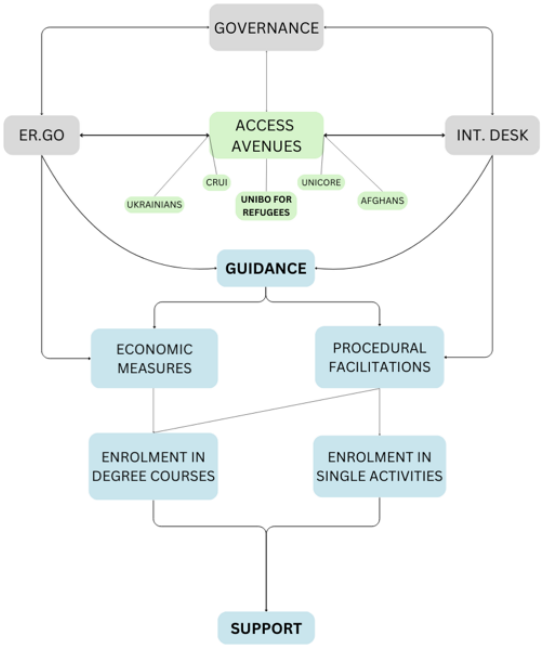

FIG. 1: THE OVERALL RECEPTION PROCESS IMPLEMENTED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA

The aim of these agreements and networks is to ensure access to education for refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons, taking into account their different legal situations. In fact, for asylum seekers is only possible to enrol in single learning activities and they cannot apply for economic benefits provided by ER.GO.

Figure 1 summarises the overall reception process as it emerges from the grounded theory analysis. In the following sections, the key analytical passages will be unpacked.

University/ ER.GO operational axis

The top of the figure shows how the whole reception process is built around the University/ER.GO axis. Especially, the partnership established over the years between the International desk and ER.GO is the operational axis around which the process of reception and enrolling refugee students revolves. ER.GO and International Desk members participate in decision-making, carry out initial information days, share files and communications, compare and exchange information on individual positions. The aim of this partnership is to design and implement initiatives, to enforce the application deadlines and to emphasise the need for students to obtain enough credits (per semester) in order not to lose the benefits. In this sense, orientation activities are a crucial step, as staff need to get to know the people who come to the counters, find out about their backgrounds and try to build a path that reflects the person's interests.

Programmes for refugees

Figure 1 also highlights the five different programmes in place at the time of the research. These include: 1) *Unibo for Refugees*, the reference framework for the reception of refugees and asylum seekers since 2015. It aims to facilitate enrolment procedures and support students by funding scholarships (12) and study awards (10), although the economic benefits do not target asylum seekers, who can only enrol in single activities with no tuition fees; 2) the so-called "CRUI" scholarships; 3) *UNICORE - University Corridors for Refugees*, in which UNIBO participated in the pilot edition but did not replicate the commitment in the following years; 4) *Aquilomnia*, which refers to Afghan students and researchers; and 5) the *University of Bologna for Peace in Ukraine* website, which collects initiatives aimed at the Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian populations. Furthermore, an initiative for the academic year 2024/25 envisages that positions in Business and Economics (CLABE) and Management and Economics (CLAME) First Cycle Degree program are reserved for displaced students and refugees, Afghan and Iranian females although there are no designated scholarships for admitted students.

Key activities and guidance

Depending on the student's status and the time of year, two different activities are carried out: a) guidance for enrolling in single courses; b) guidance for enrollment in a degree course.

For single courses, the international desk staff present the opportunities, list the documents required for registration and inform about the possibility of free Italian

courses, while for the enrolment in a degree course a full day of activities is led by the international desk staff in collaboration with ER.GO. During the day both the economic benefits and the enrolment steps are shown up (documents to apply, how to choose a course, entry test, …) Once students have been assisted with their application and successfully enrolled, the International Desk provides them with access to all the services available to the entire student community.

"From the moment a student is enrolled, he or she benefits from all the services available to all enrolled students... so from mobility…, we have had refugees who have done Erasmus, and among the various services there is also the placement after graduation, but there is no ad hoc activity. (...) We remain available during the course of study, but basically we no longer have a structured approach for all the following semesters" (Int.2) *(our translation)*

To this point, it must be clarified that the number of refugee students enrolled in single learning activities and full degree programs at the University of Bologna is higher than those who access through the 5 structured access avenues. This is because students can individually apply to ER.GO calls for benefits based on income, others do not apply for benefits and still others apply for benefits but do not declare their refugee status.

Table 1 shows the dimension of the phenomenon as a result of a recent data extraction that includes both students enrolled in single learning activities and full degrees since 2015, the first edition of the Unibo for Refugees project.

TAB. 1: STUDENTS ENROLLED IN INDIVIDUAL COURSES AND FULL DEGREE PROGRAMME AT UNIBO SINCE 2015/2016

Academic Year	Single learning activities	Full degree
2015/2016	16	22
2016/2017	23	28
2017/2018	23	25
2018/2019	10	24
2019/2020	12	36
2020/2021	5*	26*
2021/2022	19*	43*
2022/2023	5*°	37*

*** INCOMPLETE DATA RECEIVED ON 25-01-2023**
° DATA FOR THE FIRST SEMESTER

As the table shows, there is a steady increase in the number of students enrolled in full degrees, while the number of students enrolled in single learning activities is more volatile. However, there is a large increase in 2021-2022 due to the overlap of the Ukrainian and Afghan humanitarian crises.

The core category: Funnelled procedural facilitation

Having identified the structure of the reception process, the access avenues and the dimension of the phenomena, the analysis of the data collected led to the identification of three macro-categories that emerged inductively. They explain the whole reception process and are "Collaborative admission", "Administrative overload" and "Funnelled procedural facilitation".

The long term collaboration between the University and ER.GO in all the pre enrolment steps together with the lack of a structured approach to provide support activities and initiatives *in itinere* represents the "Collaborative admission". In fact, the initial effort to complete enrolment procedures is not repeated to guarantee *in itinere* support, carry out monitoring, activate postgraduate orientation initiatives and, more generally, to (co)design activities that take into account the needs of students during their period of study.

One of the main risks is to provide incomplete information about how courses work, the services, spaces and opportunities available. In this respect, one student's statement is shocking.

> I didn't know about the library until late (smiling). I couldn't find out until later that you can stay whatever long you want and also that you can borrow books, stuff like that. It was not allowed in our country. You there, you cannot borrow books and stuff like that and the opening time was very limited. We didn't know that. I didn't know. I found out that you can borrow books when we were working part time in the 150 ore (Int. 3).

Furthermore, although the number of registered refugees is not particularly high, it is steadily increasing, and this points to the need to plan additional initiatives to those currently available. However, this step implies an increased workload on the already overburdened International Desk staff. As declared:

> with this team, even just doing data extractions, having a monitoring of how enrolments are going, a monitoring... I don't know like about credits or similar, is already an extra on top of an extra. (Int. 2) *(our translation)*

The team supporting refugee students from the first interview to enrolment is the same that handles the administrative procedures of international students, visiting professors, doctoral students and post-doctoral fellows. Again, the variety of access avenues implies the implementation of different administrative procedures depending on the project to which one belongs. This criticality began to emerge from the first meetings with staff and, as the analysis progressed, took on the name "Admin overload".

Finally, given the inclusive nature of the University, as expressed in a renewed commitment over the years to provide access to a number of refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons, but also given the difficulties in establishing a real reception system that goes beyond admissions, "Funnelled procedural facilitations" was identified as a core category. It was evident that the reception system at the University of Bologna consists of various measures aimed at reducing bureaucratic and administrative obstacles, along with a range of benefits available to students. These measures and benefits are funnelled in the

sense that each access avenue targets a specific group of students. However, this variety implies a differentiation of economic benefits and access routes based on nationality or legal status. In this respect, the following statement is exhaustive:

> Considering the different projects, there are still some treatments that are a little diversified, sometimes justified, sometimes not (Int. 4) *(our translation)*

Discussion and conclusion

In the last decade several studies have investigated the benefits and barriers to access higher education, while little research is available on the students' perception and experience and on the measures implemented by the universities to guarantee access and provide support to them. In particular, in the Italian context, where a coherent political and regulatory framework is absent and actions are often left to the discretion of individual universities (Piazza & Rizzari, 2019), it seemed appropriate to examine the initiatives they undertake.

Thus, the present study investigates the reception process of students with a history of forced migration within the University of Bologna. The study fits into the field of research named refugees and higher education and enriches the existing literature by providing, on the one hand, original findings on the Italian context and laying the foundations for comparisons and possible collaborations between universities, and on the other hand, it offers an analysis grounded on the knowledge of insiders in the university reception process.

We are aware of the limitations of this case study: the role of the extended network of territorial actors and programme leaders should be further deepened and the point of view of the refugee students should be further expanded. However, the research provides an in-depth analysis of the administrative, organisational and educational reception process, which will certainly need to be further extended to other HEIs in the future.

The research shows that the main feature of the inclusive style with which the university has been receipting, accompanying and supporting refugee students is the diversification of procedures and responses based on the users' specificities. The main goal is to reduce bureaucratic barriers and to respond to different cases by complying with the law.

Refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons and forced migrants in general have different histories, profiles, needs and perspectives that must be acknowledged (Duran & Jones 2019). Therefore, differentiation and individualisation of responses is an added value that qualifies the process analysed in this study since it makes possible to respond to different challenges, different experiences and different timings, and it distinguishes the Bologna University from those universities offering "monothematic" programmes (Unangast & Crea, 2020). However, the lack of standardisation is also the main criticism of the whole process, for two reasons. On the one hand, it places an excessive workload on the staff involved, who is overburdened and unable to provide *in-itinere* support, to carry out monitoring, to activate postgraduate orientation initiatives and, more generally, to (co)design activities that take into account the needs of students during their studies. On

the other hand, it implies a differentiation of benefits on the basis of nationality or status, which does not fully reflect the principles of equal opportunity and social justice that we are sure the University wishes to protect and respect. In other words, it confirms and represents the multifaceted and complex picture highlighted by De Maria et al. (2023). A multifaceted and complex picture that also stems from the University's ability to respond to emergencies and humanitarian crises.

Following the distinction proposed by De Maria and colleagues (2023), the University of Bologna offers education system inclusion projects "and specific projects aimed at the Ukrainian population, while "reception, social and cultural inclusion projects" are lacking.

Another finding of this study is the steady increase in the dimension of the phenomenon, reflecting a positive trend reported in recent years by UNHCR (UNHCR 2021, 2022, 2023). Such increase makes it necessary to think, plan and implement further initiatives for social inclusion and recognition, with a medium- to long-term perspective, as the trend is not expected to slow down in the next few years. While expertise and commitment are not lacking, there are insufficient human resources within dedicated exclusively to this category of students, who can identify their specific needs and requirements and (co)design further programmes with them. Currently, the university encourages students to enrol in university courses by: organising information days and providing support during the enrolment process; funding 10 scholarships per year; guaranteeing fee waivers; offering language courses. However, it does not provide any specific support during the academic career. For this reason, we argue that the reception structure implemented by the University of Bologna in favour of refugee students reflects an admission rather than a reception process, as support activities end with successful enrolment.

In conclusion, given the high value of higher education opportunities for refugees, any attempt to increase access to higher education is of great importance. The University of Bologna has been working on this issue since 2015 and has acquired specific knowledge and valuable expertise in overcoming administrative barriers to access to education. However, its support is limited to enrolment, reflecting a top-down approach.

The study also highlights the need to devote more resources to medium to long-term initiatives and solutions. Initiatives and solutions that cannot be borne by the International Desk as structured today. It therefore seems necessary to recruit a permanent staff member to act as a point of reference for the refugee population, a person dedicated exclusively to the users, with tasks of strategic planning, data analysis, relations with partners and dialogue with course coordinators and tutors (if any). For all the reasons discussed in this study, it would be beneficial to adopt a Reception Protocol as a common planning and orientation tool, capable of responding to students' needs beyond the emergency, considering refugees and asylum seekers as bearers of needs for a wider sphere of fragility, and thus expanding the university's capacity to ensure equity and social justice.

Note

(1) Statuto di Ateneo emanato con DR n. 1203/2011 - Aggiornato con D.R. n. 739/2017.

(2) This article resulted from a close collaboration between the two authors, sharing the scientific responsibility for the results. In particular, Tarozzi authored paragraphs 1 and 3, while Vittori authored paragraphs 2 and 4. Paragraph 5 was co-authored by both.

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