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From family to university: Best practices for inclusive tertiary education

Abstract. This article investigates practices and integration strategies implemented by a European network of universities with regard to refugees[1] and international students, in particular, integration practices at two levels: governance and policies, regarding the institutional initiatives used and their relative success; second, the experience of such policies by international students. Our study revealed that in relation to refugee integration there is an overall lack of organisation, with too little, scattered information with respect to a bottom-up policy. In contrast, with regard to international students the system works fairly well, due to the top-down policy promoted by the EU. We propose that the EU put in place a specific program for refugee integration, such as ERASMUS+, focused on strengthening links with refugee families and schools with a high proportion of refugees.

Keywords: refugee integration, governance and policies, YUFE, international students' integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The widespread political instability in Africa and the Middle East, the effects of climate change and market globalization, and economic difficulties in eastern and southeastern Europe have led to a significant increase in global migration, with most immigrants looking for opportunities in the European Union. The EU has worked for many years to create a language policy framework to facilitate the integration of minorities and newcomers into the future of Europe, rightly identifying education as one important means of such integration (Arar 2021). However, it was observed that each EU state differs in its social, cultural and linguistic integration of newcomers pursuing tertiary education, especially young refugees and international students via Erasmus (Abamosa 2021; Dryden-

[1] The term refugees in this paper also applies to asylum seekers whose files have not been assessed yet (or have lapsed) and who are enrolled in universities.

-Peterson 2011). In fact, the Dakar Framework for Action and the Millennium Development Goals put the emphasis on primary and secondary education, as well as adult literacy, with no mention of higher education (Dryden-Paterson 2011: 11). Against this contextual backdrop, the YUFE European network of higher education institutions[2] seeks to play an important role with regard to practices, standards and methods of cultural and linguistic integration, and in fostering a vision of inclusivity in the society at large. Indeed, one of the work packages of the YUFE project focuses specifically on promoting inclusive systems, structures, policies and procedures in order to reflect the diversity in society (WP7).

There are some higher-level education institutions within the network that have almost no immigrant students, e.g., the University of Cyprus with only two students with asylum seeker status from Africa (Gambia and Guinea), and more recently, two from Ukraine. There are also some universities with no explicit policies for the integration of refugee students. It is important to note that for the years 2021 and 2022, Cyprus recorded the highest number of asylum seekers per capita (cf. Asylum information database) among the EU member states.[3] The fact that there are only two to four students classified as asylum seekers enrolled at the University of Cyprus speaks poorly for the island's primary state university. Indeed, as far as we can observe, there are few measures aimed at fostering the cultural and linguistic integration of refugee youth in the UCY community. However, at the same time, there are many international students enrolled at the University of Cyprus as exchange students, and they benefit from numerous opportunities via Erasmus, YUFE and other European exchange programs.

This article presents and discusses university policies that we identify as best practices for the integration and promotion of diversity within the YUFE network, with the aim to advise stakeholders. The methodology follows a sociolinguistic protocol (Abamosa 2021; Unangst & Crea 2020): i.e., we first sent out questionnaires to staff and students in the different universities in the network, followed up with online semi-structured interviews with the same. The results of the questionnaires provided the interview frames for discussion of governance (with the staff) and integration (with the students). These interviews enabled us to investigate the individual's experiences and beliefs related to inclusiveness and diversity.

[2] https://yufe.eu/ or Young Universities for the Future of Europe. We thank YUFE for giving us the opportunity to work on the initiatives described in this paper. We use the word *refugees* to refer to both asylum seekers and refugees; while the term *foreigner* refers to any non-nationals, including Erasmus students/international-study abroad students, and refugees.

[3] For that matter the Republic has been reprimanded for its management of refugee integration.

2. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

In this section, we first describe the YUFE network and WP7, as well as the extant research on the integration of refugees and international students within tertiary education, and our theoretical frameworks.

2.1. The YUFE network and the UCY Diversity and Inclusivity project

An important goal of YUFE is to promote and enhance diversity and inclusivity (henceforward D&I); these concepts include aspects of religion, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. YUFE is one of the first of 17 alliances selected by the European Commission as part of the European Universities Initiative.[4] It is made up of 14 partner organisations, 10 of which are universities, and it is representative of all European regions, i.e., northern Europe (Finland), western Europe (Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK, France), central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Poland) and southern Europe (Cyprus, Italy, Spain).

The YUFE stated mission is:

> To bring a radical change by becoming the leading model of a young, student-centred, non-elitist, open and inclusive European University based on the cooperation between higher education institutions, public and private sector, and citizens (University+ ecosystem).[5]

YUFE awards a number of small grants to encourage innovative activities promoting the above aim, especially when they are focused on inclusivity, diversity and equity. Most important, these small grants provide funding for *interdisciplinary student-staff teams* to translate ideas into activities, tools, and research related to diversity and inclusion that could produce a sustainable impact on the YUFE community. Projects developed under the umbrella of the WP7 have as their main aim (in compliance with the YUFE project) to put inclusion at the core of all activities by embedding equity and diversity in all organisational structures, policies, processes and procedures and to attract, retain, develop, and support a diverse staff and student population.

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[4] Co-developed by higher education institutions, student organisations, member states and the Commission, the European Universities initiative is now an integral part of the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 programme. https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative.

[5] https://yufe.eu/who-we-are/.

The University of Cyprus (UCY) was awarded one of these grants to investigate needs and practices related to the integration of refugee and international students since UCY has very few refugee students (specifically, only two in the same department). Our project therefore aimed to investigate the best practices for integrating and fostering diversity on campus, which we achieved by gathering information from both staff and students within the YUFE network, including UCY. The study was divided into two phases: the first phase focused on best practices for inclusiveness within the YUFE, and investigated refugee integration on the level of governance and policies; the second phase focused on the international/Erasmus experience of 30 Cypriot and 30 international students in UCY's Department of English Studies, investigating the challenges and opportunities related to their study abroad (i.e., at both UCY and foreign universities). As mentioned earlier, very few refugees have successfully entered the University of Cyprus and their exact number (4) is not known by most administrative staff involved with international students or with the integration of refugees on campus.

Multilingualism and linguistic and cultural diversity are closely related to globalisation, increased transnational mobility and study abroad (SA) programs. The aim of our research project is to foster diversity and inclusivity within YUFE. It is important that YUFE becomes a driver for positive change in society and our project team will work together with other members of the YUFE in this direction.

Our research questions are the following:

- What cultural and linguistic practices have been put in place to integrate refugee and international students in the YUFE, i.e., in tertiary education?
- How do students experience these practices?
- What practices should be put in place to foster adaptation and integration, especially with regard to culture and language?

2.2. Definition of integration

A successful integration could be defined by the two concepts, Inclusion and Equity, which are core to the YUFE –WP7. However, very aptly, Kappler et al. (2014: 1) observed that "despite its increasingly common usage, there is no standard definition of integration in the international education context"; their research group and project, therefore, suggested the following definition, which we will also adopt:

> Integration is an intentional process to create community, by encouraging domestic and international students to engage with each other in ongoing interaction, characterized by mutual respect, responsibility, action, and commitment.

More precisely, Kappler et al. (2014: 2) define *successful* integration in the higher education context as characterized by the following six criteria:

- active facilitation, support, and modeling by faculty, staff, and administration in the curricular and co-curricular contexts;
- an academic climate that recognizes and reflects the goals and values of inclusion;
- assessment, evaluation, and mindful reflection of intercultural and global competence at all levels of the institution (individual, classroom, school, institution-wide);
- movement from 'contact with' and 'celebration of' cultures to deeper layers of engagement and enrichment, leading to the creation of common ground;
- commitment to and recognition of the mutual benefits of such engagement; and
- a sense of belonging, contributing, and being valued.

Interestingly, the linguistic aspects are not specified in the above list; however, language proficiency has been described as key to the integration of refugees (Morrice, Topp, Collyer & Brown 2021).

In most reports and research related to educational integration in general, what is stressed is the commitment of the institutions and stakeholders: therefore, intentionality, planned strategies, committed leadership, necessary resources and infrastructure are the main components identified to ensure such success (Kappler et al. 2014: 2). In fact, Morrice et al. (2021: 696), building on previous research (Phillimore & Goodson 2008; Strang & Ager 2010), remind us of the dialectics involved in a successful integration, which "is generally understood as a two-way process requiring adaptation and change on the part of institutions, policies and practices of the receiving society as well as refugees themselves". Although research in the field of educational integration of refugees and international students has underlined different issues, especially practical issues such as health, legal, financial and housing problems (Friedrich, Bruna Ruano & Melo-Pfeifer 2021), sociolinguistic issues are also prominent. Logically, in order to achieve an academic degree, knowing the language is fundamental (Friedrich et al. 2021; Hirano 2015): indeed "learning the language of the country of resettlement is at the heart of refugee-integration strategies and is an expectation of both refugees and the receiving society" (Morrice et al. 2021: 696).

Therefore, the first part of our investigation, questions and interviews with the university administrative staff will focus on the points listed above, with the aim of making concrete recommendations. The second aim of our project is to evaluate the degree to which the infrastructures put in place meet the students' needs and to see to what degree the administrative vision of integration matches the students' experience.

2.3. Theoretical framework

For the last 15 years, many researchers have focused their attention on the integration of refugees and international students at the level of tertiary education (Arar 2021; Kapler et al. 2014; Dryden-Peterson 2011). Among the approaches most commonly adopted to investigate refugee integration, three main frameworks have been identified (Arar 2021: 10–11):

1. A humanitarian approach, focused on the right of displaced populations to access higher education, in adherence to United Nations resolutions concerning this right;
2. A social justice approach, focused on recognition, accessibility, as well as the practical side of integration such as financial support programs; an approach that works towards accreditation methods that, according to Friedrich et al. (2021: 107), "respect students' sociocultural and sociolinguistic identities";
3. A social identity approach, which works with concepts such as integration, acculturation, and multiculturalism, and a greater focus on support programs to help foreign/refugee students cope with their different challenges.

To examine the administrative side of integration, which involved assessing policies and governance, we used the social justice framework (number two above). For the student survey, we used the social identity approach (number three above), as the concepts of integration, acculturation, and multiculturalism seem best suited to both elicit student narratives and to subsequently analyze them. These concepts convey the main goals of a successful integration on the human level and seem to us a better fit for the description of the students' journey. Within these frameworks, we decided to implement a mixed-method approach to data collection and analysis and used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (Rolland 2019). Interviews allowed us to investigate an individual's experiences, beliefs and/or constructions related to our research questions (Braun & Clarke 2013; Rolland, Dewaele & Costa 2020), and we consider them both a tool to gather facts and a means to a "social construction of knowledge" (Kvale 2007: 22). We then analyzed the data both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Depending on the pandemic situation, we conducted either face-to-face or virtual interviews (O'Connor, Madge, Shaw & Wellens 2008; Hay-Gibson 2009), in line with ethical considerations (Dewaele 2013; Phipps 2013; Smith 2013; Gibson & Zhu Hua 2016). The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed (Liddicoat 2007).

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was used to analyse the data obtained via questionnaires and interviews. This methodology enabled researchers to elicit

in-depth and detailed information and to make sophisticated interpretations (Rosenthal 2018; Selvi 2020). The data-driven or inductive approach was the most suitable for our study, as there is limited research on the topics of inclusive education in Cyprus, study abroad and mobility programs; thus, topics and themes emerged from the data (Elo & Kyngas 2008). It was important to develop valid and reliable inferences and interpretations based on a continuous, reiterative and flexible process of content analysis (Selvi 2020). This was achieved in three stages: preparation, organization and reporting of results (Elo et al. 2014: 1–2).

With these criteria in mind, we investigated how the ten universities in the network strive to reach these goals and how the students themselves experience being international students/newcomers on campus.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Project structure and methodology

The investigation of governance and policies related to *inclusiveness on campus* was organized in four research stages[6]:

First, we carried out *desktop research* within the network, to identify the information that is visible, widely accessible and especially accessible to asylum seekers, international students and refugees. For this step, we examined the relevant information from each university's website, which resulted in a 70-page report. We briefly analysed the data to prepare the questionnaire, i.e., we identified the specific mechanisms and policies that have been put in place to help newcomers find the information they required.[7] For instance, some universities, such as the University of Maastricht, since 2002 have been developing a policy focused on an inclusive and diverse culture that is student-centred,[8] while there is now a UM Holland Euregion Refugee Scholarship that offers five scholarships per academic year for talented refugee students This investigation informed us of the issues that should be tested and the questions that should make up the two questionnaires, one for students and one for staff.

Second, based on the information obtained through the desktop research, we investigated *governance* within the YUFE network using a 30-item questionnaire focused on social inclusion and intercultural communication on

[6] The team consisted of two staff members, Prof. F. Baider and Dr. S. Karpava, and three graduate students, Vasiliea Anaxagorou, Myrianthi Karantona and Stella Sotiriou.

[7] We could then offer recommendations to improve the visibility and accessibility of such crucial information during the interviews.

[8] https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/um-world/truly-european-university.

campus. Our aims were: to identify the specific practices that have been put in place and were not explained on the website; to assess the extent to which they are effective in terms of linguistic and cultural integration; to ascertain the stances among the administrative staff. To this end, we adopted a methodology following a sociolinguistic protocol, using questionnaires first. These questionnaires were anonymous and were sent to the YUFE representative of each university; nevertheless, the name of the university was stated on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was piloted and subsequently modified; data collection among the staff of 10 universities took place over one month. All universities participated in the research project and provided responses to the online questionnaires. The data were collected and entered into an EXCEL database. We noted that many universities had to gather information from various departments and coordinate the answers to the questionnaire; these efforts were very much appreciated.

Third, the questionnaire was followed by online semi-structured interviews with the university staff member who had been appointed by their university to partake in the interview, generally each university's YUFE representative. We tailored the interviews to each university in accordance with their questionnaire responses. The interviews were collated in another database,[9] as all participants agreed to be audio-recorded. The interviews were semi-structured and targeted each individual's experiences, beliefs and/or constructions related to study abroad programs, language practices, multilingualism, multiliteracy, diversity and inclusion. We conducted face-to-face or virtual interviews in line with ethical considerations.

Fourth, we investigated the students' perceptions of their YUFE, Erasmus and study abroad and in-Cyprus experiences through questionnaires and on-line and face-to-face interviews. The questions were focused on multilingualism, linguistic and cultural diversity in relation to globalisation, increased transnational mobility and SA programs.

The fifth and final stage involved our data analyses, which were both quantitative, i.e., with a focus on graphs obtained with the questionnaires, and qualitative with a focus on interviews. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed. We implemented an iterative content analysis to identify and refine the categories and themes related to the research questions and to interpret them.

[9] Although all ten universities agreed to fill in the questionnaire, only six universities responded favourably to our request for an interview: University of Madrid, University Nicolaus Copernicus, University of Bremen, University of Eastern Finland, University of Essex, and University of Cyprus.

4. RESULTS

In this section, we present our results, in two separate categories. We first report our findings on governance and policies; we then relate the opinions of staff in the YUFE network and those of international students at the University of Cyprus, regarding their experience of representation and inclusion.

4.1. Results for governance and policies

Here we examine the responses of YUFE staff to the following question:

What practices have been put in place to integrate refugees in the YUFE alliance, i.e., in tertiary education?

To answer the above question, we must look at and compare the responses of two different groups: the stakeholders' policies, and the specific initiatives of the students, the staff and the universities.

4.1.1. Stakeholders' initiatives

In half of the universities, it is the office of the Rector that advises on the educational policies for refugees; 40% have a specific committee. Sixty per cent (60%) of the universities have state-approved texts and guidelines for the integration of refugee students, and although other universities have strategies related to inclusion, over 30% admitted to having no official guidelines. However, when we asked for the guidelines we discovered that only three universities actually had official guidelines for refugee students. At the University of Eastern Finland, an Equal Opportunities Committee comprising representatives of the administrative staff and the Student Union regulates the policies. The institution also has dedicated webpages, which include several support channels for students. All other universities offered mobility guidelines aimed primarily at Erasmus students or other student exchange programs.

In most universities, the refugees and the staff are left to their own devices in the integration process, and some representatives deplored the lack of political will in regard to the integration of refugees in tertiary education institutions. For instance, given the war in Ukraine, most of the universities – for example, the University of Essex and the University of Bremen – have been reaching out to Ukrainian students and students from neighboring countries that have been affected by the war. The University of Eastern Finland even has a staff member

employed specifically to welcome and integrate Ukrainian refugees. However, the Nicolaus Copernicus University representative mentioned the lack of a pro-refugee stance in Poland; this means that the university cannot supersede state regulations concerning refugees. Specifically, it was noted that although Poland is helping Ukrainian refugees, those arriving from Syria and other countries are less accepted. According to the same representative, the main obstacle to refugee integration is the lack of relevant policies.

We found that eight of the 10 universities in this study have specific policies for full and effective inclusion of all students, as well as non-discriminatory policies to protect non-nationals, e.g., antidiscrimination laws, an equality and anti-discrimination policy, and one university even has a 2019–2025 plan focused on equality, diversity and inclusion. The Universidad Carlos III de Madrid has been yearly awarded the Bequal certificate, a Spanish document verifying that the university promotes social inclusion and equality. Social inclusion policies are included in many university documents (such as Ordinance on Studying, internal QA systems, complaints and appeals systems, etc.), while non-discrimination provisions are included in the disciplinary ordinances and Code of Ethics.

Most universities have adopted policies that focus on the essentials a refugee would require, e.g., free accommodation, meals, language lessons and counselling, as well as integration into student organisations and the student council.

4.1.2. Specific initiatives

Apart from tuition waivers and specific bursaries, we noted a number of diverse measures adopted by the universities that aim to foster academic inclusion, notably: adapting examination papers to non-nationals, assessing newcomers' potential through reduction of linguistic cultural, gender and ethnic bias (Friedrich et al. 2021: 107) without affecting the test's validity or reliability (Shohamy & Menken 2015: 260). The free language lessons included the local language as well as English language courses, while the courses also targeted cultural topics and intercultural communication.

The University of Essex can boast of its accreditation as a University of Sanctuary, and it is in the process of introducing a University of Sanctuary Scholarship[10] for new Master's degree students who will study in 2023, who have UK asylum status or discretionary/limited leave to remain as a result of

[10] The Universities of Sanctuary are a network of higher education institutions that have a radical tradition of supporting refugees and people in the asylum system. 'This network has been developed through a partnership of City of Sanctuary, Article 26, Student Action for Refugees, and others. Their aim is to develop a culture and a practice of welcome within institutions,

an asylum application. This is crucial for asylum seekers who live in fear of seeing their application for asylum rejected in the midst of their studies; in fact, many of our interviewees claimed this as one of their major concerns. It is to be noted as well that some universities have created student-run societies,[11] which focus on refugee education and welfare and host discussions, campaigns and awareness-raising events, including informing asylum seekers and refugees of opportunities to study at the university.

The University of Eastern Finland, like many other universities, has benefited from governmental initiatives to foster inclusion on campus.[12] The university organizes welcome and pre-arrival webinars for all students, as well as peer-to--peer tutoring and subject-specific coordinators as necessary. Indeed, a foreign student's first months at university are the most challenging: they must familiarize themselves with a new academic context, a new city, and a culture and traditions different from their own. A "buddy system" has been initiated at the University of Rome Tor Vergata; this is a mentoring program, where the mentor – who may be a national or a non-national – helps the foreign student learn the local language. The buddy program sets up a system of welcome and support from enrolled students to the new students, and the student mentor becomes a guide and information source during the initial adaptation period. The buddy/mentor helps the new student find the appropriate offices for specific issues, become familiar with the campus, and especially facilitates his/her understanding of the general academic structure: schedule of the academic year, lectures, exams, etc. One important aspect of this linguistic and cultural integration, which is the responsibility of the "buddy", is to help newcomers learn about the city and its opportunities, and to introduce them to cultural activities and events.

Finally, some universities promote integration by working with local organizations, for example, supporting NGOs that deal with young refugees, or cooperating closely with the state integration services. At UCY we cooperate with the NGOs, Hope for Children and Caritas.[13] Through such cooperative efforts, universities often provide extra facilities or personnel for bodies that aim to provide language classes but often lack sufficient resources.

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the wider community, and across the higher education sector in the UK.' https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/.

[11] To note that within the UK alone, 50 such associations operate within universities, making the UK a more welcoming place for refugees.

[12] The BRIDGES project is a special grant offered by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021–2022) to promote the well-being of students and prevent exclusion. https://www.isyy.fi/en/bridges-2.html.

[13] Hope for Children website: https://uncrcpc.org.cy/en/; Caritas website: https://caritas-cyprus.org/.

4.1.3. Effectiveness of integration measures

Now we will examine how effective these programs and initiatives have been. Although all the universities in this study stated that they welcome students who are refugees, they also acknowledged a lack of training in this area. We conclude, therefore, that staff responsible for supporting students are in need of training/awareness-raising programs, which could be state-mandated and implemented nationwide, or alternatively, the university might join the YUFE network project. International students and refugees have particular needs and face particular challenges, and programs such as personal mentors, a buddy system and student societies that provide peer support are some of the ways to help integration. We identified a number of areas where university policies were lacking or weak:

1. All staff agreed with the conclusion drawn from several research studies focused on refugee integration: investing in the national language is a priority, which Morrice et al. (2021: 697) concluded, "might be a more effective strategy for securing integration outcomes across a range of domains," including the areas of university education and employment. Most YUFE universities offer free classes to foreign students, including refugees. However, sometimes the courses are also open to the public (and in that case, they are not free), which is the case for the University of Cyprus. This means that the language course content does not prepare the students for either academic language or academic coursework. For example, at UCY Greek for academic purposes should be taught, with the subject of intercultural communication part of the syllabus. Moreover, like in some other universities where the national language is not broadly spoken, English language courses should also be offered, which would enhance inclusion and availability for employment during their study.
2. Policies need to be more sensitive and acknowledge different needs and create measures according to the particular student's status (e.g., foreign student/newcomer/refugee).
3. Universities should encourage refugee students to engage in participatory workshops where they can suggest/create policies and actions.
4. Institutions should also create/secure additional "crisis funds" that students might benefit from in emergency cases.

We found that the majority of universities in our study have been working to put into place specific policies and activities to welcome refugee students since 2015. The war in Ukraine, which is ongoing at the time of writing this article, has challenged the existing infrastructure and, more importantly, the lack of such infrastructure. Therefore, 90% of the universities have created specific

bursaries for displaced Ukrainian students and appointed staff to accommodate and integrate Ukrainian refugees, especially those in the neighbouring countries, such as the University of Eastern Finland and Nicolaus Copernicus University.

4.2. Student experiences (inclusion/exclusion)

In this section, we investigate the views of local and international students at UCY related to: diversity and inclusivity, their study abroad experience, multilingualism and multiculturalism. Overall, 60 participants (students aged 19–42, mean age 21.5) completed questionnaires and 30 participants were interviewed. Among these were 30 local Cypriot students with Erasmus experience, and 30 UCY Erasmus students who represented various countries of Europe such as Ireland, Spain, Italy, Poland, France, Germany and Lithuania. The research was conducted at the Department of English Studies as it attracts the highest number of Erasmus students every academic year because all the courses are taught in English; in most other departments Greek is the language of instruction. Among the interviewed students, there were 15 local and 15 international students.

Data analysis of both questionnaires and interviews indicated that students believe that D&I is an important issue in the higher education sector; they see it as related to the teaching and learning process, as well as to university policies, which they believe should promote equal opportunities for all, regardless of gender, social class, linguistic and cultural identity, sexual orientation and physical ability. These results are in line with those of a recent study by Siri, Leone and Bencivenga (2022).

The following interview excerpt reveals how aware the student is of inclusive education:

Excerpt 1
Inclusive education, as far as I understand it, has to do with including all students without any borders, without any issues or rejections…I mean, genders and sexes, which include all people of every color, every nationality, religion. I mean, those things they seem granted for us, especially in recent years there has been lot of work and focus on this, which is of course positive, so they seem very natural to us, and they should be natural. I am of course informed of inclusive education. I think it has to do with the outlook of the university to include people from different universities to enrich the kind of the knowledge provided by the university (UCY Cypriot student with Erasmus experience).

However, some students found questions about inclusive education to be difficult and were not able to explain or elaborate. They acknowledged that they

need more guidance and activities in this respect, this guidance should also be part of the Erasmus's program objectives:

Excerpt 2
I have never heard of the term before I think, but the first thing that comes to mind is an education system that includes all (UCY Erasmus student from Spain).

With regard to inclusion, all participants agreed that all students should have an equal right to education; classrooms should be made up of students with mixed abilities; no student should be separated from the main group because of discrimination related to age, ethnicity, race, gender, etc. i.e., study-abroad programs should be available to all students. They also expect the host university to help in getting to discover the people, language and culture in the host country:

Excerpt 3
For me, inclusive education means that people have the opportunity to study in a different environment which offers them cooperation and helps them get to know people and places and cultures (UCY Erasmus student from Ireland).

These student responses provide further evidence to support the EDI policies of the EU, initiated at the Ministerial Meeting of the Bologna Process in 2015; the renewed agenda for higher education reiterated by the European Commission in 2017; a Gender Equality Plan, which Horizon Europe requests of all those applying for funding; establishment of best practices and approaches for more inclusive academia, progress and innovation, diversity and inclusion in Europe (Bergan & Harkavy 2018; Weimer & Nokkala 2020).

Further, according to the participants, to encourage inclusion appropriate activities should be planned, and each student's individual needs should be taken into consideration. Inclusive education should offer equal opportunities to all students. It is a new way of expanding knowledge, and it connects people and cultures from all around the world.

The students identified a number of factors that inform inclusive education: the educational environment; the social and educational conditions; the different approaches and methods used to include students with special educational needs; students with limited financial means and refugees; the quality of professional training of specialists. These findings agree with previous research by Alger (2018), Van Hees and Montagnese (2020), López-Duarte, Maley and Vidal-Suárez (2021). Overall, the students support high-quality education for all and believe that inclusive education is better than elite education. They feel that inclusive education must take into account social, cultural, political, psychological, organizational and pedagogical factors (see Table 1).

Table 1. Students' opinions: Factors affecting inclusive education

Inclusive education depends on [in %]:	
Educational environment	57.14
Social conditions	61.90
Educational conditions	66.66
Different approaches to include students with special educational needs/migrants	66.66
Quality of professional training of specialists	45.23
Do you support (study abroad programs) [in %]:	
Elite education	11.90
High-quality education for all	78.57
Inclusive education	52.38
Inclusive education (study abroad programs) depends on [in %]:	
Political factors	50.00
Practical factors	47.61
Historical factors	21.42
Scientific factors	14.28
Cultural factors	59.52
Psychological factors	52.38
Organizational factors	54.76
Social factors	66.66
Pedagogical/teaching factors	66.66

Source: current study.

Participants offered specific suggestions on how to discourage discrimination against students with special needs, minority, immigrant and refugee students: education, university-funded programs, organization of cultural events and activities, and projects both inside and outside the academic environment. The students commented that it is important to widen horizons, raise awareness, learn more languages, enhance their language proficiency in English and local language(s) of the host country, improve their opportunities for continuous development in terms of education and future profession, provide financial support to students with disabilities, minority, refugee and immigrant groups, as noted in the following interview excerpts:

Excerpt 4

I think the focus has to be put on the educational factor, rather than the social-status one. All people have the right to be educated in any way they want and people should accept that and set aside all the social parameters (UCY Cypriot student with Erasmus experience).

Excerpt 5
By teaching why racism is not good and show that by doing actions and not only teaching in theory. Also, learning more languages and learning more about other countries' histories (UCY Erasmus student from Italy).

Excerpt 6
I think that by bringing minority groups, immigrants and special needs students all in the same environment they won't feel excluded, they'll feel like their 'differences' are not a valid excuse for exclusion and their mental health will overall improve. I think that this would be a great start (UCY Cypriot student with Erasmus experience).

It should be noted that similar issues were raised in earlier research studies investigating higher education and international student mobility (e.g., Teichler 2017; Shields 2019; Rumbley 2020; de Wit & Altbach 2021). In addition, participants made a number of suggestions on ways to improve their experience abroad: adequate planning, informative meetings, sharing positive experiences, personal stories, paying attention to the well-being and mental health of students and teachers. Students believe that universities should treat foreign students with extra care, educate the staff and all students on discrimination, create a friendly, welcoming campus climate and offer equal opportunities. They suggest that universities should try to be more inclusive, accepting, patient, and understanding, and perhaps adapt the course/offer extra help for students who are having difficulties. As they stated:

Excerpt 7
There must be clear rules in the university community about behavior inside and outside the university; university members, administration and professors, as well as students, should be respected and not excluded (UCY Cypriot student with Erasmus experience).

Excerpt 8
By providing these students with extra care, educating the staff and all students properly about discrimination, by creation of a friendly, welcoming campus climate and opportunities for minority students and non-minority students to get to know each other, for example through on campus events (UCY Erasmus student from Spain).

Excerpt 9
By trying to be more inclusive, being patient, nice and understanding with everybody, and maybe adapting the course for people who are facing difficulties or offering them extra help (UCY Erasmus student from Ireland).

According to the participants, there are many benefits to studying abroad, including social, linguistic, cultural, personal, financial, educational:

Excerpt 10
There are lots of them [benefits]. First of all, people get to know a whole new country which could be far away from what they are used to. Secondly, people meet and interact and share ideas, thoughts and develop new social relationships (UCY Cypriot student with Erasmus experience).

Excerpt 11
Studying abroad can have countless benefits. It gives students the opportunity to see and discover how other countries' educational systems work and brings them closer to other cultures. It is also a great opportunity for travelling and gaining unique experiences and friendships. Lastly, it can motivate students to do even better in their academic achievement, as they might get the opportunity to attend very interesting and different classes that are absent in their program they are part of in their home country (UCY Erasmus student from Poland).

Participants also spoke of the many challenges that arise while studying and living abroad, especially cultural and linguistic adaptation, stress, anxiety and psychological issues (see Table 2).

Table 2. Challenges while studying and living abroad

What were your challenges while studying and living abroad [in %]?	
Context of a specific country	16.66
Cultural and linguistic adaptation	42.85
Discrimination	19.04
Cultural and linguistic integration	23.80
Cross-cultural misunderstanding	28.57
Stress	45.23
Emotional state and reactions	35.71
Verbal communication	23.80
Frustration	16.66
Anxiety	40.47
Non-verbal communication	2.38
Misconceptions/Miscommunication	19.04
Hybrid identity	4.76
Intelligibility issues due to low language proficiency	19.04
Social networks	21.42
Living environment	23.80
Accommodation	26.19
Well-being	16.66

What were your challenges while studying and living abroad [in %]?	
Psychological issues	40.47
Time management	7.14
Communication with parents, family in L1 country	9.52
Homesickness	28.57
Translating	11.90
Code-switching	19.04
Translanguaging	4.76

Source: current study.

The analysis of student responses showed that they considered knowledge of the local language highly important for their social and cultural life:

Excerpt 12
One of my major concerns when studying was language proficiency for my participation in social and cultural life, daily and life experiences. I think that I am a little bit shy as well (UCY Erasmus student from Germany).

It is interesting to note that most students chose to have English as a medium of instruction for their studies abroad since English is considered as the international *lingua franca*:

Excerpt 13
I have chosen my Erasmus program and university as I can study in English. I am French, I want to improve my knowledge of English, to be immersed in English-speaking environment as much as possible (UCY Erasmus student from France).

At the same time, they are motivated to learn a new language, especially the language of the host country. In that regard they have a positive attitude towards multilingualism and multiculturalism, understanding that multilingualism benefits them in their education as well as any future career:

Excerpt 14
Well, the reason was, uh, simple because I wanted to get, um, get to know the culture, the Greek culture and also the language, but with the language it is a bit difficult because I need like a bigger vocabulary. I need to put more effort for the learning process. I believe it's a good experience for my life in general. I like to live in another country and to be able to communicate in another language, doesn't matter if it's English or Greek. And, uh, I really hope that one day I will learn Greek language and somehow I will find a job with this language (UCY Erasmus student from Lithuania).

The findings of this study provide further evidence in support of the recent research conducted by Gan and Kang (2022: 227), who revealed nine areas of concern regarding SA programs: pre-trip preparation, flying on an airplane, unfamiliar food, expenditure while abroad, non-traditional class structure, anxiety with respect to unfamiliar setting, travelling with "strangers", feeling homesick, language barriers, living arrangement, learning how to get around on public transportation.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. General statements

This project is one of a series of studies aimed at observing and comparing educational policies in tertiary education institutions that purport to foster the integration of refugees and international students (Friedrich et al. 2021). A study focused on the Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR) in Brazil noted a bottom-up initiative: professors who wanted to help foreign and refugee students started by giving them language lessons. This seems to be the case for universities in the YUFE network, where it is the individual professors and/or the administrative staff who make the most effort to welcome refugees; there is no policy put in place at the national or international level. Nevertheless, in the UK there is a program related to the Universities of Sanctuary, which helps tertiary institutions accommodate refugees who are in need of safety, especially asylum seekers and those who had their applications rejected during their study years. We also note the policy at the University of Cyprus, which uses both a bottom-up and top-down approach. However, in this case, only two refugee students have so far successfully enrolled, and this may have been entirely by chance or through outside help (someone who investigated their refugee options). Yet, in Cyprus, the options open to refugees are basically unknown to the general public – and there is also a lack of information so widespread that the very people who could take advantage of such possibilities are not properly informed.

For international students, such as Erasmus students, the top-down approach (that of the European Union and the participating universities) resulted in a very successful exchange program. Our project recommends that the European Union launch a European refugee program that would facilitate refugee access to information, harmonize the different policies, and finance the structures needed to assist this specific category of students. This can be achieved by raising awareness of the authorities by preparing reports based on the findings of our study

and other relevant studies of the YUFE project. We also plan to publish both our reports in the UCY magazine and to have them posted on the YUFE main page.

5.2. Specific linguistic and social needs to be addressed

At the governance level (for the administrative initiatives of the 10 universities), we identified five needs.

The first is linguistic, i.e., the need to develop language skills in the host country as a priority once basic needs have been secured (housing, health, finance). Language skills in the student's native/home language can also offer other opportunities; for example, in our study, Felicien from Congo (name changed) is French-speaking, as are many African asylum seekers in the Republic of Cyprus (apart from the Somali); he knows that acquisition of a recognized level in this international language would open more doors for him in the Cypriot job market, as there are French companies operating in Cyprus.[14] However, he chose to learn English, which would offer more employment opportunities and enable him to communicate with the locals, most of whom speak English. Moreover, since his Dublin procedure[15] was still ongoing at the time of the writing of this article, he felt that investing time in a difficult language (Greek) would not be useful to him if the Dublin procedure is successful. Most of his compatriots adopt the same attitude, finding Greek difficult to learn and not as useful as English.

The second area where we identified a need for improvement, and which actually exists in some YUFE universities, is a mentorship program. Such a program would pair local students as mentors with refugees/foreign students, and would likely benefit both parties. For the local student, it is acquiring first-hand knowledge of a refugee experience and the satisfaction of facilitating integration; for the refugee, it could mean a unique opportunity to bond with a local student. Monitoring such a program is crucial (Friedrich et al. 2021: 115), and should be overseen by a specific integration committee.

Third, it would be helpful to centralize all resources relevant to newcomers, as in our survey we noted a wide dispersion of the relevant offices, the resulting confusion and, ultimately, the inaccessibility of services. This is especially important considering the foreign students' limited linguistic skills as well as their unfamiliarity with the new surroundings.

[14] https://www.goldnews.com.cy/en/companies/french-corporate-giants-in-cyprus.

[15] Under the Dublin procedure, unaccompanied minors or adults can apply for international protection and ask to be reunited with family members living elsewhere in Europe (the European Union Asylum Agency or EUAA, https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-knowledge/dublin-procedure.

Fourth, it appears important to reach out and work more closely with NGOs and high schools that take in young refugees. For example, one of the authors works closely with an NGO that welcomes young undocumented migrants. One of these young boys managed to register in the Architecture Department at UCY thanks to the teamwork of the NGO personnel officer and the UCY student welfare bureau. We note two initiatives that could be implemented: (1) to give ECTs to students who work with NGOs in an effort to create links between local students and refugees; (2) to disseminate refugee success stories in schools with a high population of refugees, which might encourage high school students to pursue higher education.

Finally, we recommend a wide dissemination and advertising of refugee success stories to break their quasi invisibility. This can be achieved with articles in the local press and articles on the university website. Such initiatives would show that refugees can access and succeed in the tertiary education system, which is important both for the refugee population (instilling a sense of pride) and the host population (to break stereotypes such as refugees are illiterate, uneducated and cannot integrate).

5.3. Proposal at the student level

Education should be inclusive of, and also accessible to, students from all linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Leon & Williams 2016; Özturgut 2017), and both students and teachers need special training to understand how important this concept is. Among other things, inclusion can lead to: improved social cohesion and social justice without discrimination; increased sensitivity and resource-orientation towards multilingualism and multiculturalism; a better understanding and enhanced awareness of the needs and challenges related to education in multilingual classrooms, particularly the geographical and social contexts that affect the educational, personal and social well-being of the students (Brown 2021; Conrad, Hartig & Santelmann 2021). In fact, there is a great need to continue and expand the research on the topics examined here, i.e., study-abroad programs in higher education, issues of equity, equality and diversity, challenges, needs and opportunities (Siri et al. 2022).

The aim of the present study was to partially fill this gap in the research and to offer students an active voice in making suggestions for improvement in this area. Based on questionnaires and interviews, we learned that students advocate greater diversity and inclusivity in education, and support social inclusion and intercultural communication. We recognize that they need training and preparation for the challenges they will encounter in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms and mobility programs.

6. CONCLUSION

In this research study, we investigated the practices and their results related to the sociolinguistic inclusion of refugees and international students within a specific European network of young universities, YUFE. We examined, therefore, the issues of inclusive education, multilingualism and multiculturalism in Cyprus and other YUFE countries with a focus on refugee and international students, integration strategies and practices implemented at the university level. We also investigated personal experiences of local and international students regarding mobility/Erasmus programs. More precisely, our research focused on two general questions: What practices have been put in place to integrate refugees into tertiary education? What do students understand by social inclusion? These questions led to several more specific queries: how effective, in terms of linguistic integration and culture, are these universities? What stances can we observe among staff and students in terms of diversity?

Our findings revealed that there are different policies for refugee versus international students. With respect to the first group, there is usually a bottom-up policy applied, with often ad-hoc solutions found, and revealing that more work on refugee students' integration is required, which concurs with earlier studies by Arar (2021) and Abamosa (2021). With regard to international students, most often implemented is a top-down policy, with clear structure and procedures centralized by the Erasmus program. The analysis of students' questionnaires and interviews regarding their international mobility revealed that overall students feel this is a positive experience with many benefits, although there are certain challenges. Among the challenges, they identified a lack of awareness regarding diversity and inclusivity in educational settings. At the institution level, they found it difficult to voice their concerns, which could result in a more welcoming campus climate and were expecting the host university to be supportive, which was not often the case. At a more personal level and as expected, they reported stress, anxiety and psychological issues due to cultural and linguistic adaptation.

The opportunities offered by their study abroad stay were primarily the learning of a new language, since Erasmus students are usually offered free lessons in the language of the country where they are placed. Our findings suggest a need for improvement in terms of refugees' social, cultural and linguistic integration in higher education and in terms of welcoming Erasmus students. If the short-term outcomes include the results of this research, we also aim to disseminate the identified best practices within the YUFE network, to push for the creation of policies to improve integration of refugees and international students on campus and to foster awareness about the importance of inclusivity (Yasin, Torbjørnsen & Westrheim 2019; Salehyan 2019), especially in including our findings in our

seminars and courses focusing on intercultural communication and migration discourses and policies within the EU.

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