

Summary: ‘The University Corridors for Refugees (UNI.CO.RE) Program in Italy (2019-2023) Evaluation Report’

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The University Corridors for Refugees (UNI.CO.RE) Program in Italy (2019-2023) Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

- This report evaluates the editions of the University Corridor for Refugees (UNICORE) program from 2019-2023.
- UNICORE aims to provide education pathways for refugee students and thereby contribute to the alternative protection pathways for refugees aspired by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and as enshrined in several international commitments.
- UNICORE design is based on collaboration between the UNHCR, universities, and many other local and regional stakeholders.
- Students were selected based on merit, assessing their credentials and competencies.
- Challenges remained in identifying qualified students; in some editions of the programs, the program failed to recruit enough candidates for available scholarships.
- The gender gap persisted as only 26% of selected applicants were female.
- Pre-departure challenges included failing to secure a travel document or visa on time and lacking a recognized refugee status.
- UNICORE does not directly provide a durable solution for student refugees upon completion of their graduation. Students have the option to apply for asylum.
- Students faced challenges maintaining their scholarship and status when applying for asylum before graduation.
- Students reported challenges in finding post-graduation opportunities, mainly due to their lack of Italian language skills and familiarity with the labour market.
- Lack of structured funding is the main challenge threatening the sustainability and scalability of the program.
- There should be more engagement by the government departments and institutions with the UNICORE stakeholders to ensure smooth administrative and regulatory processes for refugee students' pre- and post-arrival needs.

Introduction

- The University Corridor for Refugees (UNICORE) program started in 2019. Currently, in its fifth edition, the program provides 65 scholarships to refugee students from African countries.
- Combining the quantitative and qualitative findings, the study aims to generate evidence to inform future programs.
- UNICORE is a comprehensive partnership between universities, settlement agencies, government departments, and the UNHCR.
- The guiding principles of the evaluation evolve around dignified refugee protection, safety, and legal stay in the destination countries.

- The program's target population is refugees in the first country of asylum who have finished a three-year bachelor's degree within the preceding five years.
- The Italian Embassy issues visas for the selected students. Upon arrival, students receive financial, accommodation, academic, and integration support from different organizations.
- The thematic focus of the evaluation is on the selection, pre-departure, arrival and stay, and post-graduation, as identified in the inception phase.
 - Focusing on these thematic areas proved challenging during data collection and analysis stages, particularly making it difficult to prioritize the most important findings that are related to post-graduation.
 - Additional challenges arose from respondents either lacking sufficient time or not showing interest in the survey.

Context

- In 2022, for each refugee resettled or returned to their home countries, 16 displaced people were added, totaling over 108 million displaced people worldwide.
- Complementary Education Pathway (CEP) is encouraged by the New York Declaration as a durable solution for student refugees. Quality education helps refugees to overcome barriers to achieving their aspirations.
- Currently at 6%, the UNHCR aims to increase refugees' access to higher education to 15% by 2035.
- The UNHCR plans to provide complementary pathways to 2 million refugees by 2028.
- The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the UNHCR roadmap (2020-2030) emphasize the importance of making systemic complementary protection pathways available for refugees.
- UNICORE was pledged as a complementary pathway in the Global Education Forum (GRF) 2019 and is recognized as a good practice for achieving GCR goals. UNICORE is expected to make further pledges in GRF 2023.
- UNICORE aims to achieve at least 200 scholarships in 2023-2024, of which at least 30% will be allocated to female applicants.
- The UNICORE consortium is committed to further increasing the number, reach, gender, and impact of the program in future editions.
- The UNICORE program has led to the involvement of some partners in the creation of the Global Taskforce on Third Country Education Pathway, which launched in 2020, to expand tertiary education as a complementary pathway to protection.

Findings

- The call for application was disseminated by the UNHCR and posted on the universities' websites.
 - An identified weakness was the variation of call for application by different universities that undermined conformity in the process.
- The selection process was merit-based, in which applicants' qualifications were assessed in two phases: (1) evaluating their documents and credentials like GPA and (2) conducting interviews to assess their technical skills and language capacity.

- There has been a 233% increase in applicants from the first to the fifth edition.
- But surprisingly, the number of students admitted in the fourth and fifth editions was less than the available scholarships.
 - The main reasons for failing the admission criteria were identified as (1) possessing insufficient skills and knowledge, (2) legal status, and (3) lack of qualifications.
- Identifying and recruiting female applicants remained a challenge.
- The type of master's degree offered was tailored towards being held in English, having a reasonable prospect of employability, and including a curricular internship.
- The type of documents and other application requirements varied in each program edition. It would be helpful to have a fair and transparent procedure in place.
 - In one example of good practice, the University of Bari created an autonomous evaluation procedure in which professional evaluators consider all aspects of the applicant's credentials, including cultural components and formal and non-formal work experiences.
- The gender gap identified in the UNICORE program as the number of female students only comprised about 26% of the successful candidates.
- Pre-departure information sessions were critical steps in the UNICORE program that provided students with crucial information about their academic journey and residence localities.
- Respondents often expressed concerns over securing documents like Travel Document (TD) and Declaration of Value (DoV), which often proved very challenging.
- An agreement between UNICORE, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), and the Italian Embassy has eased visa issuance procedures, like exempting visa fees, health insurance, and advance flight-booking requirements. Students were also supported in obtaining a Laissez-Passer if they could not secure a Convention Travel Document.
- Despite being offered pre-departure and post-arrival Italian language courses, most students lacked the language skills necessary for daily interaction after graduation.
 - The reason could be studying in the English curriculum, communicating with other international students and even Italians in English, and focusing on graduation rather than acquiring Italian language skills.
 - It would be helpful to set a minimum mandatory language proficiency upon graduation through ad-hoc or intense language classes during the summertime.

Arrival and stay phase

- Students' delay on arrival, from a couple of weeks to four months, was a major concern linked to the late issuance of travel documents and visas.
- UNICORE timeline specified September as the arrival time, which did not give students enough time to acclimate and settle in before their classes started, even if they did not face delayed issuance of travel documents or visas.
- UNICORE provided a minimum standard of receptions for refugee students to partner universities that included scholarship coverage, accommodation, healthcare, cost of food, transportation, and other relevant expenses.
- Each university partner specified in the Call for Applications what contributions they make in the process, such as providing monthly stipends or language classes free of charge.

Inclusion path: Academic environment, student life, and local communities

- The UNICORE program, with the help of volunteer local students, provided integration support to refugee students upon arrival in their new communities, which increased their access to available services and their awareness about local communities.
 - Most students reported good cooperation between universities and local communities.
- Scholarship amounts are usually paid in three installments: the first in cash upon arrival and the second and third after opening a bank account. Some banks offered lowered rates and assistance in opening and maintaining an account for UNICORE students.

University enrolment and local factors

- Enrollments usually were processed smoothly except in the cases where issues existed in students' data.
 - In one example, after seven months of arrival, a student was still trying to obtain a residence permit and health care card.
- Within universities, different departments (e.g., University governance, international desk, peer students/alumni association) were involved in refugee students' reception and inclusion process.
- Some universities had refugee or ad hoc service desks that addressed refugee students' needs, such as providing psychological and housing support.

Post-graduation phase

- Post-graduation follow-up, though not in the scope of the UNICORE program, was relevant to assess the program's impact. However, not enough quantifiable data was available since most students had yet to graduate, and for many of them, it took longer than the anticipated two years.
- With the limited data, there were positive indications of finding jobs for graduates. Factors like the possession of Italian language skills and the universities' location played a role in the employment prospects of refugee students.
- To balance the benefits of having hands-on experience during the study period with meeting the challenging academic requirements, some post-graduation internships in cooperation with private or public institutions might be beneficial.
- About 12% of students dropped out within or after the first year, stating different reasons such as poor motivation, stress, migration, or other unknown reasons.
 - Monitoring and maintaining communication with students about their settling-in is crucial especially to protect female students.
 - It is also crucial to create favourable conditions to attract students while preventing the misuse of the student route for other purposes.

Hard transition to job inclusion

- Post-graduation counselling offered by UNICORE considered the possibility of refugee students staying in Italy, moving to another country, or returning to the country of asylum.
- UNICORE does not provide a durable solution *per se*, although it provides a two-year study opportunity with the possibility of a durable solution, for example, through asking for asylum.
- All interventions during study programs are focused on facilitating students' transition to the workforce after graduation. Many have reported that those interventions have been helpful.

- Some routine job placement events at the universities, held in Italian, might have been less helpful for refugee students given the language barrier.
- The role of job mentors at the universities is important to help refugee students prepare for and find a job.
- Language barriers and not having a mandatory internship program were reported as the main hurdles in securing a job.

Legal aspects

- The current EU legal framework allows students to stay for a specific period after graduation for job searches.
 - In Italy, the period is one year, non-renewable. There are ongoing discussions to effectuate all stays in the EU territory towards acquiring a long-term residence permit.

Findings related to the cross-sectional issue of legal status and the right to higher education

- If students decided to apply for international protection, they could not enrol in universities until a decision was reached about their application. This was identified as a regulatory gap.
- Since the scholarship was the only financial source for students, losing that source of income upon applying for asylum in Italy was perceived to be very challenging.
 - Students could not have two legal statuses simultaneously as international students and asylum seekers.
 - Universities took different approaches in dealing with students who lost their status. In some cases, students could continue their studies by providing additional documentation to regularize their protection status.
 - Most universities asked students to enrol on a single course basis, rather than full degree courses, until their protection status was confirmed.
 - This was concerning since the protection application could take several months or years to complete.
- Given the special circumstances of UNICORE students (refugees in the country of asylum), special procedures should have been in place to ensure their education and career path continuity.

Conclusion

- The UNICORE project has become a large education pathway featuring cooperation between diverse multi-sectoral actors. The level of cooperation and coordination between various actors, whole-of-society approach, and inclusion of refugee students are seen as strengths.
 - UNHCR coordinates with 41 universities and regional and local organizations, emphasizing clear division of labour and timelines.
 - Further engagement and cooperation by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Interior are needed to ensure students' timely access to services and the continuity of their legal status.
- The main weaknesses of the program include lack of structured funding, delays in obtaining proper documentation before entry, and uncertainty over long-term post-graduation legal stays.

- There is no clearly defined project funding for UNICORE as it is run by the voluntary contribution scholarships of each university. This undermines its continuity for future editions.
- The government's engagement to ensure sustainable solutions to regulatory and legal issues surrounding students' stay and access to benefits is required.
- The main challenges include covering all available scholarships, gender equity, long processing times for DoV (if needed) and TD impacting visa and residence permits, lack of sufficient Italian language skills, and shortage of student accommodation.
 - Given the refugee students' circumstances, more systemic flexibility in legal and administrative procedures is required to ensure students' smooth transition to their academic journey.
- UNICORE promotes universities' inclusion and awareness about refugees and creates a reception model within the academic environment.
- Refugee channels and UNICORE alumni should be more involved in introducing programs to potential candidates among their circles. Given the long duration of obtaining refugee status, the messaging can target young adults in refugee camps as potential future candidates.
- In the long run, the big challenge for UNICORE lies around program expansion to new education levels (bachelor's), nationality (beyond Africa), and target categories (students not necessarily recognized refugees).
 - This will help in scaling the program.
- UNICORE aims to endure sustainability through a whole-of-society intervention mechanism, hopefully providing tangible results for participating universities and communities.

Recommendations

- Enhance institutional attention and focus on refugees' contextual circumstances about the principle of access to education pathway.
 - Provide input to government institutions to amend their guidelines and regulations, focusing on the simplified procedures for UNICORE applicants.
- Increase awareness of refugees' needs and vulnerabilities in the higher education program design and intervention.
 - Enhance refugees' role in the program outreach to potential candidates and ensure gender parity by focusing on female candidate participation and increasing the pre-departure time to at least two months before the start of the academic year.
- Mainstream information sharing on first country of asylum conditions and outreach to higher education students using digital platforms and social media.
 - Cooperate with the local partners to ensure an adequate flow of information.
- Create a venue for cooperation and sharing learning opportunities among program stakeholders and create links between education and labour pathways.
 - Coordinate among service providers such as credential evaluators and address refugee qualification gaps during their studies to facilitate their inclusion in the labour market.
- Structure budget and design funding mechanism for a sustainable and scalable higher education pathway.

- Engage corporate employers with building education to employment pathways and develop study-work hybrid programs.
- Use the community sponsorship model to fund refugees' general and individual needs and other funding mechanisms like crowdfunding, loans, and grants to finance infrastructure and beneficiaries.
- Include education pathway beneficiaries to existing infrastructure for support for asylum seekers and refugees, including cultural adaptation and language training.
- Develop student levy models to finance refugee scholars.