



Beyond the sea, to study

UNIVERSITY CORRIDORS FOR REFUGEES IN ITALY

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MIGRATION POLICIES AND
INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION OFFICE
OF CARITAS ITALIANA

The context

At the end of 2020, the world refugee population amounted to 82.4 million individuals, among them thousands of young people of university age. Women and men forced to flee from their homeland because of war and persecution that must overcome insurmountable barriers to continue their education. Obstacles such as the impossibility to access tertiary education's systems, the restrictions on the movement from the refugee camps, the lack of economic means, health and social problems and problems in recognizing qualifications. Due to these difficulties, only 3% of the refugee population worldwide has access to tertiary education compared to the global average of 39% among non-refugee youths¹.

Furthermore, in most of first asylum countries, refugees are denied the possibility to work with high professional qualifications by using their degrees, so that they are forced to make the difficult decision to take the path of irregular travel in order to reach Europe, beyond the sea, and build their future. Journeys of hope that often tragically result in deaths and fuel the trafficking of human beings.

To respond to this widespread need for protection, in December 2018, most countries in the world signed the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), a fundamental act of solidarity, within which there is a commitment to increase investment in refugees' access to quality education, including tertiary level systems too. Higher education can indeed act as "equalizer", bringing together the refugee community and the host one with the common goal to learn, socialize and work side by side. Universities and higher education institutions represent spaces which facilitate personal growth, job placement, conviviality, and create the leaders of tomorrow. They can also play the role of connection between civil society, youth, and labor market, by raising the level of civil coexistence between people and stimulating social innovation, research, and the well-being of the whole society. In support of the goal of reaching 15% of refugees enrolled in tertiary education by 2030² a Global Task Force on Education Pathways was established in order to gather countries, regional and international organizations, private sector, NGOs, refugees, UN agencies and donors, committed to expand opportunities for refugee students, and also to achieve the objectives indicated in the Three-Year Strategy (2019-2021) on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways³.

These principles underlie the Italian Program of University Corridors for Refugees - UNI.CO.RE. which aims at promoting legal entry routes complementary to resettlement managed by governments and encouraging access to tertiary education (Student Pathways) for refugees in first asylum countries.

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>

² <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/5d15db254/three-year-strategy-resettlement-complementary-pathways.html>

Globally, in the broader framework of Student Pathways and sponsorship, we find two different models that allow refugee students present in countries of first asylum to legally access.

A first model is represented by Canada, with the extensive experience of the Student Refugee Program, in which refugee students have access to the country through the sponsorship program and university communities, supported by WUSC⁴ (World University Service of Canada), become sponsors and beneficiaries obtain permanent residency⁵. The program began in 1978 with the University of Carleton and includes approximately 130 students per year, more than 2000 since the program has begun. The same sponsorship model was borrowed from the United Kingdom, where in 2021 the first experience of welcoming a young refugee student at King's College in London has started; in this case too, the beneficiaries will obtain the refugee status and the University plays the role of sponsor within the Full Community Sponsorship program⁶.

A second model is the German one developed by DAAD (The German Academic Exchange Service) with the Syria program (and in the future with the nascent Africa program)⁷. 220 Syrian citizens, about half of whom are refugees in countries of first asylum, had access to German universities in Germany where they entered through a regular study visa as international students.

The Italian experience of university corridors is adherent to the second model, and is based on the issuance of student visas thanks to the support of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for students holding international protection in Ethiopia; once entered in Italy, they will get a subsequent residence permit for study reasons⁸. Students may eventually, but not necessarily, claim for asylum. From a European point of view, the Italian program certainly represents a unicum for its multi-stakeholder structure and organization, of which, in this paper, we will outline the main features.

History and partnership

The UNICORE 1.0 project was born in 2019 from an intuition of the University of Bologna. The intent was to ensure the legal entry of 5 refugee students in Ethiopia, where UNIBO entertains different academic relations, particularly with the University of Mekelle. Ethiopia⁹ was also chosen since on the one hand Caritas Italiana was already operative with the Humanitarian Corridors together with Gandhi Charity, and on the other hand the country allows refugees to have the opportunity to return after completing their studies (a possibility that is precluded for example in Middle Eastern countries which host millions of Syrian and Iraqi refugees). In the first edition of the program, UNHCR Italy, Caritas Italiana, Gandhi Charity and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation have been involved at national

⁴ <https://wusc.ca>

⁵ <https://srp.wusc.ca/about/>

⁶ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/help-support-kings-refugee-sponsorship-scheme>

⁷ <https://www2.daad.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/en/31298-scholarships-programme-for-syrian-students-launched/>

⁸ https://www.portaleimmigrazione.it/APR_PDS_Motivi_Studio.aspx

⁹ Currently the program takes place exclusively in Ethiopia but with the increase in available places it is intended to expand the possibility also to refugees in other countries of first asylum.

level. About 60 applications were collected, among which 5 were selected. At the territorial level, to promote integration and then work placement in Italy, the partnership involved the Archdiocese of Bologna, ER.GO. - Regional Agency for the Right to Higher Education in Emilia-Romagna, Federmanager Bologna- Ferrara-Ravenna, Manageritalia Emilia Romagna (associations of managers), Next Generation ItalyAps, Approdi and Approdo Sicuro. In the same academic year, LUISS in Rome participated in the project with a scholarship for an additional student.

On the basis of the experience gained from the first program, in 2020 UNHCR Italy took over the coordination of the program and, along with Caritas Italiana, Diaconia Valdese and Gandhi Charity, proposed the 2.0 edition of the program by extending it to various territories. Despite many difficulties linked to COVID-19 pandemic, there were 10 universities¹⁰ which made available 20 scholarships. In the meantime, the website www.universitycorridors.unhcr.it made possible to collect over 250 applications and, based on first program' model, in addition to the national protocol signed by the partners with the MAECI, local coordination tables were set up and territorial protocols were signed aggregating resources and improving the network.

In 2021, with the UNICORE 3.0 edition, numbers have further expanded, and the program made 45 places available, involving 24 universities¹¹. Over 500 applications were received (¾ of which were considered eligible) and nearly 150 online selection interviews were conducted. The national partners of the program were joined by JRS - Centro Astalli, an economic contribution from ACRI and local protocols with different actors have multiplied. Furthermore, in this third edition of the program, Caritas Italiana, with the collaboration of Diaconia Valdese, will not only deal with the integration but also with the pre-departure training of students who will arrive in Italy in September.

The procedures

Building the national partnership. With the coordination of UNHCR, and the collaboration of Caritas Italiana and Diaconia Valdese, universities willing to offer master degree courses (2 academic years) for refugee students are identified. Universities are asked to draw up a public announcement for courses possibly in English, offering a scholarship and, where possible, covering the placement at university student' houses. Together with the territorial partners (diocesan Caritas and local members of Diaconia Valdese, where present) a coordination table is set up to define roles and commitments to support the integration of beneficiaries. The table can be extended to other territorial actors who can make additional resources and

¹⁰ University of Milan, University of Padua, IUAV of Venice, University of Florence, University of Pisa, University of Perugia, University of L'Aquila, LUISS of Rome, University of Cagliari, University of Sassari.

¹¹ State University of Milan, University of Padua, IUAV Venice, University of Florence, University of Bari, University of Bergamo, European University Institute of Fiesole, University of Brescia, University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", University of Rome «The Sapienza », UNISTRASI Siena, University of Eastern Piedmont - Vercelli, University of Messina, LUISS Rome, University of Cagliari, University of Sassari, University of Chieti - Pescara, University of Salento - Lecce, University of Milan Bicocca, University of Milan Bocconi, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, University of Palermo, University of Tuscia - Viterbo, University of Verona.

collaborations available (see paragraph on local protocols) and formalize protocols containing the various commitments made at the local level.

Access criteria. The access criteria to the calls published by the universities are agreed with the national partners and are the same throughout Italy. Over time, the program has seen an evolution not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of expansion and improvement of these criteria. In the UNICORE 3.0 edition, applications are open to people who: reside in Ethiopia and hold refugee status, registered by UNHCR; hold a valid qualification for admission to Degree Specialist chosen¹²; have a graduation point average (GPA) of at least 3.0 according to the Ethiopian tertiary education assessment system or comparable standards issued by the Italian Ministry for Education¹³; are in possession of a degree obtained in 2016 or thereafter, but no later than March 31, 2021¹⁴; meet the specific admission requirements of the specialist degree course; have never been enrolled at any of the partner universities; have an adequate knowledge of English.

Selection procedures. Universities publish a notice on their website and on the project website in March, which remains open for about a month. In Ethiopia, refugee students can apply directly online by entering the documents required by the call. The opportunities are publicized in all refugee camps of the country, online, in Ethiopian universities and through refugee associations and other NGOs working with refugees. For the effective possibility of application, the role of UNHCR Ethiopia with its local partners and Gandhi Charity is fundamental, in order to guarantee the mobility of students from the remote places where they reside, to collect the necessary documentation and to access a computer with internet connection.

Universities appoint a committee of experts to make the selection and the procedure takes place in two phases.

Phase 1: Evaluation of the documentation. The expert committee evaluates the documentation according to the following criteria: Academic background and GPA (score: 0-20); CV evaluation: professional experience and personal skills (score: 0-10); Consistency between previous studies and the chosen Master Degree course (score: 0-10). Candidates who receive a score below 25 will not be admitted to the next stage.

Phase 2: online interview. Candidates admitted to phase 2 will be interviewed by the expert committee, which will assess their technical skills, subject's knowledge, motivational requirements and level of English. Candidates must show up the number of Ration Card, the Refugee Identity Card or the Proof of Registration used during the online application. A third party must be present at the beginning of the interview to

¹² In previous editions, applications were limited to qualifications obtained in Ethiopia. By extending even to those achieved in the respective countries of origin, which do not forget, they are often at war, failed states or authoritarian regimes, Universities had to play an additional role to oversee graduate certifications. A discussion is also underway on the possibility of expanding to BA degrees, as is the case in other countries. The main complexity lies in the potential high increasing of candidate numbers, difficult to manage, and the difficulty of recognition of qualifications and skill levels for high schools in many countries.

¹³ The level required is very high in order to promote the best students.

¹⁴ In previous editions the limit was higher but it was considered to reduce it to five years in order to ensure that the beneficiaries' aptitude for study is still intense and that the beneficiaries do not encounter excessive difficulties in continuing their specialist studies in Italian universities.

identify the candidate. The interviews are evaluated on a scale of 40 points. The list of selected candidates is published in June on the project website and on the websites of the respective universities.

Pre-departure information. Caritas Italiana, with the collaboration of Diaconia Valdese, will carry out a mission in Ethiopia to personally meet the selected candidates who are students with a refugee background. For this reason, the goal of the meeting and the individual interview is precisely to know the beneficiaries in depth, their history, their dreams, and desires, but also their fragilities, health and/or psychological vulnerabilities in order to report them at the territorial table to best support them in their social integration and in their academic performance too. In addition, the interviews also serve to assess the family burden. Due to the years spent in the refugee camps, the beneficiaries of the program are frequently older than the average of Italian university students and they often have family and children. It should be emphasized that the program provides for admission for individual students only and not for the whole family unit (such as in the UK) and therefore, once arrived in Italy, their thoughts will be turned to the family and the possibility of reunification as allowed by the legislation. There will also be a pre-departure training performed through role games, presentations, and mutual exchanges. The objectives of the trainings are multiple: 1- aligning expectations of beneficiaries with the reality of the reception country; 2- promoting beneficiaries' self-determination, explaining their rights and duties, both with respect to their course of study and to the possibility of integration; 3- describing the cultural characteristics of Italy (social, geographical, religious, institutional and legal ones); 4- giving information, answering questions and making people understand the reception standards guaranteed within the program, but also highlighting the differences that each territory will have on the basis of the local partnership. In order to foster this in-depth knowledge, a form is also prepared, sent via e-mail to the students, with links and ad-hoc information for each territory about the services, references and contacts useful for a prompt orientation. With respect to the pre-departure training, for the 3.0 edition, the University for Foreigners of Siena will provide all students with an online Italian course to start language learning that will continue in the individual universities with the support of the territorial networks.

Departure and entry to Italy. Once the list of students has been defined, Gandhi Charity, in collaboration with Caritas Italiana and in close cooperation with the Italian Embassy in Addis Ababa, supports refugees in obtaining the necessary travel documents. Students must register online on the portal www.universitaly.it, have their qualifications obtained in Ethiopia validated by the consular representation by issuing the Declaration of Value or alternatively, with the support of CIMEA, the Certificate of Comparability. For qualifications not obtained in Ethiopia, Universities in their autonomy can accept the documentation produced during the application even in the absence of the Declaration of Value, taking into account the level of preparation of the candidates and the humanitarian spirit of the initiative, since refugees cannot contact

their country' embassies. Once this documentation is obtained, the Convention Travel Document is issued by Ethiopian authorities and subsequently the Schengen entry Visa for study purposes by the Italian consular authority in Addis Ababa. The trip is organized by Caritas Italiana in strict accordance with the regulations for COVID-19 infection prevention (pre-departure molecular PRC test and quick swab test at the arrival) and medical examination for transmissible diseases required by the Ministry of Health. The next beneficiaries of the program will arrive in Italy in September 2021 in order to register at the university and will undergo fiduciary isolation of 14 days with the support of Diaconia Valdese and Caritas Italiana. Once in Italy, students will be enrolled to the university at the chosen faculty and hosted mostly in apartments / student residences or in accommodation provided by the diocesan Caritas. The university will take care of the beneficiaries' inclusion in the university context.

The role of diocesan Caritas and local partners in welcoming on the territory

The role of diocesan Caritas within the UNICORE project is expressed in supporting the extra-university social inclusion of the students. In addition to invest economically in hospitality, the diocesan Caritas focuses above all on the human capital of volunteers and their operators. To make this support as profitable as possible in terms of relationships and integration, a diocesan operator and mentor' families are identified to represent points of reference for the beneficiaries in the two years of the project.

In addition to the work carried out by the operators and mentor' families, which is crucial to enable the beneficiaries to live a more solid inclusion in the social environment, in the various territories in which the project is active, local multi-actor tables have been promoted between public and private actors in order to offer a greater number of services to the hosted students and to lay the foundations for a positive social and work integration paths.

The establishment of local partnerships, in addition to facilitating certain procedures and offering a wider range of services, also aims at sensitizing local authorities by informing them of the presence of UNICORE students so as to increase social awareness on the issues of international protection and allow the territories to propagate a broader vision of the multifaceted foreign presence in our country. Secondly, the involvement of federations of entrepreneurs and companies is useful for the project to facilitate post-graduate placement for example through the activation of internships and job grants.

This multi-stakeholder engagement model has taken shape since the pilot edition held in 2019 in Bologna with seven local actors who guaranteed the provision of scholarship and university housing, an extra support for integration through mentor' families, a monthly financial contribution, the handling of bureaucratic procedures and a structured post-university placement path.

In the UNICORE 2.0 edition, on the other hand, in the ten territories that hosted the 20 students for the two-year period 2020/2022 (in addition to the Universities,

the diocesan Caritas and the Diaconia Valdese) over 50 actors were involved in the territorial partnerships, including banking foundations, local authorities, business organizations for job placement, institutions for the right to education, third sector associations that deal with reception and integration, university pastoral care organisations, university hostels, but also police headquarters, local health authorities and regional transport companies.

The example of Milan. To describe how local partnerships have evolved from the second to the third edition, we may observe the peculiarities of their development in the city of Milan. In the 2020/2021 edition, in addition to Università Statale which offered 2 scholarships, accommodation and canteen for the students welcomed by the UNICORE project, the local partners active in the Milan area were Diaconia Valdese and Caritas Ambrosiana who had a fundamental initial role to facilitate students in handling all bureaucratic procedures useful to ensure a regular and safe presence in the area (health card, residence permit, telephone card, purchase of electronic devices, etc.). The work carried out by these two actors continue to be crucial and synergistic both on the educational level and on the interception of unrevealed needs, such as health, psychological or other discomforts, which in some cases, if not expressed, can compromise the path of study and integration. Università Statale, Caritas Ambrosiana and the Diaconia Valdese are currently taking action to find new actors to involve in order to guarantee students an appropriate post-graduate placement. Finding and engaging additional partners depends on exploring the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries.

In the 3.0 edition in Milan area, in addition to Università Statale, two other universities have become part of the project: Bicocca and Bocconi. The territory will welcome during 2021/2022 academic year 7 of the 45 selected beneficiaries. Thanks to the proactive role of university representatives, negotiations are underway to include the Milanese Transport Company, the Municipality of Milan, to facilitate entry to museums and promote the knowledge of the city, Sodexo catering company to guarantee meals both on weekends and in the periods of closure and the Welcome Refugees association. In addition, work is underway to extend services and facilities to the two students welcomed in the previous edition. Caritas Ambrosiana and Diaconia Valdese will continue to play a crucial role in the activities of accompaniment and integration.

Finally, the great challenge in local partnerships is to make very different actors, in terms of mission and objectives, dialoguing among themselves with the common objective of guaranteeing the well-being of the hosted students. Setting up a network that provides for the definition of different levels and areas of intervention, in which the key and reference figures for the students are also clearly defined¹⁵, is necessary in order to avoid overlaps that may confuse the students themselves on the role that each partner plays. The presence of all these actors involved represents a great opportunity

¹⁵ The proliferation of actors around it can create superstructures that risk limiting the ability to choose and confuse students.

not only for students, who see an increase in the number of services offered, but also for operators and university representatives, who are involved in a mutual learning process thanks to the comparison coming from the different experiences put in place in the reception of refugees.