

SCHOLARS AT RISK

ITALY SECTION

MCU Anniversary

World Café Table 11 – The role of universities in supporting at-risk-scholars in times of crisis

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The main aim of the world café was to share concerns and experiences of universities in welcoming, hosting, and advocating in support of displaced scholars and students in light of the recent crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine. Claudia Padovani introduced the international organisation Scholars at Risk (SAR) and the Italian section and outlined the three pillars of the network's activity: protection, advocacy, research and learning. The focus of the table was on the activity of protection, that is establishing temporary placements for at-risk and displaced scholars, with particular attention to the **responsiveness** and **preparedness** of universities in the face of the two recent crises. The participants were asked to describe how the different components of the academic community (academic and administrative staff as well as students) responded to the crises and the responsiveness and mobilisation of networks at multiple levels, to evaluate the level of preparedness of their universities looking at both strong and weak points, and finally to discuss the challenges ahead and priorities for common action.

Several participants reported displaced researchers being hosted with temporary academic positions at their universities. In relation to the Ukraine crisis in particular, participants from universities in neighbouring countries highlighted a strong response in welcoming above all the families of their students, scholars, establishing partnerships with universities, setting up of crisis groups involving students, administrative staff and academics. Ukrainian families were being hosted in student dormitories in Poland, academic staff and students were involved in solidarity and also non-academic activities. Students were supporting activities in many ways, eg. students of Medicine providing support for displaced people at railway stations, students supporting children integrating in schools, providing interpreting services and other activities. Some valuable research collaborations were reported amongst academics.

Participants from Ukrainian universities reported that their international offices in particular were very active in responding to the crisis, contacting their international partners and seeking new agreements to find temporary mobilities for their students. It was also reported that by now a considerable number of people have returned to Ukraine. Also, many students are continuing their studies online.

Several challenges were also reported.

Recognition of credentials is not straightforward given the different education systems which are not always found to be comparable and thus difficulty inserting displaced students into their courses, above all in Medical schools.

Language was another key issue, with displaced students often not knowing the language of the host country, and their English competence not always being sufficient to follow courses taught through the medium of English (which seemed to be in place in most universities). Efforts are being made to equip the students, but learning a language requires time, and some students still had not reached levels required, also due to the difficult situations they were facing. In the case of students of Medicine, several problems were highlighted. Medical schools have **strict entry requirements** and it is difficult to integrate students in these courses due to different educational backgrounds and also language issues. Alternative pathways, such as nursing were being offered, but students were generally not interested.

Another issue is the Ukrainian concern about a brain drain, the Ukrainian government and universities do not want others to 'take' their students, have them enrol in their universities. They would prefer to have a temporary hosting, mobilities, Erasmus type agreements.

Student representatives at the tables were generally positive that their universities were taking initiatives to host scholars and students from conflict areas but were critical of the universities' lack of preparedness, fragmented responses and tendency to work unilaterally and ignore non-academic aspects (welfare system, student integration, access to computers ..). There was strong student participation in addressing these issues which the universities were seen as having omitted to address – such as collections of basic necessities, computers, organization of events to support the social integration of students. All student participants highlighted mental health as THE priority issue, an issue which was not raised by other participants.

The case of how universities are responding to students and researchers from Russia and Belarus was also raised. In some cases research collaboration was not allowed, and students from these countries were not always being admitted to universities. Yet many participants saw it as important to be able to collaborate, and suggested that the cases of researchers from these countries should be analysed on a case by case basis.

Final considerations and Recommendations

Overall it was felt that rather than preparedness there were generally positive, but fragmented emergency responses to the situations and there was certainly room for improvement and more preparedness.

Universities need to take into consideration not only academic issues such as recognition and language, but also non-academic needs such as mental health, welfare, social integration, accommodation, access to basic necessities.

Universities should consult and involve student representatives when planning actions to respond to crises.

More support at higher levels is seen as important in supporting universities in this activity, both financial and regarding issues such as visas and facilitating entry. Furthermore, national programmes for at-risk students and scholars (such as those existing in France, Germany, Sweden), are considered important for preparedness and sustainability.