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The Role of Spanish Universities in the Integration of Refugee Students: An Analytical Study in the Context and Practices of Higher Education.

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Abstract. In recent years, Spanish universities have integrated refugees through academic initiatives. A national government program, driven by the Ministry of Universities, provides financial support for the University Refugee Action Plan, aimed at facilitating access to higher education and promoting integration. The University of Burgos led a research project evaluating the plan's impact on 27 universities across Spain. This study used a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data. Information was gathered through surveys administered to 21 universities and 33 refugee students, along with four focus groups, in subsidized universities across four autonomous communities. Quantitative analysis used descriptive statistics and the Wilcoxon test for refugee enrollment variations. Qualitative focus group data underwent thematic coding in ATLAS.ti, with manual theme extraction. The findings revealed a significant increase in refugee student enrollment in undergraduate courses, rising from an average of four in 2021/22 to eight in 2023/24. The Plan has improved the educational and integration prospects of students, researchers, and lecturers, although its impact on technical and administrative staff members is less pronounced. Overall, universities have reported improvements in their service quality and diversity. Language support remains crucial, with 85.7% of universities offering Spanish courses. However, only 33.3% have employment promotion initiatives, indicating room for growth. Participants rated the program 8.68 out of 10, with Spanish courses scoring 9.16. Recommendations include increasing Spanish instruction hours, enhancing psychological and social support, and broadening leisure and employment opportunities. Volunteers noted positive changes in their views on refugees and other related issues. Despite these advancements, 95.2% of institutions acknowledge the need for further improvements, suggesting the need for diversification of rights holders' profiles and increased outreach efforts.

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1. Introduction

Millions of people have been forced to leave their homes every year over the past decades, driven by complex causes such as human rights violations, persecution, and evolving conflicts, among other factors. The latest report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on forced displacement presents concerning statistics. In 2023, 117.3 million individuals were forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2024a). A significant proportion (69%) sought refuge in bordering countries, while those who ventured beyond these borders predominantly relocated to middle- and low-income countries (UNHCR, 2024a). According to Eurostat, Spain received 162,420 applications for international protection by 2023, a 37.7% increase from the previous year (Eurostat, 2025). In light of this situation, it is imperative to develop sustainable solutions to integrate refugees into host countries. Integrating them into the higher education system is one approach. However, refugee youth face considerable challenges in accessing higher education.

Over the past few years, there has been a slight increase in enrollment rates, increasing from 1% in 2019 to 7% in 2023 (UNHCR, 2024b). However, substantial efforts are still needed to meet the UNHCR's 15/30 target, which seeks to have at least 15% of the refugee population enrolled in higher education by 2030 (UNHCR, 2019). According to the UNHCR, refugees encounter numerous obstacles in accessing higher education (UNHCR, 2019). The limited availability of educational institutions and enrollment opportunities, coupled with geographical distance and mobility restrictions, presents significant challenges.

Furthermore, low secondary education completion rates, especially among women, aggravate this situation. Financial constraints, including high tuition fees, further impede access, while restrictions on certain fields of study and a lack of necessary documentation create additional barriers to education. Infrastructure deficiencies, such as unreliable electricity and inadequate Internet connectivity, complicate the online learning process. Additionally, many refugees must prioritize providing financial support for their families over pursuing further education. Women and individuals with disabilities face even greater challenges in accessing higher education (UNHCR, 2019).

A review of the literature on refugee higher education identifies several specific challenges faced by refugee students, including language proficiency, access to information, and adaptation to new cultural and educational environments (Abamosa, 2024; Berg, 2023; Lambrechts, 2020; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; Olsson et al., 2023). Moreover, refugees' mental health is a critical factor influencing their access to educational opportunities and the effectiveness of these experiences (Jack et al., 2018). The trauma they experience presents a significant challenge, often intensified by a lack of awareness within the university community and the absence of a supportive and caring culture (Berg, 2023; Maringe et al., 2017).

Additionally, institutional barriers, such as missing credentials, documentation, and qualification evaluation, were highlighted (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). Although both students and university staff exhibit strong motivation to support refugees, they frequently encounter obstacles such as inadequate training or knowledge in relevant areas and a shortage of qualified teaching staff, particularly in language instruction (Berg, 2023; Lambrechts, 2020). Collectively, these challenges hinder the effective integration of refugee students into higher-education systems.

In this context, several recommendations have been made to enhance the enrollment of refugee students in national universities (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; UNHCR, 2023a; UNHCR, 2023b). These initiatives were formulated to improve access to higher education for the refugee population through collaboration with governments, educational institutions, and other relevant stakeholders. The proposed actions are as follows: First, eliminate administrative and political barriers to enhance the mobility of refugees within the host country, ensure their entitlement to participate in final examinations at the secondary education level, facilitate access to financial resources and banking services, and modify qualification recognition systems to accommodate their specific requirements. Second, access can be increased by disseminating information to potential candidates in host regions and implementing transition programs to address particular challenges.

Third, pathways for enrollment should be created by investing in secondary education infrastructure in host regions and promoting higher education by emphasizing its economic and social benefits. Lastly, capitalize on school completion by identifying labor market demands and guiding students, accordingly, linking technical training to employment opportunities in high-demand sectors, enabling refugees to enter the formal labor market, supporting the establishment and registration of businesses, and conducting research to demonstrate the positive economic impact of trained refugees.

Aligned with the UNHCR's global strategy, the European Commission introduced an Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for the years 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020). Before this initiative, numerous European countries had already formulated their own strategies, with Germany being recognized for having one of the most comprehensive policies in this field (European Commission, 2019). In addition to Germany, 15 other European nations reported the implementation of extensive measures during 2017-2018 to enhance refugees' access to higher education, albeit frequently in an indirect manner.

These measures encompassed a range of support services for refugee university students, with linguistic assistance being the most prevalent, offered in 13 educational systems. Other common interventions included scholarships for asylum seekers and refugees, tuition fee waivers, personalized orientation programmes, and capacity-building initiatives for university staff engaged with these populations. Available data indicate significant disparities across countries: Belgium recorded 70 refugee students in the 2015/16 academic year, Luxembourg

95, Italy 356, Austria 596, and Germany over 6,000 enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes, with an additional 10,400 in preparatory courses. Furthermore, a persistent gender imbalance is evident, with male refugee students significantly outnumbering their female counterparts. For instance, in Germany, males constitute 78% of refugee students compared to 22% females, a pattern mirrored in other European countries (European Commission, 2019). Beyond the European context, policies aimed at promoting the inclusion of refugees through higher education have been implemented in other regions, such as Norway. In this nation, various public and private organizations collaborate to facilitate refugees' access to higher education (Yildiz, 2019).

However, research indicates that the lack of a comprehensive social inclusion strategy within policy documents impedes the complete social integration of refugees into higher education (Abamosa et al., 2019). This issue is not limited to Norway alone. Numerous studies emphasize the urgent need for well-rounded and effective policy frameworks and guidelines that promote refugee inclusion, recognize higher education as a means of social integration, and allocate financial resources to initiatives that enhance social and educational inclusion (Abamosa et al., 2019; Grüttner, 2019; Naylor, 2019).

Since 2015, Spanish universities have intensified their efforts to support refugees, catalyzed by the Declaration on Support Measures by the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE) (Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas, 2015; Marcu, 2018). Consequently, there has been a notable increase in support activities and tailored plans for assisting refugees. By 2019, 29 Spanish universities had implemented services for refugees in higher education, such as Spanish language instruction, counseling, tuition waivers, and housing and living expense provisions. These initiatives were funded either by the universities themselves or through regional grants (Trigo Sánchez et al., 2019).

However, Spain did not establish a State Plan for the reception of refugees in higher education until 2022. Following the Ukraine conflict, the University Refugee Action Plan was created that year (Government of Spain, 2022). Approved on March 29, 2022, this plan facilitated the reception of students, Faculty and Research Staff (FRS), and Administrative, Technical, and Support Staff (ATSS) in Spanish universities. However, its scope was limited to individuals fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Royal Decree 985/2022 was approved on November 22, 2022, to advance the University-Refuge Action Plan (Real Decreto 985/2022, 2022). This decree established a framework for allocating direct subsidies to specific public universities and CRUE. A total of 27 Spanish universities were selected to receive refugees from Ukraine based on two criteria: the distribution of potential beneficiaries of the plan across various autonomous communities and the size of the beneficiary universities. As a result, the subsidy was channeled to four regions that have seen a significant increase in the number of Ukrainian nationals: Andalusia, Catalonia, Madrid, and the Valencian Community. Each of the 27 universities was awarded a direct subsidy ranging from €33,171.70 to €216,328.20.

These funds were designed to address the needs of refugees affected by conflict. Additionally, the decree provided a direct subsidy to CRUE with two actions.

- Line 1: Coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of actions carried out by subsidized public universities. Development of a final report on the impact of these actions.
- Line 2: Development of a study on the feasibility of incorporating Spain into the European Council's European Qualifications Passport for Refugees initiative.

As a result of this funding, the University of Burgos (UBU) was awarded through a competitive process with the responsibility of monitoring and evaluating public universities (Line 1). Consequently, in December 2023, the CRUE tasked UBU with the preparation of this report, the objectives, methodology, and results of which are presented in this section.

2. Research Question

Within the context of the Refugee University Action Plan and Royal Decree 985/2022, this study seeks to investigate the following central question: What has been the impact and effectiveness of the grant provided by Royal Decree 985/2022 in the selected public universities for the inclusion of refugee students in Spain? This inquiry will guide the analysis, concentrating on the allocation and utilization of resources, the participation of refugee students and volunteers, and the academic and social outcomes resulting from the program's implementation.

3. Objective of the research

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the subsidy provided under Royal Decree 985/2022 (Real Decreto 985/2022, 2022) for the inclusion of Ukrainian refugee students in selected Spanish public universities. Specifically, this study focuses on assessing how the allocated resources contribute to the academic and social integration of refugee students within these institutions.

Furthermore, this study aims to identify the number of enrollments, assess resource utilization, and gather perspectives of universities hosting refugee students. Additionally, the study seeks to compare data from the current academic year with those from previous years and examine the perspectives and participation levels of students and volunteers benefiting from the program.

4. Methodology

The study was organized into two sequential phases to ensure alignment with the overarching objective. The initial phase (Phase I) involved a narrative bibliographic review aimed at identifying and analyzing the systematization tools utilized in refugee welcome programs across national and European public and private universities. This exploratory review, which was neither systematic nor bibliometric, informed the development and refinement of the indicators used in the subsequent phase. Phase II employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively evaluate

the impact of the subsidy provided by Royal Decree 985/2022. This sequential design was selected to ensure that the identification of relevant tools and best practices (Phase I) would serve as a robust foundation for the development of contextually appropriate indicators, which would then be systematically applied in the comprehensive evaluation of program impact (Phase II). In this manner, each phase directly contributes to the overall aim of assessing the effectiveness and outcomes of the funded refugee welcome programs, ensuring a coherent and logically aligned methodological flow of the study.

This research is conceptually grounded in the Theory of Change, a conceptual model that clarifies the reasons and mechanisms behind changes in specific settings (Vogel, 2012). Using this model, the research initially examines the resources allocated to the initiative, referred to as "inputs," which encompass economic, human, material, and infrastructure elements. It further investigates "activities," which are the actions undertaken to reach the intended results; "participants," who are the programs' target audience; the "outputs," which are the immediate consequences of these actions; and finally, the anticipated short- and long-term "outcomes," which reflect the attainment of the objectives. Although the Theory of Change was not formally applied during the initial exploratory review, it served as a guiding framework for the design and analysis during the second phase. The operationalization of these components through specific indicators is described in Phase II.

***Phase I:** Analysis of systematization tools for reception programs and actions for refugee inclusion*

During the initial phase, a bibliographic review was conducted to investigate the systematization tools employed in refugee welcome programs and other initiatives by both national and European public and private universities. The findings of this review are summarized in Table 2, which provides an overview of the main tools identified for the systematization of these initiatives. This investigation and analysis facilitated the evaluation of the items and indicators established through the logical framework, which were essential for conducting a comprehensive analysis of the impact of reception programs. Furthermore, it enabled the identification of best practices in this domain.

***Phase II.** Evaluation of the impact of actions developed by the 27 Spanish universities funded by Royal Decree 985/2022.*

In the second phase of this project, the following indicators were analyzed (Table 1).

Table 1: List of indicators analyzed in the second phase of the study

Evaluable Aspects	Indicators	Data
Academic Orientation and Advising Activities for Enrollment.	Increase in the enrollment rate of refugees.	Bachelor's Degree Students (2021-2022-2023); Master's Degree Students (2021-2022-2023); PhD Students (2021-2022-2023).
	Increase in the graduation rate of individuals in the program.	Bachelor's Graduates (2021-2022-2023); Master's Graduates (2021-2022-2023). PhD Graduates (2021-2022-2023).
Support Activities for Inclusion.	Improvement of linguistic skills of individuals in the program.	Students enrolled in Spanish courses. Students certified with B2 level of Spanish.
	Improvement of skills for social and economic inclusion of individuals in the program.	Support activities developed. Students participating in employment promotion activities. Students using psychological support services. Refugees who secure employment within a year after graduation,
Awareness Activities.	Improvement of skills and abilities of the community (university and local) to promote the inclusion of refugees.	Awareness activities. Individuals are reached through awareness activities.
Support Networks.	Strengthening of support networks for the inclusion of students in the program.	Number of host families, students, and supporting lecturers. External organizations involved in the project/action FRS/ATSS involved in the project

This set of indicators serves to operationalize the Theory of Change within this study's analytical framework. Specifically, the evaluable aspects primarily correspond to the activities implemented, whereas the data collected capture the

immediate results or outputs. The indicators were designed to measure both short- and long-term changes (outcomes) attributable to the intervention. Inputs—defined as the resources allocated—are examined transversally, with particular attention to how resource availability and management influence the implementation of activities and the attainment of desired results.

To acquire quantitative statistical data, an initial survey was developed for the 27 subsidized universities (Appendix 1), followed by a second survey targeting beneficiaries and volunteers (Appendix 2). IBM SPSS software version 25 was used for the statistical analysis. Subsequently, a descriptive analysis of the variables was conducted using frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and mean, mode, and standard deviation for quantitative variables. The Wilcoxon test was used for comparative analyses. In all instances, a 95% confidence level was used. To collect qualitative data, four focus groups were held in the four participating Autonomous Communities: Andalusia, Catalonia, Madrid and the Valencian Community. The focus groups were divided into two parts.

Initially, there was a presentation phase in which the main services offered by each university were informally discussed; this part was not included in the study's analysis. After this introduction, a series of questions were asked, specifically related to the programs and initiatives developed under the awarded grants. These questions were organized into six thematic categories: introduction, evaluation of program effectiveness, assessment of individual impact, influence, successes and failures, and future directions. The qualitative data from the focus groups were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software version 9.1.7, which facilitated the coding and thematic analysis of textual data. This qualitative analysis complemented the quantitative data by providing in-depth insights and contextualizing the findings, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of reception programs.

In this context, it is crucial to emphasize the reliability of the instruments used in this study. Currently, the evaluation of the impact of refugee reception in universities depends on context-specific questionnaires, as no validated or standardized instrument is available for widespread application in this field. In this study, the questionnaires were specifically designed to align with the study's objectives. Owing to time constraints, the research instruments were neither pilot tested nor formally validated. However, pertinent issues were deliberated within the monitoring and evaluation working group, which included representatives from 27 participating universities. Although this process did not constitute formal validation, it facilitated a preliminary consensus regarding the content. This should be considered when interpreting the results of the present study.

5. Limitations

The present study had certain limitations. The execution period of the study coincided with the duration of the grants, resulting in several actions lacking evaluable outcomes. In such instances, approximate data provided by responsible individuals were used. The available resources facilitated the temporary hiring of

research personnel, enabling the achievement of short-term research results. To monitor the actions, a Working Group for Follow-up and Evaluation was established, comprising the Ministry and the participating universities. Regrettably, the Ministry's participation could not be secured.

6. Results

Following the search conducted in Phase I, eight systematization tools were identified. Of these, five were selected, and three were excluded based on the following criteria.

- In terms of content, the tools were required to actively compile actions supporting refugees in a university environment.
- Regarding the target audience, the actions were aimed at the university community.
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The five selected tools are listed (Table 2).

Table 2: Systematization tools identified.

International Tools	Description
Together Project	EU-funded project that identifies the inclusion activities of European universities (including the Refugee Welcome Map).
Scholarship Opportunities for Refugees	Platform designed by UNHCR that compiles and organizes university scholarships for refugee students.
UNI.CO.RE. University Corridors for Refugees.	The project was developed by the University of Bologna and Luiss (Italy) and gathers information about 37 Italian universities offering scholarships and support for refugee students.
Science For Ukraine	Platform developed by the namesake association that collects support actions for the Ukrainian academic community (job offers, scholarships, and study support).
National Tools	Description
Map of University Refugee Actions in Spain	This platform was developed by the University of A Coruña (Spain) and the Autonomous University of Madrid (Spain) to compile actions developed in the university field for the inclusion of refugee students in Spain.

The results of the search reveal that the five tools collect data across four main areas to different extents: activities for orientation and academic counseling related to enrollment; support for inclusion, such as Spanish language classes, workshops promoting employment, and psychological assistance; initiatives aimed at raising awareness within both the university and local communities; and networks of support intended to aid the group's inclusion.

The initial phase facilitated the identification of optimal practices concerning the systematization of these initiatives, which was essential for the subsequent development of a Spanish platform designed to compile programs and actions for the integration of refugees in Spain (UBU,2024). It is significant to note that the only tool developed in Spain was partially created by one of the 27 Spanish universities that received support from the State Plan.

The findings from Phase II of the study are delineated into two primary sections: quantitative results, which furnish statistical evidence regarding the program's impact, and qualitative insights, which provide depth and context to these numerical data.

Quantitative findings:

Among the 27 universities that received subsidies, 21 participated in this study. The findings show that before obtaining the grant, 66.7% of the universities surveyed had already established a program to welcome refugees, while 33.3% had not yet done so.

The analysis of **enrollment trends** among refugee students revealed a statistically significant increase in undergraduate enrollment between 2021 and 2023, as indicated by the Wilcoxon test ($Z=-1.959$; $p=0.050$). During this period, the average increased from 4.38 in the 2021-2022 academic year to 8.08 in 2023-2024. In contrast, the enrollment means for master's students remained stable at 2.15, with no significant change detected ($p=0.932$). For doctoral students, a reduction in the mean enrollment was observed, declining from 1.45 in 2021 to 0.45 in 2023; however, this change was not significant.

Additionally, comparisons of the academic years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 show no significant differences in enrollment figures for bachelor's ($p=0.917$), master's ($p=0.591$), and PhD ($p=0.102$) students, suggesting that the variations across these years are not statistically significant. The universities that participated in the survey collectively reported that 285 refugees enrolled in the 2023/24 academic year as part of the University-Refugee Action Plan. Among them, there were 165 undergraduate students, 34 pursuing master's degrees, and six doctoral candidates. Additionally, one ATSS and 41 FRS became part of the university community.

Owing to the cross-sectional design of this study and the aforementioned time constraints, it was not possible to gather relevant data on the increase in **graduation rates** among refugees who participated in the program. However, regarding the improvement of **language skills** among refugees, 70.6% of universities registered refugees for Spanish classes. A total of 133 refugees received language training. Nevertheless, only 46.2% of these universities indicated that refugees had reached B2 level Spanish proficiency.

Upon examining the skills linked to the **social and economic integration of refugees** within the program, it was found that 50% of the universities saw enhancements in certain operational areas or services following the grant's

implementation. The universities identified 17 unique types of support activities (Table 3).

Table 3: List of services offered by universities and percentages of use

Services Offered	% of universities offering the service	% of students using the service	Comment
Linguistic Support	85.71%	62.1%	Average service rating: 9.16 (SD=1.50).
Tuition Assistance	76.2%		
Academic Orientation and Advising	76.2%		
Maintenance Assistance	71.4%		
Housing Assistance	66.6%		
Support Activities for Inclusion	66.6%		
Psychological Support	52.4%	20.7%	The support received was also significant.
Legal Advising	47.6%		
Employment Promotion	33.3%	30.3%	Average service rating: 7.65 (SD=2.93).
Health Assistance Advising	23.8%		
Awareness Activities	48.5%		There were varied opinions on the activities.

Six universities reported a range of additional activities, including stress management and emotional development initiatives, creative writing workshops, and training programs focused on human rights, gender equality, and coexistence. Furthermore, they provided training in refugee camps, supported document translation, and offered grants for training not directly associated with undergraduate, master's, or doctoral studies. These institutions have facilitated language exchange programs and provide specialized psychiatric assistance.

The evaluation revealed that 66.7% of universities lack participation from refugee students in programs aimed at boosting employability, suggesting that these services are rarely available and not widely used. Correspondingly, 53.8% of the universities indicated that the people they cater to are unemployed. Similarly, while psychological support services are commonly available, with 52.4% of institutions offering them, only 40% of universities have refugees who consistently use these services. This indicates that the service was underutilized. In general, 52.4% of the surveyed institutions regarded activities aimed at the inclusion of refugee students as somewhat adequate, while only 28.6% considered them very adequate.

The analysis conducted to assess the enhancement of **competencies and skills within the community to facilitate the inclusion of refugees** indicates that 77.8% of universities engage in awareness-raising activities for refugee inclusion. These institutions organized between one and ten activities in the 2023/2024 academic year. However, the scope of these activities exhibits considerable variability. Universities reach audiences ranging from small groups to thousands of people. It is estimated that the universities raised over 2,260 direct beneficiaries, although the actual number is likely to be higher. Generally, there are notable challenges in reporting data that effectively summarize participation in awareness-raising activities such as these.

Institutions were surveyed regarding the involvement of host families, students, and support lecturers in enhancing **support networks for refugee integration**. The data revealed that 61.9% of universities had academic mentors, with an average of 14.5 lecturers (SD=17.213). Furthermore, 52.4% of universities reported having student support, with an average of 4.56 learners (SD=6.502). Notably, only one university indicated the participation of host families in its program. Finally, 80% of the institutions had between 2 and 50 ATSS/FRS involved in the project (Mean: 11.80; SD=16.319).

Regarding collaboration with external organizations, 33.3% of institutions did not engage with entities outside the academic sphere. Conversely, 16.7% of these institutions collaborated with one or two external organizations, while 50.1% were involved with three to six entities. The average number of collaborating institutions is 2.33, with a standard deviation of 2.142. En total, el estudio evidencia que se establecieron conexiones con al menos 36 entidades externas.

Furthermore, the study aggregates the evaluations of professionals responsible for managing the host programs. The analysis revealed that 52.4% of the universities perceived the program as having a very positive impact on the beneficiaries, assigning an average score of 7.33 out of 10 (SD=1.853). The program's suitability for the beneficiaries was also rated positively (Mean: 7.76, SD=2.022), with 47.6% of the universities surveyed asserting that it has significantly contributed to achieving the program's objectives, and 42.9% indicating a substantial contribution. The adequacy of resources allocated for implementing the actions was also positively assessed, albeit to a lesser degree (Mean: 6.38; SD=2.355). The training of personnel involved in the care of program

beneficiaries is deemed insufficient, with 66.7% of the institutions not receiving training. When asked about the necessity for program improvements, 95.2% of the universities indicated that enhancements were required.

Assessments from 33 individuals, including beneficiaries and volunteers, were systematically collected. The responses were categorized as follows: 75.8% from refugee student beneficiaries, 12.1% from FRS beneficiaries, 6.1% from faculty volunteers, and another 6.1% from student volunteers. In terms of program evaluation, refugee student beneficiaries provided an average rating of 8.68 (SD=2.34), while FRS beneficiaries assigned an average score of 9.25 (SD=1.5). Additionally, both student and faculty volunteers reported that their participation in the program positively influenced their perceptions of refugees.

Qualitative findings:

The quantitative study involved 20 university representatives and obtained responses from 33 beneficiaries and volunteers. This analysis elucidated the perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the implemented reception program. Universities widely recognize the advantages of the University Refugee Program, particularly its role in facilitating the rapid and effective integration of Ukrainian students into academic environments. In general, all the participants rated the inclusion of refugees included in the program in the university community as good or very good, without having received notification of any notable problems of coexistence. The inclusion of refugees through this grant has generated sensitivity in the university community, especially in research groups that welcomed Ukrainian researchers.

Regarding the inclusion of students, perceptions were diverse depending on the university. Some pointed out that their presence in the faculties has indeed influenced the sensitivity of the university community, while others stated that it is very difficult to determine whether the positive impact is due to this program or to external awareness-raising campaigns alone. Similarly, certain differences were observed between larger and smaller universities: *"I believe that in smaller universities, where there is more integration, there is a greater impact"*.

Universities that previously lacked refugee programs have successfully invested in initiatives to establish robust measures to adequately support refugee students. For institutions that already had such programs in place, the plan served as a significant source of funding, enabling the implementation of measures that were previously unattainable with their financial resources. Additionally, the ease of fund processing by the Ministry of Universities and the grant's facilitation of staff hiring to manage these initiatives and develop protocols and roadmaps for program stabilization were highlighted as key strengths of the program. Moreover, the program encourages improved coordination across various administrative departments, ensuring a cohesive institutional response to refugee support.

Despite these advantages, several challenges have emerged. A primary concern among universities is that funding allocations do not adequately account for the specific needs and capacities of individual institutions. Furthermore, there was a

noted deficiency in communication between universities and the Ministry of Universities, both prior to grant allocation and during its execution. Universities reported a lack of consultation before the funding decision, which adversely affected the effectiveness of the grants and impeded advisory support for institutions that lacked prior experience in refugee programs. Additionally, during the implementation phase, universities identified the need for enhanced technical assistance in grant management and justification processes.

One significant critique pertains to inconsistencies in the selection criteria for funding allocation, resulting in dissatisfaction among institutions. Furthermore, bureaucratic impediments, such as regional admission processes and the recognition of academic credentials, have obstructed the program's seamless implementation. The restrictive nature of financial support, particularly concerning accommodation, presents additional challenges for international students. Universities have noted that "*funding has been very constrained*."

Moreover, concerns have been raised regarding the nationality-based eligibility criteria, as universities have been unable to extend support to refugees from diverse backgrounds, creating inequity perceptions. The lack of harmonization with other types of subsidies has led to complicated resource management by universities, duplication of procedures and data collection, and varying capacities for monitoring beneficiaries, all of which have been identified as weaknesses of the program. Smaller universities maintain closer contact with beneficiaries, allowing them to gain detailed insights into social and academic inclusion. In contrast, larger universities reported difficulties in conducting follow-ups.

A final concern is the uncertainty surrounding the continuation of funding, which has impeded institutions' ability to commit to long-term educational opportunities, such as full-degree programs for refugee students. The institutions have indicated that they were unable to offer a degree due to the lack of guaranteed continuity, as it would be inequitable to provide a scholarship for one year and then be unable to support the continuation of training in the subsequent years. Nevertheless, the majority assert that the "refuge section is here to stay."

For the program's direct beneficiaries, the combination of financial aid and psychological support has been invaluable in helping them rebuild their lives and adapt to university environments. These elements contribute significantly to the overall well-being and academic success. However, several recommendations have been suggested by beneficiaries to enhance the program's effectiveness. These include increasing language support for non-Spanish-speaking students, ensuring continued access to psychological and social support services, and improving the dissemination of information regarding university resources.

Additionally, beneficiaries have called for more structured assistance in recognizing foreign academic credentials and for increased financial aid options. Expanding available leisure activities and providing bus cards to facilitate mobility are also recommended. Finally, the beneficiaries emphasized the need

for stronger partnerships between universities and external organizations to provide comprehensive support beyond the academic setting.

7. Discussion

The discussion in this study is based on an analysis of the components of the employed logic model, specifically, the inputs, activities, participants, outputs, and anticipated outcomes. Regarding **inputs**, the allocation of funding has yielded limited and inconsistent results, attributed to a distribution of resources that neither aligns with universities' management capacities nor addresses their specific needs and contexts. The absence of a flexible state framework for admissions has constrained the effective utilization of funds, and instances of funding duplication have been identified in certain Autonomous Communities that already provide grants and subsidies for the university admission of refugees. These findings support the assertions made by various researchers.

Several studies have emphasized that the absence of comprehensive regulatory frameworks limits the effectiveness of inclusion policies in higher education (Abamosa et al., 2019; Grüttner, 2019; Naylor, 2019). The University Refuge Action Plan also highlighted this problem, noting that the lack of a holistic approach that considers institutional, local, and beneficiary contexts has worsened these challenges. Nevertheless, the staff's strong commitment has been instrumental in facilitating the social and academic inclusion of refugees and enabling the recruitment of personnel to manage these initiatives.

Furthermore, the facilities, services, and materials available at the universities have been effectively utilized. However, despite this commitment, the absence of specific training and technical support may have posed challenges for the academic and administrative staff involved in the program's implementation. Although the European Commission identified staff training as a measure adopted by many refugee inclusion policies (European Commission, 2019), this dimension appears to have been only partially developed, potentially limiting the program's effectiveness in the long term.

Funding allocated to **activities** has facilitated the implementation or enhancement of essential services, including Spanish language instruction, psychological support, and academic guidance, which are vital tools for addressing the challenges encountered by refugee students (Berg, 2023). Nevertheless, areas for improvement in labor orientation, employment, and access to master's and PhD programs have been identified, which are crucial for enhancing the self-sufficiency and labor market integration of refugees. Although awareness-raising activities have expanded due to funding, their scope remains limited. There is a need for increased coverage to effectively combat prejudice and promote an inclusive environment within universities and the broader community, as well as foster a culture of support and care (Maringe et al., 2017).

In terms of **participants**, there has been notable participation of refugees in undergraduate education, with a lesser extent observed among master's and PhD students. No changes have been observed in the incorporation of these profiles,

or there is a delay in their integration at these educational levels, as well as among the FRS and the ATSS. The university community has actively engaged in initiatives aimed at raising awareness and providing support for refugees. Funding has occasionally facilitated the expansion of collaborations with external organizations; however, this area has been identified as needing improvement to prevent the duplication of efforts.

In connection with the **outputs**, for the 2023/2024 academic year, 165 undergraduate students in a refugee situation participated in one of the welcome programs offered, along with 34 master's degree students and six doctoral students. In addition, one ATSS and 41 FRS joined the university, and 133 refugees received language training. Awareness-raising activities have reached more than 2,260 direct beneficiaries, although the actual number is likely to be higher.

In terms of **anticipated outcomes**, an immediate increase in educational opportunities for refugees is projected, facilitated by the establishment of new host programs and enhancement of services at universities with existing initiatives. Additionally, improvements in the language proficiency of hosted refugees and increased engagement of the university community in awareness and support activities are expected. In the long term, it is imperative to ensure the sustainability and continuity of the University-Refugee Action Plan to achieve significant outcomes, such as increased graduation rates among refugees and their integration into the labor market. However, owing to the limited duration of this study, these changes cannot be ascertained at this time.

8. Conclusions

In a context in which higher education for refugees remains a distant right for the majority, the University-Refugee Plan (Real Decreto 985/2022, 2022), has proven to be an important initiative to address the scarcity of educational opportunities for this group. The universities participating in this program, especially the staff members involved, have shown strong dedication to promoting both social and academic inclusion. This commitment has opened educational and inclusion opportunities, particularly for students, FRS, and ATSS. While the inclusion of the latter group and access to master's and doctoral programs still need further development, the data presented, along with the evaluations and perceptions from the universities, refugees, and volunteers, emphasize the initiative's significant potential and highlight the need for ongoing support for comprehensive university programs for refugees.

However, a major issue concerns the financial viability and enduring effects of the University Refugee Plan. Although the allocated funds have enabled significant advancements, the current allocation is both limited and uneven, and the lack of a flexible and comprehensive state framework hinders effective resource utilization and program expansion. Without a stable and well-coordinated financial strategy that aligns with the capacities and contexts of universities, the future of these initiatives is uncertain. Furthermore, while immediate results, such as increased educational access and enhanced support services, are encouraging, long-term outcomes, such as higher graduation rates and successful integration

of refugee students into the labor market, have not yet been achieved. This highlights the urgent necessity for ongoing funding mechanisms and thorough, continuous evaluations to ensure that the program's benefits are sustained and grow over time.

Nevertheless, the Plan's impact has been limited and varied in scope. The prior and active involvement of these stakeholders in the process of selecting and granting aid is crucial for achieving a more significant impact. Similarly, bureaucratic challenges in administrative processes, such as the recognition of prior studies, the absence of a state framework to facilitate universities' internal processes for the admission of this group, and the stable financing of these programs, remain significant obstacles to effective academic and social inclusion in higher education. The findings indicate that considerable progress must be made to harness the full potential of higher education institutions for the inclusion of displaced people.

In this context, a set of **recommendations** is proposed to facilitate the integration of refugees into higher-education institutions.

- i. Ensuring the continuity and sustainability of the university-refugee plan in the long term.
- ii. The program's scope should be diversified to broaden the spectrum of beneficiaries and their personal conditions.
- iii. Broaden the territorial scope of the University-Refuge Plan to include all universities with the capacity to manage this type of program.
- iv. To organize the administrative procedures for the correct management and justification of this type of subsidy.
- v. Improving coordination and communication between universities and the State General Administration is necessary to achieve this.
- vi. Periodically evaluate the impact of the University-Refuge Plan in the medium and long term to adjust the program in a timely manner and improve its effectiveness.
- vii. Improving the system for the recognition of qualifications so that refugees can access or continue their higher education studies through a common framework of action that allows for the flexibility of admission procedures.
- viii. Policies that reduce the cost of education for refugees should be developed to allow universities to develop more comprehensive reception programs.
- ix. Improving and expanding the supply of support services at universities, especially in the areas of career guidance, employment promotion, mental health, and psychological support, is essential.
- x. Develop better and greater support networks and external collaborations between universities, third-sector organizations, and companies to improve refugee inclusion.

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Appendix 1. Survey developed for the 27 subsidized universities.

This survey is part of a study conducted by the University of Burgos (UBU) on "Coordination, Monitoring, and Evaluation Measures of Actions Carried Out by Universities That Have Received Grants Regulated by Royal Decree 985/2022 within the University - Refuge Action Plan." This project is funded by the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE) under the activities outlined in the aforementioned Royal Decree.

For any questions related to this study and this survey, please contact: centro.cooperacion@ubu.es

INSTRUCTIONS:

This questionnaire is structured into three sections:

1. Quantitative aspects related to the 2021/2022, 2022/2023, and 2023/2024 academic years regarding the reception program developed by your institution.
2. Qualitative aspects related to the management, monitoring, and evaluation of the reception program.
3. Questions for beneficiaries and/or involved individuals (volunteers, students, faculty, entities, etc.). <https://forms.office.com/e/PLMzgyiX0X>

For the last section, an external and anonymized form was provided, the link for which is above. To collect this information, please share this link with the target groups.

Clarification Notes:

In this document, the masculine gender is used as an inclusive term encompassing both male and female genders, as well as all gender identities. This choice is based on traditional and widespread usage in the Spanish language and does not reflect any biased or exclusionary position. This decision was made for linguistic economy and clarity, avoiding textual overload that other, less standardized inclusive forms might create in formal written language.

In this survey, the term "refugee" refers to all individuals who have been forced to leave their country due to the causes outlined in the Geneva Convention, regardless of the stage of their refugee status application.

Acronyms used:

- CRUE: Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities
 - ATSS: Technical, Management, and Administrative Staff
 - FRS: Teaching and Research Staff
1. Center to which you belong:
 2. Position held:
 3. Age:
 4. Gender:
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say
 5. Before the grant was received under Royal Decree 985/2022, did your university have a reception program for refugees?
 - Yes
 - No
 6. For the 2021/2022 academic year, please indicate the following:
 - Number of undergraduate refugee students enrolled
 - Number of master's degree refugee students enrolled
 - Number of doctoral refugee students enrolled
 - Number of ATSS refugees included in the program
 - Number of FRS refugees included in the program
 7. For the 2022/2023 academic year, please indicate the following:
 - Number of undergraduate refugee students enrolled
 - Number of master's degree refugee students enrolled
 - Number of doctoral refugee students enrolled
 - Number of ATSS refugees included in the program
 - Number of FRS refugees included in the program
 8. For the 2023/2024 academic year, please indicate the following:
 - Number of undergraduate refugee students enrolled
 - Number of master's degree refugee students enrolled
 - Number of doctoral refugee students enrolled
 - Number of ATSS refugees included in the program
 - Number of FRS refugees included in the program
 9. Select the services your university offers to refugees:
 - Financial aid for enrollment
 - Financial aid for maintenance
 - Housing assistance
 - Academic guidance and advice for enrollment
 - Language support (Spanish courses)
 - Integration support activities
 - Employment promotion activities

- Psychological support
 - Legal advice and support
 - Health care advice and support
 - Other types of assistance
10. If you selected "other types of assistance" in the previous question, please specify:
 11. Number of refugees enrolled in Spanish language courses in the current academic year
 12. Number of refugees with a B2 level of Spanish in the current academic year
 13. Number of refugees using psychological support services in the current academic year:
 14. Number of refugees participating in employment promotion activities in the current academic year
 15. Number of refugees employed in the current academic year:
 16. Number of awareness-raising activities developed within the program to promote refugee integration:
 17. Number of recipients reached through awareness-raising activities within the program
 18. Regarding the previous questions (23 to 29, inclusive), what changes have been observed since the grant was received? Please indicate whether they have remained similar, increased, or decreased, and to what extent.
 19. Regarding support networks for refugees, the program includes the following resources:
 - Host families
 - Student support
 - Faculty support
 - Others
 20. If you selected "others" in the previous question, please specify:
 21. Number of host families:
 22. Number of student supporters
 23. Number of faculty supporters
 24. Number of external organizations involved in the project
 25. Number of ATSS/FRS (non-beneficiaries) involved in the project
 26. Observations or comments regarding the previous questions (data, services, activities, etc.):
 27. Do the staff involved in the project receive specific training?
 - Yes
 - No
 28. Please detail the type of training provided.
 29. Describe the project's monitoring and evaluation tools:
 30. Indicate your level of agreement with the following statements (Completely disagree; Somewhat disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat agree; Completely agree)
 - The training offered to the staff involved in the project was adequate and sufficient.
 - Strategies to promote the participation of refugee students are effective.
 - The planned activities are adequate for the integration of refugees.
 - Advisory services for refugee students are effective.
 - The Refugee Program had a positive impact on the beneficiary students.
 31. Rate from 1 to 10 the adequacy of the Refugee Program for the beneficiaries, where 1 is not adequate at all and 10 is completely adequate.
 32. To what extent has the grant contributed to achieving the program's objectives?
 - Not at all
 - A little

- Quite a lot
 - A lot
33. Rate from 1 to 10 the sufficiency of the resources allocated to implement the program, where 1 is totally insufficient and 10 is totally sufficient.
 34. Rate the Refugee Program overall
 35. Does the Refugee Program need improvement?
 36. Please specify which aspects could be improved.
 37. Observations or comments regarding the previous questions (training, human, and material resources, etc.):

Appendix 2. Surveys of Refugee Beneficiaries or Volunteers.

This survey is part of a study conducted by the University of Burgos (UBU) on "Coordination, Monitoring, and Evaluation Measures of Actions Carried Out by Universities That Have Received Grants Regulated by Royal Decree 985/2022 within the University - Refugee Action Plan." This project is funded by the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE) under the activities outlined in the aforementioned Royal Decree.

For any questions related to this study and this survey, please contact: centro.cooperacion@ubu.es

Instructions:

Before providing consent to participate, it is important to read and understand the following explanation:

The participants will not directly benefit from this study.

The collection and processing of such data will be conducted in accordance with applicable privacy legislation. Appropriate measures will be taken to ensure the protection of data at all times without violating confidentiality.

These data will be processed electronically in an anonymous manner.

As established by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which has been in force since May 2018, all data collected are strictly confidential. You have the right to request access to any personal data kept in an identifiable form and to request the rectification of any incorrect or incomplete data. The information collected will not include your name, address, or any other identifying information. All records will be kept confidential. Only anonymous data will be collected and processed.

You have the right to object to and cancel data collection, as well as to request data portability, limitation, claims, and withdrawal of consent for the use of your data at any time, in accordance with the GDPR (May 2018) and Organic Law 3/2018.

We appreciate your participation and the time you have dedicated to this study.

Please indicate whether you wish to participate.

- Yes, I agree to participate voluntarily and provide my informed consent.
- No

1. Age:
2. Gender:
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say
3. Indicate the University where the reception program you participated in was developed:
4. What has been your role in the Refugee Program?
 - Support volunteer (student)
 - Support volunteer (faculty)

- Beneficiary (student)
 - Beneficiary (FRS)
 - Beneficiary (ATSS)
 - Other (host family, volunteer outside the university community, etc.)
5. If you selected "other" in the previous question, please specify:
 6. Have you used psychological care services?
 - Yes
 - No
 7. If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, please describe your experience with this service:
 8. Have you participated in Spanish courses?
 - Yes
 - No
 9. Rate the usefulness of the Spanish courses from 1 to 10, where 1 is not useful at all and 10 is completely useful:
 10. Have you participated in employment promotion workshops
 - Yes
 - No
 11. Rate from 1 to 10 the usefulness of the employment promotion workshops, where 1 is not useful at all and 10 is completely useful:
 12. How has your participation in the program influenced your perception of and relationship with refugees?
 13. Have you participated in awareness-raising activities?
 - Yes
 - No
 14. Please describe your experience with these activities:
 15. Rate your satisfaction with the program from 1 to 10, where 1 is completely dissatisfied and 10 is completely satisfied.
 16. From your perspective, what improvements would you suggest for the support programs?
 17. Observations or comments