




“The role of higher education institutions in refugee integration: Evidence from Norway”

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THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN REFUGEE INTEGRATION: EVIDENCE FROM NORWAY

Abstract

This study examines whether participation in targeted higher education courses is associated with differences in perceived social integration among refugees. Using survey data from 255 Ukrainian refugees in Norway (93 program participants and 162 non-participants), the study applies one-way ANOVA to compare value orientations, perceived well-being, and integration barriers and facilitators across groups. The findings indicate that participants report significantly higher levels of well-being and more positive assessments of education-related integration supports compared to non-participants. Differences in civic value priorities, including freedom, human rights, and equality, are positive but not consistently statistically significant, while dignity remains uniformly high across both groups. The results suggest that participation in structured higher education courses enhances refugees' perceptions of professional development opportunities and future prospects. The expanding access to higher education and reducing institutional barriers may enhance long-term integration outcomes beyond immediate labor market activation. Overall, the study highlights the role of higher education institutions as institutional contributors to integration and suggests that educational initiatives can complement traditional language-based integration policies.

Keywords

refugee integration, higher education institutions, integration policy, social inclusion, well-being, Norway, Ukrainian refugees

JEL Classification

J15, I23, F22, M14

INTRODUCTION

The recent surge in refugee arrivals has emerged as a significant public management challenge for European host societies. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 displaced millions of individuals, resulting in an unprecedented influx of refugees across Europe. In the Nordic countries, the number of refugees granted residence permits in 2022 increased nearly twentyfold compared to the previous year and more than doubled the previous peak recorded in 2016 (Nomesco, 2021; Statista, 2023; UDI, 2023a). In Norway, weekly registrations of new refugees in 2023 exceeded 1,000 individuals, more than 90% of whom were Ukrainian (UDI, 2023b). These figures reflect not only the scale of displacement but also the intensity of institutional adjustment required within a short timeframe. Such rapid inflows place immediate pressure on public services, labor markets, and social welfare systems. Many refugees reside for extended periods in temporary housing arrangements while navigating administrative procedures and labor market barriers. As of 2021, approximately 47% of refugees in Norway were unemployed (Statista, 2022), indicating persistent mismatches between qualifications and employment opportunities and highlighting the risk of human capital underutilization. From a policy perspective, prolonged economic inactivity may generate substantial social and fiscal costs, including

welfare dependency, exploitation risks, and deteriorating psychological well-being. These structural pressures underscore the need for institutional mechanisms that support sustainable integration beyond short-term humanitarian protection.

Refugee integration is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional process encompassing economic participation, social inclusion, institutional embeddedness, and psychological stability (Ager & Strang, 2008; Garcés-Masareñas & Penninx, 2016). In European welfare systems, integration strategies have traditionally emphasized language acquisition and activation policies aimed at accelerated employment (Bevelander & Pendakur, 2014; Jensen & Pedersen, 2007). However, language-focused approaches alone may not prevent skill depreciation, occupational downgrading, or long-term underemployment among highly educated refugees (Dustmann, 1996; Goldin et al., 2012).

Within this evolving integration landscape, higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly been recognized as potential contributors to long-term inclusion. Education enhances human capital accumulation and productivity (Becker, 1993), while universities provide structured environments that facilitate professional requalification and social network formation (Crea & McFarland, 2015; Streitwieser et al., 2020). Moreover, HEIs operate within broader governance systems and may function as institutional actors implementing national integration strategies (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Tavoletti, 2010). Despite growing policy attention, empirical evidence remains limited regarding whether structured HEI programs are associated with measurable differences in integration outcomes among refugees.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on refugee integration, higher education, and the institutional role of universities within public management frameworks. It first develops the conceptual foundations and research hypotheses, and then introduces the Norwegian context as an empirical setting for examining the role of higher education institutions in refugee integration.

1.1. General framework and hypotheses

Refugee integration is a multifaceted process that goes beyond mere economic assimilation. Ager and Strang's (2008) influential framework identifies multiple domains of integration (including employment, education, housing, health, and social connections) alongside 'facilitators' such as language and rights. European integration policies have traditionally emphasized language acquisition and labor-market activation (Bevelander & Pendakur, 2014; Jensen & Pedersen, 2007). However, such approaches often overlook structural barriers. For example, Bloch (2002) finds that employment is "key to successful integration" for many refugees, yet obstacles like non-recognition of credentials and discrimination frequently lim-

it access to appropriate jobs. Similarly, Brell et al. (2020) report that refugees often experience significantly lower employment and wage outcomes than other immigrants, reflecting long-term productivity losses. These findings imply that integration cannot be reduced to short-term labor-market entry alone, but must consider how host institutions accommodate migrants' skills and potential.

Higher education can play a central role in building human capital for refugees. Education enables migrants to acquire new skills and improve their productive contributions over the long term (Becker, 1993). Indeed, the OECD (2019) notes that "education and training systems can play a key role in helping countries unlock the benefits of migration" by helping immigrants use their skills and feel a sense of belonging. Yet access remains limited: UNHCR reports that only about 3% of refugees globally are enrolled in tertiary education, compared to over 30% of non-refugee peers (UNHCR 2019; UNHCR, 2024b). Barriers cited include cost, language, and bureaucratic hurdles (Jungblut et al., 2020; Lambrechts, 2020). Despite these challenges, participation in higher education is associated with positive psychosocial outcomes. Finatto et al. (2023) review evidence that refugee students often gain increased self-confidence, social networks, and well-being through university

programs. For example, securing a scholarship or academic placement can enhance refugees' sense of purpose and agency (Marcu, 2018; Unangst & Crea, 2020).

Empirical research on universities' impact on integration is still emerging. Qualitative studies highlight that refugee students navigate complex needs (from trauma-informed support to credit transfer) to succeed in higher education (Kingston & Karakas, 2022). Such research suggests that HEIs can aid "social and economic inclusion" by providing cognitive and digital skills needed in the labor market (Hajisoteriou, 2023). However, large-scale comparative studies are rare. To our knowledge, no published quantitative study directly compares integration perceptions of refugees who participate in a structured HEI program versus those who do not. This gap is notable given calls in the public discourse (e.g., the UN Global Compact on Refugees) for universities to become active partners in refugee self-reliance and resilience. In short, while theory and case reports underscore the potential of higher education, systematic evidence on its measurable effects remains scarce.

From a public management viewpoint, universities can be seen as meso-level organizational actors in integration governance. Elken and Røsdal (2017) describe professional HEIs as developing "organizational actorhood" – formalizing structures, accountability, and managerial processes to achieve institutional goals. In migration policy, this perspective implies that HEIs do more than teach: they interpret policy mandates, mobilize cross-sector partnerships, and shape integration programs. For example, Tavoletti (2010) and McGrath et al. (2020) highlight how universities engage with government and civil society in policy networks. In the context of the refugee crisis, Finatto et al. (2023) advocate that HEIs "should contribute to the management of the refugee crisis" through tailored actions for both displaced people and host communities. Nonetheless, public management literature has yet to systematically test this view in the refugee context. The question remains: do HEIs' institutional activities translate into better integration outcomes for refugees?

Therefore, despite growing recognition of higher education as a potential contributor to refu-

gee integration, empirical evidence remains limited regarding its measurable institutional impact. In particular, comparative assessments examining whether participation in structured higher education initiatives is associated with differences in perceived integration outcomes are scarce. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a comparative approach to evaluate the institutional role of higher education in shaping refugees' integration experiences. By contrasting refugees who participated in a targeted higher education program with those who did not, the study examines differences in value orientations, perceived well-being, and integration conditions. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to assess whether structured participation in higher education is associated with higher levels of perceived social integration and inclusion among refugees, thereby contributing empirical evidence to debates on the institutional role of universities within national integration frameworks. Accordingly, the following research hypotheses were formulated and tested:

- H1: The HEI and its special educational program have a statistically significant impact on the core values of Ukrainian refugees.*
- H2: The HEI's educational program has a statistically significant effect on the social integration of Ukrainian refugees.*

1.2. Context of the study: Norway

Norway presents a particularly compelling case in the context of refugee integration. According to The Economist (2023), it was recognized as the wealthiest country in the world based on multiple indicators in 2023. As such, it is unsurprising that many refugees view Norway as a destination for 'dream migration,' characterized by strong perceived gains and minimal losses (Cerdin et al., 2014). Recent research further confirms that refugees' destination choices are shaped by perceived economic opportunities, institutional conditions, and expected well-being in host countries (Goncharuk & Kereziev, 2025). Nonetheless, among those fleeing conflict, especially from Ukraine, all four migration types identified by Cerdin et al. (2014) are represented.

According to Samoliuk et al. (2024), Norway has balanced indicators of international academic mobility with regulated risks of losing human and intellectual capital. Its growing economy, abundant job opportunities, high salaries, and relatively welcoming environment make it especially attractive for skilled migrants seeking professional advancement and long-term well-being. However, despite these advantages, refugees in Norway face a set of structural and contextual challenges, including a harsh climate, low population density, and a certain degree of cultural and psychological distance from newcomers. Thus, Norway's experience provides an instructive case for understanding how barriers to integration can be addressed even in highly developed host societies.

One of the first and most significant barriers refugees encounter in Norway is the language gap. Consequently, the Norwegian government's integration programs have primarily focused on providing refugees with language training. Proficiency in Norwegian is essential for employment, but the language itself is challenging to learn and typically requires several years to master. During this period, many refugees remain unemployed or underemployed, which can lead to social isolation, psychological stress, and dependency on state support, challenges frequently identified in the literature on refugee integration. Even after acquiring the necessary language skills, many refugees lack the local education, credentials, and cultural capital required for qualified employment. As a result, many are forced into occupational downshifting, taking unskilled jobs far below their qualifications. This outcome is particularly disheartening for refugees who held professional roles or had advanced education in their home countries. Their initial "dreams" of integration and advancement may go unfulfilled unless systemic support mechanisms are in place.

To resume their careers in Norway, refugees typically need to follow a multi-stage process: first, attain language proficiency (1–2 years); second, enroll in higher education or vocational training programs; and finally, gain credentials recognized by the local labor market. This lengthy and demanding process can lead to mental health challenges, including burnout, frustration, and loss of motivation. Not all refugees are able to en-

sure these hardships, making it essential to develop more effective and accelerated integration pathways.

Limiting integration policies solely to language instruction and basic welfare support is, therefore, insufficient. Broader, more holistic strategies are required, especially those that enable refugees to resume professional development and social engagement early in their resettlement.

In 2022, the Norwegian government introduced a quota of 1,000 tuition-free places in higher education institutions (HEIs) for Ukrainian refugees (Berglund, 2022). This initiative aimed to support approximately 2% of the newly arrived Ukrainian refugees by allowing them to pursue full or partial degrees in Norway. Many Norwegian HEIs responded positively and were prepared to assist refugees not only through education but also through additional measures to promote integration. However, language proficiency requirements, specifically, a minimum B2 level in English and/or Norwegian, significantly restricted access to these programs. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2025), Ukraine ranks 45th out of 113 countries in English language proficiency, trailing behind many countries from which Norway traditionally receives migrants (e.g., Poland – 13th, Croatia – 11th, Portugal – 8th). As a result, only about 500 Ukrainian students enrolled in Norwegian HEIs in 2022 (Berglund, 2022), prompting a reduction of the government quota to 500 places in 2023.

Against this backdrop, NLA University College implemented an innovative and inclusive initiative: it offered select bachelor's-level management courses in Ukrainian, delivered in a hybrid format (both online and in-person). This program enrolled 52 students, representing over 10% of all Ukrainian refugees enrolled in Norwegian HEIs in 2022. Importantly, the initiative extended beyond traditional academic instruction. Students are engaged in a variety of social integration activities, including intercultural events, holiday celebrations, excursions, and community-based programs. These activities were supported not only by the university but also by religious organizations, volunteer groups, and local community networks, providing a comprehensive integration ecosystem. By com-

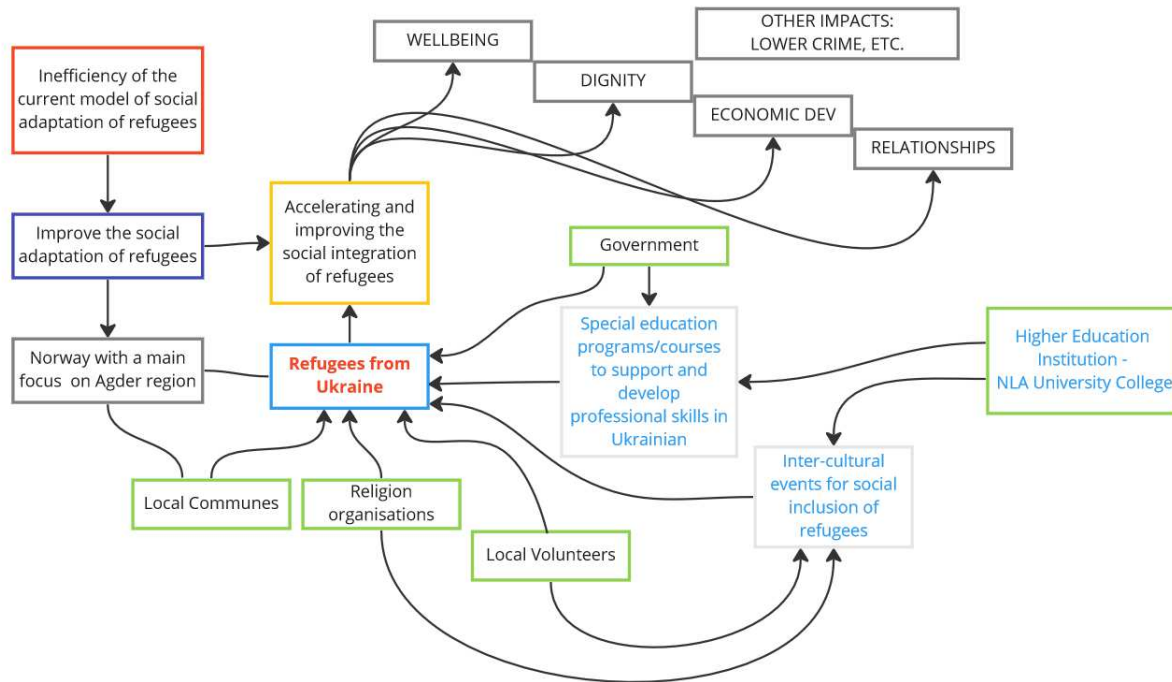


Figure 1. The way of accelerating and improving the social integration of refugees and their impacts

binning language learning, academic instruction, and community engagement from the outset, this model accelerated integration, allowing refugee students to maintain educational momentum and begin rebuilding their careers in Norway. Rather than spending years in isolation or in menial employment, participants were able to immediately develop skills in organization and management while cultivating a sense of belonging.

To better understand the interplay among various actors and factors involved in this initiative, visual mapping was employed (Figure 1). This tool illustrates the complex relationships and impacts of different stakeholders involved in accelerating refugee integration in the Norwegian context.

To assess the effectiveness and reliability of the courses and associated activities in accelerating the social integration of Ukrainian refugees, an empirical study is conducted.

2. METHODOLOGY

To assess the impact of a specialized HEI program on refugee integration, we conducted a comparative survey study in spring 2023. Two respondent

groups were sampled: (1) Ukrainian refugees enrolled in the targeted HEI program ($N = 93$), and (2) comparable Ukrainian refugees not enrolled in the program ($N = 162$), representing the broader refugee population in Norway. All participants arrived after February 24, 2022. Data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. Program participants were contacted through a private Telegram group for the course. In contrast, the control group was recruited via random invitations posted in public Facebook groups for Ukrainian refugees across Norway (total membership ~30,000). The resulting sample of 255 respondents (about 1% of the national Ukrainian refugee population) is sufficient for statistical analysis.

The questionnaire covered (a) demographic and background characteristics; (b) migration motivations; (c) core value orientations; (d) perceptions of aspects of life in Norway; and (e) integration barriers and facilitators (Appendix A).

To gauge motivations, respondents were asked “What prompted you to go to Norway?” with predefined options corresponding to Cerdin et al.’s (2014) typology (dream, felicitous, chance, desperate). They also rated the importance (on a 5-point

Likert scale) of five values during their stay: freedom, human rights, dignity, well-being, and equality. Integration was probed via questions about factors hindering and helping their social adaptation in Norway, and a question about the quality of host-country institutions (e.g., attitudes of residents, course quality). The questionnaire outlines the key survey items. For example, questions 11–13 asked respondents to list (open-ended) the values they most care about, factors that achieve those values, and to rate various life aspects in Norway. Questions 14–15 listed specific potential barriers and facilitators to adaptation, allowing multiple responses. These structured items enable quantitative comparison of perceived obstacles (e.g., language, cultural difference, economic factors) and supports (e.g., local culture, volunteer aid, education quality) between the two groups.

were cleaned, compiled, and compared. To test for significant differences between the two samples, a one-way ANOVA (Cuevas et al., 2004) was employed. This method is widely used for comparing group means and detecting statistically significant variations. A *p*-value below 0.05 was interpreted as strong evidence against the null hypothesis, indicating that significant differences exist between the two groups across the measured dimensions.

Thus, if the null hypotheses were not rejected, it would suggest that the educational program had no measurable effect on either the values or social integration of refugees. Conversely, rejection of the null hypotheses would indicate that the program exerted a statistically significant influence on the relevant variables.

Once the required number of responses was obtained to ensure statistical reliability, the data

The sequence of research steps followed to test the hypotheses is illustrated in Figure 2.

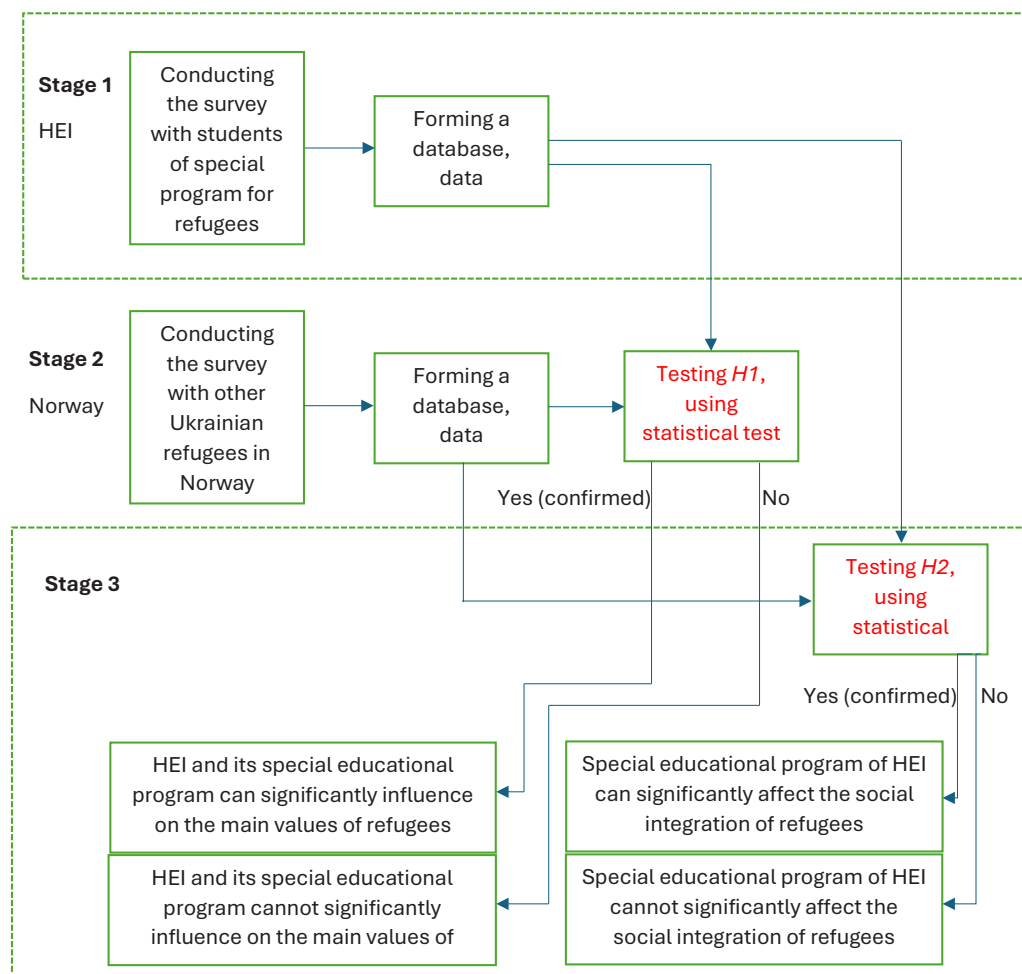


Figure 2. Research model framework

Before testing the hypotheses, we verified that the two groups were comparable. Demographic variables (age, gender, marital status, education level, length of stay) showed no significant differences, indicating that differences in outcomes could be attributed to program participation rather than background disparity. Migration motivation profiles were also examined to check for potential confounders.

To analyze the data, we primarily used one-way ANOVA to compare mean responses between the program and non-program groups. ANOVA is a standard method for testing group differences in mean scores. A p -value < 0.05 (or approaching significance) was taken as evidence of a real difference. Null hypotheses stated that the HEI program has no effect on refugees' values (H1) or integration perceptions (H2). Rejection of a null hypothesis for a given item would suggest that enrollment in the educational program significantly influenced that outcome.

Data were collected during the 2023–2024 academic year through two parallel recruitment strategies targeting Ukrainian refugees residing in Norway. An electronic invitation was distributed to all 113 students enrolled in the special higher education program for refugees. Of these, 93 participants completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 82% within the program group.

In parallel, a broader survey was conducted over a three-month period by posting invitations in 18

Facebook groups for Ukrainian refugees across Norway. These groups had a combined membership of approximately 30,000 original users. Through this outreach, 162 completed questionnaires were received from individuals not enrolled in the targeted educational program.

The average age was approximately 37.8 years ($SD \approx 9.4$), with a roughly equal gender split among respondents. Education levels varied, but most had at least a bachelor's degree. These descriptive statistics (Table 1) indicate that both groups were broadly similar in age and background, supporting the validity of the comparative analysis.

Therefore, survey responses were divided into two analytically distinct groups:

1. Participants enrolled in a special higher education program designed for Ukrainian refugees in Norway ($n = 93$);
2. Ukrainian refugees not enrolled in the program, representing the general refugee population in the country ($n = 162$).

The research hypotheses were tested using selected items from the questionnaire. Prior to hypothesis testing, both groups were compared across a set of control variables, including gender, age, religious affiliation, marital status, and length of stay in Norway. No statistically significant differences were found on these variables, indicating that the

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the survey sample

Respondents	Mean	Median	St. Dev.
Female			
Age	37.8	37.0	8.847
Male			
Age	37.5	37.0	12.589
High School Education			
Age	36.1	34.0	13.653
Junior Bachelor's Degree			
Age	36.6	37.0	10.649
Bachelor's Degree			
Age	37.4	36.5	9.426
Master's degree			
Age	38.8	38.0	8.085
Ph.D. degree			
Age	36.7	38.0	11.060
Total sample			
Age	37.8	37.0	9.442

groups were sufficiently homogeneous for comparative analysis. This strengthens the validity of any observed differences, allowing them to be attributed to participation in the educational program rather than background characteristics.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Core values and program participation

To assess the potential influence of the HEI program on the core values held by Ukrainian refugees in Norway, both groups were asked to respond to the question: “What values are critical for you during your stay in this country?”

Respondents evaluated five key values on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all, 5 = extremely important):

1. Freedom – freedom of choice in building a new life strategy;
2. Human rights – the right to a happy and secure life in new conditions;
3. Dignity – the ability to work and provide for oneself independently, without relying on state assistance;
4. Well-being – career and self-development opportunities to ensure personal prosperity;
5. Equality – equal access to work, education, and personal advancement, on par with local residents.

Table 2 reports one-way ANOVA results comparing the two groups on the importance of five core values.

On average, HEI program participants rated all values slightly higher than non-participants. However, the only value showing a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) was well-being (career development and long-term prosperity). Students in the program gave well-being the highest importance (mean ≈ 4.58) and significantly outscored the other refugees on this dimension. This suggests that the educational program had a notable positive impact on participants' emphasis on personal and professional growth. In contrast, the dignity value (self-reliance and non-dependency) showed no significant difference between groups ($p \approx 0.95$), implying that all refugees (regardless of program status) equally prioritized dignity. The other values (freedom, human rights, and equality) had higher mean ratings for participants but did not reach conventional significance (p between 0.12 and 0.30). The trend suggests a modest shift toward valuing civic freedoms and rights more strongly among students, but the evidence is inconclusive. Overall, the data indicate that the HEI program most clearly enhanced refugees' sense of well-being and growth, while leaving universally accepted values (like dignity) unchanged. Hence, Hypothesis H1 receives partial support, as a statistically significant difference was found only for the well-being dimension.

To explore how refugees expected to achieve these values, a follow-up open-ended question was posed. Responses (illustrated in Figure 3) differed between the groups: program participants more frequently cited structured support (e.g., organized training, career guidance) and less often pointed to passive reliance on state aid.

This aligns with their higher well-being orientation. In managerial terms, this may reflect the program group's engagement with formal pathways (such as education and job training) to real-

Table 2. One-way ANOVA results for core values by refugee group

Refugee group	FREEDOM		HUMAN RIGHTS		DIGNITY		WELL-BEING		EQUALITY	
	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.
Students	4.387	.955	4.677	.599	4.387	.919	4.581	.886	4.581	.807
Other refugees	4.123	1.118	4.377	1.022	4.370	.990	4.259	1.084	4.364	1.079
Between groups	FREEDOM		HUMAN RIGHTS		DIGNITY		WELL-BEING		EQUALITY	
Prob	0.221		0.114		0.951*		0.009**		0.290	

Note: * means no statistically significant difference was observed, indicating that both groups similarly prioritize this value; ** means a statistically significant difference was found between the groups ($p = 0.009$), indicating that participation in the HEI program is associated with higher perceived well-being.

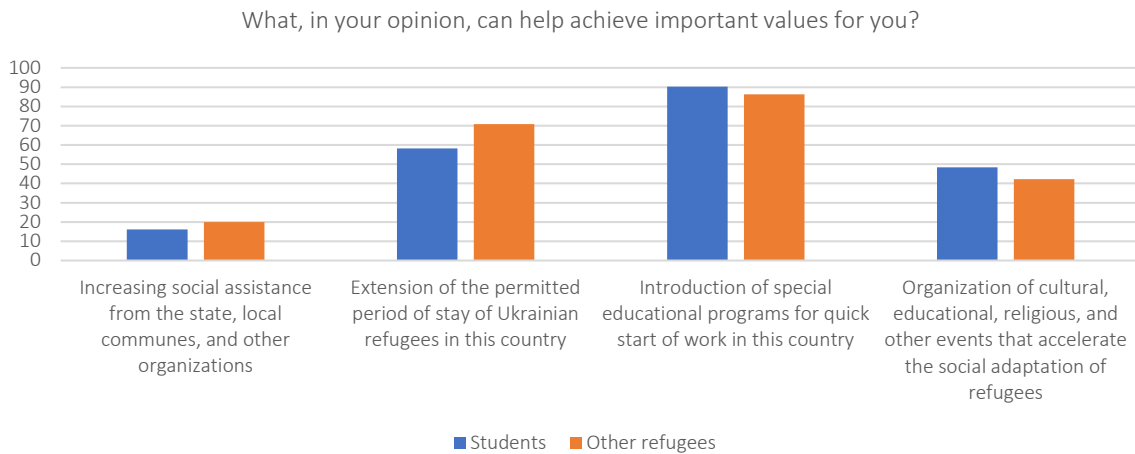


Figure 3. Responses of two groups of refugees to a specific question, in %

ize their goals, reinforcing the interpretation that the program itself shaped these outcomes.

3.2. Perceived barriers and facilitators

The survey asked respondents about factors that hindered and helped their social adaptation in Norway (Figure 4).

Many barriers (e.g., language difficulty, cultural differences) were reported by both groups at similar rates. Statistically significant differences emerged in key areas with >90% confidence. For obstacles, students in the HEI program were significantly less likely to report “Limited opportunities for self-development and leisure” than other

refugees. This likely reflects that the program itself provided meaningful development and engagement opportunities. Conversely, program participants were more likely to cite “high prices” and “difficulty finding a decent job” as barriers. Their heightened awareness of economic and labor-market challenges may stem from greater information or higher expectations fostered by the program.

In terms of facilitators, the difference was starkest for educational factors. The option “high-quality advanced training courses from local HEIs” was chosen by a much higher proportion of participants than non-participants. This confirms that students valued the very program under study and perceived HEI courses as a major support

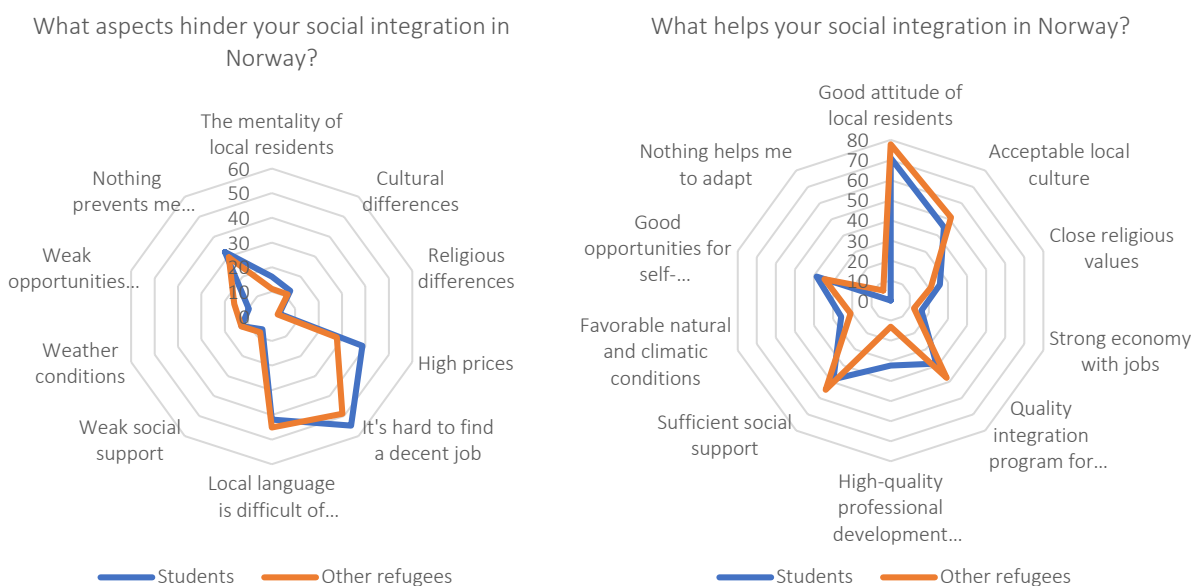


Figure 4. Responses of two groups of refugees to two specific questions, in %

for integration. Additionally, none of the program participants selected “nothing helps me to adapt,” whereas some non-participants did. In other words, every participant saw at least one factor aiding their adaptation, indicating an optimistic outlook. Taken together, these patterns strongly support Hypothesis H2: the specialized educational program appears to mitigate key barriers and reinforce enabling conditions for refugees. Program enrollees feel more personally supported and empowered (fewer developmental deficits) and recognize educational initiatives as helpful, highlighting the role of HEIs in creating positive integration pathways.

3.3. Perceptions of the host society

The survey also measured refugees’ perceptions of various aspects of Norwegian society (Table 3).

Most items (e.g., “attitude of local residents,” “local cultural traditions”) showed no significant difference between groups, indicating that students and non-students held similar views of the general environment. Importantly, no differences were found in how each group viewed local residents or authorities, suggesting that participation did not alter cultural perceptions.

However, one item stood out: “quality of courses offered by local institutions of higher education.”

Here, ANOVA revealed a highly significant difference ($p = 0.001$). Program students rated the quality of HEI courses in Norway far higher than that of other refugees. This result is consistent with the previous finding: those who experienced the program perceive HEI offerings as substantial assets. In practical terms, it underscores that the HEI program has a measurable impact on how refugees value and trust educational institutions in the host country. By contrast, perceptions of basic support (e.g., state aid, volunteer organizations) did not differ significantly, suggesting that the program specifically enhanced views related to education and professional development.

3.4. Migration typologies

Finally, we compared respondents by the motivational typology of their migration decision (Figure 5).

Both groups included all four types identified by Cerdin et al. (2014). Notably, the share of “dream” migrants (aspirational, low-perceived-loss) was slightly higher among program students (16.1%) than among other refugees (13.6%). Conversely, “felicitous” migrants (high gain, high loss) were significantly lower among students (16.1%) than non-students (22.2%). The largest segment in both groups was “chance” migrants (moderate gain/loss), at roughly 38% of each sample. The propor-

Table 3. Comparison of perceived integration conditions between groups (ANOVA)

How do you perceive the following aspects of life in Norway?								
Refugee group	Attitude toward you from local residents		Attitude toward you from the local authorities		The amount of state (communal) aid		Support from volunteer organizations	
	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.
Students	4.323	.748	3.806	1.046	3.806	.833	3.613	1.116
Other refugees	4.284	.807	3.957	1.059	4.012	.959	3.691	1.154
Between groups								
Prob	0.901*		0.365		0.131		0.599	
Refugee group	Support from religious organizations		The quality of courses offered by local institutions of higher education		The quality of language courses offered free of charge to refugees		Local cultural traditions	
	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.	Mean	St. dev.
Students	3.258	1.460	4.323	.945	3.871	1.118	4.097	.790
Other refugees	3.210	1.362	3.580	1.107	3.685	1.155	3.994	1.037
Between groups								
Prob	0.831		0.001**		0.395		0.917***	

Note: * means that the differences between groups were not statistically significant ($p = 0.901$), suggesting similar perceptions among respondents; ** means a highly significant difference was observed ($p = 0.001$), indicating that program participants rated the quality of higher education courses significantly higher than non-participants; *** means that no statistically significant difference was found between groups ($p = 0.917$), indicating that both participants and non-participants share similar perceptions.

What prompted you to go to Norway?

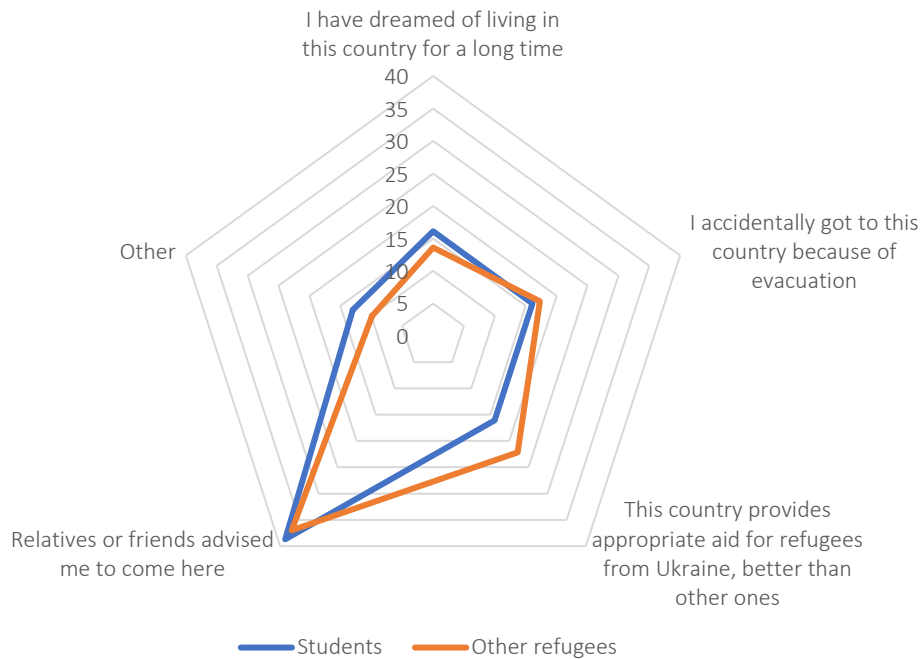


Figure 5. Responses of two groups of refugees to question number 9, in %

tion of “desperate” migrants (low gain, high loss) was similar and modest (~16–17%) in both groups.

This distribution suggests that the HEI program attracted relatively more highly motivated individuals (dream/chance types) and fewer whose primary motivation was welfare (felicitous type). According to migration theory, dream migrants are those most intent on long-term integration, while desperate migrants typically have the weakest drive to integrate. Our data align with this: program students skew toward the more optimistic, goal-oriented category. This may reflect self-selection (those eager to pursue education) or targeted outreach by the program. In any case, it implies that the positive outcomes observed among students are partly due to the intrinsic motivation of the participants. From a management standpoint, this means that the program was drawing in refugees who already saw Norway as a place to build a new career and life, thereby amplifying integration prospects.

Overall, the empirical findings provide partial support for Hypothesis H1, as statistically signifi-

cant differences were observed only for well-being. Hypothesis H2 is supported, as program participation is associated with differences in perceived integration barriers and facilitators.

4. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that higher education programs can be powerful levers for refugee integration when managed effectively by institutions. Enrollees in the HEI program reported significantly higher well-being and optimism, particularly regarding career prospects. This is consistent with prior research showing that access to education improves refugees’ sense of security and satisfaction, e.g., studies of Syrian refugees in Jordan (Al-Rousan et al., 2018) and Turkey (Safak-Ayvazoglu & Kunuroglu, 2021). In our data, the program especially elevated the importance that refugees placed on their own well-being and development. From a management perspective, this suggests that participating students view HEI as investing in their future, thereby increasing their

engagement. By contrast, values like dignity (right to self-support) were already rated highly by all refugees, likely reflecting a shared cultural belief in self-reliance. The program could not increase the value that was already near ceiling for everyone. This may be explained by the conceptualization of dignity as a broader, more universal value that encompasses fundamental rights, such as the right to education (Konsta, 2019). Since all refugees generally perceive equal rights to higher education, this shared understanding could explain the uniformity in responses related to dignity. High overall levels of the examined values may indicate a strong readiness among Ukrainian refugees to integrate into European society, reflecting aspirations cultivated over many years in their home country (Sologoub, 2022).

The results also highlight how HEIs act as institutional actors shaping integration pathways. Program participants identified educational resources (courses, career training, and integration initiatives) as key enablers, and saw fewer personal-development barriers. In other words, the university's program mitigated feelings of stagnation and provided tangible opportunities for growth. This is a crucial finding for managers: it shows that designing curricula and support services tailored to refugees can create real developmental benefits. Equally, participants' greater awareness of job-market challenges implies that the program also sharpened their understanding of economic realities (perhaps through networking or career counseling provided by HEI).

The results provide support for Hypothesis H2, indicating an association between program participation and perceived integration outcomes. This concurs with findings from studies conducted in Kenya, Malawi, Jordan (Crea & McFarland, 2015), Switzerland (Hainmueller et al., 2017), Germany (Dustmann, 1996; Danzer & Ulku, 2009), and the Netherlands (De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010). However, it contrasts with research on African refugees in Spain and Italy (De Haas & Fokkema, 2011), and on refugees in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland (Jensen & Pedersen, 2007; Rooth & Saarela, 2007), as well as a recent study of Syrian refugees in Germany (Hannafi & Marouani, 2023). In these latter cases, refugees with higher education obtained outside the host country exhibited a greater

desire to return home and showed less social integration. This discrepancy likely stems from differences in context – refugees who received higher education in the host country through special programs, as studied here, may have stronger incentives and opportunities to integrate socially and professionally.

While students in the special programs perceive economic challenges, such as high living costs and difficulty finding decent jobs, more acutely than other refugees, they also view their education as a critical asset for overcoming these obstacles and enhancing their social integration. This suggests a higher degree of concern among students about securing a stable economic future in Norway. The link between access to the labor market and refugees' well-being and dignity has been emphasized by Sahin Mencutek and Nashwan (2021) and is consistent with the International Labor Organization's (ILO, 2015) concept of decent work, which highlights employment that is both productive and protective of workers' rights. Accordingly, the elevated awareness of employment challenges among students is closely tied to their values of well-being and dignity, though statistically, the impact was more significant for well-being in this study.

Moreover, limited opportunities for self-development and leisure were perceived as less hindering to social integration by students compared to other refugees, indicating that participation in educational programs may provide meaningful avenues for personal growth beyond formal studies. Interestingly, both groups shared similarly positive perceptions of local residents' attitudes and cultural traditions, suggesting these social and cultural factors are largely independent of educational involvement. This may be explained by cultural affinities between Ukrainians and Norwegians (Tkach, 2016), as well as the generally prosocial and altruistic nature of Norwegian society (Larsen & Witoszek, 2023).

The migration typology analysis carries clear implications. The program drew more "dream" and "chance" migrants (those with clear aspirations) and fewer "felicitous" welfare-driven migrants. According to Cerdin et al. (2014), these groups have the strongest motivation to integrate. In man-

agement terms, this suggests that the distribution may reflect self-selection by those already inclined to integrate and succeed. This is a useful outcome (it maximizes return on investment in education), but it also alerts policymakers and administrators to potential selection bias. To fulfill broader integration goals, HEIs and governments may need to find ways to engage the less motivated (e.g., through outreach, bridging courses) so that benefits are not confined to the most optimistic migrants.

The empirical evidence points to several managerial and policy recommendations. Firstly, HEI administrators should recognize refugee integration as part of their strategic mission and human resources planning. Offering specialized programs should be integrated into the university's organizational structure, e.g., by dedicating staff to admissions support, language assistance, and career placement for refugee students. The data make clear that the quality of courses and support services directly influences students' integration experience. Therefore, HEI leaders must invest in maintaining high standards and in tailoring curricula to address refugees' needs, e.g., condensed programs and credit for prior learning. Success in well-being suggests that programs that quickly get refugees into skill-building activities help maintain their motivation and mental health.

Secondly, on an institutional level, universities should build partnerships beyond academia. As the literature suggests, collaboration with businesses, local government, and NGOs can amplify impact. For example, HEIs might partner with industry to offer internships or apprenticeships to refugee students, thereby linking education directly with employment. This would address the very job-market barriers that participants already perceive and would cement the university's role as a bridge between refugees and labor opportunities. Internally, university managers should also foster an inclusive campus culture (via intercultural events, mentoring by local students) to reinforce the social side of

integration. The finding that attitudes of local residents were rated similarly by both groups suggests that social reception may be adequate, but institutional action is needed to leverage it.

Thirdly, at the policy level, the study underscores the need for holistic integration strategies. While Norway's quota scheme was a positive initiative, the data indicate it could be made more inclusive. Policymakers should consider lowering language entry barriers and offering preparatory language support so that more refugees can benefit. Governments might also increase the number of program slots, since only a tiny fraction of refugees globally access higher education (roughly 3%) (Streitwieser et al., 2020), despite the total number of refugees being projected to exceed 130 million by 2024 (UNHCR, 2024a). Besides, authorities could provide funding for wrap-around services (child-care, transportation subsidies, mental health counseling). From a public administration perspective, refugee integration should be treated as cross-sector governance: ministries of education, labor, and social affairs need to coordinate on such programs. The positive survey results call for these programs to be expanded and institutionalized as part of a broader labor integration policy, rather than ad hoc projects.

Finally, the language of the conclusion must consider scalability. Other countries facing refugee inflows can learn from the Norwegian experience. This evidence suggests that when HEIs are empowered and supported to manage integration programs, outcomes improve. International frameworks (e.g., UNHCR's 15% higher-education access goal by 2030) echo this need. In summary, managing refugee integration through higher education means treating universities not just as service providers but as strategic partners in social policy. With the right mix of institutional commitment and policy backing, HEIs can convert the refugee challenge into an opportunity for human capital development.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to assess whether participation in a structured higher education program is associated with differences in perceived social integration outcomes among Ukrainian refugees residing in Norway. The findings indicate that refugees who participated in the specialized HEI program reported

significantly higher levels of perceived well-being and more positive assessments of education-related integration facilitators compared to non-participants. Differences in broader civic value orientations were limited, with dignity remaining uniformly high across both groups. The results also suggest that program participants were more likely to emphasize structured professional development pathways as mechanisms for achieving their integration goals.

These findings highlight the institutional role of higher education institutions as actors within national integration frameworks. Participation in structured educational programs appears to strengthen refugees' perceived prospects for career development and social inclusion, thereby complementing traditional language-focused integration policies. From a managerial perspective, universities can contribute to integration governance by providing coordinated educational, mentoring, and career-oriented support mechanisms. For policymakers, the results suggest that expanding access to higher education and reducing institutional barriers may enhance long-term integration outcomes beyond immediate labor market activation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study relies on self-reported perceptions rather than objective labor market outcomes, and participation in the educational program may partly reflect self-selection of more motivated individuals. Future research should incorporate longitudinal and outcome-based indicators, including employment trajectories and income progression, to further assess the long-term institutional impact of higher education on refugee integration.

According to the SIKT (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) conclusion, this study does not process directly or indirectly identifiable data about natural persons and does not need an assessment from Data Protection Services. This study complies with the ethics of scientific research described in the Ethical Principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and other applicable ethical principles and legislation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Anatoliy Goncharuk.
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 Formal analysis: Anatoliy Goncharuk.
 Funding acquisition: Anatoliy Goncharuk.
 Investigation: Anatoliy Goncharuk.
 Methodology: Anatoliy Goncharuk.
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APPENDIX A. Questionnaire to study the social integration Ukrainian refugees in Norway

Social integration of Ukrainian refugees in Norway

This questionnaire has been developed for the study carried out within the framework of the SHINE COST Action CA18236 “Multi-disciplinary innovation for social change”, funded by the European Commission. All data obtained during this survey are anonymous and not subject to disclosure. Only general trends and factors may be published along with other study results. The results of this survey should bring science closer to understanding the refugees’ perception of living conditions in another country and the level of their social integration.

How long are you staying in Norway?
.....

What is your qualification?
.....

In which industry did you work until February 24, 2022?
.....

What is your age (in years)?
.....

What is your gender?
.....

What is your current marital status?
.....

Do you have children?
.....

What religion do you belong to?
.....

What prompted you to go to Norway?
.....

What is important to you during your stay in this country?
.....

What values are critical for you during your stay in this country?
.....

What, in your opinion, can help achieve important values for you?
.....

How do you perceive the following aspects of life in Norway?
.....

What aspects hinder your social integration in Norway?
.....

What helps your social integration in Norway?
.....
