

Student support services for Refugees and Newcomers (non-EEA students) in Flemish higher education. Implications for Europe

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Flemish Fund for Scientific Research Project (FWO) From Camp to Campus (CtC): Higher education as *social investment*

Key Idea:

*Higher education is not only an individual opportunity for refugees and newcomers but should also be seen as a **public investment in Refugees and Newcomers (technically non-EEA students)** to acquire needed labour market skills, greater civic participation, improved social mobility and social cohesion.*

**From Camp → to Campus
→ to meaningful participation in Society**

The supply side of social investment in Refugees and Newcomers (non-EEA students) through higher education

- *From Camp to Campus* is an FWO Project (Flemish Fund for Scientific Research) and a consortium of KUL, VUB, PXL and UCLL.
 - The project asks whether Flemish higher education offers the services, structures and pathways that allow R&N (technically non-EEA) students to gain access to, progress through but also to succeed in Flemish higher education and ultimately the labour market.
 - **Focus of this presentation: Work Package 4.4: Student and social services:** availability, visibility, accessibility, responsiveness and adequacy.
- The key question is not whether these services exist, but whether R&N students can easily find, access and benefit from them.

The problem:

Barriers leading to Brain Waste of R & N (Non-EEA students)

Many Refugees and Newcomers, who are technically treated as Non-EEA (international) students, arrive with education, skills, already recognized professional experience and ambition, but in higher education, they face many barriers, for example:

- in admissions
- documentation
- language acquisition
- finance solubility
- adequate and affordable housing
- administrative burdens and
- access to academic (and cultural) support.

Easier Access to Higher Education: a Win-Win Proposition

Without support:

- Well educated R&N are unable to access higher education or, more likely, fall through the cracks.
- Their talents remain un- or underutilized. It goes to waste.
- But also, society loses out on needed skills and talents

With support:

→ Higher education becomes a route to societal gains for both R&N but also Society as a whole.

Why this matters: Europe underutilizes the talent it needs to compete in a volatile world

- Close to a million **first-time asylum applicants** seek protection in the EU every year.
 - Across the EU, **47% of highly educated immigrants are either overqualified or unemployed**, compared with 30% of native-born peers.
 - **Almost 4 in 10 employed non-EU citizens work below their qualification level.** For highly educated newcomers, this represents a direct loss of human capital — or “brain waste.”
- “Brain waste”: a loss for individuals and a missed social investment opportunity for both Europe and Flanders.

Student services are a gateway to integration and means to invest in societal prosperity

- **Recognizes and activates existing skills:** by offering fair admission, diploma recognition and bridging pathways.
- **Reduces *brain waste*:** by helping R&N students activate qualifications, experience and ambitions that might otherwise remain underutilized.
- **Creates structured pathways into society and labour market:** through language learning, academic guidance, student support, career services and social networks.
- **Supports belonging and well-being:** by helping students navigate housing, finance, administration, mental health and community life.
- **Generates public value:** by strengthening labour-market participation, social cohesion and long-term welfare gains.

Methodology Overview

A Multi-method approach:

- 1) Policy analysis (codex hoger onderwijs)
- 2) Online mapping of HEIs
- 3) Student survey
- 4) Photovoice research

Method 1: Analysis of the *Codex Hoger Onderwijs* as the formal framework for student services

- The Flemish *Code of Higher Education* defines student services as instruments for **equal access and participation**
 - **Frames support** as a way to remove study barriers
 - **Covers key student service domains** such as housing, social services, medical/psychological support, transportation and student activities, i.e. main areas of student services.
- Allows for targeted actions for disadvantaged or underrepresented groups, but does not create a specific R&N pathway or define R&N as a disadvantaged group.

Method 2— Mapping the support landscape in Flanders on all HEI websites

What services exist, and what does the legal framework require?

- Online mapping of **18 Flemish HEIs websites**.
- Focus on **English webpages**, as these are often the first access point for non-EEA/R&N students
- Mapping of **14 categories** of student and social support (*housing, finance, psychosocial support, academic guidance, immigration, legal advice, etc.*)
- Assessment of **visibility, accessibility and R&N relevance**

Method 3 & 4 — Understanding the student experience

How do students experience support in practice?

- **Student survey: N = 71**, mostly non-EEA students
 - Focus on awareness, use and perceived usefulness of services
- **Photovoice Research with 9 international students**
 - Photos + narratives on barriers, emotions, belonging and importance of informal support

Results: Analysis of the *Codex of Higher Education*. A mandate for support, but no explicit pathway

- **Frames student services** as a structural part of Flemish higher education, aimed at equal access, participation and the removal of study barriers.
 - **Student services are formally organised around key domains:** *food, housing, social services, medical and psychological support, transport and student activities.*
 - **Explicitly allows institutions to develop targeted actions for disadvantaged or underrepresented groups**, but R&N are not defined as such.
- Because the *Codex* does not specifically define R&N as a potentially disadvantaged group, interpretation is open to each institution and, thus, access and support varies significantly between HEIs.

Results: Online Mapping. Services exist, but visibility and accessibility are weak

- **Flemish HEIs offer a broad range of student services, but these are rarely tailored to the situation of non-EEA or R&N students.**
 - **Information on websites is fragmented and difficult to find:** often only discovered through targeted Google searches, not via normal navigation.
 - **English-language information is available across institutions, but often incomplete or links back to Dutch-only information.**
 - **Dedicated refugee support exists in a few institutions, but it is underdeveloped and information buried deep within institutional websites.**
- Availability ≠ accessibility: services exist, but can R&N students find them?**

Results: Student Survey. Website and peers are the primary source of information for Non-EEA students

- **56% of respondents rely on institutional websites for information, while 20% on peers. Academic advisors/lecturers play a much smaller role.**
 - **Most non-EEA students' awareness of student services is limited, especially legal support.**
 - **Although 62% were learning Dutch, language levels remained a barrier for students trying to understand and access support in a digital landscape that is primarily in Dutch.**
- **Students depend heavily on websites and informal networks, but because important information is often only in Dutch, and is fragmented and incomplete, most websites are inadequate for students navigating a new higher-education system and culture.**

Survey: Use & Barriers. Support is available, but not always understood as useful

- Linked to lack of awareness, usage levels of student services were low. 66% either never or rarely used services.
- *Academic counselling and ICT/tech support* were experienced as the most useful services.
- *Legal advice and financial aid* were experienced as least beneficial, despite their importance for R&N students.
- Main barriers to accessing services were *insufficient information, language barriers and long waiting times*, potentially explaining the negative perception of legal and financial aid services.
 - Services are available, but their availability and relevance are poorly communicated to non-EEA students (R&N students).

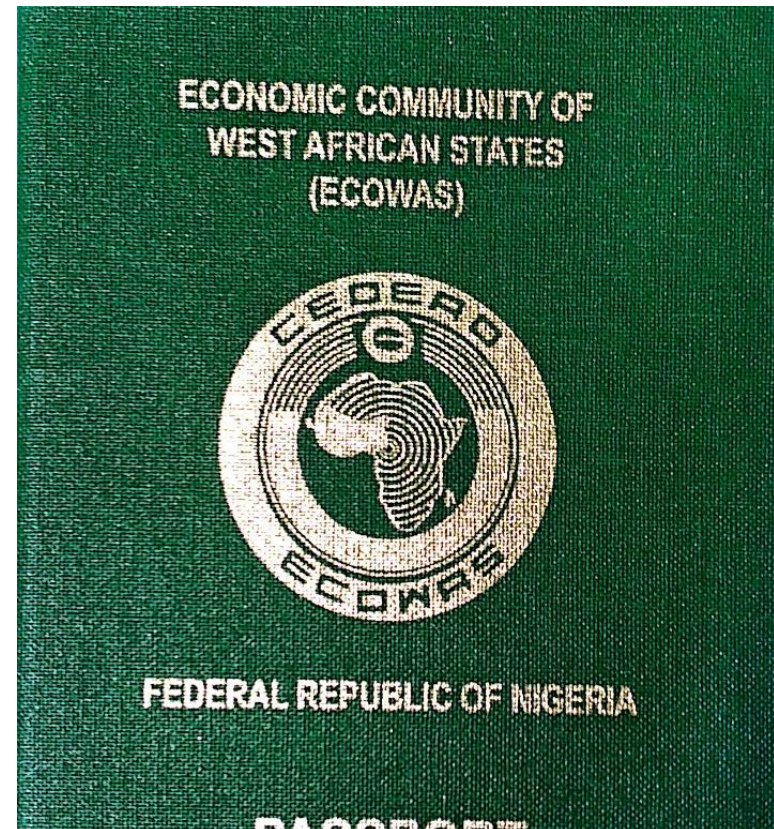
Results: Photovoice. Student Support is a human and emotional pathway, not only a „service“

- Students described major systemic and structural barriers around housing, administration, visa procedures, legal, financial requirements and unclear guidance.
 - Many students experienced the transition as emotionally heavy: e.g. students struggle with *loneliness, uncertainty, homesickness and ambiguity*.
 - The most meaningful support was informal: e.g. classmates, staff members, teachers, strangers and family at a distance.
- Non-EEA students show strong agency and resilience, but this resilience often developed because they need to survive and manage formal gaps on their own.

Student from Nigeria

There are so many barriers in this process. One of the biggest is the Ministry of International Affairs. The waiting time for a decision can easily take three months or even more. During that period, you're stuck in a state of suspense. You've done so much already, but you still don't know if the answer will be positive or negative. It's incredibly stressful. You have to take the IELTS exam, send your academic transcripts, and then go to the embassy for your interview. Every step takes time, money, and a lot of energy. Nothing about it is easy.

Then there's the police character certification, which is also required. You need insurance too. The list just goes on and on. First, you apply for admission at UCLL. But once you get that, it's just the beginning. You still need to apply for your visa, and the Belgian consulate has a long checklist of requirements that you have to meet. It feels endless.

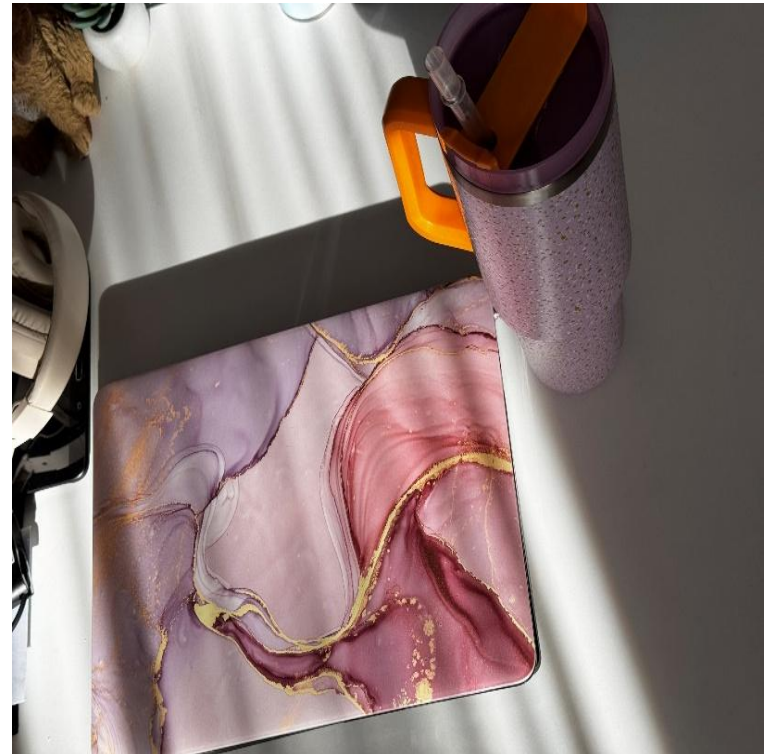


Student from Cameroon

The application process was far from easy. In the beginning, the school responded quickly, especially when it came to academic matters. But once I got my approval, everything changed. After that point, it felt like I was on my own. No more replies. I had to handle everything myself, especially with the embassy or consulate. It was incredibly stressful.

I had to travel just to collect documents from my Nigerian university, even though I already had proof that I'd finished my studies. They still needed to send a direct confirmation to UCLL, and for some reason, my own documents weren't enough. It felt unfair.

The embassy could also take a long time to respond, even if I submitted everything on time. Sometimes I felt like if the school had simply stepped in, just contacted the embassy, it could've helped speed things up. But that kind of support was missing.



Student from Iran

There were moments when I felt overwhelmed by financial and emotional pressure. Being new to the country, dealing with a different language, and trying to figure everything out at once made me feel like my capacity was full. Even though I had received some support along the way, the weight I was carrying still felt too much. At that time, I was working general cleaning jobs and felt like I had no real path to connect with the society or use my skills. Sometimes, I would draw shapes with the vacuum cleaner on the floor, just to feel a little creative space for myself.



Needed: Support throughout the System

“Without a support system... every step felt heavier and more uncertain.” anonymous student

The Photovoice study confirmed website mapping and student survey.

It identified the following key themes:

- The persistence of structural barriers and poor communication,
- The need to rely on informal support networks vs. institutional,
- Unsupported emotional transitions,
- The feelings of ‘in-betweenness’, ambiguity and need to develop self-resilience as a response to lack of support.

Key Insights: From available services to accessible pathways

- **Non-EEA Students often feel isolated and must navigate complex systems alone.**
 - **Support is fragmented and incomplete across institutions.** Information on websites is incomplete, generic, unevenly available in English, or buried deep in institutional websites.
 - **The *Codex* allows for targeted support for disadvantaged groups but does not define R&N as such.** R&N support depends on whether a particular institution chooses to interpret this group as a potentially disadvantaged one.
 - **Access to student services is linked to formal enrolment;** however, many R&N barriers occur before students are officially enrolled.
 - **Students often rely more on informal networks** and even strangers to fill institutional gaps.
- **Availability ≠ accessibility.** Many services formally exist, but R&N students struggle to find, understand or use them.

Conclusions and Recommendations 1/3

- R&N should be defined as a disadvantaged or underrepresented group in the *Codex* and this should be communicated to all Flemish HEI.
- **Integration ≠ Inclusion.** HEIs are essential for integration, but R&N cannot “integrate” if they are not “included” in the definition of potentially disadvantaged students at a policy level and structural changes are not communicated to and made in the system.
- **The most challenging barriers for non-EEA students appear before and around official enrolment**, e.g. uncertainty around housing, visa procedures, finances, documents, language often arise before students are fully connected to formal student services.

Conclusions and Recommendations 2/3

- **Most Non-EEA students rely on websites for their information, but most websites are incomplete or inadequate for needs.**
 - **Given the fact that most R&N do not initially speak Dutch, essential information in English (as a second language) should be available on all institutional websites.**
 - **Institutions should include specific Non-EEA student support page(s) on their websites, while including R & N in their definitions / explanations.**
- **Institutional websites (also *Study in Flanders*) should take the entire student journey into account (from application to arrival/enrolment), including a more centralized approach to remedy gaps.**

Conclusions and Recommendations 3/3

- **Informal support fills institutional gaps:** Students often rely on **random personal support** rather than clear institutional pathways. **Better formal institutional support pathways should be built, but also clearly communicated on institutional websites** –based on the definition of R & N as a disadvantaged group in the Codex.
 - **Resilience and self-reliance should not become the support system.** Students show strong agency and grit, but their success should not depend on their ability to navigate unfamiliar and complex systems alone.
- This is in the interest of the non-EEA student, but also the Flemish intellectual community and Society at large.

Welcome to Leuven!
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Participate in the full 5-days of our “Fall School” in Leuven, write a short reflection and receive a microcredential worth 3 academic ECTS.

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Thank you!

**Remember: International Students are
students too!**

For more information about from Camp to Campus and Work
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