



# UNIVERSITY-REFUGEE ACTION PLAN AT UNIVERSIDAD POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID

A GUIDE TO LESSONS AND  
CHALLENGES FOR TRANSFORMATION

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**UNIVERSITY-REFUGE ACTION PLAN AT UNIVERSIDAD  
POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID**

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## **WHAT DO WE WANT TO TELL YOU?**

**1.**

**WHAT IS THE AIM  
OF THIS GUIDE?**

**2.**

**WHAT IS  
UNIVERSITY-  
REFUGE?**

**3.**

**CONTEXT AND  
BACKGROUND OF  
THE UNIVERSIDAD  
POLITÉCNICA DE  
MADRID ON REFUGE**

**4.**

**WHAT IS THE  
UNIVERSITY-  
REFUGE ACTION  
PLAN?**

**5.**

**WHAT ACTIONS  
HAVE WE CARRIED  
OUT? HERE ARE  
SOME LINES OF  
WORK**

**6.**

**WHAT ROLE HAS  
THE UNIVERSITY  
PLAYED?**

**7.**


**LESSONS LEARNED**

**8.**

**CHALLENGES**

**9.**

**FUTURES**



*“Universities should promote more projects and experiences like this. I think States should offer opportunities to students who cannot start or continue with their studies because their lives have gone through tremendous changes, changes over which they have no control, like wars or military and climate conflicts.”*

*Davyd, Ukrainian student*

# 1. WHAT IS THE AIM OF THIS GUIDE?

The University-Refuge Action Plan, promoted and developed by the Spanish Government through the Ministry of Universities—currently the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities—has been a pilot experience in the welcoming and accompaniment of refugee students from Ukraine at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM). As with many other pilot projects, much has been learnt from this experience, some significant lessons, and it has also posed certain challenges we have to face and work around in the future in a steady and consistent manner.

The goal the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid seeks with this plan, and with other initiatives of its own, is to facilitate the inclusion of refugees or people with international protection into the higher education community and ultimately into society. It is with a comprehensive approach that this plan provides refugee students with academic, emotional and social support to help them make the best of the studying opportunities and actively contribute to university and social life.

This guide was drafted to help explain the implementation process followed in the University-Refuge Action Plan, to highlight the main achievements and offer a description of the various challenges encountered during the whole process, which has lasted for approximately two years. In addition, there is also a section on our future collective thinking, a space we build—both inside and outside university—to strengthen the capacity of the university community, and of society in general, to welcome and accompany refugees. And we approach this challenge from a social perspective that focuses on intercultural diversity and social cohesion, promoting supportive, critical and participative attitudes.

We hope our experiences, included in this guide, will be of help to the university and even to other higher education institutions and entities willing to implement similar initiatives. We hope they prompt a process of internal reflection: in a world witness to ever-growing trends in forced displacement, these proposals may help facilitate the

integration process of refugees and/or international protection applicants into higher education systems, recognizing their capacity to actively and successfully contribute to society.

The Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, through the University-Refuge Action Plan and other initiatives, promotes the inclusion of refugees and/or international protection applicants into the education community and society in general, providing them with a comprehensive framework that covers academic, emotional and social support schemes. In line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), this action plan directly contributes to three key targets: Goal 4 (Quality Education), which promotes inclusive access to higher education; Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which promotes equal opportunities for people in vulnerable situations; and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which promotes the creation and development of a safe and supportive environment in which each individual can thrive and grow to their full potential.



*“The role the University plays in the inclusion of refugees in the higher education learning system is one of immense importance, it is a path, a door to a future for them; it’s an opportunity for refugees to better integrate into Spanish society. It is also a very enriching experience for the University itself and the academic community, having refugee students in their classrooms, students from different countries who can contribute a lot; they all come with a very important cultural background.”*

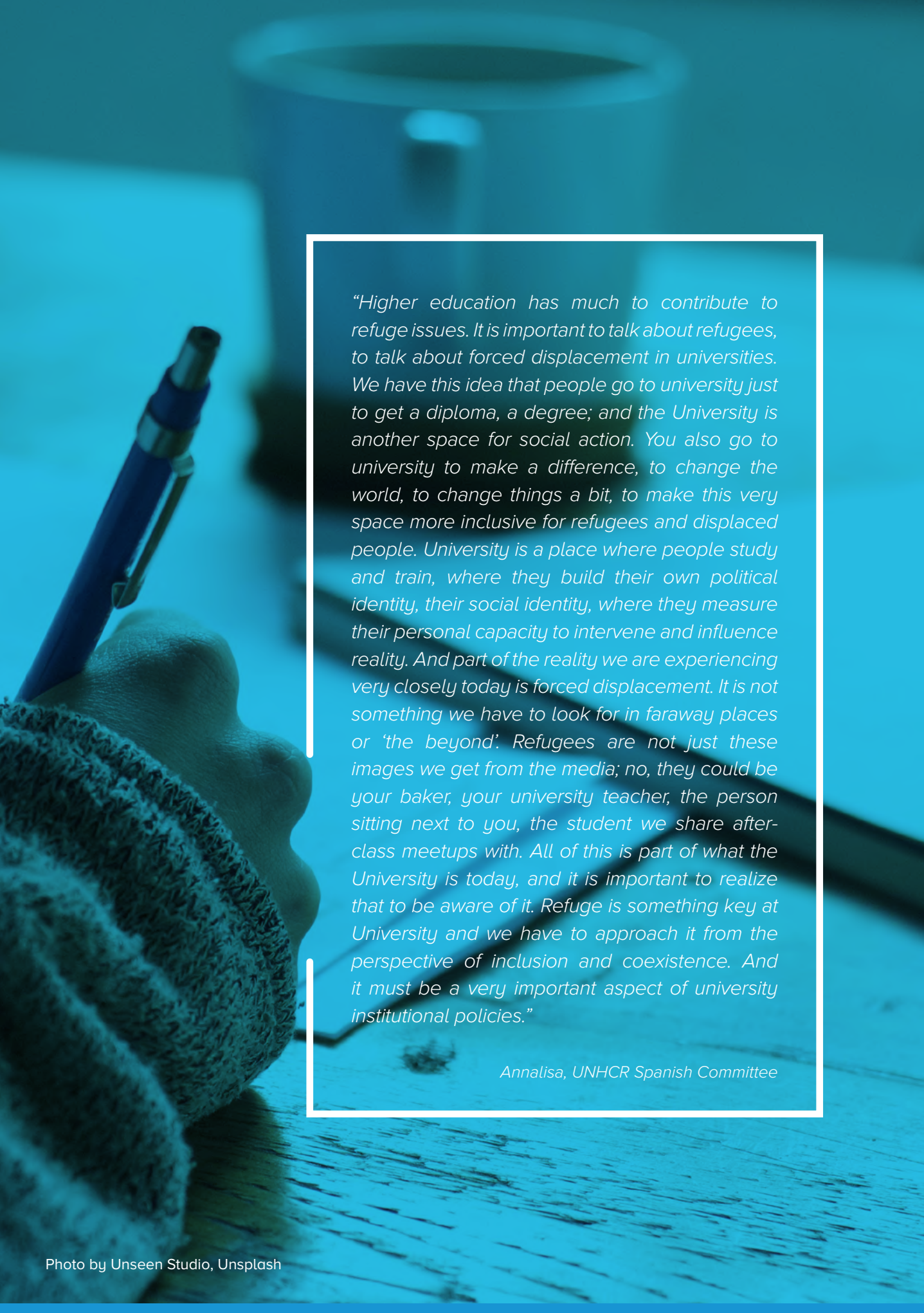
*Dania, UNHCR representative*



*“Many of us have a stereotypical idea of what refugees are, thinking that their needs all have to do with access to basic services. And that is true. But refugees also need to rebuild their lives, they need to get back on track with their professional careers, reconsider their pursuits, get back to what they used to do and who they were before they had to flee, leave a context of war or persecution. And so, in a situation like this, the University plays an important role and works to rise to the challenge of helping refugees get back on their feet, back to their careers, back to what their lives were, and rebuild themselves here as multiple and complex people. They are refugees, yes, but they are also so much more; they are people with huge potential and with much to contribute to this society.”*

*Annalisa, UNHCR Spanish Committee*



A person's profile is shown in silhouette, holding a blue pen. The background is a blurred, blue-tinted image of a desk with a lamp. A white rectangular box with a thin border contains the text. The text is in a light blue, italicized font.

*“Higher education has much to contribute to refugee issues. It is important to talk about refugees, to talk about forced displacement in universities. We have this idea that people go to university just to get a diploma, a degree; and the University is another space for social action. You also go to university to make a difference, to change the world, to change things a bit, to make this very space more inclusive for refugees and displaced people. University is a place where people study and train, where they build their own political identity, their social identity, where they measure their personal capacity to intervene and influence reality. And part of the reality we are experiencing very closely today is forced displacement. It is not something we have to look for in faraway places or ‘the beyond’. Refugees are not just these images we get from the media; no, they could be your baker, your university teacher, the person sitting next to you, the student we share after-class meetups with. All of this is part of what the University is today, and it is important to realize that to be aware of it. Refugee is something key at University and we have to approach it from the perspective of inclusion and coexistence. And it must be a very important aspect of university institutional policies.”*

*Annalisa, UNHCR Spanish Committee*

## 2. WHAT IS UNIVERSITY-REFUGE?

The university as a refuge is an educational model which aims to provide answers not only to academic needs, but also to new social circumstances arising from today's world situation, thus creating a safe inclusive environment where refugees (students, researchers, teachers, administrative staff and service personnel) feel welcome, valued and supported. This space would offer them an opportunity to rebuild their lives, develop all their skills and to access a more stable and independent future, all within a safe and protective environment.

**Welcoming:** this is the first contact refugees have with the university. At this stage, the refugee effectively accesses the university system and goes through the different services the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid has put into effect to help international protection applicants.

**Accompaniment:** this is a permanent support service the UPM offers refugees who have become part of our university community (students, researchers, administrative staff or service personnel) to help and assist them in their inclusion process and to facilitate their integration into society.

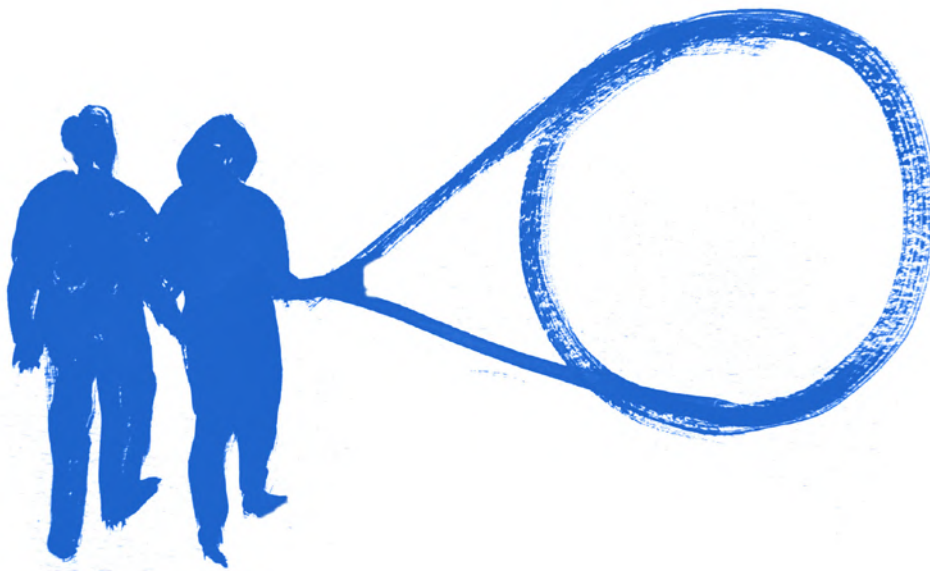
**Opportunity:** this is a circumstance which requires action, decision-making competences / skills / decisiveness and a proper and adequate use for it to become a real benefit. The University-Refuge Action Plan has been a real opportunity for various actors: on the one hand, the university community, as it has provided a favorable space for deep reflection and analysis on refuge, it has provided a down-to-earth experience in the welcoming and accompaniment process of refugee students, and has posed challenges for improvement; on the other hand, refugee students, who have been able to continue their university studies and have found their integration process into society was somewhat easier; and finally, the civil society, as the actions carried out within the plan have successfully raised greater awareness of what it means to be a refugee.

**University education for refugees:** having access to higher education studies allows refugees to continue their education and training, acquire valid certificates and qualifications and improve their chances of accessing employment opportunities. And this, in turn, makes their social and economic inclusion much easier, it enhances their chances of rebuilding their lives with dignity and independence.

**Refugee:** a person who, due to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, or due to an armed conflict developing in their place of origin, is forced to leave their country and is unable or unwilling to return for security reasons.

**Inclusión:** the process by which all people, regardless of their personal characteristics or circumstances (race, gender, disability, or origin, among others), have access to and full participation in every aspect of social, educational and working life. A successful implementation of this process requires adapting environments, resources and attitudes to ensure people are not excluded from the system and have equal opportunities to grow to their full potential. It seeks not only the participation of all, but also to value respect and the appreciation of diversity.

**Integration:** the process by which a person or group, usually from a different culture or background, adapts and adjusts to the norms and values of a majority society. In this case, the person conforms to the established system, accepting and adapting themselves to the social and cultural structures, roles and expectations of the new environment they find themselves in.



*“It is important to create spaces for reflection and activism on current issues, such as forced displacement, migration, xenophobia and racism. In line with the 2030 Agenda, it is important for universities to present themselves as welcoming and much more inclusive spaces and sites. Refugees in the context of universities (students, teachers, administrative staff), they all need safer, more inclusive spaces in which they can be openly informed about their rights and in which to help them and support them with their asylum and refugee conditions, among other procedures. It is also important to include basic refugee-related materials in university syllabuses and courses, to provide new narratives and so raise awareness within the community, build and encourage volunteering and mobilization.”*

*Lucía, UNHCR interactive campaign facilitator*

**Diversity:** this concept refers to the presence and inclusion of students, teachers and staff with a wide variety of characteristics and traits, be they cultural, social, economic, racial, of gender, sexual orientation, religious, or based on their abilities, their origin, etc. Diversity within the university is essential to create an inclusive, equitable and nurturing educational environment, an enclave where students not only prepare for their professional future but also contribute to the development of a fairer and more caring society. The key to achieve these goals is to value the differences and build policies that foster the inclusion and respect among all members of the university community.

**Durable solutions:** long-term strategies aimed at ensuring a rapid and effective action to protect refugees and at the same time ensure also they can build a stable and fulfilling future within a safe environment, an environment in which they do not live in constant or long-term uncertainty.



**Resilience:** this is the capacity of an individual or a community to successfully face, overcome and adapt to adverse situations, trauma, stress or hardships, and manage to do so without any loss of emotional or physical well-being. It is the ability someone has to bounce back from negative experiences and emerge stronger from them, the capacity they have to learn from hardships and grow as a person.

**Solidarity:** this is a collective action aimed at supporting and helping others, an action based on the recognition that we all share responsibilities and have to contribute to the common good. Solidarity is a key value in building fairer, more compassionate and inclusive societies.

**Interculturality:** this is a process of interaction and mutual enrichment between people and groups from different cultures and backgrounds. The process promotes and fosters respect, understanding and coexistence on an equal footing. A process that encourages interaction, listening and mutual understanding.

**Human rights:** set of universal and inalienable rights that protect the dignity, equality and freedom of each and all of us, without distinction of any kind, and which are fundamental for a fair and fulfilling life.

**Equality:** a principle of justice that aims to ensure equal opportunities and equality of treatment of everyone. To achieve it, resources and support means have to be adapted to the needs and characteristics of each person to ensure a successful and equitable inclusion and development process.

*“I see myself as a migrant; I come from El Salvador, in Central America, and I came here to study a master’s degree in cooperation which also has a human rights component. So for me, as a migrant myself, refuge is the space that the University gives you to be free, to express yourself, your ideas, and your thoughts; and I also understand refuge in a country as a space where my identity is welcomed, a space that allows me to put my own culture into context and at the same time become part of this society and its culture.”*

*Beatriz, UPM student*



*“We are working hard, we are making huge progress, and many support structures are being carried out and effectively implemented. But there is still much work left to do. We have to raise awareness, effectively inform population on the issue; and, above all, we have to help the structures that make all of this possible, we need to provide them with the necessary human and economic resources to work with. We need to strive to gain the inclusion of refugee students, not only in their education and training—which is fundamental, obviously; we are University after all—but also in their social, economic, personal and psychological inclusion.”*

*Sandra, UPM teacher*



### **3. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF THE UNIVERSIDAD POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID ON REFUGE**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2023 around 117.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced because of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order. Out of those 117.3 millions of forcibly displaced people, 43.4 millions are refugees.

In recent years, we have borne witness to an alarming increase trend of forced displacements worldwide, due to a combination of various factors that are aggravating the vulnerability of millions of people around the globe. Among the main factors for this worrisome situation, we find armed conflict and generalized violence, including civil wars, insurgencies and conflict between States (for example, the conflict in Syria, war in Ukraine, or the situation in Afghanistan); and violence connected to organized crime, gangs and drug cartels (for example, in Latin America, in countries such as El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala). Political, ethnic and religious persecution also contribute to forced displacement, such as the persecution of the Rohingya community in Myanmar and the political crisis in Nicaragua and Venezuela.

And if we look towards European, then the Russian invasion of Ukraine back in February 2022 generated a sharp increase in the numbers of international protection applicants. According to the 2024 report of the Spanish commissioner for refugees (CEAR, for its abbreviation in Spanish), around 4.31 million people were forcibly displaced to other European states; Germany, Poland and the Check Republic were the main hosting countries. According to a 2024 report from the Spanish Oficina de Asilo y Refugio (asylum-seeker and refugee office), in 2023 alone Spain granted temporary protection to a total of 33,928 Ukrainian citizens, thus reaching almost 195,000 refugees under this figure since the beginning of the conflict (report carried out by the Universidad de Burgos university, 2024).

**Access to education.** For the around 14.8 million school-age refugees in 2022, access to education remains a major challenge difficult to surmount. More than seven million of these refugees (51%) do not attend any school and are out of education. According to a UNHCR report, in the 2021-2022 academic year the average gross enrolment rates revealed that 38% of refugees accessed preschool level, 65% accessed primary school, 41% secondary school, and 6% accessed tertiary level (i.e., higher vocational training, higher education, graduate degree, master's degree, doctorate) (UNHCR 2023).

The gap in access to education between refugees and non-refugees at the tertiary level is quite significant: according to a World Bank report, in 2022 the percentage of people enrolled in tertiary studies worldwide stood at around 42%. Although we have seen a slight increase in the numbers of young refugees enrolling in tertiary education studies in recent years—reaching 7% in 2023 (UNHCR Spain, 2023)—, the efforts put to raise the numbers are still not enough to meet the target set by UNHCR and its partners in the Global Compact on Refugees: to achieve enrolment of at least 15% of the refugee population in higher education by 2030 (UNHCR, 2019).

*“At the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid university we need to prioritize refugees. It is key to understand that the University is a place from which much can be done to provide lasting solutions: when refugee students are taken in and welcomed by the University, it allows them to study, to train and continue with their lives; it provides them a space in which to rebuild themselves and contribute to the society they are currently living in. Being a refugee is a situation that no-one, none of us wishes to live or go through, but frequently it is external situations that force us to. Society has to stop and rethink how to address the issue of refugees; it has to look at it from a different perspective and be more proactive. This is happening now, and given the international context, it's a situation that is going to keep increasing in the future. So, we cannot continue to stand on the sidelines or simply turn our backs on this reality.”*

Susana, UPM management team



Faced with this international context, the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid university has launched and implemented various initiatives and research projects to address the various situations faced by refugees in different parts of the world. Here are some of these initiatives:

- **Shire Alliance (since 2013):** this is the first experience of a multi-stakeholder partnership in the humanitarian field promoted by Spanish cooperation. It seeks to develop energy solutions to improve both access to basic services and living conditions in refugee camps in Ethiopia.
- **UPM Platform on Refugees (2018-2020):** This was a collaborative network initiative which developed the NAUTIA methodology (Need Assessment Under Technological Interdisciplinary Approach), with the aim to study and analyze the pressing needs in refugee camps and their host communities in parallel. As of the year 2021, this platform became part of the Plataforma África (Africa Platform).
- **IncluSTEM Project:** A training programme for sustainable rapid inclusion leading to employment via STEM universities in Europe (September 2020 – August 2023). This is a partnership programme funded by the Erasmus+ Programme and implemented between three European universities: Swedish Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan (KTH), German Technische Universität Berlin (TUB), and Spanish Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM). The aim of the project is to address and look for solutions to two social issues: first, the slow inclusion of highly skilled immigrants and refugees into the European society and labor market; and second, the high demand for STEM professionals (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics professionals) in an increasingly digital labor market.

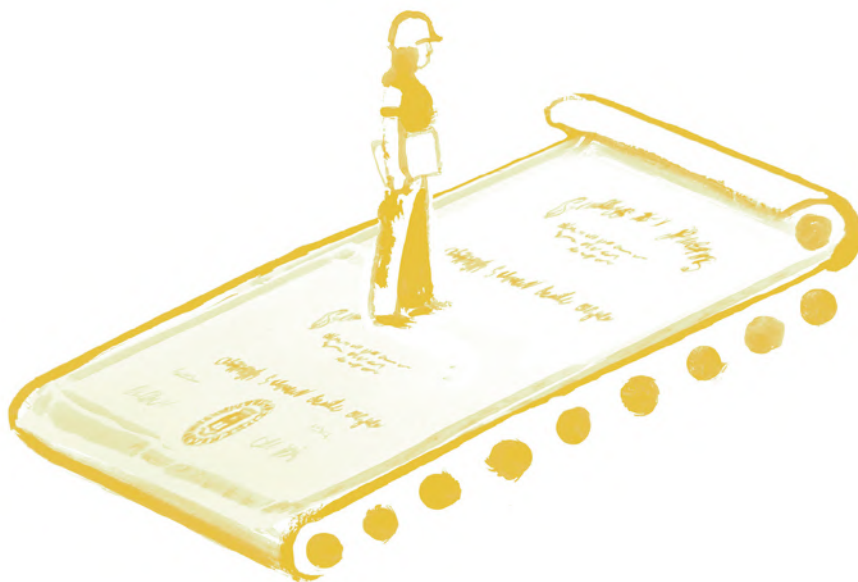
*“Universities have an obligation to get involved in the process of integration of the refugee population, precisely because this population is within the objectives of the institution itself.”*


*Nuria, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid University*

- **Green Jobs Platform (2021):** This platform is an initiative that serves as a space in which to build a network to connect the new jobs generated by the green transition with people in vulnerable situations. Universidad Politécnica de Madrid is an active member and participant of this platform, and it plays a pivotal role as operator of the technical training given to people in vulnerable situations. Since the beginning of this initiative, the university has successfully trained more than 1200 people in vulnerable situations—including refugees—in photovoltaic systems operation and maintenance.
- **MEIPREU Project (2022):** this is a project promoted by the UPM Platform on Refugees and aimed at implementing a methodology for the evaluation of the integration of refugees in urban settings (MEIPREU for its abbreviation in Spanish: Metodología de Evaluación de la Integración de las Personas Refugiadas en Entornos Urbanos). The main goal of this project was to develop a diagnostic framework that would help researchers with the evaluation and designing of holistic policies and initiatives aimed at improving the living conditions of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection (ABIP) in the city of Madrid. Such a project was implemented with funding from the regional government of the Autonomous Community of Madrid.
- **University-Refuge Action Plan (2023-2024):** This is an initiative promoted by the Spanish government. It strives to implement different actions aimed at receiving, welcoming and accompanying students, administrative staff and teachers from Ukraine following the outbreak of the conflict with Russia on 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022.

*“We live in an increasingly polarized society, one in which migration and forced displacement are very sensitive issues. Through mass media, we are continuously bombarded with images that project an imaginary refuge, one that is distant from us, closely linked to emergency situations, to conflict and disasters, to catastrophes that happen all around the world. The effect that this has is that university students see refuge-related issues as something remote, something that happens far away, and not as something really close to them, something that happens every day and that is just next door to us. This is why we must work and build a new narrative that will enlarge the picture and increase the possibilities of a real approach to refugees.”*

*Annalisa, UNHCR Spanish committee*





*“The refugee students that have arrived at the UPM have all come with different perspectives and different language levels, but they all have something in common: a huge motivation to learn the language and integrate. For some it has been easier, and for others it has been harder, but that is also a matter of personal character, not because they are refugees or not. There is a trait common to all language learners that we always must take into account, especially with these people, and that is emotional and affective factors, because they are very important. We need to have a certain sensitivity because we don’t know of their personal experiences, sometimes we don’t even know how they are living. Some want to share and tell you more about themselves, but others don’t; and it is their right not to.*”

*“One of the refugee students told us that so much ‘empathy’ was sometimes a bit too much, that they were tired of it. People would keep asking him, ‘And what is your experience?’ And every time he has to answer that question, he relives things he doesn’t really want to go back to. Maybe we must learn to be more empathetic and pay more attention to these emotional factors, maybe think a bit more of how they are feeling right at this moment...”*

*“Having them in class is a fantastic experience. I do believe they always bring a lot, they give us much more than what we give them.”*

*Ana, Language Centre at the UPM*

## 4. WHAT IS THE UNIVERSITY-REFUGEE ACTION PLAN?

The University-Refuge Action Plan is a set of activities aimed at welcoming and hosting students, researchers, administrative staff and service personnel (PTGAS, for its Spanish abbreviation) affected by the conflict in Ukraine. This action plan is funded by grants from the Spanish Government, through the Ministry of Universities (currently the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities), and is to be implemented between the years 2023 and 2024.

This grant is aimed at 27 state universities in four autonomous communities (six universities in Madrid, seven in Catalonia, five in the Comunidad de Valencia autonomous community and nine in Andalusia), and at the non-profit association Conference of Vice-Chancellors of Spanish Universities (CRUE, for its Spanish abbreviation).

In the case of universities, they were presented with a plan and a list of actions that had to be adapted to the conditions and reality of each university in particular in order to be successfully implemented and carried out. The eligible actions are as follows:

- Language support actions.  
.....
- Development and review of the institutional university programmes and syllabuses to adapt them to the reception and integration of applicants and beneficiaries of international protection.  
.....
- Development and distribution of university programmes specific to receiving researchers, students, teachers and administrative and service staff who are in a situation of international protection.  
.....
- Cultural and psychological support actions.  
.....
- Provision of academic guidance and transition courses to facilitate and guarantee access to and effective inclusion into university education sessions and activities.

- Counselling services and access to the academic and social services provided by the universities, as well as access to the different university spaces.

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- Awareness-raising actions developed within the different sectors of the university community on aspects related to the crisis in Ukraine and international protection.

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- Mentoring programmes to assist students, researchers and administrative and service staff. Buddy Programmes for students.

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- Grant and scholarship applications and programmes to help and assist people beneficiary of temporary and/or international protection in their integration process at the universities and the various activities therein; they also aim at providing these students access to study materials, accommodation and boarding in halls of residence.

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- Specific and oriented courses to prepare students for job searching and access to internships in companies.

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- Online courses to keep in touch with Ukrainian universities.

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- Financial aid to help integrate and recruit (and allocate) research personnel and administrative and service staff members in the universities and university institutes.

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- Programmes to facilitate research stays.

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- Collaboration with Ukrainian universities to develop programmes and action plans to help Ukrainian research personnel and administrative and service staff keep in touch and not lose contact with the Ukrainian university system.

The Vice-Chancellors' association (CRUE) put forward two specific actions:

- The implementation of a system of coordination, monitoring and evaluation measures of the actions to be carried out by the different public universities. Universities would then have to draft a final report on the impact of said actions.

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- Preparation of a comprehensive study into the feasibility of Spain becoming a partner of the European Council's initiative European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR).




*“It was five in the morning. The first missiles flew over Ukraine and the airspace was suddenly closed. The war had started. At first, my family and I were not aware that what we heard was the sound of missiles flying over our house. Then the evacuation started and my parents decided that I had to leave. Amidst a crowd of other evacuees, I got on a train and got separated from my mother, crying and saying goodbye from the train window. Nobody knew where we were headed, no-one knew what we would do next. All I could carry with me was a backpack with a laptop and my ID documents.*

*I got to Germany, was welcomed by a friend and I stayed with him for a few days. During those days I tried to find a way to keep studying. I thought that, perhaps, exchange programmes were an option; I had already participated in an academic mobility programme back in 2020, and so I contacted the coordinator to see if there was an option to do it again.*

*The Universidad Politécnica de Madrid university was the first one to answer my letter. They told me to travel to Madrid and that they would do everything possible to help me out. I will remember those words for the rest of my life. I was very lucky that, thanks to the cooperation between the Politécnica de Madrid and the Zaporozhye Polytechnic, I was able to do a mobility withing the Erasmus+ programme and so finish my postgraduate degree in Ukraine. With further support, I completed a master’s degree at the Politécnica de Madrid, and I am now studying a PhD and doing an internship in a Japanese company.*

*The war continues, my family experiences really high levels of stress because of the explosions in the city of Zaporozhye. It has been hard, especially when a missile hit a neighbouring house and when my brother was mobilized by the military and took part in the fighting. He is still fighting to defend Ukraine, and we are very worried for him. There are air raids every day, and my family cannot leave the city because my grandmother is 94 years old and needs care. My parents are extremely grateful and happy that I am safe, and that the Politécnica de Madrid has given me all this help and support.”*

Yeva, Ukrainian student

A person wearing a denim jacket is holding a stack of books. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent pink filter. A white-bordered box contains a quote in a light pink, italicized font. The quote discusses the UPM's programs for raising awareness about refugees and the university's role in addressing vulnerable situations.

*"...It was an enormous surprise for me to find out that the UPM had programmes that raise and promote awareness about refugees, about the experience some people must go through when becoming refugees. These cases are usually left isolated and marginalized, mainly due to lack of information. This is why I find the action taken by the university to objectively show everything we must take into account when we meet someone in a vulnerable situation and how to act more responsibly so commendable."*

*Yulissa, student participant in the Creative Campaigns and social activism course*

## 5. WHAT ACTIONS HAVE WE CARRIED OUT?

### **ACTION 1**

Mapping of UPM services for supporting and assisting students with international protection

### **ACTION 2**

Financial assistance to cover registration fees, board and lodging and other services (psychological services, reinforcement classes)

### **ACTION 3**

Language support

### **ACTION 4**

Continuous support

### **ACTION 5**

Training activities

### **ACTION 6**

Raising awareness within the university community

### **ACTION 7**

Research studies on refugees in other universities

Of all the previously mentioned actions corresponding to the University-Refuge Action Plan, we have implemented the ones aimed at refugee students, as well as those that best adapted to the internal organisation and regulations of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid university.

The actions have been performed in different lines, detailed below:

### **ACTION 1: Mapping of UPM services for supporting and assisting students with international protection**

This action was carried out with the aim of providing students under the framework of international protection with user-friendly and helpful information on the different services offered by the university to assist them and support them during their studies and their stay at the university. All this information was condensed in one single document to make it easier to handle. In order to successfully provide all the details, the UPM carried out a mapping of all their services with the collaboration of various schools and the general services of the university. Based on the results of this mapping, we have elaborated a service catalogue (please, see QR at the end of this document to access the information).

### **ACTION 2: Financial assistance to cover registration fees, board and lodging and other services (psychological services, reinforcement classes)**

One of the biggest hardships refugee students stumble upon when they arrive is to have access to sufficient financial resources to pay for their living expenses (board and lodging) or tuition fees during their studies and training period. It is for this reason that the Dirección de Cooperación (Cooperation Directorate) decided to—using their own funds and funds from this grant—cover all enrolment costs and help with living costs; each student recipient of these aids has managed them themselves according to their own personal needs. In addition, we have also provided psychological care services and reinforcement classes requested by students.

*“Our association currently has several travelling exhibitions of social content. One of these exhibitions is ‘Refugiados’ (‘Refugees’), with 32 works by different authors and whose main aim is to use our creative and artistic execution ability as a tool to transmit the enormous value of solidarity. It also pursues to denounce one of the worst and biggest dramas of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We want to use the artistic expression of our works to voice our rejection of the situation of refugees around the world. And in order to convey this way of thinking, we adopt a fair perspective, committed with human rights and social justice. It is within this framework that we have presented the exhibition ‘Refugees’ in the various campuses of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid university.”*

Alfredo, Círculo de Pintores Solidarios – Solidarity Painters’ Circle

**ACTION 3: Language support**

The UPM Centro de Lenguas (language center) has offered Ukrainian students access to Spanish courses. We also established a partnership with CAPMAN (company dedicated to certifying and assessing language levels) to provide students online access to their platform CAPMAN Platform where they could study English online and free of charge. Informally, UPM staff members, Ukrainian teachers and Russian administrative staff have also contributed to the effort of welcoming these students, providing support and help in the translation and interpreting process of all the paperwork and bureaucracy needed by the refugee students, especially in the first stages of their stay.

**ACCIÓN 4: Continuous accompaniment and support**

The UPM has assisted refugee students with constant support and accompaniment via various of their general services (especially the Vicerrectorado de estudiantes y extensión universitaria and the Vicerrectorado de Internacionalización, the Vice-Chancellor for Students and Vice-Chancellor for Internationalisation, office for international relations), and through each of the Schools and Faculties refugee students have registered in.

The UPM staff also expanded their provision of assistance in the search for internships and jobs, including collaboration with the Unión Profesional association. This professional association developed an employability-centered theoretical and practical professional and skill-training programme aimed at refugees who have studied, are studying or have already completed a university education.

**ACTION 5: Training activities**

In an initiative carried out jointly with UNHCR, we organized a workshop entitled “Creative campaigns and social activism,” with the major goal of promoting activism within the university community. Students were given the necessary tools to design, create and implement creative campaigns to raise awareness in their communities and help build a more welcoming and fairer world for us all. This training project was later included in the university’s catalogue of activities carried out during the 2023-2024 academic year and which can be accredited (code C31148). The academic evidence was also included in the European project EELISA Credential System (Published in EELISA Community Newsletter).



## **ACTION 6: Raising awareness within the university community**

The awareness-raising activities conducted by the university and its partners targeted schools and faculties on various university campuses. The action consisted in organizing and programming of the training cycles called “Cycles: Let’s talk about Refuge”. Each cycle included one of the many UNHCR interactive campaigns or initiatives to help raise awareness in society. Each time, we would set up an informative tent or stand in which to provide and display accurate and up-to-date information on the current situation of refugees worldwide, offering a first-hand approach to personal stories of young people, such as university students. For a full experience, we included the use of new technologies such as virtual reality, which allows the visitor to “put themselves in someone else’s shoes”. There was also a painting exhibition, “Paintings on Refuge”, organised by the Asociación Círculo de Pintores Solidarios solidary painters’ association and the Red Cross; through their own paintings and artistic works, the exhibition aimed at establishing a clear stance on and vindicating the right of refugees to a life of dignity, as well as denouncing and making this current issue visible.

Further events were also organized addressed to the entire university community, events meant to make society aware of refugees around the world and reflect on their situation. These events included first-hand testimonies provided by refugees and were conducted in partnership with organizations that have a long history of field work and experience on refugee issues. Some of these partners include UNHCR, CEAR (Spanish Commission for Refugees), Amnesty International and Painters’ Circle (one of such events was “Refugees: Context, Testimonies, and Actions”). There was also an event that proposed a space for reflection on Refugees and the University, the “Participatory Workshop on Refugees and University”. This workshop was a good background in which to present and share the various actions carried out by the university and the Refuge Action Plan in connection with refugee issues, and it provided a welcoming space for reflection on the role that both universities and civil society can play in the construction of long-lasting solutions to the current growing reality of refugees. The workshop took place at the UPM INNOVA HUB ETSIDI, a coworking space striving to provide social innovation and entrepreneurship solutions.

Lastly, we included the production of a video featuring the whole experience so that the materials, comments, reflections, actions, etc., could also be distributed through the media and social networks.

**ACCIÓN 7: Research studies on refugees in other universities**

Within the framework of the actions carried out under the funding of the CRUE (vice-chancellors association), the UPM has participated in a study on the impact of the actions carried out and implemented under the framework of the University-Refuge Action Plan, led by the Universidad de Burgos university, and in a study of the progress on the implementation process of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) in Spain, activity led by the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid university.

*“I learnt about the support programme once in Spain while looking for options to continue my unfinished studies back home in Ukraine. In the summer of 2022, the social worker at my university gave me a list of universities in Madrid that have architecture studies. Unfortunately, at that moment, and due to the timing, no university was prepared for this situation. Luckily, UPM staff members managed to enrol me at the university as a student within the Erasmus programme. For a year, I attended classes at the university, got a scholarship and had access to language courses at the UPM language center.*

*The following year, I was able to enroll at university and continue attending classes, this time as a full-time UPM student; all the while, I also kept the scholarships and had access to language courses. To this day, I continue with my studies.*

*I won't say things have all been easy; bureaucracy and red tape, the language barrier, mental challenges, the impact of the war back in my home country... they have all made the process complicated. But, throughout this long journey, the UPM staff have always tried their hardest to help me and support me in my training.*

*The University has also helped me a lot with socializing with the community, because before I started my classes I felt very isolated, I didn't feel integrated in the society. Now, with all the help I have received and all the work, I feel like I have made a lot of progress.*

*For me, it is very important to know and understand that there are many people who do wonder what to do about refugees, how to tackle the situation. That makes me feel that I am not forgotten that people do want to help other people.”*

*Davyd, Ukrainian student*



SHUKRIA, AFGHAN ATHLETE



ENTHUSIASM  
PROACTIVENESS

INCLUSION







UKRAINIAN STUDENT



*"For the University, the University-Refuge Action Plan has taught us identify in a more accurate way the various difficulties we might encounter when we need to articulate improvement processes within the university space. Being aware beforehand of what these difficulties are and knowing what we shall find, enables us to act preventively, that is before they happen, identify them as soon as they show, analyze them with a critical eye to put a solution to them as soon as they appear, and try to find a way to prevent them from generating a much larger problem."*

*Virginia, Deputy UPM Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation*



## **6. WHAT ROLE HAS THE UNIVERSITY PLAYED?**

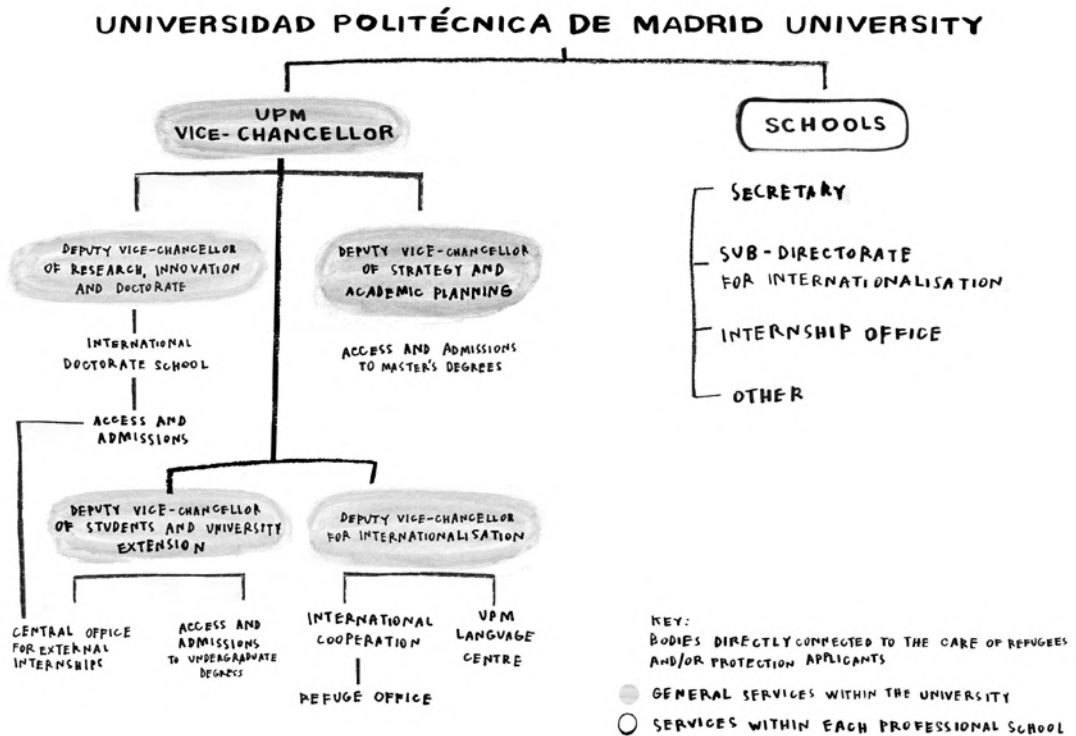
We strive to build an active and alive university, one that excites its community, that connects persons and cares for them. The university we dream of is one that transcends frontiers, goes beyond borders, not just physical, but also social, cultural, and emotional. We aim to transform, and in this sense our commitment to receiving and welcoming refugee students becomes a living expression of our values: fostering solidarity, inclusion and respect for diversity.

From every single corner of the university community, from the Vice-Chancellors' offices to the Schools and Departments, all levels of management have risen to the challenge and have worked incessantly to make the most of this opportunity to build a richer, more plural and open society. This grant has enabled us to help and assist refugee students in their academic and personal integration processes to the university; it has also made administrative steps and stages easier and more flexible and has addressed the extraordinary circumstances of the applicants with a more humanitarian approach, understanding the urgency and complexity of their situation. This has been a joint effort that not only responds to the current situation, but also defines who we are and what we understand higher education should be in a globalised and an ever-changing world.

From an organisational point of view, the University-Refuge Action Plan has been implemented under the operational framework of the Vice-Chancellor for internationalisation. It is under supervision of this department that several other UPM bodies coordinate to help and assist people with international protection throughout their process of admission to university; it is then the different schools and faculties at the UPM that ultimately implement the programme in more detail.

The university's involvement in this whole process is not limited to the institutional level alone, no. It also extends to the human fabric that makes it up. Teachers, students and administrative staff, they have all contributed to the best of their abilities in providing help and support much beyond the classrooms and the academic context. They have collaborated in opening welcoming spaces, collaboration areas and frameworks for intercultural dialogue. Receiving and welcoming refugees impacts everyone, it changes

all our lives, not just of those seeking refuge and shelter. It transforms the whole university community, forging bonds strong enough to break down barriers and sow the seeds of global citizenship and solidarity. In this journey, the university not only welcomes the traveler: through the experience, it learns, grows and reaffirms its unwavering conviction to become and remain a space of knowledge and humanity, a university-refuge.



**Chart 1.** Organization chart of the UPM with the different bodies involved in implementing the action plan to help and assist refugees or international protection applicants.



*“Part of the first action plan the University takes is to provide them with training, offer them the possibility to continue it, because training is extremely important—obviously, without forgetting the differences there might exist. But another important issue is also accompanying them along the way, offer personal, psychological and especially cultural background to aid them in their integration process, to provide them with enough tools to have a comprehensive inclusion process. This is pivotal in their training process and in being able to assimilate it. They need this support because they are going through a very difficult and emotional personal situation. So, the question is, to what extent can universities generate the necessary items and tools to make these students’ integration process easier at all levels? To achieve this goal, we need resources, not just financial ones but also on human capital..”*

*Group work, University-Refuge workshop*

*“Probably, the most difficult and complex issues we have faced have been the barriers we bumped into for a quick and agile access of people to university, as demanded by the emergency we found ourselves in. The public university is not made for the entry of students in such a way. Despite these hurdles, we came up with a temporary solution while working to find more long-lasting measures. The fact that for the first time we were faced with these new realities and had no flexible tools to deal with them, it was clear that the system was too rigid and needed to be adapted quickly and in accordance with the moment we were facing.*

*“Despite everything, we managed to help all the students that came to us and made sure they were able to enter almost immediately a bridging course that would at least allow them to keep studying; and, above all, we gave them access to Spanish language learning classes, which has been pivotal, aside from financial support. The accompaniment procedures we followed, basically adapting them daily, have been essential for students to feel welcomed by the university, to feel integrated in the university community, despite the limitations of those who face something so extraordinary for the first time.”*

*Elena, UPM management team*

*“There’s something else we need to consider we just put everyone under the label of ‘refugees’, but they are not all the same, there are differences among them and they have been treated differently. For example, when the war in Ukraine broke out, they gave official papers to Ukrainians almost immediately, but not to Latin-Americans who had also come as refugees, and they complained about it. Why is it that some have papers and others don’t? They (Latin-Americans) have no papers and have been working here for years. They have been treated differently and I wanted to ask, how do you choose who to help?”*

*Representative of Las Cotidianas*

## 7. LESSONS LEARNED

The success of this initiative is the result of the combined efforts and collaborative work of the many people and institutions involved, especially the refugee students themselves, who have decided to make good use of the opportunities offered to them by the University-Refuge Action Plan to continue their studies and integrate into both the university community and Spanish society. We would also like to highlight the important contribution of UNHCR, an invaluable ally in the development process of the various training and awareness-raising actions we put into place and who assisted us in the implementation of the actions on refugee issues. The contribution of other organizations and institutions that have participated in the activities we have carried out should also be mentioned.

The following are some of the goals achieved:

### **Access of refugee students to the university to continue with their studies**

During the grant period, eight students from Ukraine have accessed undergraduate and postgraduate studies at the UPM. Five of these eight students are still studying at the university (two undergraduate students, two master's students, and one PhD). The remaining three students either returned to their country of origin or decided not to continue their studies. In the case of the undergraduate students, their access to university was carried out as mobility students within the Erasmus programme; they were subsequently admitted as transfer students, with a minimum of 30 credits already taken at their universities of origin; and they also had to pass the required Spanish language proficiency test. In the case of the postgraduate students (master's), the admission process was easier, and they are not required to demonstrate proficiency in the Spanish language as master's degrees are offered in English. Finally, in the case of the student pursuing doctoral studies, she had previously studied a master's degree at UPM and so her admission process followed the same procedure as any other PhD student.

### **Paid internships and volunteering activities**

two postgraduate students are currently completing their paid internships in their fields of expertise. In addition, one undergraduate student is carrying out volunteer

activities at the University Institute for Cooperation in Basic Habitability (ICHaB, for its abbreviation in Spanish), a university development cooperation space set up to help students gain skills basic to their professional training. To carry out these activities, students have been accompanied and assessed by staff from the Central Internship Office, by their respective schools and by staff from the Cooperation Directorate.

### **Mapping and preparation of a Catalogue of UPM services**

All information and details on the main services the university must provide support and assessment to refugee students during their stay and university education period with us have been compiled into a single document (see QR at the end of this document).

### **Strengthening of inter-institutional partnerships**

The successful implementation of this plan has been possible thanks to the collaboration and coworking of various institutions and organizations, such as the Asociación Círculo de Pintores Solidarios (the Solidarity Painters' Circle Association), UNHCR, CEAR (Spanish Refugee Aid Commission), Amnesty International, the CAPMAN platform company, and "Hope of Freedom", among others. Working together to develop actions and activities focused on a common goal has been an invaluable opportunity to build closer relationships and strengthen ties of trust and partnership between institutions.

### **Raising awareness in the university community**

Training and awareness-raising activities have brought the complex reality of refugees closer to the university community.

### **Design and development of an institutional programme to welcome and help refugees and/or international protection applicants, the "UPM Reception and Refuge Programme"**

This programme brings together all the previous experiences the UPM has implemented in and out of the university, everything done regarding refugees; it also defines the institution's lines of action and establishes indicators to measure the degree of compliance of said actions. The aim is to go beyond specific short-term actions and initiatives, and move onto a long-term institutional policy, one that would enable UPM




to act in response to the demands of the current global situation and the increase in refugee numbers around the world. This programme is currently under review by the Vice-Chancellor for internationalization.

*“When the student first arrived, he didn’t know any Spanish, he spoke almost no English, and communicating with him was very difficult and frustrating at times. And it was for me too, because I couldn’t help him with class, with the activities we were doing. This meant that we would usually stay half an hour or an hour after class trying to go over everything we had seen and summarize it, trying to find a way to help him. At the end of the year, this student dropped out; I’m not sure if it was because he was frustrated, because he had a lot of time to do all the activities; but communication with him was difficult and he couldn’t understand the language much. I stopped seeing him for a while as he was no longer in any of my classes, but we would bump into each other from time to time at school and I would say ‘hi’. It was thanks to this initiative and the UPM Cooperation team that we met again: the student had asked for voluntary work; as he had enrolled in the architecture school, they asked us if as a cooperation group we him would have do his volunteering work with us. We told him what we were doing and asked him what he felt more comfortable with. He is currently head-on working on the web page and helping us tremendously. I see him much happier, which in turn makes me very happy.”*

*Mar, UPM teacher*





*“It is highly important to stress the role the student body plays in the whole process: students at university need to be aware of their responsibility in welcoming refugee students. Involvement and commitment must also be shown through student representation, it is important for delegations to understand and be aware that they represent all students, including refugee students. Besides, we also must find ways to overcome administrative rigidity when it comes to people for whom it is difficult to integrate into university life. This could be achieved through voluntary work, providing clearer and more comprehensible information on websites, etc. In other words, it could be done by identifying the different instruments and tools that we need to make this integration process all the easier for these students.”*

*Group work, University-Refuge workshop*

## 8. CHALLENGES

The University-Refuge Action Plan has been the first experience the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid has had in welcoming and accompanying refugees from Ukraine. In this journey, we have had to face several challenges; we overcame some and we are still working on others.

The following are some of the most note-worthy challenges we have encountered:

- Difficulties and limitations in accessing the Spanish education system: language, entrance assessment system, lack of validated protocols.
- Difficulties in the identification of UPM refugee students (data protection law)
- The difficulties and hardships the teaching and administrative staff encounter when addressing and supporting students undergoing complex personal situations; these students usually have few or small social support networks and have a different mother tongue, which creates a language barrier.
- We need greater coordination between the different service providers within the UPM university so that we can improve the care of refugees and/or international protection applicants.
- University authorities need to prioritize refugee issues in their policies and facilitate as much as possible access and support programmes.
- We need to encourage greater openness to other cultures, listen to refugees, and increase their involvement and proactive participation in the design and implementation of university services aimed at this population group.
- There is permanent concern and uncertainty on the future availability of resources necessary to sustain further actions promoted within this framework. This is why, from the institution it was decided to provide attention on demand. At present, the main uncertainty is whether the actions related to the registration and board and

lodging fees of the students currently enrolled shall be met, and hence students will be able to continue with their education and training process.

- Limited reception of administrative technical staff and service personnel, teachers and researchers, due to: a) legal constraints, they did not have refugee status; b) training of Ukrainian teachers not aligned with degrees offered at the UPM university; c) uncertainty about future working conditions.
- It is necessary to grow more, to go from specific initiatives to a strong institutional policy on refugee issues, one which provides the allocation of permanent resources and which includes not only refugees and/or international protection applicants from Ukraine, but also people of any nationality.

*“It is important to share and make public what has been done with these refugee students so that their chances of staying on at university are real and defensible. Spanish regulations are very complicated and applying them to the new situation poses very demanding challenges to each university. And then, to make it all work properly we need a very good connection between the different stages necessary to successfully welcome a student, like their curriculum, their real possibilities of enrolling certain syllabuses, etc. In other words, we need to ensure these students find a solid and efficient system that provides them with both financial and psychological helplines, with a structure that allows for the monitoring of their activities and what they are doing, and with constant support.*

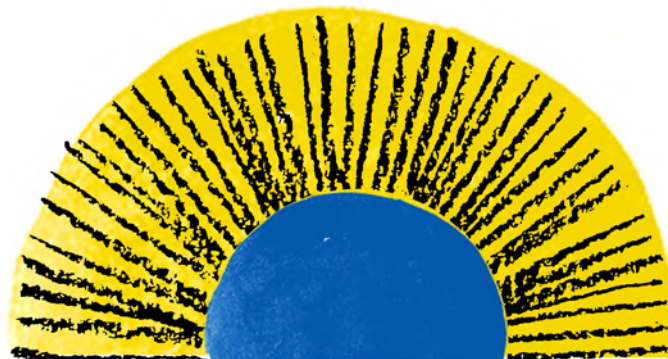
*In short, the biggest challenge within the University is perhaps establishing a more fluent and flexible coordination system; and outside the University, providing these students with a reliable access system. In the case of Spain, limited access is a national legal issue; what we need is to take a political stance in certain structures so that we can really implement mechanisms that facilitate the access process, mechanisms which are already in place in other European Union countries.”*


*Virginia, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for UPM International Cooperation*

*"We suddenly found ourselves receiving a person whose cultural background is very different from ours, with different customs, ways of behaving and working, ways of expressing themselves... And all of this without even mentioning the language barrier, which is a whole other issue. So, overnight we had to implement and put in place many mechanisms and personal resources to effectively tackle the situation and be able to welcome and accompany her.*

*Once we finally managed to communicate with her and talk a bit more fluently and closely with her, we learnt a bit more about her feelings and integration process: for a person who suddenly finds herself immersed in a group of students of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, a person who does not understand the rules and who theoretically will be sharing a set of academic activities for which a certain performance is expected, she felt at a disadvantage. Projects will be graded, there are tests and exams to be taken, and it doesn't matter how much you adapt your methodology, how much you help, how much you facilitate things, that person feels they are always at a disadvantage in comparison with the rest of students; and they are. So, for the future, I think it's not so much a question of immersing the refugee student as soon as they come in a specific student body, in a specific degree—even if the people responsible for the degree say it's ok; I think it's more a question of preparing the student beforehand, work with them before they start."*

*Raquel, UPM teacher*





*“I’m a high-level athlete and sometimes we give talks at schools or to various groups. In my personal case, I find this type of courses (Creative Campaigns and social activism) a valuable source of information on current social issues and problems. I learn from them and then use that learning to pass onto people my own message, to adapt my message to the current situation. These courses also help me prepare for future internships or jobs.”*

*María, student participant in Creative Campaigns and social activism*

## 9. FUTURES

The identification of “futures” on University and Refuge has been carried out in a participatory manner, from two perspectives: one, from within the university; the other, from the civil society.

*“Societies are built of diverse people and groups; some groups have a better understanding of what surrounds us than others. It is these latter that may need a hand in realising it is an obligation, a responsibility of all of us to help refugees integrate into communities.*

*This is a diverse society, and I believe that all the spaces that allow us to openly share our different perspectives and visions of the same reality—a reality which is rather frequently unknown—are useful.”*

*Group work, University-  
Refuge workshop*



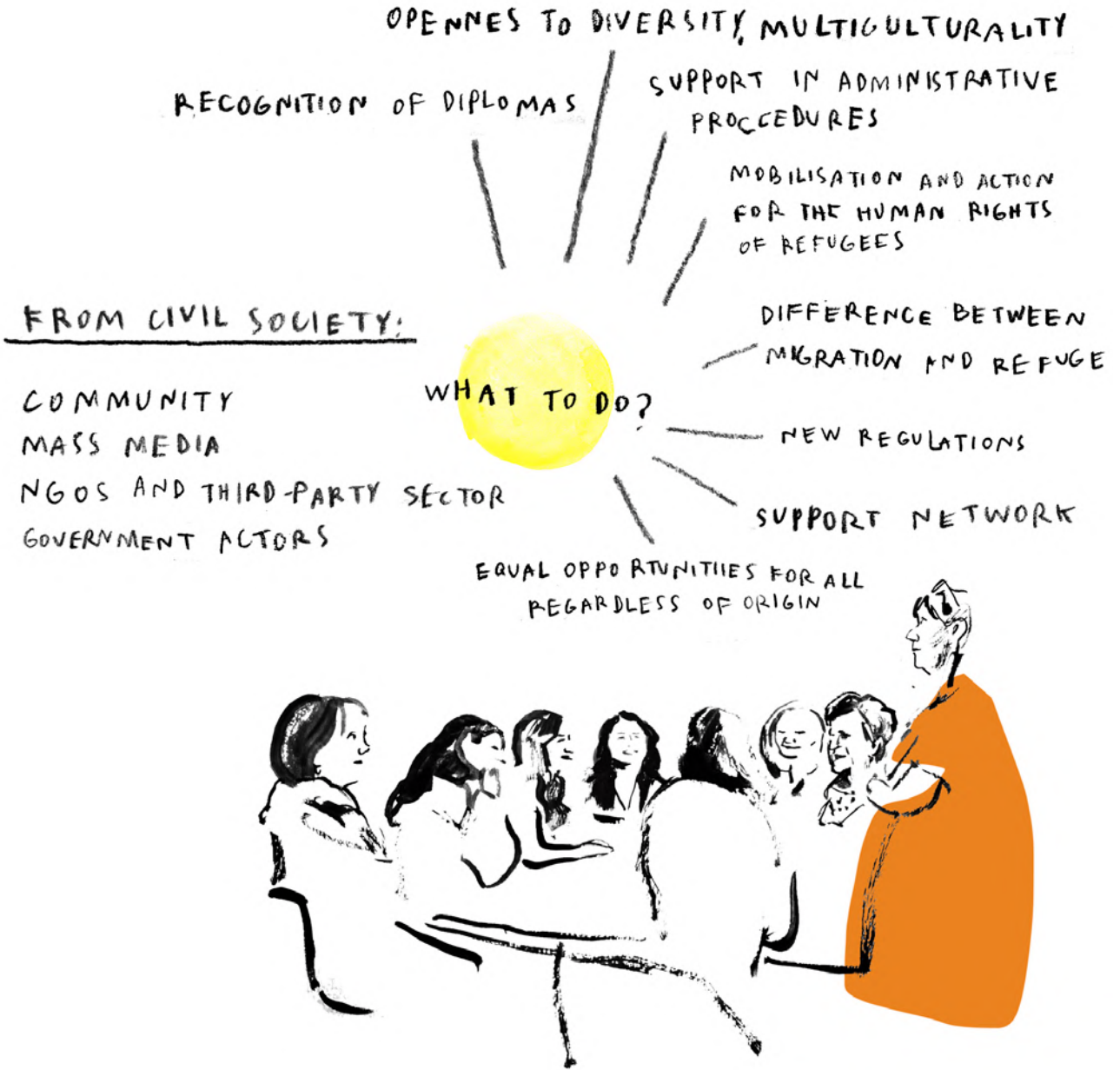
## FROM THE UNIVERSITY:



STUDENTS  
ADMINISTRATIVE AND SERVICES STAFF  
TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS  
STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS AND DELEGATIONS  
STUDENTS' VOLUNTEERS  
REFUGEES





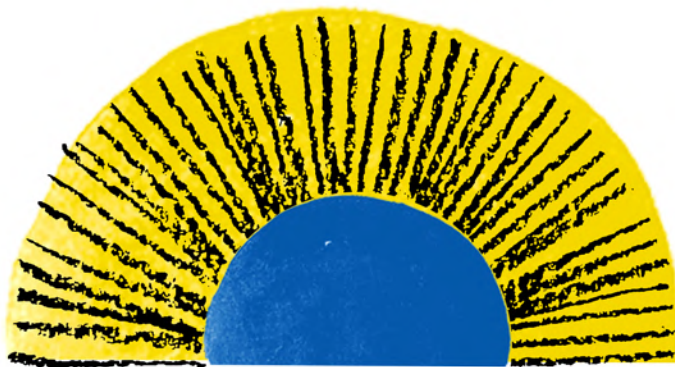


*“We believe that, in the future, projects like this aimed at refugees will require much solidarity, an increase in awareness and empathy. It is important to consider raising awareness among the different government actors because the first hurdle refugees are faced with when they arrive in an academic/professional field is the validation of their studies and certificates. They find themselves fighting against the bureaucracy of the entire governmental system, a system that sets a limit and keeps them going round in circles without even considering what this implies for them. It is essential to have these actors involved so that they understand the impact these procedures have on a refugee and how they affect their integration into Spanish society.*

*We face several challenges in the future: establishing a preparation process prior to the arrival of refugees, for example, or a programme to learn how to work with these refugees to help them adapt to a different culture, a new culture for them, a culture whose language sometimes they don't even understand. It is also necessary to do a case-by-case analysis or be able to study the intricacies of each refugee individually, because not all of them came here under the same circumstances and for the same reasons. For example, the circumstances of an Afghan refugee are not the same as those of a Ukrainian refugee; and so, it is very important to be aware of their individual cultural contexts. We also must realize how important it is to support these refugees, both from the universities and from the third sector or other organizations that can no doubt help throughout the whole process. This support procedure would help them during their training, would help in raising awareness of their circumstances, and even help them with a matter of such importance as acquiring a good level of Spanish to make their integration process more fluent. Emphasis should also be placed on showing them how the administrative process works here, how to deal with bureaucracy, because many of them don't do their paperwork not because they don't want to but because they don't know how to. This lack of understanding of the administrative intricacies together with a low level of Spanish—not even a B1—make things very, very difficult for them.*

*Looking into the future, we as a society need to be awoken to reality, we need to raise awareness within our communities, to mobilize, to take action and learn and understand refugees and their circumstances.”*

*Group work, University-Refuge workshop*



# UNIVERSITY-REFUGEE ACTION PLAN AT UNIVERSIDAD POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID

A GUIDE TO LESSONS AND CHALLENGES FOR TRANSFORMATION

International Cooperation Area  
Vice-Chancellor for Internationalization  
Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

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# UNIVERSITY-REFUGEE ACTION PLAN AT UNIVERSIDAD POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID

A GUIDE TO LESSONS AND CHALLENGES FOR TRANSFORMATION

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