



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



# EULOG 2025

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**From “university sponsorship” to integration-  
through-education: the role of the Italian  
universities as a community**

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## Focus

How universities, as a community, applied an integration-through-education approach for refugees.

**Case study:** the UNICORE program (good practice and pledge at the GRF 2023)

## Outline

1. Intro: Refugee access to higher education, skill-based pathways and the Community Sponsorship schemes
2. The University Corridors for Refugees (UNICORE) program in Italy
3. *Beyond Admission: The Integration-through-Education Approach*
4. Best practices, Added Values and Challenges
5. Conclusions



# 1. Intro: Refugee access to higher education, skill-based pathways and the Community Sponsorship schemes

The legal framework:

- The **UN New York Declaration** (2016) → “*responsibility for refugees shared by national and local authorities, international organisations, international financial institutions, civil society partners (including faith-based organisations, diaspora organisations and academia)*»
- The **EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion** (2021-2027) → “*to build a more inclusive society for all*”
- The **New Pact on Migration and Asylum + the European Commission Recommendation on legal pathway** (2020):

*Member States wishing to establish community or private sponsorship schemes through funding, capacity building and knowledge- sharing, in cooperation with civil society, with the aim of developing a European model of community sponsorship, which can lead to better integration outcomes in the longer term.*

(COM(2020)609 final, para. 6)



# 1. Intro: Refugee access to higher education, skill-based pathways and the Community Sponsorship schemes

## "Community sponsorship" (CS) and higher education pathways

CS = “**encompassing several different approaches** for refugee admission to third countries other than countries of origin or transit”, **which have in common** “a **shared responsibility between civil society and the state** when engaging in refugee admission efforts, **by providing** financial, emotional, social and/ or settlement support to help newly arrived refugees integrate in a third country”

*(European Parliament, briefing 2021)*

- The notion of community sponsorship triggers a **whole-of-society approach** to **responsibility-sharing** in international and humanitarian protection.  
*(Bond and Kwadrans, 2019)*
- Approach also **applicable to university policies** on refugee access to higher education  
*(Bond et al, 2020)*

Today, **7%** of refugees have access to higher education compared to only **1%** in 2019. This is far below the global average higher education enrollment among non-refugees, which stands at **42 per cent** (UNHCR 2025)



# 1. Intro: Refugee access to higher education, skills-based pathways and the Community Sponsorship schemes



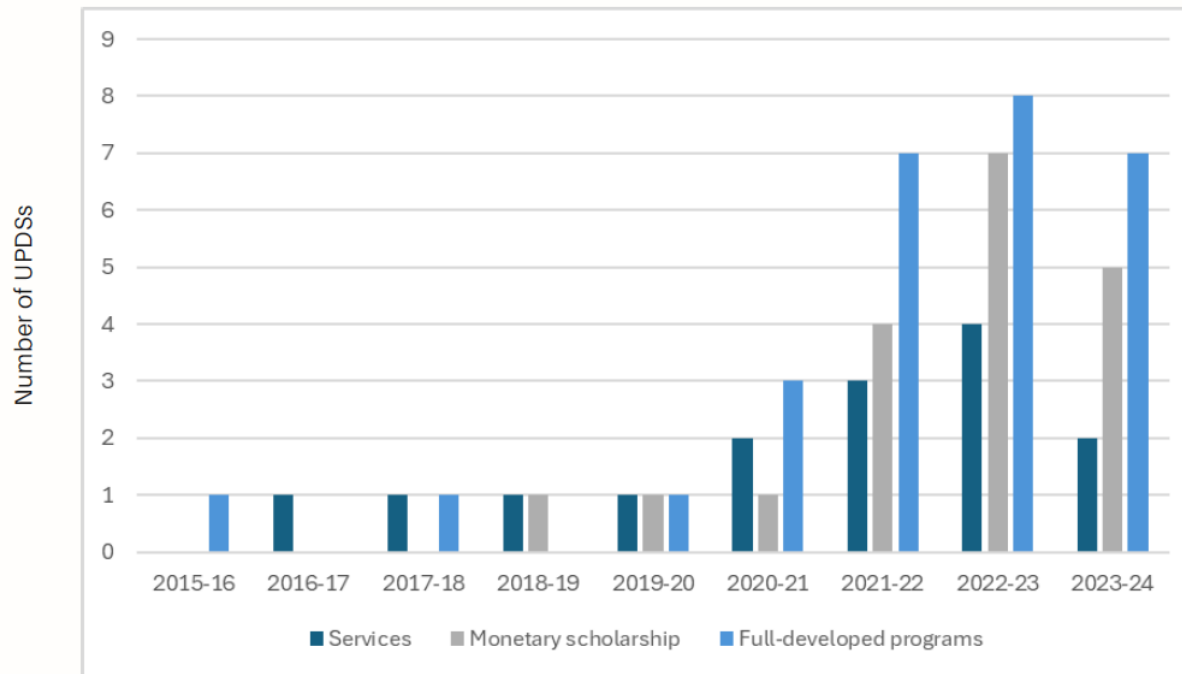
Source: «[Transforming Futures: Why and How Your Institution Should Champion Refugee Education Pathways](#)» (EUPassworld Project, 2025)



## 2. The UNICORE Program in Italy

Preliminary observation on the Italian context of higher education system

# University Provisions for Displaced Students (UPDSs)



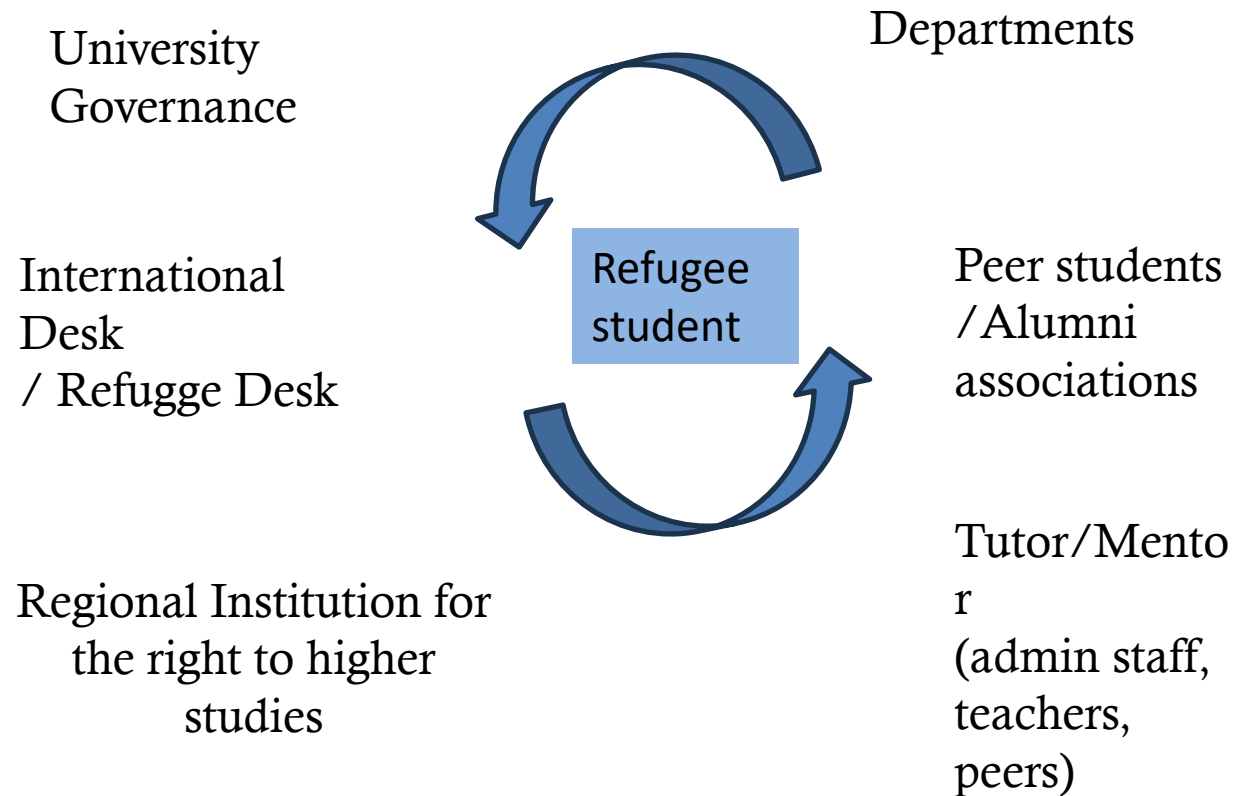
The graph shows the presence of the three different types of UPDSs among the 9 selected HEIs, per A.Y (Source: Cristina Mazzero, Building institutional capacity through inclusion, or the other way around?, CGHE webinar series on HE and geopolitics, 2025)



## 2. The UNICORE Program in Italy

### Preliminary observation on the Italian context of higher education system

The **key actors** within the University who ensures education pathways for refugee students admission, reception and inclusion

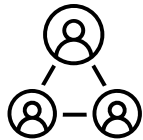


## 2. The UNICORE Program in Italy

### Objective and main features



Aim of the project is to provide refugees with bachelor degree residing in targeted Country of first asylum with scholarship for **Master's degrees in Italy**.



The project is based on a **multi-stakeholders** and **whole-of-society approach**.



**National Partnership:** UNHCR / MFA / Universities / Caritas Italy / Diaconia Valdese / Centro Astalli / Banca Etica (Bank)

**Local Partnership:** Alliance built by each partner University with civil society organizations (local protocols)



Azienda Regionale  
per il Diritto agli Studi Superiori



(Ex. UNIBO  
local alliance)

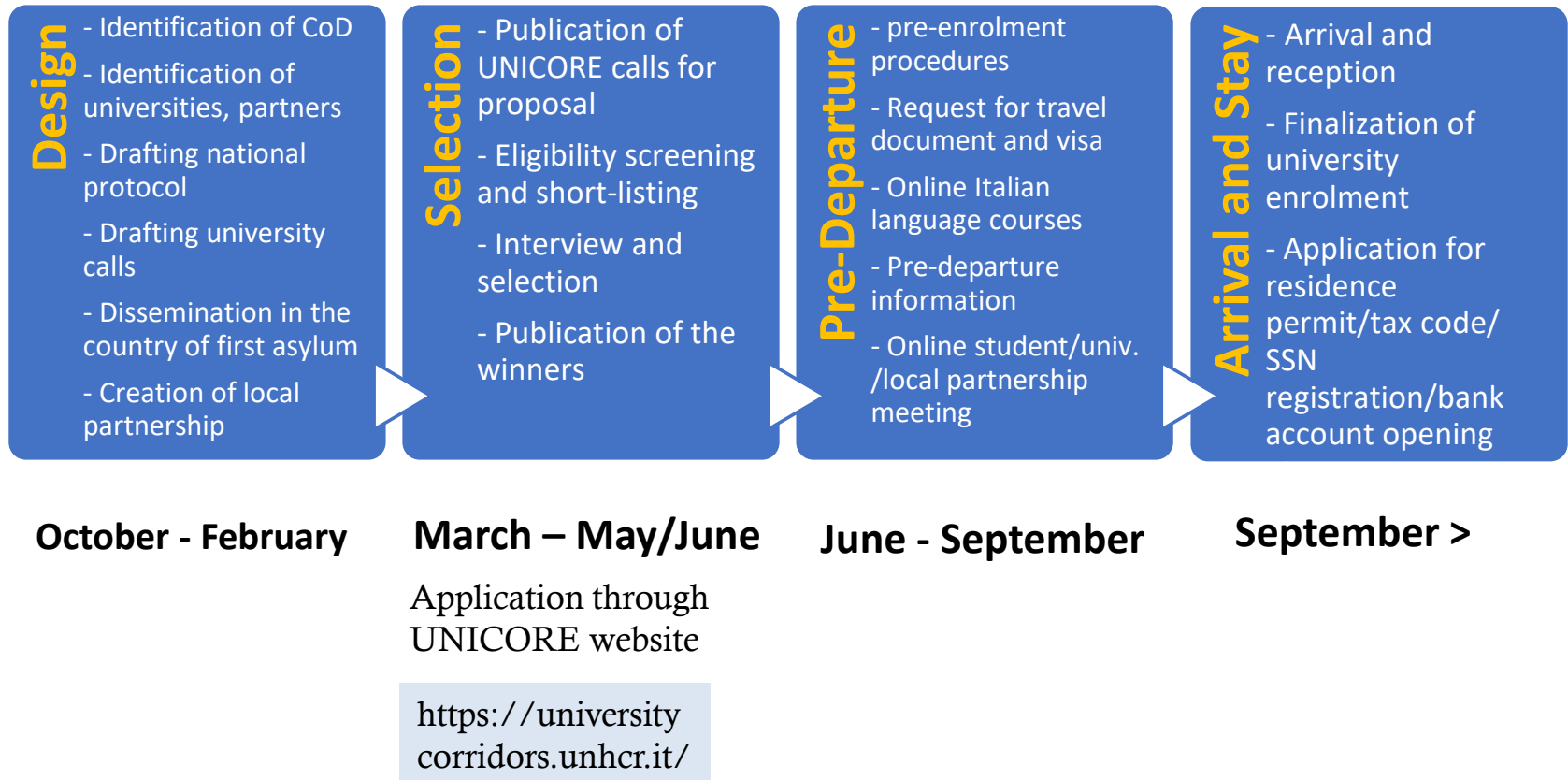


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## 2. The UNICORE Program in Italy

### The main phases



## 2. The UNICORE Program in Italy

The quick expansion from the 2019 pilot to 2023 good practice and pledge

(UNICORE 1.0) 2019	(UNICORE 6.0) 2024	TOTAL EDITIONS
6 scholarships	66 scholarships	<b>202 scholarships</b>
2 Italian universities	35 Italian universities	<b>41 Italian universities</b>
30 submitted applications	807 submitted applications	<b>2341 Submitted applications</b>
1 Country of first asylum ( <i>Ethiopia</i> )	9 Countries of first asylum	<b>13 Countries of first asylum*</b>
6 students	65 students	<b>237 students</b>
0 female	20 female (31%)	<b>59 female</b>

\*Cameroon,  
Ethiopia, Kenya,  
Malawi,  
Mozambico,  
Namibia, Niger,  
Nigeria, Sudafrica,  
Tanzania, Uganda,  
Zambia, Zimbabwe.



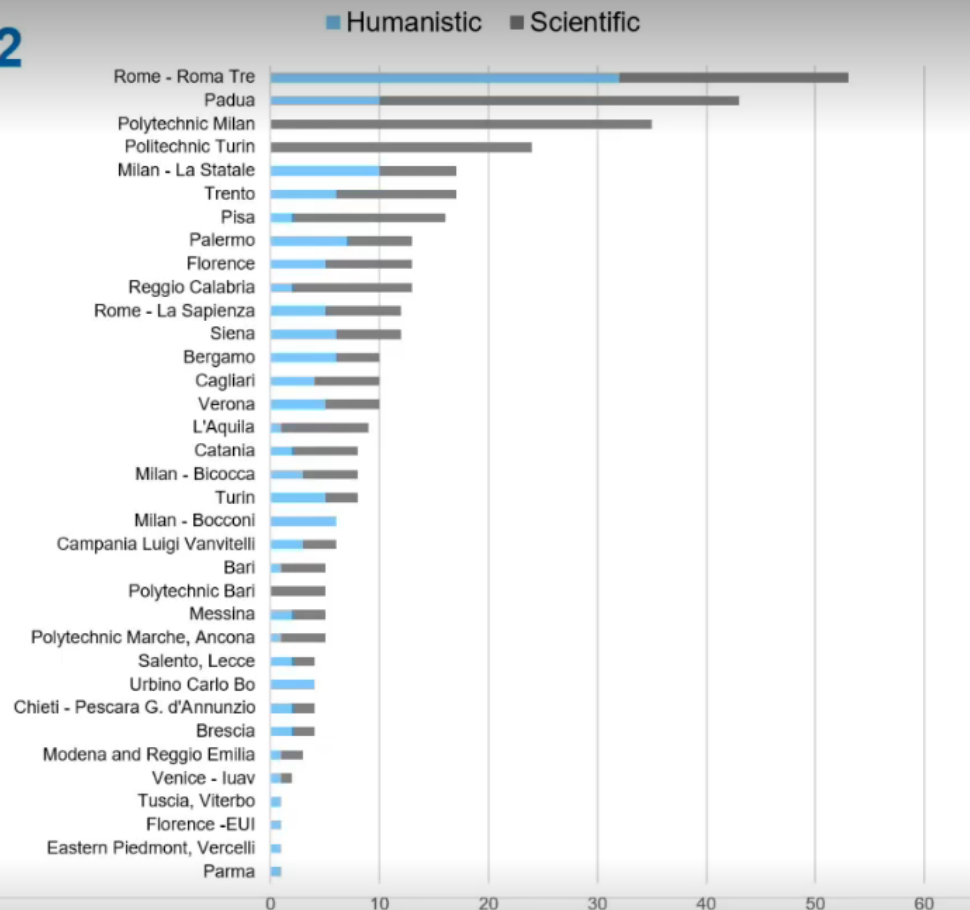
## 2. The UNICORE 6<sup>th</sup> edition (2024-2026, ongoing): *education offer*

### Education offer

1/2

**35 Universities** offering:  
**67 scholarships** for  
**388 courses** grouped under **14 main topics**

- 89% of universities offered more than one course
- Average number of courses offered by university: 11
- **High variability in number of courses offered:**
  - from 53 courses to 1 course offered;
  - Roma Tre and Padua offered 1/ 4 of total courses!



## 2. The UNICORE Program in Italy

### GCR objectives



#### Obj 2: Enhance refugee self-reliance

UNI.CO.RE assists and supports students pursuing higher education and helps them develop their professional skills so that when they graduate, they will have both the knowledge and skills to obtain gainful employment and to better their future.

#### Obj 3: Expand access to third-country solutions

UNI.CO.RE opens avenues for persons in need of international protection that provide for a lawful stay in a third country where the international protection needs of the beneficiaries are met. Beneficiaries are given legal access to a third country where they can gradually obtain a more sustainable permanent status.

#### Obj 4: Support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity

Several students (First edition) express a desire to take what they learn back to their countries or to the refugee camps where they once lived. Many recognize that with the knowledge they have gained through education, they are able to help others, whether that be helping them start and fund business, providing medical care or going back to teach others.



## Annex. The UNICORE pledge launched at the Global Refugee Forum 2023

Title of the pledge	Expand Higher Education Pathways for Refugees and Develop Welcoming Communities through a Whole-of-Society Approach
Action 1	Increasing the <b>number of students</b> sponsored (from 6 in 2019 to 50 in 2022) to their universities each year
Action 2	Increasing the <b>number of Countries of first asylum</b> (from 1 in 2019 to 7 in 2022) where refugees reside
Action 3	Ensuring <b>gender equality</b> and parity of access by creating opportunities specifically for women and girls (from 0 in 2019 to 13 in 2022) and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
Action 4	Supporting in <b>harmonizing</b> the administrative selection procedures among all Italian universities.
Action 5	Supporting <b>acquisition/certification</b> of alternative documentation confirming credentials and learning.
Action 6	Developing <b>study-work hybrid programmes</b> also by the strengthening of the corporate sector engagement and synergies with existing labour pathways programmes.
Action 7	Working towards <b>building welcoming and inclusive communities</b> by raising awareness and utilising community sponsorship models.
Action 8	<b>Amplifying the refugee students and alumni voice</b> and strengthening their engagement at every stage of UNICORE's programming, including their involvement in designing and remodulation of existing study, legal and psycho-social services.
Action 9	Providing <b>trainings and technical support to other institutions</b> who could welcome refugee students or open new education pathways
Action 10	Develop <b>sustainable funding mechanisms</b> and social support structures, also by the strengthening of the Italian Government partnership

### Expected impact 2023-2027

- ✓ Provide at least 200 full scholarships
- ✓ from 10 Countries between Africa and Middle East
- ✓ have at least 150 refugee graduates by 2027, of which at least 30% female
- ✓ at least 45 HEI's, 3 CEOs associations, 2 banks and 5 other private sector entities engaged as partner at national level
- ✓ replicate this model to at least 4 EU MSs



## Annex. The UNICORE pledge uploaded in March 2025



Supported by UNHCR,  
the UN Refugee Agency

UNICORE project provides legal and safe entry and stay for refugee students residing in Africa and Middle East who are strongly motivated to continue their higher education in Italy. Since the 2019 pilot, two universities pledged for university corridors. Across the academic years, the programme has met several challenges, fulfilled initial gaps, and far exceeded its commitment of providing 50 scholarships for master's degree courses in 4 A.Ys. UNICORE core's phases have been structurally implemented, refining more flexible admission policies, facilitating administrative and legal procedures when feasible, providing pre-departure language courses and post-arrival job orientation/placement and social life inclusion paths. Starting from its 6th edition which is being launching on 2024, University of Bologna and 34 Italian Universities, in collaboration with UNHCR, Caritas Italiana, Centro Astalli, Diaconia Valdese and other local partners pledge to:

- 1) Increasing the number of students sponsored (from 6 in 2019 to 50 in 2022) to their universities each year □ at least 50/A.Y.
- 2) Increasing the number of Countries of first asylum (from 1 in 2019 to 7 in 2022) where refugees reside □ at least 10 Countries between Africa and Middle East.
- 3) Ensuring gender equality and parity of access by creating opportunities specifically for women and girls (from 0 in 2019 to 13 in 2022) and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
- 4) Supporting in harmonizing the administrative selection procedures among all Italian universities.
- 5) Develop sustainable funding mechanisms and social support structures, also by the strengthening of the Italian Government partnership.
- 6) Developing study-work hybrid programmes also by the strengthening of the corporate sector engagement and synergies with existing labour pathways programmes.
- 7) Working towards building welcoming and inclusive communities by raising awareness and utilising community sponsorship models.
- 8) Amplifying the refugee students and alumni voice and strengthening their engagement at every stage of UNICORE's programming, including their involvement in designing and remodulation of existing study, legal and psycho-social services.
- 9) Providing trainings and technical support to other institutions who could welcome refugee students or open new education pathways.
- 10) Supporting acquisition/certification of alternative documentation confirming credentials and learning.





## *Annex. The UNICORE Student Association*

# UNICORE



## UNICORE Students Association

Advocating for Refugee Education | Enhancing UNICORE Programs | Supporting Academic & Career Success\*\*



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### 3. *Beyond Admission: The Integration-through-Education Approach*

#### BENEFITS

##### Admission

- legal entry in Italy with study VISA
- support in pre-enrolling at the Embassy of Italy in CoD and related procedures
- flight tickets

##### Reception

- scholarship and accommodation

##### Integration

- engagement in the local student life and community
- Socio-legal and psychosocial assistance
- Promoting the process of job placement (*social inclusion goes through job inclusion*)



##### In Academia:

- ✓ Peer-to-peer support
- ✓ Mentoring (*peers, professors, admin staff*)
- ✓ buddy programs
- ✓ Sport&games engagement

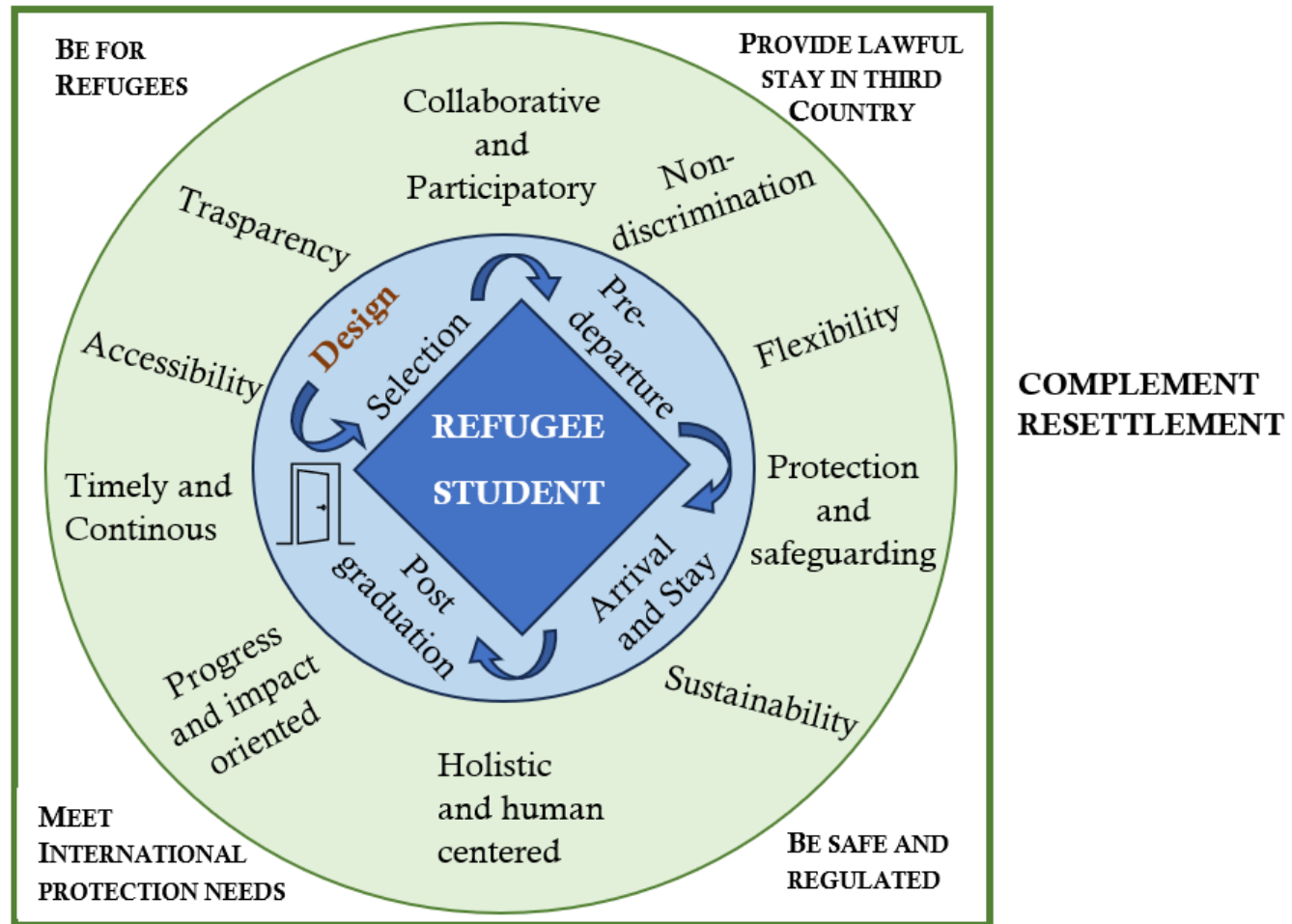
##### In society:

- ✓ Sponsor families
- ✓ Local community volunteers
- ✓ Alumni Associations (*refugees voice*)





### 3. *Beyond Admission: The Integration-through-Education Approach*



Source: M. Borraccetti and M. Veltri, [Evaluation Report of the University Corridors for Refugees \(UNI.CO.RE\) Program in Italy \(2019-2023\)](#)



## 4. Best practices, added value and challenges

### UNICORE CHALLENGES

- Legal status limits (study permits, healthcare costs, job transition).
- Language barriers despite pre/post-arrival devoted courses.
- Financial sustainability largely borne by universities

### UNIVERSITIES CHALLENGES

- Long-term sustainability – more projects, same or fewer admin and teaching staff
- Shortages of student accommodation, which increase after graduation
- Language barriers, linked also to the post-graduation job opportunities
- Difficulties in the activation of graduate and postgraduate traineeships



## 4. Best practices, added value and challenges

### BEST PRACTICES IN ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

- **University of Bari:** Fast-track recognition of qualifications
- **University of Verona:** Broad multi-sectoral network (NGOs, legal bodies, CEO association, private sector, families and local communities).
- **University of Tuscia:** Crowdfunding model #UNITUS4Refugees.

### ADDED VALUE FOR ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

- more sensitized, civic, inclusive university
- new approach to students' needs
- improvement of services for the benefit of other groups of students
- new approach in the job placement



## 5. Conclusions

- Italian universities' experience through the UNICORE program proved that education-based sponsorship can create durable integration paths.
- UNICORE is a scalable European model for refugee admission through education (replicated in France, Belgium and Ireland)
- *"Integration-through-education"* is a powerful tool for building cohesive, resilient societies.

*“UNICORE is a great project. UNICORE is an opportunity for many people who do not have access to higher education. There are so many students who have skills and/or knowledge without being able to continue their studies in African countries.*

*It gives you opportunities and hope to help their country tomorrow.”*

(UNICORE former student)



UNICORE student C.N. graduated in Food Safety and Food Risk Management at the University of Parma (April 2025)



## References

**M. Veltri**, The role of public entities and civil society in promoting active refugee and migrant admission policies in Europe: Exploring an emerging research field” in “Towards a European Model of Community Sponsorship for Migrants and Refugees: The Legal Perspective” Routledge-Giappichelli (*forthcoming* 2025)

**M. Borraccetti, M. Veltri and D. Vitiello**, ["University sponsorship" for refugee admission and integration: The Italian experience](#), in: The Admission and Integration of Refugees in Europe Legal and Policy Perspectives, London, Routledge, 2025

### *Reports:*

**M. Veltri**, Community Sponsorship and Higher Education Pathways for Refugees in Third Countries and EU Member States. Mapping and Comparing the existing Practices and Approaches”, *ongoing* 2025

**M. Borraccetti and M. Veltri**, [Evaluation Report of the University Corridors for Refugees \(UNI.CO.RE\) Program in Italy \(2019-2023\)](#)

**Thank You!**

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