

Resolution

Students at risk: Integration of Ukrainian Students

The Baltic Organisational Meeting (hereinafter - BOM) is a regional cooperation network of the national student associations of the Baltic States - the Federation of Estonian Student Unions (Eesti Ülipilaskondade Liit), the Student Union of Latvia (Latvijas Studentu apvienība) and the Lithuanian National Student Union (Lietuvos studentų sąjunga). Its purpose is to promote the mutual cooperation of student organizations at both the national and local level and to ensure the transfer of knowledge on issues of political, economic, social, and educational processes in the Baltic States. 20 years after the signing of the BOM cooperation agreement, as student representatives, we must be at the forefront in solving emotional and challenging issues for students. As for this year, the focus is on tackling the issues of Ukrainian student integration into our higher education systems.

This document is a guideline for the implementation of the integration mechanism for 'students at risk' into the higher education student community. BOM takes a stand for the availability of support mechanisms for any student, not based on their placement of stay, nor on the status in society to which they belong.

Students at risk is a term used in the field of education to refer to students who may be facing academic, social or personal challenges that may hinder their educational progress and success. Although the specific definition can vary depending on context and research, students at risk often share characteristics or circumstances that make them vulnerable to difficulties in the process of obtaining education.¹ It is important to note that the term "students at risk" is not used to label or stigmatize individuals, but rather to identify those who may require additional support and resources to thrive academically and personally.

This year's primary focus of discussions was made towards problem identification and root cause analysis for the integration of students affected by the war in Ukraine. Since the escalation of war in 2022, we have seen the increase of Ukrainian citizens in the Baltics and

¹ The Glossary of Education Reform.. 29.08.2013.. "At risk". Available in: <https://www.edglossary.org/at-risk/> [Last seen: 10.09.2023.]

also in the European Union in general. At the end of June 2023 there were more than 150 000 Ukrainian refugees in the Baltics, and among them a lot of students.²

Taking into account the recent aggravation of the geopolitical situation, BOM pays increased attention to the influence of the political arena on Ukrainian students. BOM is requesting increased attention to the support mechanisms for strengthening the situation both - refugees from Ukraine, as well as students from any other conflict zones, or disadvantaged people within in our societies in these four categories:

Physical and mental well-being is one of the most important factors for the ability of students to participate in the higher education process through and through. Students from conflict zones can be exposed to more psychological stress factors than the average student, and that can impact the way they are able to study and live their daily lives. For example, faculty staff may not always be flexible when it comes to sensitive situations, and state-funded counseling is not readily available to students who need it because of the shortage of counsellors. Thus, higher education institutions need to develop guides for faculty staff on how to respond in different situations that arise and have special training for them. To tackle mental health issues before they become serious and have a lasting impact on the study process and day-to-day life, state-funded counseling should be made available to any student at risk that needs it.

Student representatives need to be the ones to keep the conversation about mental health going by gathering information from the students at risk about their needs and exchanging experiences in different higher education institutions and between Baltic states. When thinking about physical and mental well-being, governments should address issues regarding health insurance to students at risk. Health care should be part of student rights and be accessible without additional fees. It should not be the case that it is cheaper and easier to go to a different country to receive the necessary medical services, as it is in some cases.

Although some support systems are already in place for students at risk to ease their ascension into higher education, there needs to be a comprehensive and accessible system not to over burden students with administrative procedures. Currently students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds or fleeing conflict zones need to overcome certain barriers while just trying to enter the country because of complex and extensive migration policies that are currently in place, moreover, when already in the country face obstacles such as discrimination in the labour market as well as lack of financial and health support.

² Eurostat., 09.08.2023., "30 June 2023: 4.07 million with temporary protection.," Available in: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230809-1> [Last seen: 10.09.2023.]

Understanding the different backgrounds of the Baltic States, the ability to tackle the aforementioned issues needs to be supported by funding. BOM as a collective along with the European Students' Union should work toward a European approach to the "Students at Risk" programme.³ This should include, but not be limited to, directing funding towards the financial support systems for students.

BOM stresses that access to higher education and support mechanisms should not be based on borders and country of origin, but on the student status itself – treating both local and international students in the same way without creating discriminatory policies like the working framework, such as limitations in work hours, and limitation to local language learning possibilities.

In addition to the already existing regulations established by the Bologna process, prior learning recognition should be regulated in a straight forward, universal manner with transparency for all parties involved. This will eliminate another point of stress and bureaucratic burden for students at risk.

The diversity of students and viewpoints is essential for global education. That is why the integration of international students, including students from conflict zones, such as Ukraine, is a vital part of daily life in higher education institutions. Students coming from conflict zones are cut out of their families, home, and culture, which is why they need extra help to feel included in the new environment. This is why the creation of student associations that bring together students from certain countries is vital and must be encouraged. Through these societies we can work towards connecting international students also with local students to be more included in the society and in the student community at the higher education institution. We must ensure that international students have the possibility to be heard and represented in higher education institutions.

Since students are coming from a completely different country with different languages, we must acknowledge that a language barrier exists; therefore, it is vital to ensure various ways of communication and options for improving their local and English language skills free of charge. Faculty must be flexible enough to communicate with these students in a language that is comfortable for everyone. Furthermore, it is important to be precise and

³ Frederikke Veirum Hogsgaard, Hector Ulloa and Matteo Vespa., 10.12.2021., "Why Europe and the world need a 'student at risk' support scheme.,'

" Available in: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2021121013142255>. [Last seen: 10.09.2023.]

concise in the communication used to engage with and inform students at risk due to the overflow of modern-day information.

One part of the integration of students at risk is their integration into the community of higher education and also into the wider society as a whole. To do it successfully, we have to be aware of the stigmas and stereotypes that exist among locals. There is a broad palette of reasons why this exists, including propaganda, information fatigue, and historic background. It is vital to introduce mandatory media literacy courses in education programmes that are also available to the public to encourage critical thinking. The student representational body, in collaboration with higher education institutions, should encourage intercultural exchange between students in various formats to decrease the level of ignorance and combat stereotypes.

After establishing the prerequisites mentioned above, by fostering a higher education ecosystem where students are regarded as equal partners and where inclusive collaboration thrives within the higher education landscape of the Baltic States region, the highest aim will be to enhance the inclusivity of education and promote the common good throughout the region. It is important to recall that BOM upholds the support mechanism availability, mentioned above, for any student whilst not putting the attention to their placement of stay, nor on the societal status in society they belong to.

When improving all the support systems for students at risk, it is the responsibility of the student representatives to be in constant communication with the students in question to understand their needs and take appropriate actions. The Baltic states should place an emphasis on mutual cooperation in terms of sharing the experience of existing good practises and improving the systems already in place.

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