

Article

Refugee Students in Spain: The Role of Universities as Sustainable Actors in Institutional Integration

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Abstract: This article examines the role of institutions—particularly universities—in the recent refugee crisis. It contributes to the debate on the integration of refugees through the higher education system in Spain. Based on semi-structured interviews with refugees and experts in the institutions linked to the reception and integration of refugees, the paper presents evidence—albeit within an under-developed field of analysis—which has strong practical and sustainable policy implications. I argue that expanding access to university, by recognizing refugees’ qualifications and their overcoming of language barriers, increases the potential of refugees to contribute to the socio-economic progress of the receiving country and thus avoid marginalization. The evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of the existing initiatives and programs for the integration of student refugees identifies challenges that still need to be addressed. The conclusions highlight the role of universities as sustainable actors in the integration of refugees, which through their programs make the reality of refugees more visible to other actors throughout Europe in the hope of encouraging institutions and other organizations to follow their lead in effective and sustainable initiatives.

Keywords: global education; university; refugees; integration education for sustainability

1. Introduction

Higher education plays an essential role in the achievement of sustainable development through research, teaching and practice [1]. In the recent refugee crisis, the need to foster collaborative action between all kinds of actors—public, private and social—through public–private partnerships has been repeatedly stressed in all declarations, reports and recommendations that have paved the way for the 2030 Agenda [2]. In this bundle of initiatives, human development, sustainability, human rights and their defense are an inseparable part of the social action of universities. As spaces for analysis and reflection, proposals and training, research, development and innovation, and the creation and dissemination of knowledge, universities have a responsibility to ensure that respect for human rights and the preservation of human dignity are part of the road towards a global society.

While a growing body of knowledge [3–7] has emerged documenting the integration experiences of refugees in the receiving countries, until now, access to university and the integration of refugee university students in EU countries has been researched to a lesser extent [8–10].

This article analyses the dimensions of the so-called “refugee crisis in Europe”, declared in 2015, focusing on the case of refugee students in Spain. It discusses the role of institutions—particularly universities—in the sustainable integration of refugees into the higher education system. In the context of this paper, sustainability refers to strategy action plans for integration. The paper thus contributes to the debate on the integration of refugees in Europe, and in Spain in particular, through education. I ask how, and with what degree of success, refugee students navigate the path towards integration in a Spanish university.

Through the use of the qualitative technique of in-depth interviews with university students and experts in the institutions linked to the reception and integration of refugees in Spain, the article aims to answer the following questions: What are the access problems facing refugee students in Spain? Do institutions act correctly? What is the role of the universities? And how can the universities contribute to strengthening support for refugee students?

This study addresses these questions with the aim of evaluating the role of institutions and how they facilitate the sustainable integration of refugees into the Spanish university system. I argue that expanding access to university for refugees, by recognizing their qualifications and their overcoming of language barriers, increases the potential of refugees to contribute to the socio-economic progress of a country and thus avoid marginalization.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the framework of the complex web of integration issues. Section 3 describes the background to the situation in Spain within the context of the EU refugee crisis. Section 4 contains a brief description of the Spanish higher education system as well as the general situation of refugees in terms of integration procedures and support. Section 5 presents the methodology used. Section 6 analyses the most important integration problems the students have. Section 7 highlights the specific programs that Spanish universities have for integration. Finally, Section 8 analyses the cooperation between Spanish universities and other governmental and non-governmental institutions in Spain to achieve better integration. Section 9 highlights the main conclusions reached, namely, the role of universities as central actors in the integration of refugees. Through their programs, universities make the reality of refugees more visible to other actors throughout Europe in the hope of encouraging institutions and other organizations to follow their example.

2. Theoretical Framework

Integration is a significant concept in the global education system, both as a stated policy goal and as a targeted outcome for projects working with refugees [11–13]. Refugee students frequently suffer from past and/or ongoing trauma, current marginalization and discrimination, social alienation and lack of support, and difficulties accessing education [14–18]. Refugee students face the bureaucracy and schooling expectations of education institutions, and so must learn to quickly navigate a system whose policies and standards are widely unfamiliar and vastly unknown [19,20]. That said, an inclusive education system that provides abilities, skills and knowledge for future employment enables people to become more constructive and active members of society [21–23].

In the context of the higher education system, refugee students believe that the possibility of accessing university is of the utmost importance in terms of making contact with members of the local host communities, which in turn plays an important role in establishing relationships supportive of integration. Researchers have emphasized that refugees are often highly educated in comparison with other groups of immigrants [24–26]. According to the segmented assimilation theory [27], immigrant groups with high human capital (such as higher education credentials) are well received by the host country and tend to follow a path of upward mobility. However, in the special case of refugees, there are a number of barriers towards effective integration in the university system [28]. In the recent refugee crisis, it has been observed that the major barrier to securing employment is the non-recognition of qualifications and previous work experience. Recent literature on “organizational barriers” highlights that discriminatory processes within organizations prevent refugees from fully participating in the labor market [29–33].

Many refugees are unable to produce proof of previous qualifications, and even when they can employers may not recognize them [34]. Duke et al. [35] argue that evidence suggests that for refugees “successful resettlement depends on programs which allow them to find a place in the new society, for example by converting their skills and qualifications so that they can be used in the new situation” (1999:106). Recent research—for instance, in the Nordic countries—indicates the degree of success of the integration programs of Norway and Sweden, highlighting the role of housing and employment to

achieve full integration [36–38]. However, there is little evidence on the success of the programs of reception and sustainable integration of students at university. This gap in the literature necessitates inquiry into the ways in which refugee students experience integration in Spanish universities.

3. Spain and the Refugee Crisis in the Context of the EU

Since 2015, there has been the largest influx of refugees to Europe since World War II, mostly fleeing the war in Syria, but also people fleeing other conflicts and tensions such as Iraq, Eritrea, Venezuela, Ukraine or El Salvador. According to the United Nations, more than 65 million people have been forcibly displaced by war, violence or political persecution [39]. During the last two years alone, more than one million refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa have arrived in the European Union (EU) across the Mediterranean or via the Balkan route [40]. According to Eurostat [25], the number of first-time asylum applications within the EU-28 in 2015 reached 1.26 million and almost four in every five asylum seekers were children and young people under 35 years of age.

In the summer of 2015, the high number of arrivals to Greece and Italy exceeded the reception capacity of these countries and raised the need for a response at a European level. After an internal debate, the EU agreed on equitable distribution among the different countries of the 160,000 refugees; a very small number but one which represented a first step in the direction of showing a joint response and solidarity from the EU. Spain agreed to welcome 17,337 refugees from the European relocation and resettlement quotas. However, after two years, Spain has only relocated 1983 refugees, (11%) of the total agreed (Figure 1) [41].

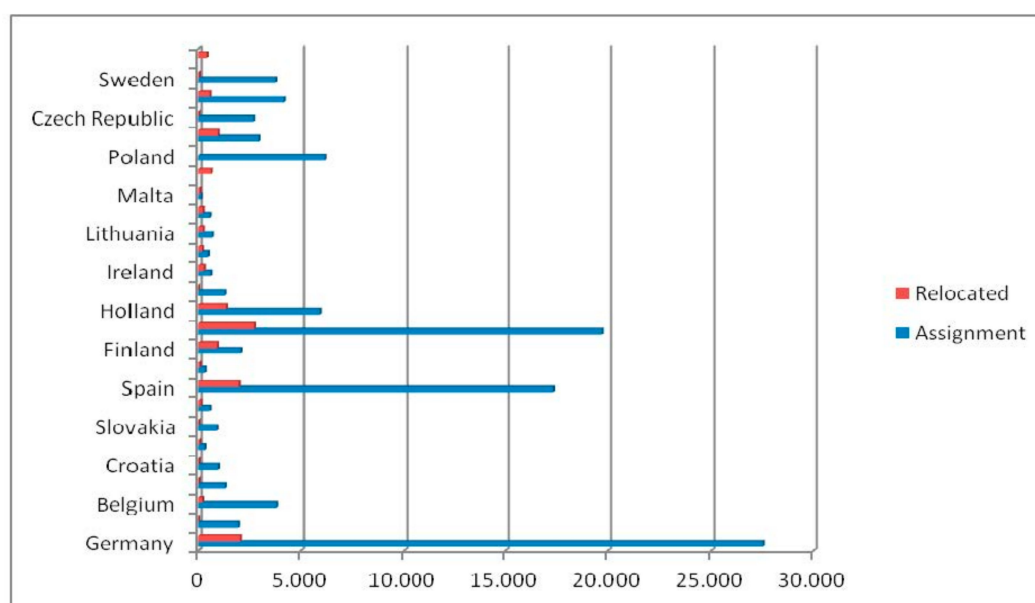


Figure 1. Refugees assigned and relocated in the EU (2017). Source: author's elaboration, 2018. The Commission to the European Parliament. Relocation and resettlement.

The system of refugee asylum applications in Spain involves several procedures (Figure 2) [42].

First, the immigration office registers the identity of the asylum applicant, based on the applicant's documentation as well as their finger-printing records. The latter is also used to check whether the same person applied for asylum in another EU country and/or whether the person entered the EU through a country other than Spain. Applicants can then ask for accommodation in one of the reception centers, receive material help, and social, legal and/or medical guidance, including interpreters. The applicant is then invited for at least one interview by the Spanish Commission for Refugee Assistance (CEAR). Reception centers also organize support for asylum seeking children so that they may attend school in the neighborhood, including evening homework classes.

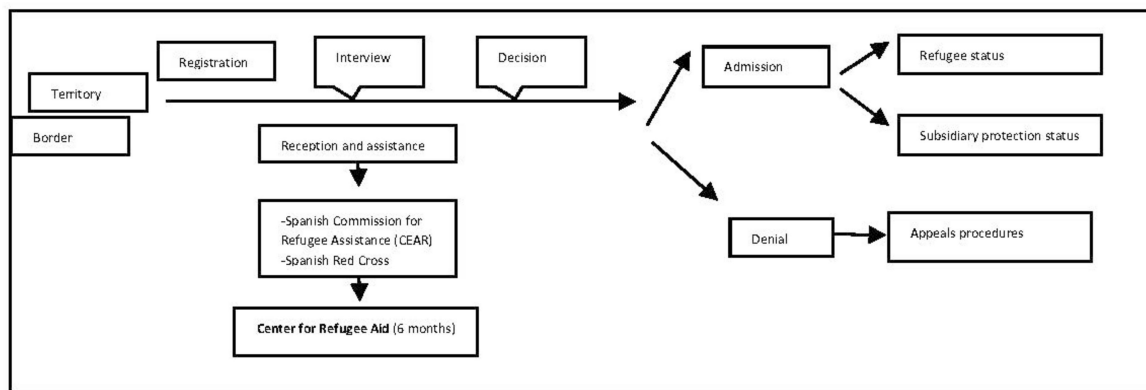


Figure 2. The procedure concerning asylum seekers in Spain. Source: author's elaboration, 2018. Spanish Commission for Refugee Assistance (CEAR).

Spain has a System of Reception and Integration (SRI) that allows an asylum seeker to stay between six and nine months in a center or shelter. By the end of 2018, the refugee reception system will have reached 8333 places, distributed among the reception centers of the Ministry of Employment [43] located in Andalusia (1185), Madrid (776), Catalonia (591), Valencia (526), Castilla y León (456), Basque Country (341), Murcia (246), Castilla-La Mancha (233), Aragón (209), Galicia (141), Asturias (135), Navarra (110), Cantabria (76), Canary Islands (71), Baleares (50) and La Rioja (26). In these centers, the level of personal and material protection is very high as they also receive financial aid that is then extended up to 18 months, and even 24 in the most vulnerable cases. But although the support ends, the refugees' need for it does not and they witness how their life projects to become destabilized again. The decision is made by the CEAR, which if positive, can either grant refugee status or grant subsidiary protection status. The latter concerns cases where all the requirements for refugee status have not been fulfilled, but where nevertheless it would be unsafe for the applicant to return to the country of origin. CEAR can also decide not to handle an asylum application, for example, in cases where the application is from an EU national from a country that is considered safe, or where the applicant is already a recognized refugee in another EU country.

The most critical period was between 2014–2015, and most of 2017, when there were 31,129 applications for protection in Spain (91.6% more than in 2016), (Figure 3) [44].

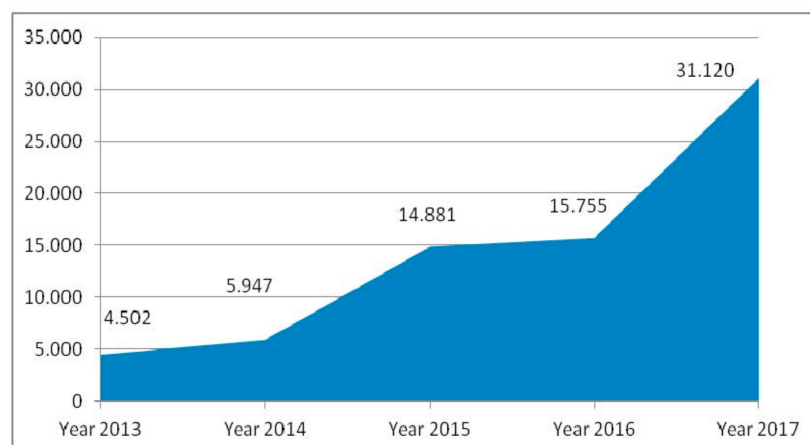


Figure 3. Evolution of applications of asylum seekers in Spain. Source: author's elaboration. Ministry of Interior, Spain, 2017.

This peak corresponds to the more general increase in asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria in 2015, which have been amongst the top-10 countries of origin of asylum seekers throughout this period. Significant numbers of asylum seekers in 2017 also came from Venezuela, Colombia and the Ukraine (Figure 4).

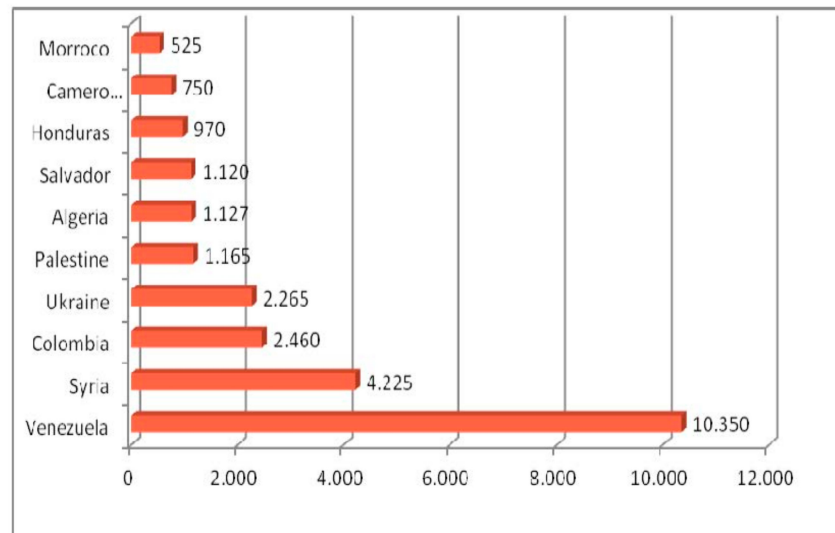


Figure 4. Asylum applications in Spain by country of origin. Source: author's elaboration. Ministry of Interior, Spain, 2017.

In 2017, Spain accepted only 595 asylum applications, rejecting a total of 8675, which is why it is below the European average—35% compared to 45%—in recognition of the right to asylum [45] (Figure 5). Among the accepted applications, 95% of asylum resolutions were favorable to people from Syria, compared to only 9% of those from the Ukraine and 1% from Venezuela.

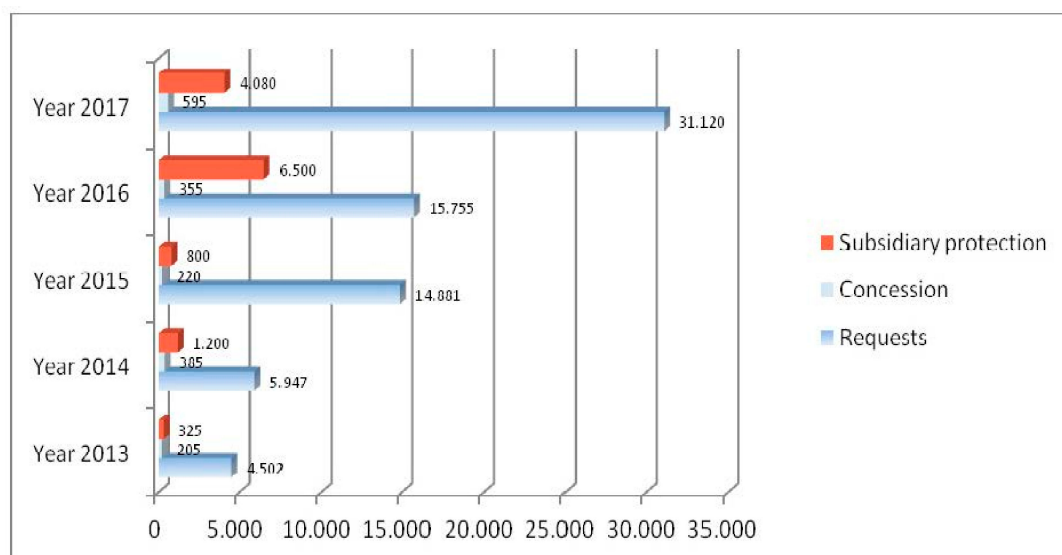


Figure 5. Accepted asylum application. Source: author's elaboration. Ministry of Interior, Spain, 2017.

In the case of university student refugees, the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRSU) indicated that it would facilitate access to institutions. As CRSU noted, education for sustainable development allows everyone to acquire the knowledge, skills and values that empower them to

contribute to sustainable development [46]. However, in the 2017–2018 academic year, only 11 higher education centers in Spain had an established program for the incorporation of refugee students.

4. Foreign Students in the Higher Education System in Spain

The Spanish higher education system is composed of 85 universities (50 public and 35 private), as well as 322 research institutes and 78 science-technology parks [47]. Traditionally, there has been a small number of foreign students in Spanish universities, with the number increasing only in recent years [48]. The Organic Law 4/11 January 2000 [49] on the rights and freedoms of foreigners and their social integration contemplates the right to education. To access the education system in Spain, refugees do not have special status. This further adds to the situation of helplessness in which refugee students from war and tense environments live. Like other foreigners and immigrants, they must comply with specific access requirements, in addition to having a sufficient level of Spanish to be able to follow the academic course without difficulty. The access requirements consist of: (1) Specific tests or being in possession of a specific certificate, such as, a school graduation diploma or the baccalaureate; (2) Homologation or validation of the studies of the country of origin. The process of homologation and validation of previous studies is carried out by the education administrations. It is a long and arduous process in which documents must be provided that accredit and certify the studies carried out in the country of origin. This process is essential to be able to continue with studies in higher education, or to access a job that corresponds to previous training [47].

It is important to note that the Spanish education system, traditionally, does not collect data from refugee students. Currently, there is no database that separately collects homologation requests or the reception of refugee students in Spain. In addition, when the EU refugee crisis began, Spanish universities did not contemplate refugee access and insertion. Consequently, organization in the host reception system is still lacking. That said, there are programs and projects that favor integration through economic and moral aid. Additionally, the integration of foreigners into the Spanish higher education system is substantial.

The lack of an explicit higher education initiative within resettlement services misses an excellent opportunity to assist refugees to become more participative in the workforce and, perhaps, to be more smoothly integrated through interaction with other Spaniards in higher education institutions.

5. Methodology

The research method adopted is a qualitative case study approach, using in-depth interviews. I consider that conducting interviews with both qualified staff of the universities and other relevant institutions—who deal with the reception of students in general and with refugee students in particular—is the most appropriate method to understand more fully the reality refugee students face and in this way determine the relevance of the role of Spanish universities as a sustainable actor in institutional integration.

Given the sensitivity of this research topic, it is important to stress the difficult and delicate process involved in the application of this methodology in terms of making prior contact with refugee students; however, once the contact was made, the interviews were carried out with fluency and with the full cooperation of the interviewees. In all, 15 in-depth interviews were carried out between September and December 2017. Eight of the interviews were with refugee students—four from Syria, one from Afghanistan, one from Venezuela, one from Ukraine and one from Iraq—enrolled at the Complutense (3), Carlos III (3) and Camilo José Cela Universities (2), all Spanish universities in Madrid. All three universities belong to the program “Refugees Welcome” of the Association of European Universities (AEU) [50]. The eight interviewees, five men and three women, were completing undergraduate studies (3), master’s degrees (2), and PhD studies (3). For the sample selection, we worked with the refugee assistance offices of the three universities.

The structure of the interviews included the identification of the key issues of the process of reception and integration of refugees in Spain. The students were asked to describe their experiences

and difficulties of integration in Spain: initial information, homologation of degrees, knowledge of language, the cost of registration, tuition fees, and housing. The respondents were given the opportunity to discuss any case of discrimination they may have experienced. Finally, they were asked about their level of trust in those who provide integration services in the Spanish university system and what their expectations for the future were.

The remaining seven interviews were carried out with experts responsible for university studies and institutional positions: a representative of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees); a member of the UNICEF Advisory Council; a representative of the NGO “Tres Culturas”; a technician of CEAR; and three technical experts who assisted the students in the aforementioned Universities. They were asked to reflect on and describe the role of the university in the institutional system of integration of refugee students in Spain and to highlight the impact of integration programs and their effectiveness on the career prospects of refugees. They were also asked to indicate what could be changed so that the process of sustainable student integration in Spain could be improved, and to reflect on the effectiveness of the general organization.

The interviews, which ranged from twenty-five to forty minutes, were conducted in Arabic, Spanish and Russian with the consent of all interviewees and were recorded. Audio files, transcribed into English, were analyzed using Atlas ti (version 8.0), a software package for use in qualitative data analysis. The data was initially coded according to the thematic questions posed to the interviewees. Given the considerable quantity of information, I have used the inductive approach of thematic analysis in which the themes identified are linked to the data highlighting both the experience of the interviewees as a decisive factor in the analysis, and their interaction with events and institutions (in this case universities and other relevant institutions). Thus, concepts and categories identified key relations between the data obtained and conclusions reached. The issues that emerged from the interviews were analyzed as follows: recognition of qualifications and language difficulties; the problems faced by refugee students regarding their integration in Spain; the sustainable initiatives of Spanish universities for the integration of refugees; and finally, the interaction between Spanish universities and other public–private institutions. Thus, ‘narrative analysis directs attention towards the relationship between people, events, representatives of the institutions and how people and public–private institutions understand and organize their experience and capacity of interaction’ [51]. The discourse of the interviewees regarding their interaction with the institutions helps and favors the sustainable design of the activities and initiatives created to integrate refugee students in Spain, highlighting the role of the university within the larger system of integration (See Table 1).

Consequently, the thematic analysis highlights the barriers that refugees encounter for integration into the Spanish system, and the role that the university plays, in conjunction with other public and private institutions, in solving these difficulties, breaking down these barriers and achieving institutional integration of the refugee students.

6. Recognition of Qualifications and Language Difficulties

Below, I provide an analysis of my findings in relation to key themes that together highlight the role of universities as sustainable actors in the institutional integration of refugee students in Spain.

The main barriers refugees face when accessing higher education in Spain are: lack of information; lack of advice and individual guidance; recognition of credits and qualifications, particularly in the absence of documents; inadequate language support provisions; and lack of adequate financing. Consequently, to enroll in degree programs, refugees must overcome two hurdles: first, the recognition of documents including school leaving qualifications, completed modules of study or final certificates of Bachelor’s degree programs, and secondly, the enrollment process itself [52]. Thus, unlike the higher education systems of other EU countries (such as, Belgium or the Nordic countries), students need to have their education credentials previously recognized by the Spanish authorities. This process can last more than 2–3 years, and in this period, the aid that students receive as asylum seekers or refugees can end. Moreover, when they flee their troubled countries, refugees do not usually carry their university

degrees with them. In Spain, there is no guarantee that they will be granted homologation and just requesting that service costs 160 euros [47]

As Mazen noted:

I am a war refugee, from Syria. I lost my help after a year and a half, and I had to work in a house cleaning. I wanted to continue with my studies, and I tried to validate my civil engineering degree, but two years passed and they always told me the same thing: "We are studying your profile." I had to contact my university so that they could send me the diploma through diplomatic channels. Then a UNHCR volunteer told me that this scholarship exists to study. Now, finally, I am enrolled in a Master's degree at the Complutense University. [Mazen, Master's student, Complutense University; from Syria]

In his interview, Mazen listed the difficulties he encountered in validating his degree, highlighting the role of the institutions, in this specific case of UNHCR that helped him in his interaction with the Complutense University, so that he could continue studying.

In turn, Hassam, a medical student from Iraq confessed that he had been waiting for the validation of his degree for three years, and that meanwhile he was attending the courses as a guest. He had still not received any news from the Ministry of Education about his application, but he was happy because despite not being able to continue his studies directly, he could at least "be in touch" with the university environment and with his profession.

To add to the difficulty of the homologation of their qualifications is the lack of information. It is unclear, for example, whether information is delivered in the most accessible of formats and at optimal times so as to best benefit students. Refugee students may not feel comfortable requesting personal everyday life information in institutional settings, such as student services offices, without an ongoing social connection to establish trust. The participants in the present study discussed unevenness in approaches to advice across academic units.

Houda told me:

In some places they inform us better, but in others they do not tell us anything. They only speak in Spanish in the offices and sometimes we do not understand. [Houda, undergraduate student, Carlos III University; from Iraq]

Consequently, we can highlight both the bureaucratic difficulty existing in the Spanish administrative system and the lack of language knowledge of the interviewees in order to access information.

This matter was also highlighted by the representative of the Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid who noted that:

The problem is that we do not know what qualifications they have, they cannot prove that they have them. We met with Ministry staff to try to facilitate the process. The Government only offers a phone number without promoting a single campaign that provides information on validation and deadlines. They are lost. And many do not know the Spanish language. [Expert UNCHR]

Another problem is the lack of coordination between the relevant agencies. According to UNHCR, there is no established protocol in answering questions about university programs. The expert of the Red Cross also pointed out that an asylum seeker can enroll in a university, but that there are no agreements for them:

We have not made any kind of agreement with the universities, nor have we had meetings. [Expert Red Cross]

In turn, the assistant coordinator of the Resettlement Plan for Refugees, which the Complutense University of Madrid has promoted in the last two years, pointed out that:

The bureaucratic obstacles are still infinite. Here we try to make it a little easier, see what documents can be submitted to validate subjects, provide them with the help we have available, but each case is different and very complicated. [Technical Expert Complutense University]

Therefore, it would seem that the role of the University in the solution of problems related to the validation of degrees is increasingly prominent and becoming a source of institutional support for students.

At the time of the interview, the Complutense University had received 29 applications, of which nine were admitted. The others were still at the validation stage:

Unfortunately, not all of these young people will be able to enter the system. In many cases, we cannot verify their previous studies by means of any document as proof. [Technical Expert Complutense University]

The experts interviewed emphasized the need to establish a separate and simpler system in the case of refugees, which would deal with their particular situation.

We could try to adopt other different measures to determine professional accreditation or studies, in the case where they do not have the original documents, with some type of test or exam, for example. [Technical Expert Carlos III University]

As mentioned above, the lack of knowledge of the Spanish language has been found to be the main barrier to integration at university. Knowing the language of the host country is key to entering university, finding work and socializing. And refugees with the status of asylum seekers and asylum applicants do not have the opportunity to attend preparatory language courses.

Jala noted that:

Language is the most important thing. If you do not know how to speak the language, and you do not understand what is being said, how can you study? In addition, Spanish is so difficult and different. It is written one way, and spoken in another. However, I did receive the necessary support at the Complutense University. [Jala, undergraduate student, Complutense University; from Siria]

Jala's fragment of interview highlights the difficulty in learning the Spanish language, but at the same time emphasizes the support received from the University.

Moreover, that is why many voluntary projects were initiated in Spain to enable refugees to take language courses. Many of them, however, are usually not preparatory courses for university entrance, but essential basic courses. To commence their studies at university, refugees need language skills at least at a basic level.

The experts interviewed pointed out that in the universities, courses are organized so that refugee students can overcome the language barrier, and in this way *"while they are homologating their degrees, they can learn to speak Spanish"*. [Technical Expert Carlos III University]

Maybe we will be able to solve the language problem more easily than the validations. They are willing to learn. Some learn very fast. Here we have volunteers who help us. [Technical Expert "Camilo José Cela" University]

The refugee students interviewed indicated that they are happy to learn Spanish and with the way they are treated at university:

Igor noted that:

I am very happy here. They help us, and I understand well enough. Learning Spanish is a process that will make life much easier if I stay in Spain. [Igor, PhD Student, Complutense University; from Ukraine]

However, respondents expressed frustration with the specific details of course content and design, which they often saw as being at odds with the aim of providing them with active language-learning opportunities that will allow them to communicate effectively in both spoken and written Spanish [53].

Faiza pointed out:

Sometimes I get lost. I don't understand. I don't know when I will learn to speak Spanish. [Faiza, undergraduate student, Complutense University; from Syria]

Given the difficult situation young refugees who are trying to study in Spain find themselves in, Spanish universities need to act through integration initiatives and specific programs.

7. The Sustainable Initiatives of Spanish Universities for the Integration of Refugees

There are still few Spanish universities that have put in place plans to facilitate the access of refugee students to university in Spain, as requested by the (CRSU) 2015 [46,47]. The absence of government-funded study grants for asylum seekers limits the training opportunities for refugee students. CRSU insisted that university centers facilitate access to student refugees in their countries of origin. A year after the signing of the statement, which claimed that “Spanish universities cannot remain indifferent to the drama we witnessed in recent months”, CRSU says that data has not yet been collected; data that centers have collected under their own initiative.

Some universities, such as the Complutense University (UCM), included volunteer actions among national students, awareness and activism seminars, or Spanish classes for asylum seekers, but those that have actually enrolled asylum seekers in undergraduate or postgraduate studies are still scarce. One of the most important initiatives of some of the Spanish Universities is the “Student-refugees Welcome Program” [50] promoted by the European University Association (EUA). This program-campaign aims to showcase and document the commitment of higher education institutions and organizations to supporting refugees. It has been opened expressly to help (Syrian and Iraqi) recognized refugees start or continue with their academic studies. This initiative, which exists throughout the EU (Figure 6; Map 1), allows recognized refugees who had to interrupt their studies in their country of origin to apply to follow a regular university program by means of introducing a separate online registration for student-refugees that is different to the “normal” direct application for EU students. This “special” application program involves a pre-screening of the refugee candidate students.



Figure 6. Refugees Welcome Map European countries. Source: author's elaboration. EUA, 2018.

In Spain, there are 11 universities that took part in this program: three in Madrid, three in Catalonia, two in Galicia, two in Andalucía and one in Valencia (Figure 7; Map 2).

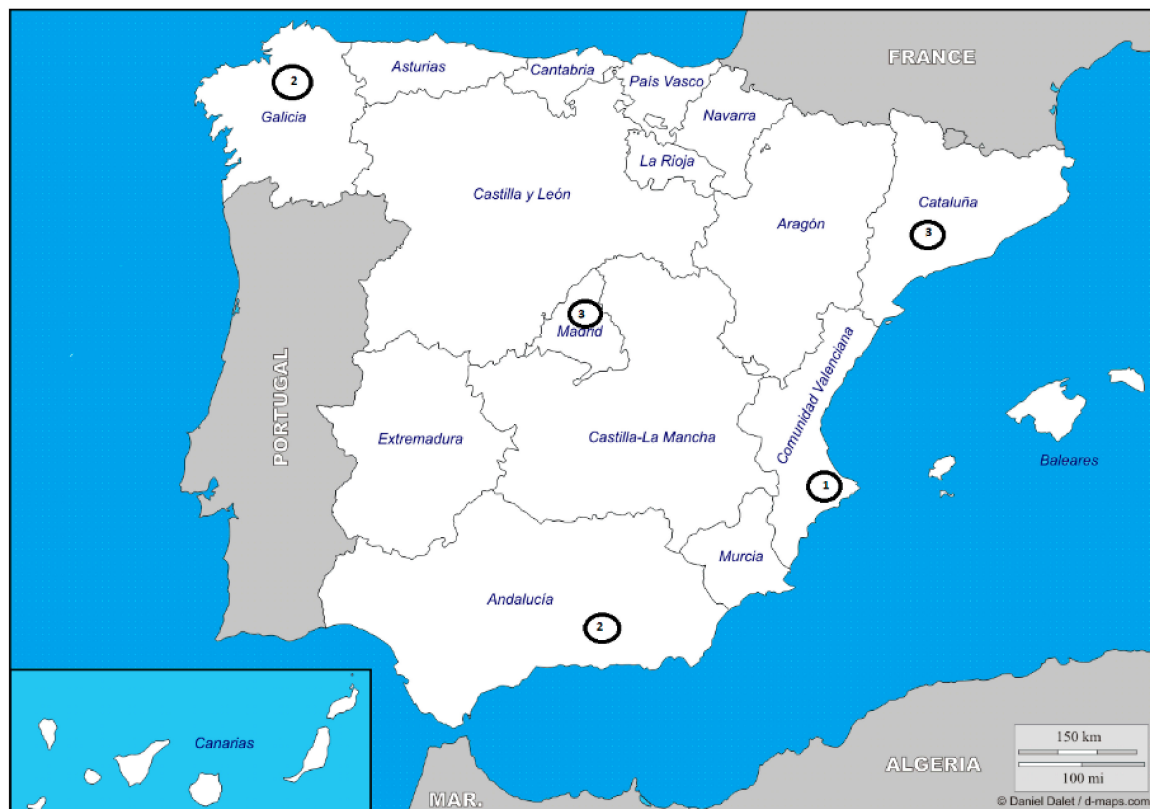


Figure 7. Refugees Welcome Spain. Source: author's elaboration. EUA, 2018.

The national, institutional, regional and international programs that were implemented in the Spanish Universities (Table 1) include several categories of global initiatives, focused on studying the recognition of previously obtained degrees, access to higher education, financial resources and the integration measures of refugee students.

The specialist that represents the programs implemented at the Complutense University pointed out that:

In our university we have come a long way in the last two years. We believe that our program is sustainable because it works. We currently have political and financial support for the integration of students. We even offer scholarships to the best of them. Many Spanish students volunteer to help them with the language, including looking for accommodation. They are offered psychological support, and are prepared for the world of work. We want to integrate them in every aspect. [Technical Expert Complutense University]

This fragment of interview shows the capacity of the universities to provide sustainable measures in the integration of refugee students, highlighting the time factor, and the political and financial measures necessary to implement the proposed initiatives.

Table 1 shows the interaction between subjects and institutions, highlighting the initiatives of the universities and their institutional, national and regional scope. The specific initiatives highlighted are the social and educational reception of student refugees, the promotion of volunteer activities and programs among students in cooperation with the public administration and social agents, and the prioritization of countries in conflict in university cooperation programs, among others. As we can see, among the specific initiatives undertaken, the organization of numerous innovative projects that encourage the social and educational reception of refugee university students stand out.

Table 1. “Refugees Welcome Program”—Initiatives of Spanish Universities. Source: author’s elaboration with data collected from Spanish universities, 2018.

University	Initiative	Categories of Initiatives	Refugees Welcome Plan. Specific Initiatives	Number of Student Refugees
Complutense University of Madrid	Institutional	- Recognition of studies and prior learning	1. The social and educational reception of refugees, especially students.	26
		- Access to higher education	2. Development of values, attitudes and solidarity actions between the UCM Community and Madrid society.	
		- Financial support for refugee students	3. Promoting a conscious, critical and committed society.	
		- Integration measures		
Carlos III University of Madrid	National and Regional	- Recognition of studies and prior learning	1. Facilitates access to refugee students who study at university in their country of origin.	17
		- Access to higher education	2. Promotes collaboration between Spanish universities and refugees who are university professors in their country of origin.	
		- Financial support for refugee students	3. Promotes volunteer activities and programs among students in cooperation with the public administration and social agents.	
		- Integration measures	4. Receives refugee students in student housing.	
		- Employment opportunities for researchers and staff of IES	5. Provides legal advice, health services, psychological assistance and support in accessing social services.	
		- Pre-educational and bridge courses	6. Offers education in Spanish to allow social integration in the country.	
			7. Provides scholarships.	
			8. Prioritizes countries in conflict in university cooperation programs.	
“Camilo José Cela” University	Institutional International	- Access to higher education	1. Facilitates access to refugee students who study at university in their country of origin.	10
		- Financial support for refugee students	2. Promotes collaboration between Spanish universities and refugees who are university professors in their country of origin.	
			3. Promotes volunteer activities and programs among students in cooperation with the public administration and social agents.	
University of Barcelona	Institutional International	- Access to higher education	1. Offers academic and educational support, accommodation, social integration, legal and psychological assistance.	69
		- Integration measures	2. Offers scholarships that cover full tuition fees.	
		- Preparatory and bridge courses	3. Offers a preparatory course for university access (supported by the Barcelona City Council).	
			4. Cooperates with different countries in academic and research matters to palliate the refugees’ difficult circumstances.	
			5. Organizes activities to inform, train and raise awareness of the humanitarian refugee crisis.	
			6. Participates in two European Projects (Erasmus+): inhere and RESCUE.	
			7. Promotes the Project “Mare Nostrum” which aims to incorporate a multidimensional vision of refugees in local organizations as actors that legitimize the right to peace.	

Table 1. Cont.

University	Initiative	Categories of Initiatives	Refugees Welcome Plan. Specific Initiatives	Number of Student Refugees
University of Lleida	Regional National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to higher education - Integration measures - Recognition of studies and prior learning - Preparatory and bridge courses 	A summer course.	15
University of Santiago de Compostela	Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial support for refugee studies 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provides Support Programme for Refugees aimed at students with refugee status in Spain who were registered at USC in order to allow them to continue their Bachelor, Master's or doctorate studies. 2. Call for renewal of the 2 scholarships. 3. Call for the allocation of 2 new scholarships. 	2
Higher Technical School of Architecture. University of A Coruña	Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Integration measures 	Adapting a building to shelter refugees in large numbers. The target is not just to run a design but to implement a global strategy for the reception and settlement of refugees in an adequate space.	
University of Sevilla	Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial support for refugee studies - Integration measures 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Training and awareness in linguistic and cultural immersion. 2. Psychological support, legal support and housing search support. 	6
University of Almeria	Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial support for refugees' studies - Access to higher education 	20 tax-free places for university refugee students.	4
VINCE Project Validation for Inclusion of New Citizens in Europe (Barcelona)	European	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognition of studies and prior learning - Access to higher education 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develops university staff training. 2. Adapts existing methods to the specific needs of newcomers so they can access HE and more easily integrate into European society. Training courses for HE teachers, validators, advisors and administrators. 3. NGOs are actively involved in the project. 4. The output of the project forms the basis of policy recommendations targeted at decision-makers and institutional learners. 	

The figure highlights the financial support and access to higher education that Spanish universities allocate to the integration of refugee students. In the specific initiatives included within the framework of the Refugees Welcome Plan, highlighted are those that adapt to European policies for the inclusion of refugee students, such as the provision of legal advice, health services, psychological assistance and support in accessing social services among others.

However, in the field, I also observed that the effective development of the initiatives is at an early stage. In the UCM, for instance, during the 2017–2018 academic year, 234 refugee students applied to join the UCM Refugees Office. Only 26 students managed to integrate into the program. The others were still waiting for the recognition of degrees obtained abroad. The initiative of the UCM has been selected as good practice for the inclusion of refugees in the university. The UCM has adopted

a procedure to study the cases of the applicants individually and to try to adapt the bureaucratic demands to the particular situations of each one, without there being a call for limited scholarships. However, one of the experts interviewed said:

Currently there is greater sensitivity than before, but the regulations are yet to be adapted. Approximately one third of the requests we dealt with at the university with these profiles are asylum seekers who were already in Spain before 2015.. [Technical Expert Complutense University]

Another important action was promoted by the private University “Camilo José Cela” (UCJC) within the framework of the “Integra Project”. To participate in this project, the candidates must be refugees, come from areas of conflict derived from wars, and have their titles validated. In the last academic course, the UCJC awarded scholarships to 10 refugees (training and accommodation) through an agreement signed with UNHCR, UNICEF and the “Three Cultures Foundation”. As the experts interviewed noted, they received 55 applications from Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi students. Before the announcement, “no refugee had come to our university” [Expert UCJC]. The scholarships consist of six-month language courses, and training in Spanish culture and values that help integration into society. The overall idea is to facilitate the subsequent access to the degrees offered by the university, with future employment opportunities.

Abdel, a student beneficiary of the “Integra Project” of the UCJC pointed out:

It took me three years to start the procedures. I was very excited when they told me that they had accepted me. It's a huge opportunity. [Abdel, PhD student, Carlos III University; from Syria]

Abana, an Afghan student, noted:

I'm going to study nursing because I've been told that I can find work here, to start over and ensure a better future. [Abana, undergraduate student, Camilo José Cela University, from Afghanistan]

In turn, the University of Barcelona (UB), the University of Santiago de Compostela (USC) and the University of Seville (US) noted that they have developed individual scholarship programs with a limited number of places for people with refugee status, with these academic institutions—without state support in most cases—being responsible for financing them. Also noteworthy is the call of the Program of Aid for Refugees to carry out or continue university studies at the USC during the 2017–2018 academic year for refugees and applicants from Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Iran, Iraq or Yemen. However, to apply for the grants, refugees must have been enrolled in the 2016–2017 course or be able to formalize their registration, that is, to have their degree validated.

The initiatives promoted by Spanish universities make it clear that there is much room for improvement in terms of achieving the objectives of sustainable integration of refugee students. As such, interaction between universities and other institutions of both the public sphere and the private sphere is necessary.

8. The Interaction between Spanish Universities and Other Public-Private Institutions

Spanish universities, which work for human development and sustainability, have been reflecting on how to integrate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into their policies and strategies.

Like the other universities of the EU countries, they develop academic research agendas linked to the diagnosis of reality and the definition and innovation of sustainable intervention policies, programs and projects in the field of student integration [54,55].

Universities encourage dialogue and collaboration among the different agents, institutions and organizations that make up the sector.

First are the state organizations involved in the reception and integration of refugees: The Office for Attention to Refugees (Autonomous Communities)—Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports; CEAR (Spanish Commission for Refugee Assistance); CRE (Spanish Red Cross); and ACCEM (Association of the Spanish Catholic Migration Commission).

At the national level, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport is preparing a protocol to coordinate the actions of the Autonomous Communities and the universities in relation to the approval process, such as “*the lack of original documentation, or the impossibility of justifying the degree obtained abroad.*” [Expert, member of the UNICEF Advisory Council].

CEAR has, pending the signing of an agreement with the UB and the UCM, to provide housing for refugees on campus. The expert of UCM interviewed pointed out that there are also other agreements, such as the one with UNHCR in which the only thing that remains to be added is “*the signature*”. Likewise, the UCM and the Spanish Network for Immigration and Refugee Aid have signed a framework agreement for collaboration to carry out various actions in relation to migration policy. Among these actions will be the creation of its own master’s degree, in which studies of migratory policies will be introduced.

Similarly, universities cooperate with institutions and non-state actors to promote the sustainable integration of refugee students. For example, the University of A Coruña has been cooperating since 2011 with the Inditex-UDC Chair of Social Responsibility [56]. This initiative promotes a space for community reflection, academic training and applied research on the responsibility and social innovation of public administrations and organizations, companies and non-profit entities. With the same Chair, Inditex cooperates with the Chair of Refugees and Forced Migrants of the Pontificia Comillas University of Madrid [57]. Additionally, it carries out refugee integration projects in European cities.

This interaction is aimed at the sustainable integration of students in Spanish universities, as well as favoring academic research in the field of migration, improving aid to immigrants and refugees, and creating social awareness.

The expert from CEAR interviewed noted that:

The cooperation between the successful Spanish companies and the universities can help the sustainable integration of refugee students. First, they offer economic resources, money, which is so necessary for them to be able to benefit from the care they need. Secondly, they offer assistance and information so that students can find work when they finish their studies. I believe that the universities and the whole system of institutional integration in Spain benefit from the support of private institutions, such as INDITEX, for example. [Expert, member of CEAR]

Other important objectives of the cooperation initiatives between universities and state and non-state entities in the field of refugee integration focus on the strengthening of university curricula in the field of refugee management through the creation of a closer link between NGOs working in this sector and the academic world [58,59].

Agreements between universities and non-state institutions are important not only for refugee students to carry out studies, but also for emphasizing the importance of reaching these types of agreements with public universities; the entities must translate this message of solidarity to society [60,61]. Therefore, the main challenge that Spanish universities face in achieving total sustainable integration is seizing social leadership at a time when political leaders are acting from an integration perspective.

9. Discussion and Conclusions

This article examines the role of universities in the recent refugee crisis, contributing to the debate on the sustainable integration of refugees through the higher education system in Spain. I argue that expanded access to university for refugees, by recognizing their qualifications and their overcoming of language barriers, increases the potential of refugees to contribute to the socio-economic progress of the receiving country and thus avoid marginalization. To answer the research questions, I cover several specific points which emerged from interviews and theoretical and empirical analysis.

First, it is necessary to solve the problem of access of refugee students to the Spanish university system. Although Spanish universities and private institutions have shown great sensitivity towards

refugees, asylum and human rights, the official position of the Government and the legislation of the ministries that affect this problem (the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security) have yet to be improved. Since homologation and/or validation of academic degrees is a long and complex process, it is essential that students have access to scholarships and to university, before having their degrees validated. Their qualifications need to be recognized and they need to be offered support for learning the Spanish language. Beyond providing access to higher education, bridging courses and language training, which in themselves have an important integration value, Spanish universities could offer a wide range of activities to contribute to sustainable future integration. These actions could include cultural exchanges, interactions and activities, mentoring or buddy systems between Spanish and refugee students and researchers, joint research projects and publications, and classes in the local culture, human rights and advocacy for refugees.

Furthermore, many gaps remain and unresolved questions abound. These include whether actions are providing the level of access, sustainability, and quality that refugees really need; whether mentorship programs at universities are providing refugees with the academic and social support, network building, psychosocial counseling, and other services they require to feel accepted and integrated; and whether efforts that seem to be working can be scaled up to have a greater sustainable impact.

As seen, refugee students lack the resources to defray tuition fees and those who are of working age tend to be under pressure to work or even to support their families. Consequently, without the financial support of scholarships, they cannot afford to take university studies.

Second, the initiatives supported by the universities, with the support of national and international organizations, are expected to have more sustainable and lasting effects on the participating organizations, on the political systems in which they are framed, as well as on organizations and individuals directly or indirectly involved in the organized activities [62,63]. Likewise, it is expected that there will be positive results in the development, transfer and application of innovative practices at the organizational, local, regional, national and European levels [64].

Another important aspect would be to request, through the universities, an agile coordination instrument for the reception and integration of refugees in Spain in which regional and local administrations participate, which would allow greater predictability, sustainability and efficiency in resources and in the preparation of assistance plans in the short, medium and long terms [65]. To do so, an action plan could be carried out in Spain under the coordination of the general state administration and with the support of all the administrations and specialized asylum entities. In Spain more institutional support is needed for the sustainable integration of refugees and aid programs need not be limited to covering basic needs but should also offer solutions for the future. In their recent research "Welcome without integrating", the authors, professors at Comillas University Madrid [66] noted that it is necessary to carry out sufficient measures of integration, and above all, to create a welcome social narrative that reinforces the necessity for refugee reception policies, both in Spain and in the most developed countries of the world.

In the specific case of student refugees, before arriving at university, they must have the necessary information about the entire process. As such, information centers need to be set up in key institutions with which asylum seekers and refugees are in contact during their integration process (National Institute of Employment, Social Security, Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, and Social Services). The staff of these centers could receive training in international protection and could act as liaison officers between the university and the asylum specialized entities and the users.

In the same way, the Spanish universities can act as an engine to strengthen the work of city councils and NGOs; raise awareness about the reality of refugees to the host society and to the actors who will intervene in one way or another in their reception and integration (companies, unions, associations, and education centers).

Third, universities could establish a system of integration indicators and collect data on the refugee population in Spain with minimum standards of integration: language level, how many have

left refugee centers and how many have jobs, and in which sectors [67,68]. Knowing the key elements that have led to success and what has been lacking is essential to improve planning and work strategies with this group of students; to establish channels of communication and evaluation so that students can express their opinions about proposals on the issues that concern them.

As observed in this research, listening to the voice of the refugees as recipients of the programs is key in the planning and improvement of the system; it offers credibility and gives higher quality to the sustainable policies of global education. Likewise, it would be necessary to incorporate models and formulas to strengthen the solidarity of the Spanish students. They could be involved in projects that help their fellow refugees.

It is essential to strengthen and maintain the databases created at the national level that collect the resources available at all levels—national, regional and local. These bases could be another useful and effective instrument in the coordination of the reception and integration programs of asylum seekers and refugees [67,68]. This would make it possible to involve civil society, which would help raise awareness, manage the expectations and frustrations of student refugees, and encourage the creation of support networks.

Finally, the Spanish universities can contribute to social sustainability in terms of funding models and long-term planning. Similarly, they have the potential to be replicated and broadened in scale. To conclude, Spanish universities have the potential and—although still in the early stages—have demonstrated that they can become central actors in the integration of refugees. Through their initiatives they make the reality of refugees more visible to other actors throughout Europe, encouraging institutions and other organizations to follow their lead in effective and sustainable initiatives.

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