

## CHAPTER 10

# REFUGEE STUDENTS DURING PANDEMIC TIME: KEYWORDS FOR ACADEMIC INTEGRATION

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper reports the experience of the CAP (Centre of lifelong learning of the University of Bari Aldo Moro) and its activities in the field of validation and certification of competences acquired in formal, and informal contexts of learning of young student refugees who have chosen to continue their studies which were interrupted in their own countries. This CAP's experience highlights how informal education is crucial within the processes of academic integration. Moreover, this experience represents an attempt of internationalization aimed to institutionalize the “finalized recognition” procedure, through the comparability of qualifications and the certification of competences. In particular, the paper focuses on the most relevant words of a Focus Group Discussion held with the refugee students at the University of Bari “A. Moro”. The event was realized during the UNHCR World Refugee Day celebration. How did the students face the restrictions due to anti-Covid-19 security rules? How did they respond to the stop of face-to-face classroom teaching and to the solely digital learning arrangement and on-line administrative services of the host University? The paper presents the key words of the most relevant answers to these questions and starts from the testimony from a Dept. of Economy University freshman and from a Dept. of Education graduate student, different in the concern of integration levels but very similar on the aspect of motivations and resilience capabilities.

**Keywords:** Refugees, academic integration, UNHCR, resilience, pandemic time

## 1. Education: a Resource for the Integration of Young Refugees in Italy

Education is, in the current refugee crisis that Europe is facing, a strategic dimension for integration, and higher education in particular is crucial in providing refugees with greater opportunities for access and social participation. Data from the UNHCR's *Turn the Tide: Refugee Education in Crisis Report* (2018) already show that only 61% of refugee children in the world attend primary school, compared to 92% of children in the world. In the case of higher education, the situation is particularly critical: if at this level school enrolment is 37% in the world, in the case of refugees the percentage drops to 1%, a situation that has not changed in the last 3 years. «Moreover, around half of all asylum applicants in the EU are aged between 18 and 34 – the age range typically associated with higher education» (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2019, p. 24).

More than 79,5 million people in the world are currently displaced by conflict, violence and persecution. Of these, 26,0 million are refugees (of whom over 20 million are under UNHCR mandate)<sup>1</sup>. The 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees establishes minimum standards for the treatment of refugees in countries of asylum, including the right to housing, public support and education. However, holders of international protection face greater problems and difficulties than both the resident population and other foreign persons in accessing these services, including access to education, especially university education<sup>2</sup>. In 2018, the number of refugees who had access to university education increased from 1% to 3%. However, with regard to the 37% globally, the difficulty for refugees to reach higher education opportunities continues to be dramatic and so far from the UNHCR target of 15% of the refugee population entering the higher education system by 2030<sup>3</sup>.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) considers refugees' access to higher and university education to be an integral part of its protection mandate and a strategic operational priority<sup>4</sup>. As stated in the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, it is necessary first and foremost to recognize the fundamental norms regarding the rights of refugees in different areas of life, including access to education (Art. 22), as also reaffirmed in the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development. It states: “No

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1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2019) <https://www.unhcr.org/unhcr-global-trends-2019-media.html>

2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2019) <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>

3 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2019). <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/71213>

4 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2017) <https://www.unhcr.org/excom/announce/5894558d4/unhcrs-strategic-directions2017-2021.html>

one is left behind”; this statement is also mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goal 4.3: “By 2030 ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education - including university” Furthermore, with regard to higher education, Article VII of the Lisbon Convention says: “Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence”.

UNHCR therefore, urges the Lisbon Convention States Parties to put this provision into practice through the adoption of flexible evaluation measures, such as those suggested in the Lisbon Convention Explanatory Report and by the Lisbon Convention Committee on Recognition. In accordance with Article 22 (2) of the 1951 Convention and with reference to the recommendation of the Executive Committee, UNHCR also encourages EU Member States to extend the use of such flexible assessment measures to qualifications obtained by refugees in countries other than those covered by the Lisbon Convention

Therefore, also because of the growing phenomenon of the devaluation of cultural and professional qualifications held by young beneficiaries of international protection, it is essential to promote an appropriate cultural/academic integration process that could encourage their active participation in the society. The chance to contribute to an adequate process of cultural integration of the young refugees, especially in the academic, would also involve the possibility to increase their empowerment and spread more inclusive and supportive communities in society.

Regarding these important priorities established at the international level, it is more necessary than ever to understand how fundamental is to promote, for young refugees, an adequate process of cultural and academic integration in order to favour their active participation, also because of the growing phenomenon of the devaluation of their cultural and professional qualifications. Offering educational opportunities to young displaced refugees, however, cannot be the result of late reflection, since it requires long-term planning and investment. For this to happen, it is also essential that refugees could be integrated into the education system of the country in which they live, as education and training can in fact be an essential and strategic part of the European (and not only) response to refugee crises.

## 2. The Experience of Refugee's Academic Integration at the University of Bari

A process of integration and inclusion involves multiple aspects, from economic independence to the creation of a relational fabric, from the acquisition of linguistic and cultural skills for full participation to the political dimension of citizenship, and may be achieved over different time spans and to various degrees (Cesareo & Blangiardo, 2009). Presupposing a multidimensional approach to operational solutions, and to ensure the result is extended to cover various generations, it is fundamental to work on the possibility to diminish social inequality starting from interventions of a cultural nature. Contrasting all approaches of a structuralist kind, it is fundamental to consider the relationship between education and social mobility in order to obtain a high-level qualification and a qualified job to make it possible for people to improve their initial social position. The step forward that the hosting societies are called upon to make, as expressed also by the UNHCR, consists of placing the refugees in the condition to be able to state their own needs and take part actively in decisions concerning their own lives. When they are in a position to be able to take part in the definition of strategies and policies, it will at last be possible to speak of the real empowerment of the refugees themselves. For these reasons, working in terms of valorisation and enhancement of the cultural capital of migratory resources represents a real turning point for inclusion policies (Colombo & Scardigno, 2019), a focus on the unexpected effect of unfairness (Peterson et al., 2017) that may be triggered in processes that – despite activating acceptance itineraries – does not make the step of promoting real recognition of human capital and the economic and cultural advantage of valorisation and integration.

The *CAP (Centre of lifelong learning of the University of Bari Aldo Moro)* thus currently works to apply the combined guidelines of articles 22 and 25 of the Geneva Convention, of art.2 of Law 148/2002, of art. 39 of the TUIM paragraph 5, the procedure laid out in the *Testo Unico* on immigration (legislative decree No. 286/98, directive 2011/95/EU – legislative decree 16/2014 – recognition of qualifications in lieu of original documents, the procedure foreseen for law No. 148/2002 following the Lisbon Convention). On the basis of this normative framework, the *CAP* operates on three main services of recognition and valorisation of the human capital of refugees, i.e.:

- The recognition of previous qualifications with a view to academic integration;
- The recognition of on-the-job learning with a view to the certification of professional qualifications as acknowledged by the regional council of Apulia;The vocational/ aptitude recognition with regard to the highlighting of the soft skills of service users.

The (interdisciplinary) practice of social research, applied to and in support of the public policies of inclusion, specifically concerns the recognition and assessment of the qualifications of people granted political asylum, refugees and beneficiaries of international humanitarian and subsidiary protection, cases in which it becomes a “moral and ethical obligation” (Trimble & Fisher, 2005) to make it possible for them to obtain an initial assessment by the host university on the equivalency of their qualifications granted in their countries of origin and of which no original copy is available. Given that the refugees have a well-founded fear of persecution and cannot turn to the authorities of their own countries, including consular representatives abroad, the state in which the refugee resides is obliged to deal with their situation, to activate all the necessary and substitutive procedures to understand the juridical status of the person as well as the formative and scholastic career they come from, both to access new scholastic transitions and to obtain certification of comparability of their previous academic career. The itinerary set up in 2017 therefore addresses a completely new target for our University, one that challenges the logic of inclusion based on the criteria of income and social status.

The young refugees who make use of the *CAP* academic services constitute a unique opportunity for us as researchers in the field (it is not by chance the interdisciplinary team is made up of academic researchers of sociology of education, psychology of work and didactics) to reflect discursively on the quality of our work and above all, on the potential of these tools to respond not only to criteria of internal and external validity, but to also be able to provide useful and applicable answers. This is a local perspective on integration processes which valorises experimentation and concrete, contextual inclusion practices, capable of creating virtuous circles that may also indirectly counter the emergence of new forms of populism and racism (Zanfrini, 2015), as community-based responses to the widespread sense of fear and disorientation among autochthonous citizens.

In the University of Bari, as well as for all Italian universities that wish to guarantee a process of academic inclusion, also with reference to the Manifesto for Inclusive Universities promoted by UNHCR, we make use of the important resource CIMEA, in order to promote the transparency of previous studies. CIMEA is the node of the international network ENIC-NARIC and, as a ministerial institute, it is able to produce a declaration of equivalence of qualifications (on MUR mandate it is free of charge for refugees and is the only instrument that allows access to a course of tertiary education), thus allowing the recognition of the university degree already acquired in the country of origin (Scardigno et al., 2019). Moreover, an important experience of integration was achieved with the certification of the skills of two

Afghan refugees who had gained in Italy several experiences of intercultural mediation and who obtained, thanks to the University of Bari, an important recognition with a consequent professional qualification of “Technicians of intercultural mediation” (Scardigno, 2019).

Currently, 16 refugee students are enrolled at the University of Bari, attending different courses of study and in 2019 the first two refugees graduated from Political Science and Linguistic Mediation, reaching the goal of the three-year degree and today they attend specialized courses of study (the first in Bologna, the second in Bari).

Our international students with protection come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Cameroon, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, the Palestinian Territories, Egypt and Libya. Four of them are enrolled in the first year of International Mediation (2), Economics and Commerce, Law. One student is enrolled in the second year and comes from Afghanistan (International Mediation), six students are enrolled in the third year of Biological Sciences (2), Education and Training Sciences (2), International Mediation (2); 1 student is enrolled in the first year of specialization in International Relations and 4 in the first year off and are about to graduate from Economics and Commerce, International Mediation, Languages.

In the course of these years, the *CAP* has also met students who abandoned the degree programme undertaken. It was the case of *U.* who, however, obtained the recognition of his degree in Communication gained in Pakistan and now works for the International Organization of Migration, or *S.* from Nigeria who decided to move with his new family to London, or *S.* from Yemen who unfortunately suffered the mourning of her Italian husband from whom she has not yet been able to recover.

Stories of resilience, of social fractures, made even stronger by a period that we are still going through and makes it particularly hard.

Name	Gender	Year of birth	Nazionalità	Degree course	CRUI scholarship year
N.	Male	1995	Nigeria	Political Science, International Relation and European Studies (three-year course)	3°
S.	Female	1992	Iraq	Biological Sciences (three-year course)	3°
K.	Male	1983	Egypt	Linguistic and Intercultural Communication (three-year course)	4°
G.	Male	1987	Iraq	Linguistic and Intercultural Communication (three-year course)	4°

W.	Male	1985	Palestinian Territories	Languages and Cultures for Tourism and International Mediation (three-year course)	1°
N.	Female	1964	Pakistan	Training and Education Sciences (three-year course)	3°
R.	Male	1988	United Arab Emirates	Languages and Cultures for Tourism and International Mediation (three-year course)	1°
S.	Male	1963	Pakistan	Training and Education Sciences (three-year course)	3°
L.	Male	1988	Gambia	Economics and business (three-year course)	4°
A.	Male	1994	Cameroon	Degree in Languages on 02.14.2020 Enrolled in Political Sciences, International Relation and European Studies (three-year course)	4°
S.	Female	1999	Libya	Economics and business (three-year course)	1°
G.	Male	1993	Nigeria	Languages and Cultures for Tourism and International Mediation (three-year course)	3°
K.	Male	1995	Afghanistan	Languages and Cultures for Tourism and International Mediation (three-year course)	2°
M.	Male	1990	Syria	Cultures of Modern languages and Tourism (three-year course)	4°
F.	Female	1989	Iraq	Languages and Cultures for Tourism and International Mediation (three-year course)	3°
M.	Male	1993	Guinea	Law (five-year course)	1°

*Note.* The scholarships are reserved for students having the status of refugees or subsidiary protection to enroll in bachelor, master degree and PhD programs in Italian public universities.

### 3. Different (but very similar) stories in the Covid-19 pandemic times

Each year UNHCR celebrates the resilience of refugees on World Refugee Day, 20 June. Since the *CAP* was established in 2016, our University has always honored its refugee students on this important day by organizing events in which they have enhanced their integration and studies, communicating with the local community and the academic community through poetry, music, art, dance and singing. It is an opportunity to interact and exchange ideas with Italian and international students from our University from an intercultural, artistic and convivial point of view, in order to share talents, diversity, spirit of adaptation, but also to preserve cultural background, show the motivational drive of international students and offer testimonies of resilience. On the website of our University you can view many videos

and photos of the many initiatives that over the years have been organized by the students themselves<sup>5</sup>. The World Refugee Day has always been a useful opportunity for the University of Bari to raise awareness around the value of differences and to make available to those who do not have a migration background or an unmediated knowledge of the phenomenon, the experience of students who, on the other hand, bear the scars of the phenomenon, with the aim of showing their experience, beyond the prejudices and encodings resulting from the media.

From March 2020 until today, the Covid-19 emergency and the harsh restrictions imposed by the pandemic period have unfortunately and drastically reduced the opportunities for engagement and exchange between students of our University. Refugee students in particular, have experienced great difficulties linked to the absence of their families of origin, which we all had the opportunity to consider as safe nests and protection elements during the lockdown.

Among the most vulnerable categories, these students have lost the daily relationship with their colleagues, reduced the possibility of interaction related to teaching aspects, lost the direct relationship with teachers and access to libraries and service counters, which in some cases also make up for language deficiencies and administrative support in the handling of practices related to studies. Often it is not simply a matter of knowing who to turn to for information and assistance, but also of relating to people with whom a trusting relationship has been established, sometimes also linked to psychological support which can become almost as essential as health and legal practice.

Having missed most of the opportunities for normal socialization in their respective Departments, it was decided to dedicate the virtual space of the University to them by transforming, for one day, the online teaching platforms into a place for meeting and discussion. Starting from the assumption that not all of these 16 students know each other, both because they are enrolled in different courses of study (the Departments are urbanistically distant from each other) and because they belong to different age groups and ethnic groups, the Focus Group Discussion also offered the opportunity to create a moment of contact, especially with freshmen, which is normally generated on the occasion of social events planned by the University, such as the Refugee Day.

In order to be able to understand and evaluate the difficulties linked to this period, *CAP* first proceeded with the administration of a self-completed evaluation questionnaire that the researchers prepared in order to understand the kind of problems faced by students and those that were accentuated by isolation.

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5 Centre for Life Long Learning of University of Bari. Retrieved from <https://www.uniba.it/centri/cap>

The process of self-assessment is not only based on awareness, that is the ability to grasp critical elements in order to develop the necessary tools for change and to produce a resilience reaction, but on the courage to highlight one's own weaknesses, to face uncertainty, and on a basic principle of usefulness: to change and improve we have to recognize that evaluation, analysis, awareness raising are hard but necessary processes.

This first phase of compilation and analysis in autonomy was followed by a moment of collegiality and confrontation: the debate within the group gave space not so much to the verification of the answers, but to their sharing. Since there were no correct answers but reflections, self-analysis on moods and reactions to the problems encountered, the group discussion served as a phase of comfort, encouragement, consolation, stimulus... (leading to considerations such as: others have experienced the same fears as me, I am not alone, etc.).

However, this period was also an opportunity to renew the commitment of *CAP* researchers in the process of academic integration of refugees by listening to the stories and the (extraordinary) words of life experience and resilience of our students.

In order to highlight the different approaches to the pandemic in terms of age and living conditions, a space for intergenerational confrontation has also been created. For this reason, two testimonies have been offered that are very far apart in terms of age and experience: the first is that of N. and S., two spouses with three dependent children, who are students over 50, close to graduating and who have re-registered to have a university degree formally recognized in Italy; the second belongs to S., a 20-year-old and newly-registered Economics student of Libyan origin.

Below is the full story that the student N., enrolled in Education Sciences, mother of three children, former head of a Catholic school (and therefore persecuted) in Pakistan and already graduated in English in her country, wanted to share during our online meeting:

*"My name is N., my husband and I have three children. I worked as an executive at a Christian school in Pakistan. It was a school/college for girls, where the girls came from the North of Pakistan. The school was burned because the militants didn't want the Muslim girls to study in a Christian school. First they threatened us and then they set the school on fire. We tried to re-open the school because of many requests from the girls' parents, but they burned the new school again together with our house. Moreover, they also tried to kill me, locking me in a room that was burned-out. I am alive thanks to our cook who was a Christian. He opened the door that someone had closed from the outside, when he heard me scream. The parents saw what had happened on TV and came to get their daughters right away. The nuns from my daughters' school took my children away for their own safety.*

*When I finished sending all the girls home, I couldn't walk or talk anymore. My husband took me to the hospital, where it turns out I have diabetes, and I hurt my shoulder. In a few hours we were devastated, homeless, jobless and our children without school and our lives threatened. My husband and I decided that we had to escape Pakistan as soon as possible. Dubai was the closest place we could escape. We tried to start a new life in Dubai, working as teachers and our children started attending a new school. For security reasons we also had to leave Dubai after two years.*

*Thanks to the Italian Government, which has considered our problem and accepted our request for asylum, we received a house in Puglia from the Minister of the Interior. Our children started school in a completely different situation. We started our religious life with the parish. But even in the parish it was not easy to integrate. Our children suffered difficult times because they did not know the language and there was discrimination from students and some teachers. Our children struggled to settle both in the church community and at school. They went to school with tears in their eyes. The headmaster of the school spoke to the teachers in our presence and explained to them that our children's problem was only the language. After about 6 months the teachers 'welcomed' them as part of the class. At the same time, my husband and I had a lot of difficulty in learning the language and finding a job. We left our CV in more than 500 places but in vain. We were very tired and depressed because for two years we looked for work everywhere, it was very discouraging notwithstanding our Pakistani degrees: it was impossible to find a job.*

*In the meantime, an Arci educator introduced us to the CAP of the University of Bari which helps refugees to improve and reach the Italian education standards. We came to them for this purpose and we gained a new hope. We felt recognized and welcomed. Their way of helping us without considering us 'guilty of a crime not committed' encouraged us and boosted our spirits. We felt like human beings and not numbers. They put us on the road to our destination. This hope and encouragement were not only for both of us, but also for our three children who suffered with us during their childhood, their time to have only fun and play.*

*My husband and I decided to go to university and graduate again. During all this, the person who had given us the house to live in asked us to leave it. Our oldest daughter was only three months away from her diploma and we were forced to leave the house with no job and nowhere to go to live. Once again, the teachers at the school helped us get a place at Caritas for three months with the promise to leave it as soon as our daughter finished her exams. Then we had a lot of questions about what to do and where to go after our daughter graduated from high school. We started looking for a house. Even the church was unable to find us a place to live in because we were out of work. Luckily at least we found a house in Trento.*

*So we moved to Trento. When we were getting ready, we were afraid we'd have to interrupt our education. Once again, the president of CAP and his team were the ones who were with us in a new situation. Moving to Trento because of more job opportunities was a difficult*

*decision, made with a heavy heart, with the risk that our education would be interrupted. But the CAP has given us hope that we can continue our education. It is because of their kind behaviour, spirit of working with heart and soul for the refugees, that now we are able to reach our goals, despite the distance, thanks to an email or a phone call. They helped us to study and plan our exams also during Covid19. Thanks to them we are almost able to graduate, despite the pandemic times. We have great respect for them and we thank them for their kindness towards refugees. We are very happy for our future thanks to their commitment. I received a job as English teacher in a middle school because, during the interview, I presented my booklet from the University of Bari. Thank you for everything you are doing for the refugees and because you give them the hope of a safe and happy life”.*

N.’s story is full of sad emotions but also of a powerful message of trust, both for us social researchers who work for the academic inclusion of refugees and for the other students, especially the younger ones who are starting their university experience today in a new and strongly different educational context from the ones they left behind them and in a period, such as the pandemic one, very particular for the reduction of opportunities for exchanges and interaction.

During the Refugee Day the story of N., mentioned above, was also heard by S., one of the new students in Economics. She is from Libya and she also told her emotional experience during the pandemic, sharing her words of integration, highlighting above all the stereotype and prejudice of those who believe that the social and economic condition of refugee students, prior to their arrival in Italy, is significantly worse than the current one and to the one they found in Italy.

*“I’m from Libya. I was born and raised there. Before the war I had a pretty quiet and stable life. My parents practiced quite important professions. My mother worked in the administration of Total, my father in the Embassy. When the war came, my life changed... I could say in a day and in a way I could never have imagined. From a normal family life to a life full of uncertainty. I guess it’s not easy for anyone, but for me it was a big shock. When we had to leave the country, and we used to travel a lot before then, it was very different: it was not by choice but what we had to do. I think a lot of people don’t know what the crisis of a migrant, the status of a refugee, could mean: around the word refugee there are so many misinterpretations. One thinks that he/she did it on purpose instead no refugee could ever think to do it on purpose, to leave his/her country and take a path so full of uncertainties and difficulties... nobody would leave a place that he/she considers home to go into a world full of uncertainties and dangers. A refugee did it because his first choice was just life.*

*When I started my journey, I learned many things. I have always valued study and education even before I left my country. I attended an international school so I grew up in a multicultural climate. When I had to make this trip, I learned many things, I met many*

*people who had different stories but partly similar to mine because we are all bound by this fact: we 'had to' leave our homeland for security reasons. It is not easy to integrate oneself into a culture, into a different world with the fear of not being accepted.*

*When I arrived in Italy I was immediately welcomed. First of all by the professors. I was very young, I was 16 and I was starting high school. The first person who welcomed me was an Italian teacher. For me professors have a special place in my heart, they had a really big impact on me because what I am today is thanks to all of them. The teachers I had in my life - and the teachers are our first approach to the world, the first things we learn are thanks to them - were special.*

*High school went quite well, I was happy. I remember classmates and teachers with so much affection. Even though there were so many difficulties, like learning the Italian language, integrating myself, they never made me feel different or foreign and I thank them for that. When I finished high school I immediately decided to go to university. I enrolled in a conscious orientation course and my choice was to enrol in Economics. From that day I loved all the subjects and the professors who gave us a message that impressed me so much. I told myself: this is exactly what I would like to do in my life. I enrolled. There are some difficulties, even in language. But I really like this path and I can't wait to see where it will take me in my life.*

*This Covid emergency has affected everyone. It is a kind of world war that has brought so many uncertainties to everyone and for the migrants the most difficult thing is that they also are far from home. They are very far from their families and countries and they felt more loneliness and uncertainty, even though we were all alone, locked in our homes. But a migrant feels this loneliness more. It was not only the Covid emergency but also the feeling of being far away, not knowing where to turn in case of problems, being afraid in a country that is not yours.*

*For me it was a very difficult period because, in addition to the emergency I had financial and family problems. I really say this from the heart: in a really difficult period, the University and the scholarship were fundamental. Even technology has helped us so much to not feel so alone in a dark moment for everyone.*

*This experience has also shown us that yes, there are difficult moments, but these moments serve to reconstruct our points of view and rebuild our knowledge. We can consider it a paradigm: when there are difficulties, we suffer them but they are useful. Although there are difficult moments, they serve to give more value to our life even if in that moment it doesn't seem like that, because we are so busy dealing with things we have never faced before. But I think that life is also made of this. If there's something I've learned during these years is that there are many difficulties in life but it's not true that your life will always be like this. Stability doesn't exist in one place. We have to find stability in transformation and that's what I've learned and that's what's going to make us stronger and open our minds to be able to move forward. That's why I'm saying it's a difficult time but little by little things will change".*

#### 4. Overcoming the pandemic hardship: the (resilient) words of refugee students

During World Refugee Day 2020 there was a Focus Group Discussion focused on the pandemic in which the 16 refugee students enrolled at the University of Bari talked with the UNHCR and the University of Bari. The words used during the discussion once again recall particular skills, the so-called soft skills, of our refugee students who, by evidence, for their biographies and cultural trajectories report, on the experience lived in the lockdown, previous experiences that still recall a desire for rescue and overcoming difficulties.

The discussion focused in the first instance on the theme: *“What have we learned in this difficult period?”*

- *We learned how to be united in pandemic time, that we are strong and can do everything together (Palestine).*
- *During this troubled period every other person in the world is experiencing the same situation as me. We have learned that everyone, no one excluded, needs to get up and we need encouraging words (Pakistan).*
- *I learned to be autonomous, to accept and face what life presents to you. I am not afraid of change anymore (Syria)*
- *I personally managed to understand more deeply the stories that my parents told me about the wartime, that is when we were locked in the house. I understood the importance of human affection, solidarity toward others (Iraq).*
- *I learned that despite all the difficulties, everything is usually solved for our good and these experiences, even if they are difficult, serve to give us a teaching and make us stronger and more aware (Libya)*
- *Do your best and leave the rest to God (Pakistan)*

The students' answers carry a message of resilience, which is reflected in the stories and biographies of refugee students. It is also an opportunity to “learn that we all can overcome difficulties”, as a very young student said, or to tell each other words that could help us and support each other.

Among the key words that better represent the thoughts of the refugee students about how to overcome this pandemic, there are patience, trust, dream and hope. Here are some keywords the students associated with the theme of the Covid-19 emergency:

- *Stay safe, respect for others safety, stay strong (Pakistan)*
- *Patience, Trust, Dream. Tomorrow everything will be better (Syria)*

- *Patience, optimism, respect (Iraq)*
- *Hope, support, understanding (Libya)*

Finally, the discussion focused on the further challenges faced by refugee students in this pandemic.

- *We had to overcome the difficulty and the challenge of staying all the time at home, and still studying despite the loss of will because we were mentally ill (Palestine);*
- *During the lockdown when someone who is already alone and away from his family, has to stay at home and can't meet friends, you have to overcome the anguish that can prevail (Pakistan).*
- *Pandemic has doubled the sad feeling of distance for us that we already are far away from our family, (Pakistan)*
- *The challenge was to try to do useful things that would drive away negative thoughts (Syria)*
- *There are challenges to which everyone is called, not just we refugees and international students. All the Italian people must try to work to get out of the economic crisis that crosses the whole country (Iraq).*
- *The greatest challenge is to be away from your country, your families and your homes, to overcome this feeling of being alone and in a period of great uncertainty (Libya).*

Even if the University of Bari, following the stop to in person lessons and the closure of Departments, has activated distance learning platforms in order to ensure the continuation of lessons, the indisposition of some tools that guarantee the right to study such as the closure of laboratories, study rooms, libraries, computer centres, hotspots and free wifi, has in fact led to the interruption of normal study paths. In some cases, the digital divide has drawn a clear dividing line between before and after.

The feeling of isolation, the fear linked to the virus, the impossibility of reaching friends or loved ones, as well as the lack of perfect knowledge of health care systems in Italy, have exacerbated the difficulties and made the lockdown period more difficult to bear. The closure, albeit temporary, of the administrative offices of the University has also blocked the normal processing of scholarship procedures on which students' livelihoods depend, so that in some cases, daily needs have created many urgent problems.

Domestic isolation has not found everyone in the same conditions or able to react in the same way, but it has exposed other vulnerabilities. Again, it was the availability or scarcity of resources (in this case the comfort of one's own home, the sharing or not of the flat with other people, just like the power of the network connection or the quality of the access devices) that amplified social inequalities and distances.

During the meeting, however, an attitude of relativization mixed with a feeling of universalization emerged, precisely on the basis of personal, or parental, experience of particularly painful and traumatic experiences. Not a simplistic *diminutio* in the comparison, because in many cases the pandemic has greatly aggravated vital conditions and increased the state of anxiety and uncertainty, but a more careful awareness of the values of life and the universality of the human condition of difficulty into which the pandemic has brought us all, none excluded. In some cases, spirituality and contact with one's inner self have increased.

Touching life narratives have been offered by people who have already been able to overturn harmful premises in the past, with courage and determination, turning difficulties into opportunities. Stories that have brought out loneliness, economic difficulties, discrimination, isolation, but also hope and the will to start again: *“The pandemic, like what forced each of us to flee and face so many problems here in Italy in order to start living again - said S.- has shown us that difficulties serve to reconstruct our points of view, our knowledge, our priorities. They serve to give more value to each person's life, even if while we endure them we don't think we can use them”*.

In other words, many students shared a thought: every emergency brings with it new challenges that stimulate the ability to adapt, making us realize that we have skills and resources that we thought we did not have. The limit can become a point of support that gives us new strength.

If the pandemic has shown what happens when our points of reference suffer a shock, when a novelty, an external change undermines our certainties, the experiences of resilience shared by this specific group of international students of University of Bari have shown how much it is possible to learn from moments of difficulty and how important it is to network, so as not to leave anyone alone.

On the basis of the collected sensations, it has emerged the need to develop an innovative formula by the University that could be more inclusive because it could be first of all more able to “listen” to different sensibilities.

The common condition of deprivation, the serious limitation to our lifestyles that affected us not only in terms of reduction of displacements, of absence of social life but that also caused a stop to shared rituals and common spaces of meeting and carefree moments, has produced repercussions on everyone's subjectivity. The debate has therefore highlighted not only the need to take into account the principles of autobiography methodology in

the relationship with this peculiar segment of the student population, in order to better understand refugee students and to establish correct relationships with those who are undertaking a narrative construction of personal identity, who bear emotional baggage (and are now reprocessing it) linked to migratory wounds. The migratory background should not be understood as a burden, a past to leave behind. On the contrary, it is a resource that can be formally recognized by the university system. Valuing the human and cultural capital of international students is a fundamental enrichment opportunity for the University and not to do so would be a wasted opportunity.

Handling a personal experience full of “other” meanings and focusing on it, however, presupposes paradigm changes, relational evolutions and new behavioural and conceptual maps. Among all of them, especially for these students, it is necessary to strengthen the offer of opportunities for socialization, focusing on the structuring of relational networks that allow its users leave the protected perimeter offered by the *CAP*, especially if the final objective is structural social cohesion.

It is therefore necessary to learn to talk about human capital within a framework of humanizing the economy, through networks and relationships, grasping the sense of diversity, defeating fear and valuing stories of resilience. It is possible to change for the better and it is necessary to do it if it's true that the university system has a fundamental formative role within our societies. The experience of refugees entering our universities must serve to improve the services we offer to all students, but above all, it must serve other refugees who may feel encouraged to take this path, to understand that it is a possible way forward, based on successful examples of people who have gone through their own difficulties.

Not only words, then, but also experiences, expertise, responses. Perhaps the most important lesson that refugee students of our University have given us is that there can be no crisis without change and without new solutions.

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