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## Migrant and refugee students from the Global South at Austrian universities: A typology for targeted support

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# **Migrant and Refugee Students from the Global South at Austrian Universities: A Typology for Targeted Support**

Vienna, April 2022

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## Abbreviations

AMS	Public Employment Service Austria
ASÖ	Arab Students in Austria
BMBWF	Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research
BMI	Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior
DAAD	German Academic Exchange Service
e.g.	for example
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EPRS	European Parliamentary Research Service
EU	European Union
HEI	Higher Education Institution
i.e.	that is
IGASuS	Association of Afghan Students in Austria
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ÖH	Austrian Student Representative Body
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
SDGs	(United Nations) Sustainable Development Goals
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNIKO	Universities Conference Austria
vs.	versus

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## Abstract

Drawing on qualitative data from five focus group discussions (N=23), we developed a typology with migrant and refugee students from the Global South living in Vienna and studying at an Austrian university. Our findings indicate that different levels of support are required, depending on both structural and personal factors that respondents displayed. Structural factors include residence permit, field and level of study and conditions at the university (such as digital access, student representation, supervision by professors, workload). Personal factors involve respondents' social capital in terms of social network and friends/colleagues, in particular in the form of in/formal mentoring, language skills and other qualifications, personal resilience and aspirations, and mental health. Based on these factors, our typology differentiates between four different types of migrant and refugee students from the Global South, who differ with regard to the quality of their experience at university and their general well-being, which in turn impacts their study success.

**Keywords:** refugees; higher education; Global South; development; university; inclusion; typology; Austria



## 1. Introduction

Roughly one in four foreign students at Austrian universities is a migrant or refugee from the Global South (Langthaler 2018). Including both regular students on a student visa and students with an asylum status, this group makes a crucial, yet often overlooked contribution to the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEI). The refugee movement in the summer of 2015, which led to an impressive wave of humanitarianism by the civil society in Austria and many other affected countries, finally directed the public focus on the needs and resources of these students. It sparked a welcome culture at European universities, several of which introduced different programs and initiatives to facilitate the tertiary education of recently arrived refugees, as many of them had finished (upper) secondary education in their countries of origin or had even been enrolled in a university program before they had to flee (Buber-Ennser et al. 2016).

Yet, academic research on migrant and refugee students' experiences, their aspirations and the barriers they face when studying at an Austrian university remains scarce, as do targeted support programs. Responding to these research and policy gaps, our study assesses the barriers and contributing factors for the personal well-being and study success of these students. What makes their studies at an Austrian university a positive and enriching experience, both personally and professionally, and what inhibits them in doing so? Drawing on qualitative data from five semi-structured focus groups with students from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, as well as Rwanda and Kenya, we present a typology of migrant and refugee students living in Austria and studying at an Austrian university.

Comparing refugees' and migrants' data, the implications of different backgrounds and legal status need to be taken into consideration, while not being overly generalized. Refugees are fleeing armed conflict or persecution, while migrants are choosing to move not because of direct threat of persecution or death, but rather to improve their lives in various ways (UNHCR 2016b). Yet, as refugee and migrant students from the Global South share many experiences at Westerns universities to which their residence title is, if at all, of secondary relevance, our study includes both groups, while at the same remaining aware of key differences that emerged in the research.

## 2. Literature Review

Despite international conventions, including the Geneva Refugee Convention and Human Rights Declaration, refugees' and migrants' access to (higher) education varies significantly across the globe (Dryden-Peterson 2016; UNHCR 2016a). This holds true for primary and secondary education, but even more so for enrollment at universities and colleges: Only 3 % of refugees worldwide have access to tertiary education (UNHCR 2019), compared to 36 % of the global population. Similarly, inequalities can be observed when looking at students from the Global South, with a gross tertiary education enrollment ratio of 9.4% in Sub-Sahara Africa (Worldbank 2020), versus 76 % in Europe and North America (UNESCO 2017). 15 % of students from abroad undertaking tertiary level studies in the EU are from Africa (Eurostat 2018).

This is contrasted with high educational aspirations of refugees and migrants from the Global South, as several studies show (Aver 2017; Naidoo 2014; Marar 2011; Bloch/Hirsch 2017; Shakya et al. 2010). In many contexts, refugees and migrants have been found to display higher levels of educational aspirations than natives (Stermac et al. 2012). This can be traced back to educational experiences in the countries of origin, such as having been enrolled in a university before (forced) migration, but also to hopes for security and social mobility in the host country via education. For receiving institutions, refugee and migrant students can make an important contribution to "internationalization at home" (Beelen/Jones 2015; Brandenburg

et al. 2019), e.g. by motivating the incorporation of international and intercultural aspects into syllabi.

However, these potentials and high aspirations have been shown to transform into low education *expectations* when newcomers become increasingly aware of obstacles to their educational goals in the receiving country (Brücker et al. 2017; Refugee Support Network 2012; Stevenson/Willot 2007; Morris-Lange 2017). These obstacles can roughly be grouped into

- (a) *structural factors*, such as problems with residence permits and asylum status (Dryden-Peterson 2010; El-Ghali et al. 2017; Stevenson/Willot 2007; Doyle/O'Toole 2013; Avery/Said 2017; El-Ghali et al. 2017; Hohberger 2017; Schroeder/Seukwa 2017; Lambert et al. 2018) or the formal recognition of degrees obtained abroad (Pietkiewicz 2017; Ferede 2010; Schammann/Younso 2016; Shakya et al. 2010; Egner 2015; Houghton/Morrice 2008),
- (b) *socio-economic factors*, including a strained financial situation post-migration that necessitates migrants and refugees to seek (lower-qualified) work, rather than continue their education (Anselme/Hands 2010; Avery/Said 2017; Dryden-Peterson 2010; Hohberger 2017; Korntheuer 2016; Earnest et al., 2010; Joyce et al. 2010; Spiteri 2015), and
- (c) *social factors*, such as experiences of discrimination and social exclusion (Kanno/Varghese 2010; Ferede 2010; Shakya et al. 2010; Mangan/Winter 2017; Morrice 2013). In addition,
- (d) *cultural factors*, such as differing gender relations and women's rights to higher education (Dahya/Dryden-Peterson 2017), have been shown to play a (minor) role. Finally,
- (e) *mental health factors*, such as acculturation stress, traumatization due to experiences of war, conflict and forced migration, separation from family at home, and social isolation, have only sparsely been explored as factors that impact the study success of refugee and migrant students (Hannah 1999; Stermac et al. 2013). Yet, as this study will show, addressing these barriers can help to advance the equitable participation of refugee and migrant students at HEIs. In our focus groups, all five of these main barriers were explored, taking into account the specific conditions that refugee and migrant students are confronted with at Austrian universities.

## 2.1. Refugee Students in Austria and Europe

Following the events of the year 2015, Austria, together with fifteen other European countries, introduced and adapted policies for tertiary education of refugees at the national level (Eurydice 2019). Across Europe, these programs varied, depending on the policy orientation of the national government and the university structure (such as tuition fees and admission procedures). Universities with (high) tuition fees introduced scholarship programs, while others offered (mostly free of charge) language classes in either English or the national language(s). In this respect, Germany is often cited as one of the countries with the broadest range of support measures (Eurydice 2019; Streitwieser et al. 2019), as it was also the country most affected by refugee inflows. In the year 2015 alone, Germany received more than 460,000 asylum applications, while several thousand more followed in 2016 (Germany Federal Ministry of the Interior 2016).

In their overview of university policy interventions in North America and Europe, Streitwieser et al. (2018) show that tertiary educational refugee assistance differs greatly by mode of delivery (virtual or physical) as well as by extent and duration: While some programs bestow full scholarships but no living expenses, others provide only one or two years of scholarship support. After the funding period, refugee students have to fend for themselves. Many higher education interventions are the result of collaborations across governments, HEIs, and civil

society organizations. Their success depends on the degree of coordination between actors and the level of commitment their leadership displays to supporting the enrolment of refugee students. Besides humanitarian or social motivations, globalization provides a strong economic incentive for the internationalization of universities by creating competition among institutions for students, funding and prestige. Indeed, some refugee students may provide financial stimuli to HEIs as they arrive with their own funds, as is the case with the Higher and Further Education Opportunities and Perspectives for Syrians (HOPES) program, which was funded by the European Union's Madad Fund for Syrians and disadvantaged students from host countries (DAAD 2019). So far, however, there is a discernible lack of publicly available data and information on the actual outcomes of such programs and other interventions, in particular with regard to longer-term impact.

In the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis,' the Austrian Universities Conference (UNIKO 2021) initiated a program called MORE with the aim of providing refugees with access to university educational opportunities, thereby contributing to their social and educational inclusion. All 22 public Austrian universities participated in the initiative, but implemented it in substantially different ways. As Bacher et al. (2020) show, the success of MORE and similar programs heavily depended on the political and societal climate as well as existing legal regulations beyond the influence of HEIs. Between the winter terms of 2015/16 and 2019/20, 3,100 newly admitted refugee students attended around 4,000 courses offered by the MORE program, but only a minor percentage was able to transfer to a regular study program and continue studying towards a degree. This can be attributed to several factors, among others a lack of targeted support for groups of refugees that, due to both personal and structural issues, need more and/or other forms of assistance. Similarly, several institutions focused on merely providing basic language courses, while refugee students need a broader set of interventions as well as a higher level of language skills to follow a bachelor's or master's program in German.

A first evaluation in 2019 showed that the MORE program had helped the majority of students with "everyday structure and integration", especially meeting peers and making friends, but much less so with preparing for a regular degree program. The biggest challenge according to students were finances: While the program as such was free, additional costs like study materials, books, student housing and public transport had to be covered by the students, with no access to scholarships or additional funds. Differences with regard to students' nationality and gender applied. The majority of students were male and coordinators noted difficulties in attracting female students. Syrian students in the MORE program were more successful in entering the Austrian educational system, had gained full asylum status earlier than other groups and could rely on existing community networks, which supported their integration. Afghan MORE students, on the other hand, reported better language skills and more readily entered the labor market, yet had to face negative attitudes by the host society more frequently (Bacher et al. 2020).

## **2.2. Migrant students from the Global South in Austria**

There are different models for migrant students to study in Austria. For short-term stays in Austria up to a maximum of six months, EU citizens and citizens of Switzerland do not need a residence title. Entry without a visa is permitted. For stays longer than three months, international students must register with the responsible state or regional institution within the first four months to obtain a certificate of registration. Non-EU nationals, on the other hand, require a short-term stay visa, which is usually issued for twelve months. For an extension, proof of study success of at least 16 ECTS or, in the case of doctoral students, confirmation from the academic supervisor of academic progress in the previous academic year, is needed. Students must thus prove that they are "seriously dedicated to their studies" (BMI 2022). Given these requirements, 79 % of students from Iran report having difficulties in obtaining and/or renewing a residence permit, the highest rate across all nationalities (Unger et al. 2020).

In contrast to EU students, for whom tuition at Austrian universities is free of charge, students from non-EU countries are liable to pay a tuition fee of EUR 726.72 per semester (BMBWF 2021). Gainful employment is permitted for students from third countries with a student visa. Only employment permits for less than twenty hours per week are granted without prior labour market examination, on the grounds that it does not interfere with students' education. The entire permission process takes approximately eight weeks (AMS 2021), depending on the documents submitted and the authorities' resources, which poses a considerable barrier for employers and students alike. Students from third countries and those from EU countries are almost equally likely to be in employment (58 % and 59 % respectively). This changed over recent years due to an increase of the maximum employment time for bachelor's students. Yet, students from non-EU countries still have the lowest rate of study-adequate employment across all groups and most often report difficulties in combining work and study (Unger et al. 2020). For both issues, employment restrictions play a role.

In terms of hosting students from non-European countries of origin, Austria is below the European average. Numbers even fell slightly from 2016 to 2019 (Mandl et al. 2021). The number of first-year students from (South)eastern Europe, the rest of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the rest of the world remained relatively constant over the long term, but has declined again, especially since 2015/16, after having been higher in the interim. One reason may be the increase in the language level required for admission to most universities (from a German level B2 to C1), which is supposed to make study success more likely. The most important non-European country for Austrian universities is Iran. In the winter semester 2020/2021, 1,334 students from Iran and 514 students from Syria were enrolled in Austrian universities (Mandl et al. 2021), both of which are represented in our study sample.

Between 20 % and 30 % of international bachelor's students drop out in their third semester, compared to 19 % of Austrian students. Among students from non-EU countries, the dropout rate rose to over 50 % in the 8<sup>th</sup> semester (Mandl et al. 2021). The majority of students from Egypt (84 %), Afghanistan (75 %) and Syria (74 %) are male (Unger et al., 2020). To the contrary, women dominate among students from Austria (54 %) and Western Europe (51 %). On average, students from third countries, especially those from non-EU countries, tend to be older than EU citizens (28 years and 29 years vs. 26 years).

In a representative survey among international students in Austria, 65% of students from third countries state that they have had difficulties in obtaining a residence permit for Austria (Unger et al. 2020). For more than a quarter of students from non-EU countries, it was difficult to obtain information on admission to an Austrian HEI. Once studying, they face financial hardships more than any other group (47 % vs. 30 % across all international students). For students from countries beyond EHEA, this rises to 48 %, which is corroborated by our focus groups. Among other reasons, high expenses during their studies, including tuition fees, lack of employment (options) and not being able to rely on family for support, are relevant factors. Hence, students from non-EU countries, although on average older, tend to have a lower monthly budget than EU students (EUR 1,050 vs. EUR 1,330). In our focus groups, family support indeed emerged as a crucial aspect for participants' study success and overall well-being, as employment options remain scarce.

In contrast to native students, non-EU students cover a smaller part of their expenses via their own earnings, yet those who do work, do it out of sheer necessity (84 %), rather than for gaining work experience or financing vacations. This is also reflected in students' living situations: Among non-EU students, 37 % live in student housing, while native students tend to live with their parents (24 %), a shared apartment (23 %) or together with their partner (29 %). Finally, while already a significant part of international students feel discriminated against because of their origin (roughly one quarter), which particularly holds true for students from third countries: Almost every second student experienced discrimination at university and roughly 50 % would like to have more contact to native students. They consider their level of social inclusion as low, which our results corroborate.

## 2.3. Study contribution

The above insights from the Austrian context match research findings of students from the Global South reporting greater levels of loneliness and financial hardship than native-born students at European universities (Saba/Wyns 2021). Paralleling the evident paucity of targeted, evidence-based support, the specific needs of refugee and migrant students from the Global South remain underexplored in academic research (Lenette 2016). In their scoping review, Lambert et al. (2018) stress that the experience of students, their motivations and difficulties, have so far been largely ignored in the German-speaking world. Considering that the number of African tertiary students is expected to double by 2030 (UNESCO 2021), there is growing need for creating equal education and mobility opportunities for young people. Mirroring the lack of data on the actual outcome of existing programs, however, similar research gaps emerge when it comes to the self-understanding of universities as places of diversity and internationality of *students* rather than researchers (Dryden-Peterson 2016). Finally, equitable access to universities and HEIs also involves refugee and migrant (young career) researchers, both in terms of qualification and employment (Cohen 2010; Crawford et al. 2017), which, besides the inclusion of early-stage doctoral students in one of our focus groups, exceeds the scope of this study.

## 3. Methodology

This research uses primary data from a qualitative study on the inclusion and participation of migrant and refugee students from the Global South at Viennese universities. The fieldwork took place between October and December 2021 and consisted of five semi-structured focus groups with three (due to last-minute cancellations) to six participants (Hennink 2014). Given the high language proficiency required for studying at an Austrian university, four out of the five focus groups were conducted in German and one of them in English. Focus groups were semi-structured (Rabiee 2004) and divided into key themes, namely, (1) student life, (2) study experience in country of origin (if applicable), (3) study experience in Austria, (4) stressors and barriers, (5) support or lack thereof, (6) social and personal aspects. We differentiated between primary and secondary questions (see appendix for guiding questions).

### 3.1. Recruitment of participants and conducting focus groups

Participants were recruited via a diverse set of channels, given that refugees and third-country nationals constitute a notoriously hard-to-reach population in social research (Faugier/Sargeant 1997) and few of them are enrolled in higher education. Additionally, trust played a key role, which we established by contacting participants through student organizations such as the society of Arabic or Afghan students in Austria.<sup>1</sup> Overall, our recruitment phase lasted several months. Establishing contact via official (language or foreign) offices at universities proved to be much less efficient in comparison. Overall, recruiting refugee students was more difficult and time-consuming than finding participants who had migrated to Austria on a student visa, due to the (vastly) different size of the two groups, their previous educational attainment and their language skills in both English and German (see above). Once contact was established to a small number of students, further participants could be recruited via snowballing. Due to the continuing Coronavirus situation in Austria and, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Organizations we reached out to for recruiting participants include: the Vienna Municipal Department for Integration and Diversity; Vienna Social Fund and its Advisory Center for Migrants; UNHCR Austria; the MORE Initiative by UNIKO; NGOs specializing in social inclusion, equality on the labour market or anti-racism work; the Association of Arab Students in Austria (ASÖ); the Association of Afghan Students in Austria (IGASuS); social businesses catering to migrants and refugees; student admission offices of universities in Vienna; the student representations and student consultants for Arabic- and Farsi-speaking students; offices for foreign students. Additionally, we contacted community media channels, higher education coordinators and activists as well as language teachers.

second half of the field phase, a nationwide lockdown, all focus groups were conducted online via Zoom and video-recorded. Participants were given the choice to switch off their cameras, if preferred.

Working with the vulnerable, hard-to-reach group of refugees and migrants, we placed particular emphasis on research ethics and followed the ethical guidelines of the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre (UNHCR 2017), which present state-of-the-art provisions for doing responsible research on forced migrants, analyzing and interpreting results and storing data. Since focus groups as our chosen research method exclude participants who do not feel comfortable speaking out in a group setting, some students who had initially expressed interest dropped out when they were informed about the specific conditions. This self-(de)selection should be taken into when interpreting results. Recorded data was stored in a protected way not accessible to third parties beyond the project team. Aggregated data is available upon request to guarantee reviewability of the study.

In terms of composition of groups, we aimed for homogeneity, as lack of hierarchies and other distinctions tend to make participants feel safer and increase trust, so that more (and more detailed and personal) information is shared (Finch/Lewis 2012; Hennink 2014). Same-sex groups were chosen because men and women have been shown to behave differently in group settings, as concerns speaking-time, directness and conformity (Stewart/Shamdasani 2014). Eleven female and twelve male participants were eventually recruited. Two groups with female participants and two groups with male participants were conducted in German, one mixed-gender group was done in English. While most participants had other first languages (Arabic, Farsi, Kinyarwanda, Swahili), we consider the working language of the focus groups only a minor limitation of the study, since all participants had to prove proficient language skills in either German or English (or even both) to enroll in a degree program at an Austrian university. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out any bias created by a language barrier, excluding potential recruits who may not have felt comfortable speaking out in their second or third language in a recorded online group setting, as well restricting the expression of meaning in a foreign language of those who participated.

Participants were encouraged to comment on or respond to statements by others (Finch/Lewis 2012). Having previously established and maintained contact with participants via messenger groups proved helpful for increasing trust and rapport, despite the online setting. Hence, most focus groups were (at least in parts) interactive, especially after an initial warm-up phase. We noted both disagreement between participants, for instance when it came to experiences with university staff or the university preparation program, and, more frequently, agreement, for instance when one participant reported her difficulties with visa renewal, and several other participants confirmed her experience. Not surprisingly, hence, participants showed themselves grateful for being able to share their struggles and receiving support and feedback from students who went through similar experiences. Overall, the atmosphere in the online focus groups was supportive and encouraging. Participants also shared advice with each other, such as free mental health support offers. In one group, participants expressed that although they had not known each other prior to this study, they now felt a sense of collectivity and pride for each other's achievements.

Diverging from the general guiding questions, a few additional topics were introduced by respondents, such as the role as migrant or refugee women in a Western society or structural deficiencies of the Austrian higher education system affecting both national and international students alike. Additionally, the changed study situation due to the Coronavirus pandemic took up a vital part in several focus groups, although we did not explicitly ask for it. To represent the relevance of the pandemic situation for international students, we include these insights into our analysis where fit.

Focus groups lasted between one hour and ten minutes and one hour and 35 minutes. A certain challenge during the group discussion proved to be that some speakers were more dominant than others, while some were hesitant to speak at all. This is a common group

dynamic discussed in methodological literature (see, for instance, Hennink 2014; Stewart/Shamdasani 2014). We aimed to mitigate this effect by calling upon participants directly and encouraging everyone to engage. Nonetheless, biases in speaking time could not be avoided. Similarly, interviewer bias cannot be ruled out completely, but was proactively addressed by employing different moderators for the male and female groups. Both moderators were experienced in applying and working with qualitative methods, which according to Littig/Pöchhacker (2014) is vital for reducing bias. Additionally, our detailed guiding questions were also meant to help control interviewer bias (see appendix).

### 3.2. Sample description

Altogether eleven women and twelve men participated in the focus groups. Female informants were on average 31 years old and arrived in Austria between 2016 and 2020. Most had completed upper secondary education, had a bachelor's degree or completed a college. Male informants were on average younger (27 years). They had arrived in Austria between 2007 and 2018. Similar to female informants, males were rather highly educated, with three of them reporting twelve or more years of schooling (i.e., completed upper secondary education or higher). As concerns study programs, seven students were enrolled in a bachelor's program, twelve in a master's program, and three in a doctoral program. Universities included the Medical University of Vienna, the Technical University of Vienna (for architecture and engineering), the University of Applied Science, the Vienna University of Business and Economics, the University of Applied Arts, the Institute of Science and Technology Austria (for Neuroscience), and the University of Vienna (for international business administration, law, chemistry, international development, mathematics, and linguistics). Several participants had been or were currently enrolled in a university preparation program. In terms of nationality, four of our respondents were Afghan, seven Iranian, ten Syrian, and respectively one student came from Kenya and Rwanda. Thirteen students had a refugee background and thus an official asylum or subsidiary protection status, while the other ten respondents stayed in Austria on a student visa.

### 3.3. Analysis

Audio recordings from the focus groups were transcribed as result logs. Participants' consent was obtained in writing and their quotes were anonymized for the ensuing analysis. The qualitative analysis started with the formulation of categories, which were derived from the focus groups as, for example, participants used common keywords for each of the guiding question. Subsequently, a content analysis following Mayring (2015) was conducted to achieve a systematic and transparent analysis of quotes by structuring the focus group contents according to the identified categories. Inhibiting and contributing factors, or *drivers* and *barriers*, expressed by the participants were each assigned to the relevant structural and personal factors in the first and second order. For example, while the category "admission" was considered a structural factor of the first order, the categories "recognition of qualifications" and "admission exam" were considered subordinate to it, i.e. of the second order. Inhibiting and contributing factors were then compared and contrasted in separate tables, which constitute the inductively developed, empirical foundation of this study. Table 1 to 4 in our results section are meant to present a variety of factors that define the resources and barriers refugee and migrant students at Austrian universities are confronted with.

Subsequently, these results were grouped together in a typology, which has proven to be a useful tool in qualitative social research to elucidate complex social realities in a comprehensible manner (Kluge 2000). Retaining basic awareness of the heterogeneity of migrant and refugee students, our study presents polythetic types, which means participants were only assigned to types with a certain probability (Kuckartz 2006). The typology consists of extreme ends of a versatile spectrum of social reality with the aim of reducing complexity while at the same time increasing understanding of refugee and migrant students' resources

and needs. While factors of both the first and second order were meant to be as consistent as possible within a given type, participants neither identified completely with one type nor are the types mutually exclusive. In reality, refugee and migrant students tend to correspond more to one set of categories of some types, and less to others.

In constructing the typology, we differentiated between “structural” and “personal” factors, which included all those factors that emerged as particularly crucial for students’ experiences in focus groups. Additionally, we drew from other empirical studies and the existing body of literature when creating the typology.

**Figure 1: Typology of four (ideal) types of refugee and migrant students, based on the structural and personal dimension. Source: Own visualization.**

		Structural	
		High	Low
Personal	High	<b>Persisting</b>	<b>Struggling against the system</b>
	Low	<b>Struggling personally</b>	<b>Withdrawing</b>

The positioning along these four central types explains the personal and structural resources as well as barriers that refugees and migrants from the Global South display when studying at an Austrian university. In addition to the two extremes of “the persisting type” (high personal and structural resources) and “the withdrawing type” (high personal and structural barriers), we also define two intermediate types as “struggling personally” and “struggling against the system”. It is crucial to note that in reality, there will hardly be “pure” types. Rather, students display more or fewer characteristics of one or several types. “Mixed” types are the rule, not the exception, which holds true for all participants in the focus groups. Hence, our typology is not meant to impose rigid categories on lived and dynamic experiences, but condense these experiences and thus uncover where structural and personal support could be enhanced to advance students’ study success and well-being. The types are meant to serve as flexible orientation guides for understanding and responding to students’ support needs.

## 4. Results

In our presentation of results, we focus on the two extreme types of “the persisting type” (+/+) and “the withdrawing type” (-/-), as they present resources and barriers in their purest, most unadulterated form. The two in-between types, “struggling against the systems” and “struggling personally”, can be seen as variations on the structural or personal factors. The persisting type displays favorable conditions on both dimensions, i.e. is high in structural and personal resources, while the withdrawing type faces high structural and personal barriers. While it is important to note that being assigned to either the persisting or the withdrawing type will not mean, in reality, that students will invariably persist or withdraw, the existence of these factors increases their likelihood to do so.



**Figure 2: Overview of four idealized types.**

<i>Typ +/+:</i> <i>The Persisting Type</i>
<i>Typ +/-:</i> <i>The Struggling Type (personally)</i>
<i>Typ -/+:</i> <i>The Struggling Type (structurally)</i>
<i>Typ -/-:</i> <i>The Withdrawing Type</i>

#### 4.1. Structural Factors

Deducting from focus group results, we identified several key structural factors for refugee and migrants students' categorization as either the persisting or the withdrawing type, namely "extra-university factors," "study entry, admission and orientation phase," "quality and contents of study program," and "university staff." These factors were further divided into "inhibiting" and "contributing" aspects, as shown in Table 1 and 2 below.

**Table 1: Inhibiting Structural Factors, Source: Focus groups**

1 <sup>st</sup> Order	2 <sup>nd</sup> Order	Inhibiting Structural Factors
Extra-university factors	Residence permit	Annual renewal and (long) validation time of student visa
		Strict renewal requirements for student visa,
		Inefficient public offices, non-transparent processes
		Requires an inordinate amount of time and resources
	Living situation	Overpriced and/or substandard student homes
		Unfavorable living conditions
	Financial situation	Financial funds not accessible
		Non-affordable laptop and other study equipment
	Work and employment	Tedious job search in a difficult (post-pandemic) labor market
		Job search is restricted by rigid work permit regulations
		Maximum work time limited by student visa, leading to financial hardship
		Precarious, unsafe or stressful work
	Legal aspects	Legal disadvantages for third-country nationals

Study entry, admission and orientation phase	Administrative	Inefficient and suboptimal orientation services
		No additional support for third-country nationals
		Tough, excessively long and/or bureaucratic admission process
	Recognition of qualifications	Non-transparent and seemingly biased assessment of documents from third-countries
		Documentation for university entrance obtained abroad is not accepted or only accepted after long negotiations
		Qualifications obtained abroad not recognized or only partially recognized
		Required documents are unattainable from home country university offices and/or may have gotten lost during the (forced) migration
		Study advancement is not possible due to lack of documentation or bureaucratic barriers
	University preparation program	Time-intensive preparation program with little to no benefit for study progress
	Admission exam	No separate quota for refugees (treated as “nationals”, yet clearly more disadvantaged)
	Language requirements	Hard to meet language requirements
		No flexibility in proving language requirements
No or expensive language courses		
Quality and contents of study program	Administrative	Unclear and confusing structures; stressful semester plan organization
		Rigid structures that allow for little to no accommodation of migrant and refugee students' situations
		Hard to access system (on- and offline)
		Students' rights are not recognized nor sufficiently valued in and beyond the classroom
	Content and study structure	Unmanageable workload
		One-sided, biased and/or even racist course content (Eurocentrism)
		Study program creates no links to job market
		Unfavorable exam conditions, “one size fits all”
		Challenging course content with single focus on theoretical input
	University resources	Low financial resources
	Support systems	Lack of tutoring offers (especially pre-exam tutorials and preparatory courses for academic writing/research)
	Language requirements	High and highly technical German skills required

University staff	Professors	Little to no consideration to non-German native speakers (e.g. dialect German)
		Hierarchical and unresponsive
		Not empathic
	Student representatives	Student representatives are not helpful in counselling or supplying funds
		Financial support is only supplied when student goes through long and tedious procedures
		No adequate representation of international students among student representative body

**Table 2: Contributing Structural Factors, Source: Focus groups**

1 <sup>st</sup> Order	2 <sup>nd</sup> Order	Contributing Structural Factors
Extra-university factors	Residence permit	No regular renewal required or easily renewed without excessive use of time or resources
		Cooperative public infrastructure and efficient functioning of the residence permit (renewal) process
	Living situation	Affordable, adequate housing
		Favorable living conditions
	Financial situation	Study grants available in sufficient number and easily/equitably accessible
		Technological infrastructure available and accessible
	Work and employment	Well-supported, successful job search
		Asylum status grants more flexibility on job market than visa
		Asylum status grants full labor market access with no restrictions
		Safe, secure and enriching working conditions
	Legal aspects	Rule of law in Austria, basic rights for everyone
		Additional legal protection due to asylum status that puts refugees (mostly) on par with nationals

Study entry, admission and orientation phase	Administrative	Orientation at university easier due to familiarity
		Efficient and student-orientated university services
		Additional support by international offices and/or student representatives
		Easy and fast admission process, helpful offices
	Recognition of qualifications	Fast and transparent recognition of degrees/qualifications obtained abroad
		Documentation for university entrance is accepted without problems, usually because third-country is sufficiently recognized or because the student attended (some years of) high school in Austria
		Qualifications obtained abroad are fully recognized
		Required documents are available and readily verified
		Fast study advancement to graduate program due to previous qualifications
	University preparation program	University preparation program is useful and efficient in preparing foreign students for regular study program
	Admission exam	Separate quotas for third-country nationals and/or refugees
	Admission restrictions	No admission restrictions at Austrian public universities based on high school grades
	Language requirements	Language requirements easy/easier to meet
Flexibility in proving language requirements		
Free and affordable language courses		
Quality and contents of study program	Administrative	Well-organized and transparent university system
		Flexibility of system and study programs to accommodate migrant and refugee students' needs
		High accessibility, low threshold
		Student rights are recognized
	Content and study structure	Workload is manageable
		Diverse viewpoints, reflections on colonial history and Europe's exploitation of the Global South
		Study program includes compulsory internships and connects students with job market
		Favorable exam conditions that accommodate students' (special) needs
		Study programs are practice-oriented and/or research-based
	University resources	High resources (mostly at private universities)
Support systems	Special support systems for international students	

		Support through extra-university organizations (NGOs, voluntary work that is facilitated through the university)
	Language requirements	English as working language
		Practice-based or technical/mathematical study programs where lower level of German suffices
University staff	Professors	Lecturers speak standard German or proficient English
		Communicative, accessible and responsive
		Supportive and mentoring attitude of professors, going the extra mile to support migrant and refugee students
	Student representatives	Student reps are helpful, accessible, efficient and communicative; know how to accommodate requests by migrant and refugee students
		Student reps provide fast and efficient financial help through so-called "hardship funds"
		Students reps help migrant and refugee students take action against discrimination

#### 4.1.1. University environment

The persisting type is met with favorable structural conditions, both at the university and society at large. They are faced with a welcoming climate, which offers financial, personal and academic support. University staff, whether lecturers, administrative staff or student representatives, are helpful and know how to cater to the specific needs of refugee and migrant students. They experience university personnel as communicative, accessible and responsive, in some cases supportive beyond their expectations.

"Now I'm on the master's in chemistry. I feel better in this program, I have contact with professors, I can ask questions at any time and they are happy to answer."  
(Female student in chemistry from Iran)

Furthermore, students reported feeling "more respect from the professors here" (Male student in medicine from Syria) compared to their home countries, due to a more student-centered university culture.

By contrast, students of the withdrawing type are confronted with an indifferent or even hostile environment. In the classroom, their professors show little to no consideration to non-native speakers, are hierarchal and unresponsive, and lack empathy in dealing with the specific needs of migrant and refugee students.

"When I didn't understand something precisely or just had problems and I wrote the professors, they were not very helpful. They were very strict: 'You have to do it according to the rules', and so on. Yes, that was not very nice for me." (Female student in economics from Iran)

"Once or twice I didn't understand something and my teachers didn't answer my question either. So once I have a question now, I think: 'Okay, leave it, don't ask again, maybe when I ask I don't get a good response.'" (Female student in applied arts from Iran)

The persisting type can rely on a student representative body that they experience as helpful, accessible and efficient, as well as knowledgeable when it comes to accommodating requests by migrant and refugee students. They provide easy and fast help, whether it concerns finance or actions against discrimination. “[T]he ÖH [i.e. Austrian student representative body] stands behind you and you can always lodge a complaint“, said a 27-years-old male student. In addition, students can rely on support through extra-university organizations, such as NGOs, or voluntary work that is facilitated through student self-organization.

On the other hand, withdrawing types are faced with student representatives that either prove to be uncooperative, inefficient or overly bureaucratic in providing (financial) help or untrained in adequately representing international students from the Global South.

“I think it’s a good idea if the university employs foreigners at the ÖH, because as a foreigner you feel weak and you want to ask about things and the language always is a barrier and most people don’t dare to talk to the ÖH. Even if they accept that you can’t speak German, it’s difficult psychologically. And when foreigners work at ÖH, the foreign students are more confident, I think.” (Male student in medicine from Syria)

“An organization like ÖH, if they want to help us, it doesn’t have to be like this [i.e. bureaucratic]. If I’m in this situation, when I don’t have any money [...] I need it now and not in a year. But for example, I got an email every week, a form, a signature, a question. And in the end, I got nothing” (Female student in economics from Iran)

#### **4.1.2. Admission and recognition of degree**

For the persisting type, administrative procedures, in particular with regards to admission and recognition of degrees, runs smoothly and efficiently, so that students can readily apply their personal resources. They can rely on a university system that makes orientation easy, including efficient and student-orientated on- and offline services and additional support by international offices contribute to the persisting type’s success. Conversely, students of the withdrawing type are faced with a rigid system that refuses to provide any extra support for first-years that struggle with finding their way through admission and orientation, in particular when the usability of the university websites is experienced as suboptimal, e.g. due to restricted availability of content in English.

“Here, more is done online, with the computer, you always have a system and you can understand everything if you look it up on the internet. That doesn’t exist in Syria, or didn’t exist when I studied there.” (Male student in medicine from Syria)

“At the beginning, it was extremely difficult. Whenever we called the admissions office, they said: ‘Everything is online, you can search online.’ They didn’t answer a single question. None of the online information could help us.” (Male student in pharmacy from Syria)

Students of the persisting type tend to find the university administration in Austria more favorable when compared to the system in their home country, where they experienced the administration as less student-centered, less digitalized and more school-like.

“It’s true that in Syria there were prescribed courses you had to do per year so that you are able to advance to the next year, but here in many study programs, maybe not in all, you can choose which subjects you want to do in this semester and which not. You can postpone, shift them to an earlier or later semester, depending on what you want to do.” (Male student in political science from Syria)

Students of the withdrawing type, by contrast, struggle with having required documents for admission recognized or available. They note a non-transparent and seemingly biased assessment of university degrees from the Global South and a long, inefficient and tiring process before even being admitted to university. In contrast to the persisting type, they cannot readily provide necessary documentation of degrees, typically because necessary documents will not be verified and/or got lost during (forced) migration.

“Many people got a negative decision or were not admitted to university because of this bureaucracy and these documents, although they knew well that we had to flee and really only have these documents. They also knew well that the documents we uploaded were originals and that we cannot supply others.” (Male student in pharmacy from Syria)

“And then they said, you have to prove to us that you are allowed to study in your country. I’d been here for three years, I could never prove that, how could I prove that? Although on the website, it says that people with a chemistry background are allowed to study for this degree. But I couldn’t do that because I don’t have access [to such a document].” (Female student in chemistry from Iran)

Some students expect discriminatory bias against university education in the Global South.

„I can say that certificates from developing countries are not valued here. Mostly they are underestimated. [...] [I]t is one of the biggest problems the students from developing countries deal with.” (Female student in linguistics from Iran)

“We don’t have so much to brag about, but our education system is really very good. Yes, of course Austria is good and I have nothing against it, but we are not that bad either. [...] If they created an overview of all countries and their university programs, they would understand it better or be able to judge it better.” (Male, former student in civil engineering from Syria)

In contrast to universities in sending countries, Austrian universities do not have restricted admission based on high-school grades in place, which the persisting type experiences as favorable, as they may have not been able to secure a spot otherwise.

“The admission for entry is not easy in Iran, because there are so many people who apply to take this entrance exam and this competition is bigger than here in Austria.” (Female student in economics from Iran)

“At the beginning I was worried that my [high school] grades would not be good enough or not good enough to study political science. This possibility doesn’t exist in Syria, it’s similar to Germany. Depending on your grades, you can study certain subjects; changing studies is very difficult. [...] It’s a bit more complicated than in Austria.” (Male student in political science from Syria)

#### **4.1.3. University preparation program**

Several students in our focus groups underwent a so-called university preparation program before transferring to a regular degree program.

For the persisting type, this preparation program, while requiring an additional one or two years before university entry, is useful and efficient in helping them get up to par with both the required language skills (in German) and the necessary qualification level. An additional advantage for students who went through such a preparatory program is that admission to a regular degree program is frictionless.

“Now I’m in the university preparation program. I’m doing better now, I can understand the language better, for example in biology or chemistry.” (Female student in the university preparation program from Syria)

For the withdrawing type, on the other hand, university preparation programs are seldom more than a waste of time, as they were neither able to enhance their language skills nor did the programs provide them with helpful knowledge for their later (regular) studies. Rather, they take up several semesters of their time and delay study entry and thus graduation.

“It was hard for me to have to catch up on the subjects I had studied at school, math, chemistry, physics, German and all kinds of other things. Yes, the advantage was that I learned everything in German and the disadvantage was that I missed about two years.” (Male student in chemistry from Afghanistan)

“It doesn’t matter if you have studied before or not, now everyone who applies has to attend a university preparation program. And a lot of people lose semesters and a lot of time or repeat the [high school] at evening schools or Arabic schools and attend a university preparation program, which is just a waste of time and more bureaucracy.” (Male student in pharmacy from Syria)

#### **4.1.4. Language requirements**

The persisting type is confronted with language requirements in their degree programs that are either easy to meet or flexible to prove; students benefitted from free or affordable language courses or the above-mentioned preparatory programs.

“At [my university], [...] there are also German courses twice a year, with 40 or 50 places a year, free of charge, and you can also take part in the German course easily, inexpensively. [...] That is an advantage of my university.” (Female student in applied arts from Iran)

In addition, English-language programs, which are not yet common at Austrian universities at the bachelor’s and master’s level, increase students’ likelihood to succeed.

Withdrawing types, however, are faced with few or no available (and affordable) language courses, or experience them as unhelpful. The system they study in seldom allows for flexibility in providing proof of language skills. In fact, several Austrian public universities increased languages requirements from level B2 to C1 for admission to a German-taught program, which can be shown through their secondary school leaving certificate or by separate examination recognized by the rectorate. This, as students reported in the focus groups, constitutes another barrier and postpones their studies further.

“[...] I have to pass German in a certain period of time. And C1 is really not easy, if someone starts new. In two years, it’s not easy to get C1, it is really a big thing to get C1 for beginners.” (Female student in economics from Iran)

“What I can recommend is maybe for language courses, to make separate courses with technical vocabulary for each area. Maybe the students will be less stressed at the beginning then.” (Female student in economics from Iran)

#### **4.1.5. Study program**

The discussion in the focus groups indicated that the specific study programs which refugee and migrant students choose contribute vitally to whether structural factors are perceived as overall inhibiting or contributing. Students of the persisting type find themselves in a well-organized, high-quality study program that accommodates their needs, which was predominantly the case in either private or applied sciences universities. Services are highly accessible, structures allow for flexibility, the workload is manageable and students’ rights are recognized, such as multiple exam-entries or the right to view exam results.



“We always had direct contact with the professors. We told them if the material didn’t fit or the lecture didn’t fit well and if we would have preferred a better lecture or a better professor, if something from the side of the university wasn’t right or the examination date unfavorable.” (Male student in medicine from Syria)

The persisting type can also benefit from course content that presents diverse viewpoints, such as reflections on colonial history and Europe’s exploitation of the Global South, and recognizes students’ migration or refugee background as a resource for classroom discussions.

“As part of the political science program, we dealt with international politics and in some sessions we dealt with the war in Syria. And then when you have experience or knowledge, you have to take part in the discussion, mention a few facts. And among students I often told the story of my forced migration. Most of them were actually interested.” (Male student in political science from Syria)

Creating such conditions depends as much on formal university leadership and availability of formal support systems (such as tutorials and mentoring) as on individual decisions by staff members and professors.

“I think it is so important that there are tutorials at the university. [...] Because students who have problems with a subject go to the tutorials once a week for maybe an hour and students who have very good grades can be employed as tutors. That helped me at the German Studies Institute. I finished German Studies already and it has helped me so much.” (Female student in law from Afghanistan)

“What helped me was that we had a mentoring program for first-year students at the Political Science Institute. There was a mentor from Egypt who helped me a lot and explained a few things in Arabic, and additionally I was able to make contacts.” (Female student in law form Afghanistan)

The withdrawing type, however, meets a rigid university system that is confusing and disorganized, and does not allow for accommodating migrant and refugee students’ needs. Students encounter derogative, Eurocentric course contents which they find alienating, or courses that require highly technical language.

“The planning was crazy. At the beginning, when you didn’t know the language, you had to master everything yourself and check everything yourself and see which exam I would take, when and how I would get in and so on. As I said, I didn’t like it.” (Male student in power electronics from Syria)

“What I noticed at the Institute of Political Science is that all the literature sources, all the books, professors or lecturers at the institute are very European-oriented. I haven’t found a single reference from the East, although there are also many Arab personalities who made a contribution to history or politics, even before the Europeans.” (Male student in political science from Syria)

Interestingly, several participants noted the low resources that public universities in Austria have to survive on, which negatively impacted their studies due to overworked university staff, outdated infrastructure and few support offers. “The University of Vienna is public and therefore has a lot of students and little money, and the Institute of Political Science has even less money and therefore doesn’t have a lot to offer. That’s why the courses you have to attend are limited, which makes it more difficult if you work or do something on the side”, as a 23-year-old male student reported.

#### 4.1.6. Residence

A major aspect that emerged in our focus groups was the relevance of structural factors beyond the university. This included, first and foremost, issues of residence. Students of the persisting type have a secure legal status in the host country and do not have to undergo exorbitant troubles with regard to their residence status. Here, a vital difference between refugee students and migrants emerged. While the formers' right of residence in Austria is based on an asylum status or subsidiary protection, which largely grants them the same rights as natives, third-country nationals' student visas have to be renewed regularly. This is, for almost all participants, a long and cumbersome process, due to inefficient and uncooperative public offices and little transparency, and takes up an inordinate amount of students' time and effort. Those experiences are significant features of the withdrawing type.

"When someone asked me what I did last year, in 2020, I could only say: I extended my visa." (Female student in mathematics from Iran)

"I really got health problems before this visa extension. I was really under stress, everything was really stressful for me." (Female student in economics from Iran)

Requirements for student visa renewal also includes minimum ECTS, which places additional pressure on them to pass exams.

"They don't give you a chance. I had a friend, she needed just one more ECTS to extend her visa, but she didn't get a chance. Yes, it was very sad. We have to spend so much energy to get here and just because of one ECTS, we lose everything." (Female student in economics from Iran)

"Sometimes while I'm studying, I start to think: 'Okay, this subject has 6 ECTS, what if I don't make it this time', and then I really can't concentrate, because I get so stressed out." (Female student in chemistry from Iran)

Similarly, while refugee students' access to the labor market is similar to that of natives, student visas restrict the maximum number of hours that migrant students are allowed to work. It also requires individual legal approval, which many employers do not want to wait for.

"For example, it takes around one month or even sometimes more for students to get a work permit, and so it makes it really difficult for the students here to find a job because most of the employers can't wait that long. It affects the job opportunities negatively." (Female student in linguistics from Iran)

This emerged as a major barrier for students of the withdrawing type to finance their studies and secure a living. Thus, simplifying to the extreme, the persisting type's residence permit is, perhaps counter-intuitively, an asylum status, while the withdrawing type resides on a student visa.

#### 4.1.7. Housing and living conditions

Apart from residence status, working and living conditions for the persisting type are optimal or at least do not place an unequal burden on them. They experience housing as affordable and adequate and their living conditions as favorable. While our focus group showed that this can apply to both single housing and group accommodation, participants tended to experience the latter as more supportive. The most common form of group accommodation are student homes, which are widely offered in Vienna and easily accessible for international students, while being cheaper and more accessible than shared apartments. Some students, mostly refugees, have also had the option of staying with host families, which were mentioned as a particularly positive experience. The persisting type can rely on the support system that this living situation offers.

“I was in the student dormitory and some were from Austria and they were all very nice. Every weekend we all drank, ate or talked together.” (Female student in economics from Iran)

“I also lived with an Austrian family, a small family. They have become part of my family and I didn’t feel alone then.” (Male student in chemistry from Afghanistan)

“[O]ther people live here with their family or so and we have to find a flat, study, work, other things at home. Everything together is so stressful” (Female student in applied arts from Iran)

By contrast, housing is a heavy financial burden on the withdrawing type, which may force them to choose substandard apartments. Social isolation is a frequent consequence of living alone (see “personal factors”). The financial situation is further exacerbated by funds or scholarships that they cannot apply for or that provide too little support. Several respondents reported that the dire labor market situation due to the Coronavirus crisis posed an additional hardship for them. In contrast, finances are secure for the persisting type, either due to long-term work or a safety net of friends and family.

Crucially, several participants mentioned legal issues as supporting structural factors, in particular when comparing the strong rule of law in Austria to their home country. Particularly female students benefited from more rights and privileges, a higher level of safety and freedom of speech; “I’ve only been here one and a half years, but the public safety is better here than in my home country,” says a 27-year-old female student. Another female student, valuing freedom of expression in Austria, states that in contrast to her home country Iran, she can call out wrong-doing: “[W]hen I say that something is wrong, they believe it.” Apart from enjoying the protection of basic rights, refugee students reported experiencing more legal protection than migrants on a student visa, as the latter more often noticed the above-mentioned legal disadvantages for work and residence.

#### 4.2. Personal Factors

Based on our focus groups, the following personal factors for refugee and migrants students’ persistence or withdrawal could be identified, again divided into “inhibiting” and “contributing” aspects. We differentiate between “qualifications,” “student life,” “social life,” health and socio-demographic factors,” and “identity and ideational factors” of the 1<sup>st</sup> order (see Table 3 and 4 below).

**Table 3: Inhibiting Personal Factors, Source: Focus groups**

1 <sup>st</sup> Order	2 <sup>nd</sup> Order	Inhibiting Personal Factors
Qualifications	Language skills	Insufficient language skills
		Postponement of study entry due to insufficient language skills
	Degree	No previous experience at university
		Entry at under-graduate level
	Work/ Employment	Non-existing or not officially verified work experience
		Work experienced as stressful

Student life	Study program	Subject is hard to manage in a reasonable amount of time (law, technical studies)
		Study subject is considered so hard that it decreases self-esteem; students experience many setbacks and fear of dropping out
		Low perspective for life in Austria
		Feels their qualifications are in low demand for the Austrian job market
	Vienna as university city	Finds acculturation to more individualistic lifestyle in Western society and university difficult
		Experiences dismissive, hostile atmosphere for migrants and refugees
High living costs		
Social life	Sentiment among peers	Study program is isolating with hardly any teamwork
		High competition
		Difficult to connect to Austrian students
		Bad teamwork/little support among peers
		Unfriendly, unhelpful, arrogant, prejudiced
	Social network	Difficult to make friends due to study program structure
		Difficult to make friends due to personal and/or professional occupation
		Difficult to make friends due to language barriers
		Difficult to make friends due to Austrian/Western mentality and perceived "coldness"
	Family and community	Hurtful and exhausting separation from family
		Surrounded solely by members of their own community, inhibits progress in German language skills
		Family/friends cannot or will not assist in financial matters (no informal safety net)
	Experiences of discrimination and racism	Discriminatory experiences in the university context (by other students or staff)
	Health and socio-demographic factors	Study-related workload and stress
Experiences high stress due to study demands		
Working too much, not enough time for study		
(Mental) Health		Existential anxiety, due to uncertain legal situation or conflict in home country
		Social isolation leads to feelings of depression
		Lack of free mental health counselling; professionals are not trained to work with migrants/refugees
Age		(Very) young

	Gender	Female students report additional discrimination due to gender
	Gender	For female Muslim students: wearing a headscarf is experienced as a highly politicized subject, even in the classroom
Identity and Ideational factors	Refugee self-identification	Indifferent/neutral to identity questions
	Personal development	No sense of belonging
		Not appreciated as contributing to (host) society
		Personal stagnation, feeling lost
		Feeling appreciated only through special, superior performance
		Continuous setbacks, hyper-aware of obstacles; paranoia when new barriers emerge
Lack of resources to feel truly free		

**Table 4: Contributing Personal Factors, Source: Focus groups**

1 <sup>st</sup> Order	2 <sup>nd</sup> Order	Contributing Personal Factors
Qualifications	Language skills	Sufficient language skills
		Language skills were improved by following a university preparation and/or non-degree program
	Degree	Experience at university abroad
		Entry at masters' level or above due to previous degrees from abroad
	Work/ Employment	Previous work experience helps obtaining student job
		Fulfilling work life
Student life	Study program	Subject is manageable in reasonable time
		Study subject is hard, but doable, so it pushes self-esteem and pursuit of goals
		Obtaining a degree from an Austrian university gives student a perspective for a better, more secure life and future
		Finds fulfilment in the fact that the study program is interesting/ provides them with job opportunities / corresponds to family wishes
	Vienna as university city	Enjoys new lifestyle, adapts easily
		Sees Vienna as an international, diverse, cultural city (with an existing and thriving diaspora)
		Lower living costs in comparison to other countries
	Social life	Sentiment among peers
Study groups, peers helping each other out		
Easy to connect to international students		
Good teamwork/support among peers		

	Social network	Positive experiences with peers/students/natives
		Gets to know peers through group projects
		Gets to know people through voluntary work and extracurricular activities (political activism)
		Study groups help with language difficulties
		Good experiences with flat mates and neighbors
	Family and community	Helps and gives hope to family in (war-torn) home country, which adds to personal motivation to do well at university
		Receives support from migrant/refugee community in Austria
		Family and friends provide financial support Low living costs due to host family
	Experiences of discrimination and racism	No discriminatory experiences at university
		Discriminatory experiences are expertly dealt with and mitigated
Health and sociodemographic factors	Study-related workload and stress	Manageable or even enjoyable work-life balance
		Copes easily with study demands
		Work and study time complement each other
	(Mental) Health	Stabilizing income, settled and secure perspectives
		Feels secure and safe in Austria
		Good mental health, high personal resilience
		Has a reliable and supportive social network
		Enjoys good health and insurance system
	Professional mental health counseling is available	
	Age	Older students fare better in foreign university environment, more experience and more personal resources
Gender	Women's rights are being valued and respected; feels safer in the streets or at night	
Identity and Ideational factors	Refugee self-identification	Refugee/migrant identity as a resource in the classroom
	Personal development	Feelings of belonging to Vienna /university/ community
		Feeling appreciated as part of society
		Personal strength and growth
		Self-determination and sense of purpose
		Enjoys new experiences; grows with challenges
Freedom (of expression) and gender equality		

#### 4.2.1. Skills and Qualifications

In terms of personal factors that we deduced from the focus groups, students' skills and previous qualifications play a vital role. While the persisting type displays high language skills in the study program language or was able to improve those skills considerably, withdrawing types struggle with the language barrier at university. Overall, students reported this much more often when their program was exclusively offered in German. For the withdrawing type, this can even mean having to postpone study entry for some semesters or years. Additionally, several participants reported difficulties in following lectures when professors did not speak standard German, but an Austrian dialect.

"I met so many students who come from Austria or were born here and even they can't understand this professor. And you can't just tell them, like: 'Okay, can you please write or speak clearer so that people can understand.'" (Female student in economics from Iran)

"I registered at the university with the B2 certificate and when I sat down in the lecture, I realized that I almost didn't even have A1 level, in terms of political terminology and so on." (Male student in political science from Syria)

Our findings also indicate that having had experiences at a university in the home country, ideally even having obtained a degree, and hence having entered the Austrian university system at the master's level or above is a characteristic of "persisting type" students. In a similar manner, qualifications and previous work experience help those students secure a non-precarious, well-paying job with favorable conditions. On the other end of the spectrum, withdrawing types do not have such formal qualifications or work experience, or face problems having them officially recognized in the Austrian labor market, so they end up being (in some cases drastically) over-qualified for their jobs. Hence, a female doctoral student reported the following work arrangement:

"I work in a cleaning company, and it is physical work and when I work, it takes so much energy [...] Cleaning work is in the morning, that means you are at the highest level of your energy and you use it for work. And afterwards, in the afternoon, you eat something and then you go back to sleep. That is not so good for my studies." (Female student in mathematics from Iran)

Another female doctoral student reported that when she told the Public Employment Agency (AMS) that she has fifteen years of professional experience, the officer responded that she should have just stayed in her home country, as her experience would not count: "This is Austria and here, you are only a student." Such encounters heavily contribute to whether students personally view their paid work as enriching for their studies or as stressful, taking away time and energy from their studies.

#### 4.2.2. Student life

Persisting types experience student life as enriching and fulfilling. The subject they chose is manageable and interesting to them, it increases their self-esteem while also providing them with a perspective for a financially secure professional life. "I studied biochemistry in Syria, where I always dreamed of continuing to study pharmacy. In Austria I got this chance and simply started with pharmacy. And yes, a better life, a better future with a degree and studies, I think that's the same for everyone", as a 25-year-old male student describes it. The persisting type experiences life in Vienna as enjoyable and values it as a diverse, international city with a thriving diaspora: "Because Vienna in particular is such an intercultural city, I got to know many students from many different countries and there was always a great exchange, which I liked very much. It's a city where you can learn about the whole world, about other cultures", says a 31-year-old female student.

Students of the withdrawing type do not report this impression at all, but rather note Vienna's high living costs and a hostile atmosphere towards foreigners. They struggle with their studies and experience frequent failures, which impact their confidence and motivation, while at the same time feel that they have little perspective for securing a stable job in Austria or abroad after graduating. Several students also reported that they find the more individualistic lifestyle in a Western country alienating and struggle with the competitive setting at university, where everyone is a "lone fighter".

"To be together and help, if I give something, I get more back. That's what I believe. And I feel, I think Austrians are not like that. Mostly they keep their information to themselves and they think: 'If I get something then it's mine, I don't give it to anyone and no one should advance more than me.'" (Female student in mathematics from Iran)

#### 4.2.3. Social networks

Social contacts emerged as an additional factor in the personal realm. Here, the persisting type displays a strong social network of peers, friends and (host) family. Such students reported good teamwork among colleagues, positive, enriching experiences with students (both Austrian and non-Austrian) and an atmosphere of trust and support at university. They make good use of study groups, volunteer work or extracurricular activities, such as political activism, to make friends. A 31-years female student reported from her study groups that "it's not just about attending classes together and listening to professors, but talking to students and knowing how to do all of that." Similarly, a 27-year-old male students reported: "Because I worked at the Red Cross, I met a lot of Austrians and they taught me the best things to do to enroll for the medical school."

Conversely, the withdrawing type can be characterized by negative social experiences, above all (overt or covert) rejection by Austrian students and an inability to forge new friendships. Several students noted the reserved mentality and perceived "coldness" of Austrians towards foreigners.

"It is striking that so many students who come from Austria are in one group. They have been together since childhood. And that's not so easy to join them and form a group together." (Female student in economics from Iran)

"I was often disappointed. They already had an idea in their head of 'how Syrian people are.' I struggled with these ideas for a very long time. [...] Why should we always focus on where I am from, if we just want to be friends?" (Female student in architecture from Syria)

Such inability to connect with others makes students of the withdrawing type view their life in Vienna as isolating and lonely. Even more so, experiences of explicit discrimination by other students, university staff or strangers emerged as a central barrier.

"I have seen this three or four times when I talked to my professors: They are different to me than to other people. They didn't answer me in the same way as an Austrian student. And when I misunderstood something, they were a bit angry and didn't answer so nicely." (Female student in applied arts from Iran)

"When I say, 'I already have a student visa', they say, 'OK, when are you going back to your country?' [...] They are always afraid of us." (Female student in mathematics from Iran)

"I actually got an A as my final grade and he gave me a C instead. Which I still don't understand. That's when I knew it was probably because of my [migration] background." (Female student in law from Afghanistan)



“Because I wear a headscarf, they look at us differently than at the other students. For example, they don’t talk to us, they do everything alone.” (Female student in the university preparation program from Syria)

Another central personal factor are students’ families back home. Persisting types draw personal motivation from the fact that their success at a foreign university supports their family members in a less privileged position and makes them proud and hopeful.

“But I am the only one abroad and they are always very happy when I achieve or do something here. Even if I build something small they say: ‘[Respondent] is abroad and she did this and achieved that.’ That gives an incredible amount of positive energy to my family, so they don’t lose hope.” (Female student in architecture from Syria)

Furthermore, they can rely on emotional and, in some cases, financial support from their families. They also receive support from the migrant and refugee community in Austria, while students of the withdrawing type do not experience such benefits from their ethnic community.

“For me, it was the Syrian community, especially those who were born here, but there were also students who came from Germany or Austrian provinces, but who are originally from Syria. They helped me the most, be it with the language or with work.” (Male student in medicine from Syria)

Some students report not having been able to establish contact at all, while for others, their community has become the sole source of social interaction, at the expense of contact with Austrians and other nationalities. Furthermore, withdrawing types experience the separation from their family at home as very hurtful and exhausting, rather than an opportunity to support them by becoming independent and successful abroad.

#### **4.2.4. Mental health**

Due to social isolation, separation from family and experiences of discrimination or even harassment, students of the withdrawing type report poor mental health and high stress by the double/triple burden. For many of them, an uncertain legal situation leads to existential anxiety and depression, as do reports of war and conflict back home. Students’ reports included “so many panic attacks”, a “very stressful situation” and low self-esteem due to a high-stakes environment.

“Just this stress with the visa extension. I see my friends and it’s really unhealthy, it puts so much pressure on the students.” (Female student in chemistry from Iran)

“It is such a mental burden if we do not know whether we are allowed to stay here for another year or not.” (Female student in architecture from Syria)

“Especially we students with a migration background don’t have many chances, we cannot go back to our country and work or do something there. As human beings we always need a perspective for the future, something that instills a feeling of security in us.” (Female student in architecture from Syria)

Withdrawing types also report that they receive little support to cope, because offers for psychotherapy or counselling are not known, too expensive or too rare, or practitioners are untrained in working with refugees and migrants.

“Sometimes you’re under pressure and you want to talk to someone, and I don’t want to talk to my family, for example, because they have their own stress. And friends here have their own problems too, so I can’t do that either. It would be good if there was someone who just listened.” (Female student in chemistry from Iran)

The same student then continues:

“At the University of Vienna, unfortunately, I couldn’t find anyone who really listens to the students: ‘Why do you have problems or what is happening to you?’ [...] I think because at the university there are so many students, they don’t have enough staff to do that. I myself couldn’t get that kind of help from the university.” (Female student in chemistry from Iran)

Persisting types, on the other hand, report a good work-life-balance and feeling safe, both physically and financially, in Austria. They enjoy good physical and mental health as well as access to health services. We also found that older students (above the age of 28) reported more personal resilience and hence seemed to fare better in the foreign university environment than very young ones.

#### **4.2.5. Identity and Belonging**

Finally, persisting types feel appreciated in society and at university and have a sense of belonging. They view their studies as contributive to their personal growth and display high self-determination, while at the same enjoy learning from challenges. “There are all these problems and pressures, but I have felt independent as a student since I’ve come to Vienna. I have become really independent. In Iran I was at home with my parents, I was just studying, not working. I feel stronger now and I think I can stand those problems”, as a 27-year old female students reports. In particular, students value freedom of expression in Western society, which was often reported by women with regards to gender equality and women’s rights.

By contrast, the withdrawing type can be characterized by a lack of sense of belonging. Students feel apathetic or stagnated in their personal and professional development with little sense of agency and self-worth. They experience continuous setbacks and seem hyper-aware of obstacles, which they can only overcome through extraordinary performance, which feels exhausting to them.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the feeling of belonging. I have the feeling that I have to show a special achievement in order to claim the feeling. Because in some situations, when I achieved something, I have a sense of belonging. But Austrians don’t need to accomplish that much. They do a good job or have a creative idea and that’s enough. But for me not, I always have to do more.” (Female student in architecture from Syria)

For these students, their identity as a refugee or migrant is a barrier, rather than a resource or source of pride to them, or is indeed seen as altogether irrelevant.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

Refugee and migrant students’ access to and success within tertiary education is a significant element in universities’ internationalization strategies and situated at the crossroads of several UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recent years saw a growing awareness of this vulnerable, yet resourceful group of students as well as efforts by universities and policymakers alike to cater to their needs, as they vitally contribute to a diverse and egalitarian higher education setting. Yet, refugee and migrant students from the Global South still face manifold barriers that native students or expats from industrialized countries hardly ever encounter.

Our focus groups show that both resources and barriers can be grouped into personal and structural factors, while the latter emerged as deeply impactful, as they directly affect students’ basic needs. More precisely, we find that extra-university factors, above all questions of

residence and labor market access (i.e. related to finances), heavily affect students' chances to succeed in their studies. This reflects the centrality of a multi-stakeholder approach to (educational) integration (Siarova/van der Graaf 2022). Many of these aspects lie beyond the responsibility and/or control of HEIs, but still directly or indirectly influence students' well-being and academic success, sometimes more than study-related factors. Thus, a key finding of our study is that the targeted support of refugee and migrant students requires the cooperation of different, multi-level actors, including employment agencies, visa offices, and community support structures.

In addition, the current legal framework that refugee and migrant students from the Global South find themselves in is at best a nuisance and at worst an insurmountable obstacle. Student visa application and renewal should be streamlined. This emerged as a key aspect in which migrant students were, perhaps counter-intuitively, more disadvantaged than refugees. Another such area are job opportunities, as labor market access is more restricted and bureaucratic for students on a visa, which may lead to financial hardships. The latter is a key concern for many students, in particular if they cannot rely on informal support networks by friends, communities or family back home.

Indeed, and moving to personal factors, a strong, both inter- and intra-ethnic network emerged as an important topic in the focus groups. Students who can rely on a support network, both personally and financially, less often face mental health problems, financial or housing issues. This reflects the interconnectedness of structural and personal factors, yet also shows that social integration can be supported by formal offers. We consider such a holistic approach of viewing refugee and migrant students as individuals with social and personal needs (beyond mere qualifications and study-related concerns) a crucial take-away. Part of such an approach could also be a critical assessment and, if applicable, adjustment of HEIs' selection logics, as suggested by Berg et al. (2018).

Drawing on these findings, our typology can help to identify and address the diverse needs and resources of individual refugee and migrant students, who are just as heterogeneous as natives. Based on the structural factors of "extra-university factors", "study entry, admission and orientation phase", "quality and contents of study program" and "university staff", and the personal factors of "qualifications", "student life", "social life", "health and sociodemographics" and "identity and ideational factors", we devised a typology with the extremes of the "persisting" and the "withdrawing" type and two in-betweens, "struggling against the system" and "struggling personally". It is important to note that these represent ideal types, while in reality, most students cannot clearly be assigned to one type only, but may display characteristics of several. Yet, assigning students more to one type than another can help to provide targeted support, as there is certainly no "one size fits all" when it comes to support structures. Indeed, our results indicate that sweeping, indiscriminate measures that fail to take the heterogeneity of students into account seldom achieve the goal of meeting students' needs.

In addition to the abstraction implicit in any form of typology, several further limitations apply. Focus groups included 23 participants from a handful of countries of origin, which vastly restricts the generalizations that can be drawn from our results. Future research may wish to extend the scope of the analysis to other national backgrounds and include a bigger sample size. Furthermore, international comparisons of universities, or examinations of different study programs at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral level may yield valuable results. Conducting focus groups in German and English only is another, though minor limitation of our study, given students' high language proficiency. Finally, the on-going Coronavirus pandemic also impacted study experiences and student life, and was referenced by several of our participants as having introduced additional hardships, both at university and in their social life. Analyzing the differing impact COVID-19 has had on refugee and migrant students in contrast to native students, however, goes beyond the scope and aim of this study.

As a way of transferring our findings into practice, we provide the following recommendations.

- Implementing peer-to-peer counselling for migrant and refugee students with the aim of identifying their individual needs and resources, and suggesting appropriate support, be it course placement, financial and housing support, or assistance with admission and registration.

One such option are special “study coaches” for refugees and underprivileged migrants, as for instance established at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KU). Such coaches can also act as liaisons to extra-university actors, most notably visa offices, student homes and host families, and employers, and hence are more personally involved with students than regular international offices.

- Reaping the benefits of mentoring and tutoring, as socially well integrated refugee and migrant students reported higher levels of well-being and health as well as more positive and successful study experiences.

This recommendation follows Lesk/Montaldo (2018) and is aimed at facilitating the formation of students’ social capital in the host country. For this purpose, formal mentoring, a wide variety of study-specific tutorials and language classes, volunteering options, as well as student outings and free-time activities should be extended and specifically offered to the target group. Study coaches at universities can serve as interfaces to match students with available offers.

- Increasing representation and visibility of migrant and refugee students.

It has been shown that refugee and migrant students are important higher education stakeholders, be it in statistics, media or university PR (Kernegger 2019). Their heightened visibility and inclusion in academic outreach campaigns can help to foster a sense of belonging.

Despite the identified barriers and takeaways for necessary policy changes, our findings also reflect the manifold resources that refugee and migrant students bring to universities. Many of them display high intrinsic motivation, personal resilience, strong community commitment and social skills, and an international orientation as well as previous work and study experiences and foreign language skills. In the optimum constellation and supported by the right structural conditions, refugee and migrant students from the Global South can make a vital contribution to universities’ diversity and international portfolio.

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# Appendix 1: Questionnaire

## Participation in focus group discussion

### Personal details

Gender:  male  female age: \_\_\_\_\_ (years)

Marital status:  single  married  widowed  divorced

Do you have children?  no  yes: \_\_\_\_\_ (number of children)

Place of residence:  Vienna  Vienna surroundings  other

I live:  alone  in a shared flat  with my family  
 in a student dorm  with my partner

If you do not live alone: How many people live in your household in total? \_\_\_\_\_

Country of birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Citizenship: \_\_\_\_\_

Since when in Austria (month/year): \_\_\_\_\_

Residence title: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of education completed to date:

- University Entrance Qualification (*Studienberechtigungsprüfung*)
- Matura  University/FH

Current university and field(s) of study: \_\_\_\_\_

When did you start your studies? \_\_\_\_\_ (month/year)

When did you complete/when will you complete your studies? \_\_\_\_\_ (month/year)

Did you previously study at another university/field of study? If yes, which one and where?

- 
- Income:  from own employment  
 I additionally receive need-based minimum benefits (*Mindestsicherung/BMS*)  
 I obtain exclusively BMS  I receive a student grant  
 I receive other financial support

Mother tongue(s): \_\_\_\_\_

German language skills:

- A1 (Basic knowledge)  A2 (good)  B1 (very good)
- B2 (fluent)  C1 (business fluent)  C2 (mother tongue level)

## Appendix 2: Guiding questions for focus groups

1. Tell about your everyday life at university! How do you organize your everyday life, how do you cope at university with...
  - a. Teachers
  - b. Colleges
  - c. Infrastructure/Environment
  
2. Did you study in your country of origin?
  - a. Enquiries regarding the recognition process (certificates/documents/proofs) etc.
  - b. Enquiries about the progress of your studies, how did it go, what experiences did you have?
    - i. Is studying in Vienna (very) different from studying in your country of origin? What is different? What is similar?
  
3. Why did you start or continue your studies in Vienna?
  - a. Why was it important for you to study?
  - b. What were your expectations/hopes?
    - i. Have they been fulfilled? Why/not?
    - ii. What surprised you most/what did you not expect? What would you have liked to know earlier?
  
4. Was admission process to your study difficult for you?
  - a. Why? What were the biggest hurdles?
  - b. Who/what helped you?
  
5. How are you doing in your student life in Vienna (personal well-being)?
  - a. What do you particularly like?
  - b. What do you not like at all? What a burden? What would you like to change?
  
6. Do you feel stressed by your studies?
  - a. What causes the stress (courses, work, foreign language, etc.)?
  - b. How do you deal with it?
  
7. Do you know where to get help/support with these issues?
  - a. Have you ever sought this help? Why/not?
    - i. Networking with other students
    - ii. Student representation
    - iii. Own community
  - b. What would help you/what kind of help do you seek?

8. Social aspects: Have you made friends during your studies?
  - a. How do you get along with your fellow students? Is it easy to make friends? (social isolation)
  - b. Do you support each other (solidarity)?
  - c. Has your private environment changed as a result of your studies?
    - i. Have your interests changed?
  - d. Optional: How do you deal with the separation from your family?
  
9. (Self)perception/identity as a student (with refugee background or from non-European countries): What role does the fact that you are a foreigner/refugee play in your studies?
  - a. Have you addressed this yourself? Why/not?
  - b. Has this been addressed (by teachers/colleagues)?
    - i. Did this bother you?
  
10. Does this make you feel “different” from students from Austria? In what way?
  - a. Is that positive
  - b. or negative?
  
11. Did you already feel discriminated/excluded as a foreigner/refugee at university?
  - a. When, where, how exactly, description
  
12. How have you benefited from your studies?
  - a. Personal added value: self-determination, self-worth
  - b. Operational: language skills, degree, knowledge, job opportunities
  - c. What did you learn for yourself personally from student life? What did you take away for your future?
  
13. Societal value: Has your status/role in the community changed as a result of your studies? How does your community/family feel about your studies?
  - a. Remittances? (financial and ideational)
  - b. Knowledge for community/country of origin/role model for others in the community
  - c. How are you doing with this new role?
  
14. In summary, what would you say has been the biggest change for you as a result of studying (in everyday life)? Positive or negative
  
15. What do you wish for from the university?
  
16. Is there anything that has not been addressed yet that you would like to share with us?