

# Refugees in Portugal and insertion processes in the university: an ethnographic inquiry

## Refugiados en Portugal y procesos de inserción en la universidad: una indagación etnográfica

Alejandro Goldberg\*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0514-3946>

<sup>a</sup> Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (Conicet). Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), Instituto de Ciencias Antropológicas, sección de Antropología Social. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Buenos Aires, Argentina, e-mail: alejandro.goldberg@gmail.com

### Abstract

This ethnographic work explores the processes of insertion of refugees in Portugal, focusing specifically on the university environment, from the perspective of the actors themselves. The field work, carried out in Lisbon during 2017-2018, was based on the selection of a sample of eight adult refugee men with complete or incomplete higher studies, to whom I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews. The integration of refugees in the Portuguese higher education system still lacks a regulatory framework and a base of guidelines that allow the recognition of their academic qualifications; added to the structural obstacles and the deficit in the teaching of the language, their insertion processes are difficult. The instances of diagnosis and evaluation of the sectoral policies implemented should consider the voice of the actors who are the protagonists of these processes and the main recipients of the actions. Here is the contribution of this study.

Keywords: refugees, Portugal, insertion processes, university.

### Resumen

Este trabajo explora etnográficamente los procesos de inserción de los refugiados en Portugal focalizado específicamente en el ámbito universitario, desde la perspectiva de los propios actores. El trabajo de campo, desarrollado en Lisboa durante 2017-2018, se basó en la selección de una muestra de ocho hombres refugiados adultos con estudios superiores completos o incompletos, a quienes se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas en profundidad. La integración de los refugiados en el sistema de educación superior portugués aún carece de un marco normativo y de una base de directrices que permitan el reconocimiento de sus cualificaciones académicas; sumado a los obstáculos estructurales y al déficit en la enseñanza de la lengua, sus procesos de inserción se dificultan. Las instancias de diagnóstico y evaluación de las políticas sectoriales imple-

Received on November 7, 2019.

Accepted on May 22, 2020.

Published on May 27, 2020.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:  
SPANISH.

\*Corresponding author:  
Alejandro Goldberg.  
E-mail:  
[alejandro.goldberg@gmail.com](mailto:alejandro.goldberg@gmail.com)



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CITATION: Goldberg, A. (2020). Refugiados en Portugal y procesos de inserción en la universidad: una indagación etnográfica. [Refugees in Portugal and insertion processes in the university: an ethnographic inquiry]. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 21, e050. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2008050>

mentadas deberían contemplar la voz de los propios actores protagonistas de esos procesos y principales destinatarios de las acciones. De ahí el aporte de este estudio.

Palabras clave: refugiados, Portugal, procesos de inserción, universidad.

## Introduction

The main objective of this article is to understand the current processes of inserting refugees into Portuguese universities. Through an ethnographic approach and through the analysis of the trajectories experienced by a group of refugees, mostly Syrians, welcomed within the framework of the European Union Relocation Programme (2015-2017), the existing integration and sectoral policies as well as the specific programs executed are addressed—analyzed in an articulated manner with evaluations made by the actor-protagonist subjects themselves and recipients of such actions. The main working hypothesis is that the Portuguese higher education system, due to inexperience in the matter, administrative bureaucracy and other factors to investigate—among which ineffectiveness in language education stands out—does not facilitate the access of refugees to universities.

To address phenomenon being studied, first, it should be noted that in the last decade of the twentieth century, after joining the European Union (EU) (1986), which gave it greater attraction as a destination country, Portugal began the progressive transition from a country of emigration to a country of immigration. According to the official data provided by the Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras de Portugal (SEF) (2019), at the end of 2018, 480 300 foreigners resided in the country, of which 50.6% were women and 49.4% were men, with 68.9% geographically distributed in three coastal districts (Lisbon, Faro and Setúbal). A total of 105 423 Brazilian citizens represented 21.9% of all foreigners, followed by those from Cape Verde (7.2%), Romania (6.4%), Ukraine (6.1%), the United Kingdom (5.5%), China (5.3%), France (4.1%), Italy (3.9%), Angola (3.8%) and Guinea Bissau (3.4%), among the most numerous nationalities.

Regarding refugees, Costa and Sousa (2017) point out that between 1974 and 2014, 1 605 refugees were granted residence in Portugal for humanitarian reasons. The situation changed radically in 2015 with the so-called “EU refugee crisis”, marking the year in which asylum applications began increasing markedly: 896 in 2015, 1 469 in 2016, 1 750 in 2017 and 1 272 in 2018 (SEF, 2019). Under the successive decisions made by the EU (September 2015/1523, 2015/1601 and September 2016/1754) within the framework of the European Union Relocation Programme (Consejo de la Unión Europea, 2015; *Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea*, 2016), from December 2015 to April 2018, Portugal had relocated in its territory 1 552 applicants for international protection, mostly from Greece (1 192) and Italy. According to the data obtained from the “Progress Report on the Implementation of the European Agenda on Migration of the European Commission”, dated March 14, 2018, the majority of the Member States, even having completed the program, were very far away from fulfilling their legal commitments regarding relocation (European Commission, 2018).

The people relocated in Portugal were mainly families and young men from 18 to 35 years of age from Syria, Iraq and Eritrea, in that order, distributed mainly in Lisbon and its metropolitan area and to a lesser extent in other municipalities of the

country (European Migration Network [EMN], 2018). As stated by Sacramento and Silva (2018), it is because of the new scenario that the Portuguese State must adopt a new set of policies aimed at guaranteeing welcoming processes and promoting the integration of refugees through a mechanism whose operationalization faces a varied set of structural obstacles.

In any case, as with the phenomenon of immigration, it is important to make clear that, compared to the figures recorded in other European countries, the number of asylum seekers in Portugal is still a relatively peripheral phenomenon (Sousa & Costa, 2018).

Notably, in Portugal, the SEF is the competent authority regarding the granting of applications for international protection. The statutes of protection are granted or rejected based on three legal pillars that correspond to the international (*Geneva Convention* of 1951), regional (Common European Asylum System) and national (*Constitution of the Republic*, *Asylum Law* and *Immigration Law*) levels. In this context, in addition to the aforementioned European Union Relocation Programme (hereinafter referred to as EURP), the other two forms of application in force in Portugal pass through the Reinstallation Program of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which maintains a quota of granting and receiving 60 refugees each year, and the Program of Spontaneous Applications for International Protection, which since 2016 has been characterized by a high rate of rejection of the applications presented (for example, in 2017, it reviewed applications from 1 750 refugees, of whom only 119 received refugee statutes and 381 were granted residence for humanitarian reasons, representing a 70% rejection rate) (SEF, 2019).

In the case of being granted an international protection permit, an individual receives a residence permit for a period of three years (five when granted refugee status), renewable to another equal period, through which he/she enjoys the following rights: free movement through the national territory and the Schengen area, free legal aid, access to housing, education, public health care and social integration programs, registration with the State Social Security, and training to facilitate labor insertion (Alto Comisionado para las Migraciones [ACM], 2017).

With respect to the EURP, at the level of the organization and coordination of the processes of welcoming and integrating refugees, the supervising government entity has been the High Commission for Migration (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações - ACM), which, for this, has integrated local services through the National Center of Support for Integration of Migrants (Centro Nacional de Apoio à Integração de Migrantes - CNAIM), with headquarters in Lisbon, Porto and Faro, and created the Nucleus of Support for the Integration of Refugees (Núcleo de Apoio à Integração de Refugiados - NAIR). The ACM, in turn, articulates the work with different host entities, among which are the Conselho Português para os Refugiados (CPR), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) representing the UNHCR in Portugal, and the Platform of Support for Refugees (Plataforma de Apoio aos Refugiados - PAR), composed of local civil society organizations, among which are the CPR itself, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and several Catholic organizations. For their part, these two "supra-entities" outsource the management of refugee welcoming processes of the EURP to minor organizations through collaboration agreements, as well as to the municipal governments of the country. Through this mechanism, refugees relocated to Portugal who meet the 18-month residence duration set by the EURP, are guaranteed, through the intermediation of different host entities, an assistance

of 150 euros per month, with housing (a quarter shared) and meals included. From the moment their contract expires, they then receive 180 euros of social security (the same as an unemployed Portuguese citizen), but that single amount does not cover housing or meals (or transportation or other expenses). According to official data provided by the ACM (2017), 51% of the refugees welcomed by Portugal within the framework of the EURP had left the country. Of the remaining 49%, 50% were working or studying. In this sense, both Santinho (2017) and Vacchiano (2018) have warned about the phenomenon of abandonment of refugees relocated to Portugal through the exclusion and lack of opportunities in processes of integration into local society. While Sacramento and Silva (2018) point out the following:

Como resultado desta situação de direitos truncados emergem formas de vulnerabilidade e de violência estrutural que, entre outras causas, têm contribuído para a saída do país de quase metade dos refugiados recebidos. Para inverter o cenário é fundamental que o Estado seja consequente com os seus compromissos, criando um sistema de acolhimento com condições operacionais para que os direitos possam ser transpostos do papel para a vida de todos os dias das pessoas refugiadas. [As a result of this situation of limitations of rights, forms of vulnerability and structural violence arise that, among other causes, have contributed to the departure of almost half of the refugees welcomed in the country. To reverse this scenario, it is essential that the State is consistent with its commitments, creating a welcoming system with the necessary operational conditions so that rights can be transferred from paper to the daily life of refugees.]. (Sacramento & Silva, 2018, p. 17).

Note that these are some of the obstacles similar to those found 20 years earlier by Sousa (1999) in his study for his master's thesis on a group of precontemporary refugees, who are addressed in this work. In it, the author ethnographically explores the life histories and trajectories of 25 refugees of different nationalities from countries of the global South and their integration into Portuguese society. Another previous work that investigates different trajectories of young refugees in Portuguese universities, through their participation in the CPR, is that of Caiado Bolas (2012).

The phenomenon of study that is addressed in this work, focused in particular on the insertion of contemporary refugees —fundamentally from the contingent relocated through the EURP since 2016— in the field of higher education in Portugal has a relatively new character that translates into the scarcity of scientific-academic productions that analyze the problem from a sociocultural perspective such as the one proposed in this article. The above presents a greater deficit if it is to recover the points of view, valuations, and, in short, the own voice of the actors-protagonists of the processes being addressed. It is worth noting in this regard the work of Santinho (2019), who investigates the academic experiences of refugee students in Portuguese higher education, which will be taken up later as a reference for proposed improvements.

Regarding the international and European levels, there are different works that analyze the specific problem, among which can be mentioned the compilation of a series of European cases edited by Jungblut and Pietkiewicz (2017), members of the International Centre for Higher Education Research and the European Students Union, respectively, on the recognition of refugees and access to higher education in

the Netherlands, Germany, Norway and Romania, in comparative terms; the analysis of Canadian public sector policies by Cameron (2014); the *Catálogo de buenas prácticas en la acogida de personas refugiadas en la educación superior* (*Catalog of good practices in the welcoming of refugees in higher education*) published by InHere, (2017), a consortium composed of universities from different EU countries; and the Sontag (2018) case study on highly qualified asylum seekers in a Swiss university.

## Methodological Clarifications

Already pointed out previously, the main contribution of this work is to generate anthropological knowledge about the particular field of integration processes of refugees in Portugal in relation to universities. This study is the result of a broader ethnographic study conducted in Lisbon between March 2017 and June 2019 in the framework of a European project titled “REFUGIUM: building shelter cities and a new welcoming culture. Links between European universities and schools and human rights”, in which I worked as a researcher. Part of the fieldwork involved in-depth interviews, discussion groups and participant observations with refugees and other actors linked to the problem (immigration officials, NGO members, refugee associations, academics, etc.). The construction of the interaction relationships with the study subjects was developed by means of the snowball technique, based on contact with a key Syrian refugee informant, who facilitated successive contacts with his peers. In addition to the interviews recorded with the consent of the interviewees, the subjects were accompanied, and spaces in different areas of their daily lives—housing, associations, leisure and free time—were shared intermittently for two years, environments of participant observation in which different types of ties with refugees of other nationalities were developed and learned about. As a research subject, the fact of being a foreigner as the subject of the study provided the possibility of maintaining a type of relationship of greater empathy, mutual trust, exchange and understanding with them at the time of carrying out the fieldwork, all of which allowed us to collect quality information that, otherwise and without a qualitative methodology such as the one applied, would have been difficult. Consequently, the reconstruction of their migratory trajectories and the analysis of their narratives about their life experiences as refugees in Portugal was accomplished, by cutting out those related to the university environment, which meant, above all, rescuing their opinions, valuations and points of view about their own reality, as active protagonists and transformers—in terms of agency— of their own processes.

For the purposes of this study, a sample of eight research subjects was selected, i.e., adult refugee men residing in Lisbon with complete or incomplete university studies, with whom in-depth semistructured interviews were conducted between March 2017 and December 2018 (see Table 1). The script for the interviews was structured following the life story technique, adapted to the migratory trajectories of the subjects, which distinguishes three large contextual blocks: *a*) situation in the origin country until leaving the place of residence; *b*) migratory itineraries until arrival in Portugal; and, *c*) life experiences in Portugal, the welcoming process and processes of insertion and integration into the new society, with a focus on the field of higher education.

**Table 1. Sociodemographic and cultural characteristics of the interviewees**

Nickname	Age	Year of arrival/ country	Type of statute/program	Employment/educational situation
Yaya	35	2008, Ivory Coast	Residency for subsidiary humanitarian reasons	He studied economics in his country of origin (interrupted). He worked in Lisbon.
Dida	27	2016, Syria	European Union Relocation Programme	He studied law in his country of origin (interrupted). He studies human resources at a public university in Lisbon (scholarship from the institution).
Liber	39	2016, Syria	European Union Relocation Programme	He studied interior design in his country of origin (completed). He studied architecture at a public university in Lisbon (scholarship from the institution).
Nuso	27	2016, Syria	European Union Relocation Programme	He studied teaching in electronics in his country of origin (interrupted). In the 2019/2020 academic year, he began to study electronics at a university in Lisbon (scholarship from the institution).
Saro	26	2016, Syria	European Union Relocation Programme	He studied computing at his country of origin (interrupted). He intends to work and/or study (with a scholarship).
Quique	25	2016, Syria	European Union Relocation Programme	He studied law in his country of origin (interrupted). He intends to work and/or study (with a scholarship).
Ali	27	2016, Syria	European Union Relocation Programme	He studied economics in his country of origin (interrupted). He studies economics at a public university in Lisbon (without scholarship/works).
Abhu	37	2012, Palestine	Program of Spontaneous Applications for International Protection	Bachelor of Communication. He completed his master's degree in tourism and communication from the School of Tourism of Estoril, Portugal (completed in November 2016).

Source: own elaboration.

As Table 1 shows, six of the refugees selected for this study were adult Syrian men who arrived in Portugal in 2016 from Greece as part of the contingent relocated through the EURP. Regardless of the routes traveled and the time elapsed in their itineraries until their arrival in Portugal, all of them were victims of the war in Syria,

having to escape due to persecution or danger to life. In the six cases, but in different periods of 2016, they managed to cross the Mediterranean Sea, in precarious inflatable boats after several attempts, from a Turkish island to a Greek island, where they were collected by a larger ship that transported them to dry land, to finally be transferred to a refugee camp in Athens. None of them knew that they would be sent to Portugal (in no case had they chosen the country among the options when signing the contract for the asylum program) and did not have prior information about it. All of them had to interrupt their university studies in their country of origin, and during the period in which the fieldwork was conducted, in some cases they had resumed their studies or started new program in universities in Lisbon or were working towards enrolling in university studies. The other two refugees interviewed provide the necessary variability to the case study in terms of country of origin, age, arrival time and experiences as refugees in Portugal, among other dimensions of analysis. Of these two refugees, one is an adult man born on the Ivory Coast who arrived in Portugal in 2008 and was granted residence for subsidiary humanitarian reasons. The reason for his inclusion in the sample selected for this work lies in the importance of obtaining opinions and assessments based on the decade of experience as a refugee in the country, with the implications that this has in analytical-comparative terms. In his specific case, he tried to resume his studies sometime after his arrival in the country. The second refugee is a Palestinian man who arrived in the country in 2012 and completed a postgraduate degree in a Portuguese tourism school.

Among the aspects raised by the subjects of the study, in general, both in the interviews and in the multiple informal conversations held, although it was a constant among the Syrian refugees relocated from Greece through the EURP, the following stand out: deficient and unclear information received, whether it was circulating in the Greek refugee camps or that provided in Portuguese territory, hindering their insertion and integration processes; the lack of correspondence between what was promised in the program and what was offered in practice by the host institutions in Portugal, which they associated with a lack of commitment and effective participation of these institutions, including their staff; and serious shortcomings in language learning (shortage and low frequency of language courses), support for professional training and assistance and support in job searches.

In what follows, we will critically investigate some of the dimensions present in the integration processes of refugees in Portugal, with a focus on their insertion in universities, with the articulation of their contextual relevance and with the analysis of secondary sources, from the valuations expressed by the subjects-actors themselves from the survey of the information generated through fieldwork.

## Government and University-Level Initiatives Aimed at Incorporating Refugee Students into Universities. Mapping of Portugal

The Lisbon Recognition Convention signed in 2007 urged EU states to recognize refugee qualifications that cannot be fully demonstrated due to a lack of documentation. Faced with the new situation at the level of the European context experienced at the end of 2015 with the so-called “refugee crisis” (Sigona, 2018), the Council of

Europe promoted, in 2018, the initiative born in Greece in 2017, under the auspices of UNHCR, called the European Qualification Passport for Refugees. It is a document that, after an evaluation, accredits the training, experience and language proficiency of the refugees, thus overcoming the wait time (up to three years) and the high costs associated with the process of homologation of a diploma in European countries. In this way, they would be able to continue their studies or work in their profession in the host country. The original partners of the program—Greece, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom—were joined only by Armenia, Canada, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

In terms of the current regulatory framework, any foreign citizen, as a legal resident in Portugal, has access under the same conditions as nationals to higher education, which, as in the rest of the EU countries, is public and paid. In relation to the recognition and homologation of degrees as well as the validation of competencies, the articulation is carried out with the universities themselves, which have autonomy in this matter. The documents presented must be authenticated by the Portuguese embassy or consulate in that area or by the embassy or consulate of the foreign country in Portugal (ACM, 2017). In turn, Decree Law No. 129/93 established the principles of the policy of social action in Portuguese higher education, which covers both EU nationals and other foreigners, stateless persons, refugees and nationals of countries with which Portugal had signed previous reciprocity agreements regarding the matter that, in the particular case of refugees, should not be required under the cloak of international humanitarian protection.

In August 2018 and through Decree Law No. 62/2018, the new international student statute of Portugal establishes that international students who have been granted residence status due to an emergency situation for humanitarian reasons will pay the same tuition costs, credits and positions as Portuguese students; however, they will also be able to participate in contests for the allocation of study scholarships under the same terms as Portuguese students. It should be noted that the latter was vetoed before the aforementioned decree law, and it was the university institutions themselves that assumed responsibility for any support or action with respect to this particular group (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

Regarding the initiatives developed in the university environment with refugees, one of the first is the Global Platform for Academic Assistance to Syrian Students (Plataforma Global de Asistencia Académica a Estudiantes Sirios; hereafter PGAAES), a scholarship program created in 2013, directed since then by Jorge Sampaio, former president of Portugal. In July 2016, the ACM signed a protocol with the platform that allowed 29 refugee students to join higher education institutions in Portugal during the 2017/2018 academic year. Based on this agreement, the ACM implemented, for the 2018/2019 academic year, the execution of the pilot project “Rapid Response Mechanism for Higher Education in Emergencies”, which broadens the applications for scholarships for young people who hold refugee status because they are beneficiaries of the right of international protection or admitted as refugees in Portugal under the protection of relocation, reinstatement or humanitarian programs. Likewise, the so-called “Plan for the Integration of Refugee Students in Higher Education” is close to being implemented at the national level, aimed at providing training on this topic in terms of the different structures of the university. From its creation (2013) to the present academic year, a total of 169 Syrian university students have benefited from a scholarship from this entity. The monthly amount of the scholarship is 300 euros net.

This is a low value, but not as much—or better, in concordance—when compared to the monthly net minimum wage in Portugal (between 420 and 600 euros). The stipend covers university fees and student support and is not compatible with other scholarships or benefits or with a regular work contract. Given specific requirements subject to assessment, it can include a complement for the acquisition of bibliographic material as well as an aid for transportation. The same happens in the case that the student does not have accommodations. Among the conditions for qualification for this scholarship are the following: being a refugee, enjoying the right to international protection or having been received in Portugal under any of the asylum programs; being under 35 years of age; mastering the Portuguese language; and having knowledge of the English language.

Additionally, from 2015 onwards, different actions of the national administration and Portuguese higher education institutions were expressed as means to respond to new situations and, above all, due to the lack of a specific government sector policy on the subject. In this regard, the creation, in May of the aforementioned year, of the RESMI—Rede de Ensino Superior para a Mediação Intercultural—promoted by the ACM to combine efforts and promote good practices of intercultural mediation in the field stands out. Likewise, the following initiatives have been developed:

- RMIR (Refugiados e Migrações: Iniciativas e Reflexões) is an interuniversity and transdisciplinary group composed of researchers in the area of social sciences and humanities working in the field of migration and refuge belonging to different research centers in Lisbon. The group was created in February 2016 with the objective of disseminating information, generating initiatives and sharing experiences that contribute to the public debate on the subject.
- Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (IUL), Integration Program for Higher Education, resulted from a protocol signed in 2016 jointly by the Lisbon City Council, IUL and CRIA (Centro en Red de Investigación en Antropología; Center for Research Network in Anthropology). Among the points of this program were recognition of competencies for refugee students who did not have documents; recognition of equivalencies for documented students; previous training in English through university units that offer language courses for the integration of foreign students; integration into society through short courses and workshops on relevant topics (cultural diversity, human and civil rights, gender equality, and religion); insertion in the international and multicultural academic environment that characterizes the IUL through an effective transition from refugee student status to international student status; and insertion in the generic social support system for higher education students (Social Action Services [SAS]). As part of the aforementioned program, in 2017, teachers of the CRIA taught a month-long course called “Living in a Different Culture”, which consisted of teaching Portuguese classes to 20 refugees from countries such as Syria, Eritrea and Iraq (all with a previous academic experience, complete or incomplete) and teaching specific modules on Portuguese society (divided into topics such as religion, institutions, asylum law, rights and duties, experiences of urban life, and social relations and practices for insertion into Portugal). The goal was for participants to have first contact with a university environment while they were assisted in their integration processes through the recognition of their academic competencies. Some of the participants then began to study at IUL. The second edition of the course was developed in June 2019.

- Universidade do Coimbra (University of Coimbra), Division of International Relations conducted a workshop on the recognition of refugee qualifications, titled “Recognition of Refugees’ Qualifications: Looking for International Consensus”, held in January 2019.
- Universidade do Coimbra (University of Coimbra), School of Nursing, held open classroom sessions, carried out in May 2019, organized by the curricular unit of socioanthropology of health, under the coordination of Professor Beatriz Xavier, who seeks to raise awareness of the global problem of refugees with a focus on cultural competence in health care at the level of the Portuguese health services.
- Universidade de Aveiro (University of Aveiro): created a Local Support Center for the Integration of Migrants (Centro Local de Apoyo a la Integración de Migrantes - CNAIM), the eleventh in the country, dependent on the High Commissioner for Migration in Portugal (ACM). Inaugurated in June 2019, it is the first center that operates within a Portuguese university and is intended for an academic audience.
- Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias (Lusophone University of Humanities and Technologies) (Lisbon), created the Refugee Academic Framing Program (Programa de Encuadramiento Académico de Refugiados - PEAR) in 2018. Its objective is to support refugees arriving in Portugal with their incorporation into universities, including the validation of higher education qualifications obtained in their country of origin. It offers exemption from payment for refugee students studying at this university through an agreement with PGAAES.
- Universidade do Porto (University of Porto): It was the only Portuguese higher education institution highlighted in the Catalog of Good Practices of the In Here project, an initiative of the European University Association that promotes universities that are distinguished at the international level by their policies regarding welcoming students and researcher refugees. This university, through an agreement with PGAAES, incorporated a total of seven Syrian students between 2014 and 2017.
- Universidade do Algarve (University of the Algarve): This university, through the intermediation of PGAAES, established a cooperation agreement with the Platform for the Support of Refugees (Plataforma de Apoyo a los Refugiados - PAR) of Portugal to facilitate the general insertion of refugee students, specifically through the dictation of courses in Portuguese language and culture.

### *Trajectories of Refugees in Relation to the Field of Higher Education in Portugal*

The recent survey titled “Registro de Alumnos Inscritos y Diplomados en la Educación Superior” (“Record of Students Registered in and Graduated from Higher Education”), commissioned by the General Directorate of Statistics of Education and Science (Direção Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência - DGEEC) of Portugal, revealed that in the 2018/2019 academic year, foreign students represented 11.9% of the total number of students enrolled (45 000) in Portuguese higher education institutions. Eight out of 10 enrolled in public institutions, mostly in universities to

pursue undergraduate degrees, among which business sciences, administration and law stand out (together they accounted for 23.9% of those enrolled), followed by engineering, industry and construction (20.4%). According to the aforementioned survey, 51.6% were women and were territorially concentrated in the metropolitan area of Lisbon (37.2%). As places of origin, the following stand out: Brazil (39%), Angola (11.4%) and Cape Verde (9.3%) (Direção Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência) (DGEEC), 2019).

The subjects of this study are not reflected in the statistics noted above. However, through fieldwork, it was possible to learn about their trajectories, which are discussed below.

Yaya, born in Buake, central Ivory Coast, arrived in Portugal in 2008 at the age of 24. He obtained residency for subsidiary humanitarian reasons because he was not able to apply for refugee status, as he could not prove that he had been persecuted for political reasons in his country. Since 2009, he has been working continuously with refugees—as he himself explained—in “social interventions, as an activist and spokesperson for the Association of Refugees in Portugal, and friend of many refugees”.

During the first decade of the millennium, when Yaya arrived, refugees were not news, neither in Europe nor in Portugal. The CPR assumed its welcoming and integration process, which consisted of providing accommodations in its newly opened welcoming center in Bobadela (a town located 15 km from the center of the city of Lisbon), in which it housed refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea Conakry, Rwanda, Colombia, Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Cuba, distributed in rooms for four with bathrooms and kitchens. In addition, the CPR provided all the refugees of the center, for four months, group Portuguese classes.

When comparing the problems of that time with the current issues regarding refugees and universities, Yaya explained the following:

At the time I applied for asylum, there were very few refugees who wanted to pursue higher education and few who had access to them, sometimes due to lack of funding other times due to lack of spots in the universities. I remember that some gave a spot for refugees but did not provide a scholarship for maintenance and sustenance. It must be taken into account that these people had a refugee document (statute), that it was difficult for them to work, pay for accommodations, transportation, food, etc., and at the same time to study. Now I observed many news talking about spots for refugees in Portuguese universities: could it be that the Portuguese State prepared these spots for refugee students in universities, or the municipalities, or the universities themselves? I also know that there are Syrian students who are already here with a specific program aimed at them... A question that I also ask myself is why this program—referring to PGAAES—does not open equally to students from other countries of the Middle East... why does it have to be only Syria?... And, why is it not open to African students?

In his case, when he arrived in Portugal, at first, he had the intention of enrolling in an equivalent program for economics, which he had studied (not completed) in Cote d’Ivoire, earn his degree and then obtain a master’s degree. However, Yaya failed

to resume his studies due to the socioeconomic situation and his conditions in the Portuguese context, in addition to a lack of certificates that were required from his previous studies to make the corresponding equivalences as well as difficulty learning the Portuguese language at that time:

Studies require a certain psychological and physical calm. Personally, I cannot study well if I have at the same time other thoughts, concerns, dominating my head. My financial and work situation at that time was precarious, so I had to work on other things to support myself.

When he left the welcoming center, he lived very close to Bobadela, renting a room. He trained in an employment center through the program Portugal acoge (Portugal welcomes), which consisted, among other things, of certified Portuguese classes and technical training in computer science. Subsequently, he began working at the Lisbon airport, hired by a car rental company. At the same time, he was an activist in the aforementioned refugee association, where he began interacting with Portuguese governmental and nongovernmental institutions. After having lived in the welcoming center, having met so many people from different countries, “to truly know, from word of mouth and face to face with them, what happened in their countries (and what continues to happen)”, Yaya had the desire to study human rights. He proposed this to the CPR, the organization responsible for his welcoming and integration process from 2008 onwards, whose response—through a young lawyer who worked there—was as follows:

“Look, it’s very difficult. Human rights is very difficult”. However, I had already studied economics and accounting, and I do not know what is more difficult than economics and accounting in life. In studies, I do not know if medicine is more difficult than accounting. Therefore, I felt a little lowered, underestimated, because maybe he thought he could be a jurist but not me. In addition, the second answer he gave me was that there was no financing. Thus, I began to study human rights in a self-taught way, to know the Geneva Convention, the *Portuguese Constitution*, the Portuguese internal law of asylum and on refugees, by myself, without anyone to teach me. And that is when the association was born.

Abhu was born in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) 37 years ago, from a Palestinian family originally from Haifa (today the State of Israel). He is also considered a Palestinian refugee because he cannot return to the land of origin of his family due to the Israeli occupation and does not have the nationality of the country in which he was born, where in addition, he studied communication. He arrived in Portugal in 2012 with a tourist visa, without a passport, but with a travel document issued to Palestinian refugees in different countries where they had to move. He applied for spontaneous asylum and was granted refugee status. At that time, there were no scholarships for refugee students; therefore, he began working in a call center in Lisbon to pay for his studies in the master’s degree in tourism and communication at the School of Tourism of Estoril (completed in November 2016). Despite having a specialized master’s degree, until now, he has not managed to insert himself into the labor market in that area, indicating, among the possible reasons for this, some discrimination suffered for not being Portuguese:

Sometimes I apply in person for public jobs, for example, once for a senior tourism technician, in a municipal chamber outside of Lisbon. They told me, “you do not have a degree in tourism”, and I answered, “No, I have a master’s degree in tourism” (laughs). I think that is discrimination; they see a name that is not Portuguese.

If it were not for job scarcity and job insecurity, coupled with a lack of recognition of previous qualifications and the lowest minimum wage in Western Europe, Abhu, like other Syrian refugees interviewed, would like to stay in Lisbon; a good portion of young Portuguese must emigrate for the same structural reasons.

The case of Dida is different in terms of country of origin, period and trajectory, although it shares some of the elements of analysis addressed, both by Yaya and Abhu, in terms of experiences at the level of welcoming and integration in Portugal, including the dimensions linked to insertion in higher education institutions.

Born in Damascus, Syria, at the age of 27, divorced, with a son (his ex-wife and son live in Damascus), Dida studied law for three years in that city, fled the war and arrived in Portugal in 2016 through the EURP; his term expired in 2018. In 2017, he began studying management at a public university in Lisbon, but in the following year, he changed to human resources in the same institution. In addition, he teaches Arabic at the same university where he studies and teaches other courses managed by the Municipal Chamber of Lisbon and the Jesuit Refugees Service (JRS), the religious entity that managed his welcoming process. He also participates as a volunteer in the Family of Refugees (FOR) association, created in 2018 in Lisbon.

Dida was granted a scholarship to study at the university, in addition to being exempt from paying university fees. Previously, he had applied for a scholarship from the Global Platform for Academic Assistance to Syrian Students, which includes a monthly allowance of 300 euros (double the allowance he received as a refugee from the EURP), in addition to accommodations in a room in the house of a Portuguese family or in a house shared with other refugee students. At that time, the administration of the scholarship program offered him only 150 euros, citing that he already collected another 150 euros from the Municipal Chamber of Lisbon for belonging to the EURP:

This scholarship program has rules such as, if you contact other organizations to get you accommodations, your scholarship is automatically canceled; then, you have to pay for books from your own pocket; 60, 80 euros, you do not have a transport card. If I accepted at that time, when my contract ended (with the Municipal Chamber-EURP), with 150 euros from the scholarship, you cannot even rent a room! Then, they say that the refugees do not want to study; we give them a scholarship, and they do not want to study! Welcome to Portugal (laughs)! (interview with Dida).

Meanwhile, Liber, a 39-year-old Syrian refugee born in Aleppo, also arrived in Portugal in 2016 through the EURP. The entity that took over his welcoming was the INATEL Foundation, which provided him with a monthly allowance of 150 euros during the 18 months of the EURP, accommodations at his headquarters in Oeiras (municipality of the metropolitan area of Lisbon) in a room shared with another Syrian refugee, and the right to three daily meals. Liber has previous training in

interior design at the University of Aleppo, as well as 10 years of work experience in that field at the Syrian state railway company. He fled the war through Turkey, then crossed to Greece by boat and, from there, was relocated to Portugal through the aforementioned program. One of his main objectives was, from the beginning, to obtain a scholarship to study at a university. He took a Portuguese course at a public university in Lisbon, and another well-known refugee told him that there was a teacher there who helped refugees who wanted to study. It was through this professor that he managed to enroll for free in the architecture degree program, although he could not take advantage of this until the second year after obtaining a study grant from the institution itself.

Partner to Liber in his welcoming and housing cohort, fleeing Syria at the same time, Nuso was studying to be an electronics professor. Since his contract with EURP ended (2018), his daily life consists of an intense search (so far, unsuccessful) for a scholarship to resume his studies in electronics at a Portuguese university.

Saro is also a Syrian refugee who arrived in Portugal in 2016 through the EURP. At the age of 26, after interrupting his computer career at a Syrian university that closed because of the war, his dream is:

Having a new life and being able to continue my studies. I did some work in Lisbon. I changed every month, but I have the problem that I do not speak Portuguese well; I need to learn it better. I also suffered with the issue of rooms for rent. If I can study, it will be better for my life, for the future, because I will be able to work in my area, in what I like. I will have more confidence in myself. I want to study computer science. I want to find a job to live and help my family in Syria.

For his part, Quique, a 25-year-old Syrian refugee from the same contingent and program, narrated his career in this way:

We studied 12 years before entering university in Syria. With a high school certificate, and depending on the final grades, you can choose which career to follow. Education in Syria, before the war, was very good; it had a good level. That was before the war, not now. I studied law because it was always my dream, which is what I like. I was in my last year of law school, which is four years. I had to leave everything and escape from Aleppo to Turkey because of the war. Since I left, I always had the intention of getting back to studying because I like it and I do it well. In Turkey, there were no conditions; then, I went to Greece, and now I am here, and I intend to study again. However, the problem is that the law curriculum in the universities in Portugal is very different from that in Syria, so almost everything I studied does not help me here; they do not recognize it. I would have to start again from scratch! I tried to apply for a scholarship, only for Syrian students [he refers to PGAAES], because I need it as support to live, but I did not get an answer. There I lost a little hope of returning to study. It is that now I am old, 25 years, and have to start from scratch; normally at that age you already have at least a master's degree... I would have finished my education in 2014 in Syria. Additionally, life here in Portugal is difficult, similar for the Portuguese. At the same time, I have to work to earn money, to live and to help my family in Syria.

Alí, a Syrian refugee, originally from Aleppo, such as Quique and Liber, set out to begin studying at a university in Lisbon, but as with other Syrian refugees in the EURP, PGAAES did not grant him the requested scholarship:

This platform brings Syrian students directly to study in Portugal, but the Syrians who came from Greece (with the EURP) are not treated the same way. They only supported the first ones who arrived the first year (2016); then, the others, they do not.

However, his desire to study was such that he began to do it even without a scholarship; he attends classes at the university in the morning and works from 5 in the afternoon to 12 at night to survive (he is exempt from paying university fees). For him, studying and working is part of the sacrifice he makes, underscoring the difference that exists in this regard in other European countries:

Most refugees in Germany, Holland or Finland, if they want to study, they study. I have many friends there. They do not have to work apart to survive, as I do, but they have support; they have financial aid, they have language training. Here, it is more difficult. They talk a lot; they promise out loud, but then, they do not help you...

## Final Considerations

The formal integration of refugee students in the Portuguese higher education system still lacks a regulatory framework as well as a base of guidelines that allow the recognition of their academic qualifications, among other aspects related to facilitating their integration process in this field. So far, there is no sector policy or specific program designed for this, which translates into a lack of information and ignorance of the subjects about opportunities to study. Who should provide this information? The Ministry of Education, the ACM, the host institutions, the universities themselves? In the opinion of Santinho (2019), access to higher education in Portugal, although highly desired by refugee students with previous academic experiences in their places of origin, is not facilitated by the Portuguese educational system. For this author, there is a lack of structural and systemic understanding in universities about the meaning of being a refugee student and its consequent implications, such as the need to implement new strategies that attempt to overcome multiple existing obstacles, aimed at facilitating better insertion and academic success of these people. Without forgetting that, in the Portuguese context, academic success does not guarantee *per se*—starting with the Portuguese themselves—adequate labor insertion, in terms of qualifications and, above all, salary.

On the other hand, the difficulty of understanding the language in which classes are taught in Portuguese universities, the concern about the scarcity or insufficiency of scholarships to cover housing and transportation costs, beyond university fees, the acquisition of the materials needed for the courses and the enormous uncertainty about the future constitute—according to Santinho (2019)—reasons for great concern by refugee students; however, this does not prevent the majority of them

from continuing their attempts to fulfill their personal wishes and achievements. One measure to highlight, aimed at filling this structural failure and avoiding the burden of responsibility on academic institutions themselves, is the aforementioned decree of 2018 on international students, which legally guarantees the right of access of refugees to higher education under the same terms as the Portuguese (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

Learning the language of the destination country constitutes a determining factor in all migratory processes in terms of socio-labor-educational integration into the new society (Turtainen, 2012, Valtonen, 2015). In the cases analyzed for this work, in agreement with what was pointed out by Santinho (2019), one of the main barriers experienced by refugees when planning their insertion in Portuguese universities (as well as at the labor level) is the difficulty that they have understanding the Portuguese language, in which the classes are taught in the study centers. The low number of courses and the incomplete learning they experienced during the welcoming/integration process (for example, in the framework of the 18-month EURP, all reported having had one to three months of Portuguese language courses) reduced, for many of them, language education to the resources available on the Internet by the ACM, through the “Plataforma de Português en línea” (“Portuguese Online Platform”) (<https://Pptonline.acm.gov.pt>), an interactive website designed to introduce migrants to the Portuguese language in a general way, without considering heterogeneity and variety in terms of origin and condition:

Four times a week is not enough. In Germany, you have language school seven or eight hours a day. If they gave us a course for six months, seven or eight hours a day, I would surely be speaking and writing Portuguese after those eight months. I like my social life; I could not imagine being locked in my house all day. I like to talk to people, go to college, go to the gym. Sometimes I use my Portuguese, but after 15 minutes, my Portuguese is over (laughs) (interview with Dida).

Thus, beyond the existing objective material limitations, the shortcomings in the use of language constitute for many of these refugees concrete barriers when trying to enjoy a full and dynamic daily social life in the new context of interactions within Lisbon. The situation described also, and sometimes, halts university admission, while in the case of those who begin to study, it is a substantial challenge that can lead to abandonment.

Many of the Syrian refugees who arrive in different EU countries under the shelter of the EURP come from important urban centers such as the capital Damascus or Aleppo and have, to a large extent, a high level of education/training, which is reflected in the proportion of them who have one or more academic/professional degrees obtained through Syrian universities. However, the lack of recognition of their previous qualifications (academic, professional, labor, etc.) has been, from the beginning, a primary barrier in their processes of insertion, both educational and occupational-professional, with the consequent prejudice that this entails at the level of their integration into the new society. The lack of recognition mentioned may be due, depending on the case, to different reasons, among which it is possible to list the following:

- Lack of necessary documentation held by refugees (unplanned flight from war and situations of danger);
- Absence of appropriate provisions in the host country to evaluate and recognize foreign qualifications (and specifically those of refugees);
- Unsustainability in the financial resources necessary to comply with the procedures that formal recognition requires; and
- Even when recognition as such is not required by the institution of the host country or when there has been a process of formal recognition, refugees may still face bureaucratic obstacles such as *de facto* nonrecognition by public officials of higher education services and institutions.

Based on comparative research between different EU countries, a study by Patuzzi et al. (2019) shows how the recognition of qualifications for education and employment should be a right for migrants and refugees because it represents a crucial step in the process of insertion and integration into the host society. Formal recognition is required to continue studies, to enroll in school or to get a job; therefore, it must be simple, transparent and effective, carried out in accordance with conventions and legitimately authorized and legally authorized international standards, so that they are subsequently validly accepted in each country, either by employers or by the corresponding educational services and institutions. Similarly, refugees and migrants should have specific advisory and guidance services for qualification recognition processes, including the availability of adequate human, material and financial resources. Although, as pointed out by Sacramento and Silva (2018), unlike what happens, for example, in many Nordic countries, Portugal does not have accumulated experience in terms of welcoming and integrating refugees, it is worth remembering that Portugal has concrete and effective antecedents in this regard. One of these was the Professional Integration Program of Immigrant Physicians (Programa de Integración Profesional de Médicos Inmigrantes - PIPMI) (2002-2005), aimed at bridging the gap between the lack of practicing physicians and immigrants residing in the country, whose qualifications, at that time, were not recognized. Financed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in partnership with the Jesuit Refugee Service, the program aimed to provide technical and financial assistance to immigrant doctors who, due to bureaucratic-administrative impediments, were unable to practice their profession in the country. The plan may well be considered successful if it is taken into account that after three and a half years, of 120 immigrant medical professionals who received the support, 106 achieved habilitation and were integrated into the Portuguese national public health system (Fundación Calouste Gulbenkian, 2006).

However, currently, the fragility of the system and the structural obstacles noted make, beyond declarations of good intentions, access to universities for a large part of the refugees—except for those Syrian students who were inserted in Portuguese universities through PGAAES—often ends up depending on informal arrangements, personal availability and contact networks. In the words of Sacramento and Silva (2018):

A pesar das boas intenções macro-políticas, o trabalho de intervenção social com refugiados ainda tem inúmeros obstáculos, contingências, indefinições e vazios pela frente. Não basta haver uma lei adequada, que salvguarde direitos fundamentais, e vontade política do Estado para conceder asilo. Da “lei nos livros” à “lei em ação” (Nelken, 1984) vai uma grande diferença, bem como da vontade e do discurso político à existência de condições estruturais efetivas para intervir e integrar. [Despite the macropolitical good intentions, the social intervention work with refugees still has innumerable obstacles, contingencies, vacancies and gaps ahead. It is not enough to have an adequate law that protects the fundamental rights and the political will of the State to grant asylum. From the “law on the books” to the “law in action” (Nelken, 1984), there is a great difference, as well as from the political will and the discourse to the existence of effective structural conditions to intervene and integrate]. (Sacramento & Silva, 2018, pp. 14-15).

In this sense, it is advisable, in terms of the production and implementation of good government policy practices, to diagnose and evaluate instances of implemented sectoral policies, which should contain, in some way, the opinion, experience, and voice of the subjects-actors-protagonists of those processes and main recipients of the actions, which until now has not been done.

Likewise, the importance of having future ethnographic studies that reflect the realities and collect the specific needs of refugee women in Portugal is noted, something that has not been possible in fieldwork due to the obstacles related to access to and interaction with refugees and difficulty in establishing and maintaining solid contacts with this group. In this regard, notably, 33% of the relocations involving the EURP in Portugal corresponded to women, mostly Syrians. Statistics show that despite still representing a lower number than men, there is a progressive increase in the number of women in a situation of mobility who arrive in Portugal, which is, on the one hand, a problem of utmost importance for the country, and, on the other hand, a specific population that needs to be approached and addressed, by the State and its institutions, through the policies and actions that are executed in the matter, including the field of higher education (Padilla et al., 2019).

Finally, a possible medium-term continuation of this research could involve the follow-up of the life trajectories of the refugee subjects interviewed for the study to evaluate, over a longer period, their processes of integration into Portuguese society in the different areas of their daily lives.

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Alejandro Goldberg

Argentinean. Social anthropologist from the Universidad de Buenos Aires; Master in Medical Anthropology and Doctor in Social and Cultural Anthropology, with specialization in Medical Anthropology and International Health, from the Universidad Rovira y Virgili. He is Independent Researcher of the Conicet. Research lines: ethnographic research on international migration, refuge and health from a transnational perspective. Recent: Silveira, C., Martin, D. & Goldberg, A. (2019). La vida confeccionada entre retazos de tela: trabajo, vivienda y salud en inmigrantes bolivianos de la ciudad de São Paulo. *Trabajo y Sociedad*, (32), 431-449.