

Education Pathways

*Establishing safe pathways to the Netherlands
for refugee students*



7-8 November 2024 / Symposium Takeaways

This report provides a summary of the Symposium on Education Pathways: Establishing safe pathways to the Netherlands for refugee students, organized by Justice & Peace Netherlands as part of COMET: [Complementary Pathway Network](#). This meeting was made possible by the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

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For more than 55 years Justice & Peace Netherlands has actively promoted respect for human rights, human dignity, solidarity, and social justice all over the world.



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Introduction



International examples have demonstrated that with dedication and collaboration, education pathways can be established for those in need of protection. What, then, is required to develop and implement such pathways to the Netherlands?

On 7 and 8 November 2024, Justice & Peace Netherlands hosted a symposium aiming to strengthen the foundation and commitment for education pathways to the Netherlands.¹ This would allow people in need of international protection to resettle safely to the Netherlands for study purposes. The symposium welcomed a national and international network of experts, including partners of the [Complementary Pathways Network \(COMET\)](#), civil society actors, policy actors, and Dutch educational institutions. During two days, a collective effort was made to exchange insights, strengthen the capacities of possible Dutch actors and discuss opportunities for a unified agenda on education pathways to the Netherlands. The following report captures and highlights the discussions that took place during the symposium.

1. For the full programme, see the attached document.

Setting the scene

International protection and complementary pathways

An education pathway is a safe and legal route that enables refugees to pursue studies in a third country. This pathway offers people the opportunity to relocate from their first country of asylum to a third country to pursue further studies.

Refugees face significant limitations in accessing safe and legal pathways to Europe, including the Netherlands. When people are forced to flee their country of origin, they often apply for asylum in a neighbouring country. Yet, pressure on host countries' reception capacities, protracted conflict, the uncertainty of legal status, limited access to legal support, education or employment opportunities, and unstable living conditions often leave people in a constant state of limbo.

Consequently, those who decide to move forward in search of safety and stability are often forced to take dangerous routes on their own. This irregular onward movement exposes individuals to significant risks, including violence, exploitation, and other violations of their fundamental rights. As a safer and more structured alternative, UNHCR has introduced a **resettlement programme** that offers refugees the opportunity to relocate from their first country of asylum to another country that has agreed to admit them and provide permanent residence. The Dutch government currently pledges to host 200 individuals annually through the resettlement pathway.² However, this programme is voluntary and therefore highly reliant upon the political will of the hosting country. This dependency, in addition to the limited scale of resettlement,³ emphasizes **the need for complementary pathways**. Through complementary pathways, refugees can use existing legal mechanisms such as education pathways, labour pathways, family reunification, or humanitarian visas to resettle. These complementary pathways can allow non-governmental actors such as CSOs, the private sector, local communities or educational institutions to showcase solidarity with, and actively contribute to global protection needs. Although the number of European examples of complementary pathways continues to grow, the scale of pathways to the Netherlands has been limited due to legal constraints and limited awareness of the possibilities of complementary pathways, such as education pathways.

“There is a significant gap between the needs of international protection seekers and the opportunities available to them. Other legal pathways, such as community sponsorship, education pathways, and labour pathways, are crucial in bridging this gap. We need a broader range of tools to provide opportunities and ensure that people can access protection through safe, legal pathways.”

María Belén Zanzuchi, Migration Policy Institute Europe

2. The Dutch commitment to resettlement has decreased from 500 persons to 200 from 2025 onwards, which continues to be a topic of political debate.
3. Less than 1% of all refugees have the opportunity to resettle worldwide.



The value of an education pathway

An education pathway provides a tangible mechanism to address global protection needs by creating safe and legal avenues for refugees to rebuild their lives, focusing particularly on people's unique skills and assets rather than their vulnerabilities. Additionally, education pathways complement international efforts to provide more access to education for refugees, as refugees often lack resources, legal opportunities or financial access to access education.

Education pathways allow refugees to further develop their potential, promote their financial and social independence, and strengthen their self-determination while residing in a safer country. Moreover, education institutions and the hosting communities benefit as it encourage diversity, create opportunity for intercultural learning, and foster positive imagery around migration and actionable steps for solidarity.

“Encouraging refugee scholarships is not just about providing assistance—it’s about unlocking potential, fostering integration, and building a brighter future for all. By investing in education pathways for refugees, we can create resilient communities that benefit from diversity, innovation, and shared success.”

Stephen, student KU Leuven⁴

4. Quote by Stephen (student KU Leuven) shared during the presentation Getting personal: First-hand experience of participating in education pathways.

Currently, there is no such pathway available for people to come to the Netherlands. Over the last two years, Justice & Peace has leveraged its expertise in legal pathways and community sponsorship to advocate for a pathway to be set up. This has proved particularly challenging in a context that is characterized by anti-migration sentiments and pressure put on educational institutions to lower the intake of international students to their institutions.⁵



Building blocks of an education pathway

Although there is no single blueprint for the establishment of an education pathway, there are a number of common elements identified, providing a valuable foundation for building an education pathway.⁶ At the core of these efforts lies a multistakeholder approach that is tailored to the national context and the capacities and commitment of the actors involved.

Legal framework and status

The legal framework determines under which visa and residence permit refugees are able to arrive and stay in the country. This may involve leveraging existing legal frameworks, adapting them, or creating an ad-hoc framework specifically for this purpose. Consequently, this has an effect on the kind of legal, financial and social support that a student could count on. For the Netherlands, the most feasible legal framework would be to allow people to enter through a student visa, and support people to find a job after their studies with a residence permit for orientation year (zoekjaar); thereby circumventing the asylum procedure in the Netherlands.

5. This text is based upon the presentation given by Giulia Gori (FCEI) during the Welcoming Remarks.

6. The building blocks discussed were shared by Irene de Lorenzo-Cáceres Cantero (Pathways International) and Melissa Martino (UNHCR Belgium) during the panel What does it take to establish education pathways in the Netherlands?



University Clermont Auvergne welcomes students with Forum Réfugiés

A French education pathway has been operational under the COMET project with a comprehensive framework that combines student visa regulations with asylum procedures. Refugee students are selected with the support of UNHCR Niger and enter France with a student visa. Once in the country, they can either apply for a refugee status, which allows them to enter the asylum procedure, or they may transition to a resident permit through job placement.

Eligibility

Eligibility entails defining the criteria that students must meet to qualify for the pathway and specifically its study programme. This may be dependent on academic factors, such as prior educational qualifications, a minimum Grade Point Average (GPA), or language proficiency. Additionally, eligibility depends on legal factors, related to the framework that is chosen, including recognition as a refugee, country of origin, or registration with the UNHCR. Dutch educational institutions are free to determine the level of flexibility they are willing to give in order to determine eligibility requirements for people to enter a refugee pathway.

Students coming to KU Leuven

An education pathway for refugees was set up at KU Leuven in the 2023-2024 academic year with three Syrian and South Sudanese students arriving from Egypt. KU Leuven has opted not to make any adaptations in terms of academic qualifications in comparison with other students. It has decided to offer places within education programmes that have less strict requirements, in this case in the social sciences. Other universities in Belgium have taken a different approach, offering placement for education programmes in fields with high demand in the job market, such as engineering. This consideration ensures that graduates are better positioned for employment after study.⁷

7. The example of Belgium, in specific at the KU Leuven was discussed during the panel Setting the scene: Education Pathways from different perspectives by Raf D'Haese (KU Leuven).

Application and selection

Carefully organizing the application and selection process is key in ensuring that individuals are matched with the most suitable opportunities for their needs and qualifications. Potential refugee students are identified through various screening mechanisms that assess their eligibility. Within this process, it is important to ensure that as many potential eligible students as possible are informed through a tailor-made approach that recognizes challenges in information access for people living in a refugee settlement. Organizations such as UNHCR, and refugee support organizations in the first country of asylum play a crucial role in this. Following the identification phase, applicants are directed to relevant platforms and institutions, where they can submit their applications. Working with partner organizations in the departure country can ensure accessibility for all, taking into account potential barriers like language or digital literacy.⁸

Pre-arrival process of students: The example of Italy⁹

Italy's education pathway called UNICORE has organized the pre-departure in a series of steps to ensure that students are fully prepared for their academic journey to Italy:

- a) Students complete their pre-registration on a portal;
- b) The academic documents are validated by the competent authorities in the student's home country or country of asylum;
- c) The student requests a refugee travel document in their country of asylum to enable international travel, and if necessary an exit visa;
- d) Appointments are arranged to apply for a study visa and, where necessary, to obtain the Declaration of Value to authenticate their academic credentials for the Italian authorities;
- e) Universities and/or refugee support organizations facilitate contact between academic tutors and students, providing academic orientation, pre-departure Italian language courses, and cultural orientation sessions;
- f) Students are responsible for booking their flights to Italy and must undergo a fit to travel assessment before departure;
- g) Upon arrival in Italy, students are received at the airport by refugee support organizations and are introduced to their academic institution.

8. The importance of comprehensive pre-departure planning was discussed during the Pre-arrival session hosted by Alessia Perricone (ICMC – SHARE Network).

9. This process was introduced during the panel Education pathways in practice: Learning from experience by Ludovica Raiola (UNICORE, Diaconia Valdese Italy).



Support for students and higher education institutions

It is important to recognize that students who arrive through an education pathway may require some additional support in pre-departure orientation, logistical support, post-arrival guidance, language training, cultural orientation or support in accessing services in the country of arrival. While universities have ample experience with hosting international students at their institutions, this requires an assessment and identification of which additional partners need to be involved in order to support in the specific needs of refugee students. In the Dutch case, Justice & Peace coordinates this effort to ensure smooth collaboration between educational institutions, support organizations, and the students. Additionally, many Dutch universities have experience with hosting and accommodating refugee students who are already in the Netherlands, through the support and guidance of organizations like UAF and inclusion programmes.¹⁰

Samen Hier: Community sponsorship in the Netherlands

With community sponsorship, groups of individuals collectively take an active role in supporting the safe resettlement and integration of refugees into their communities. These groups may provide practical support, such as practising the language or guidance with navigating through bureaucracy, but more importantly, can provide a social and warm support system to welcome newcomers. Since 2019, Justice & Peace has been implementing a Dutch community sponsorship model, named Samen Hier (Together Here), to welcome resettled refugees in different municipalities throughout the Netherlands.¹¹

10. An insight into support structures at Dutch educational institutions was presented during the panel Focus on the Netherlands: Building on what is already happening presented by Ewing Amadi Salumu (Stichting UAF), Elise Priester (InclUision) and Yousef Al-Sallal (InclUision Community).

11. A description of the Dutch community sponsorship model was given by Kirsten de Mik (Justice & Peace Netherlands) during the panel The potential role of community sponsorship for education pathways.





Programme management and sustainability

Setting up an education pathway requires a coordinated and comprehensive approach that is sustainable and scalable.

Relevant actors

Although the commitments, involvement and responsibility of different stakeholders differ greatly among different implementing contexts, as they are related to the chosen legal and financial framework, an insight can be given.

- **Universities** are crucial in the establishment of an education pathway, they are the education providers and give access to the academic programmes. Often they offer their already existing support services towards (refugee) students and play a role in providing housing or organizing student support.
- **UNHCR** plays a key role in supporting refugee resettlement programmes and coordinating with actors involved (governments, CSOs, and educational institutions) to ensure refugees receive necessary protection. In particular, UNCHR has a role in the pre-departure process, such as the outreach toward possible students, and making the selection process possible.
- **The national government** ensures and enforces the legal protection framework of the possible students. In many cases, the national government will issue the needed visas, residence permits, and possibly provide funding.
- **Local governments** could play a role in the reception of refugee students by managing of the logistics of refugee integration, such as housing, and local support services in collaboration with the local education institution. The scale of their role depends on the legal framework chosen. If refugees access the educational institution through a student visa, the role of the local government may be more limited.
- **NGOs and civil society** in the first instance are highly involved in advocacy towards the establishment of an education pathway by bringing together different societal actors. Additionally, they often support the university, (local) governmental bodies, and civil society actors involved with the design, implementation and evaluation of the education pathway.

Financing an Education Pathway

A final pillar that is crucial to successfully implement an education pathway concerns the financing model. Amongst other things, expenses for an education pathway include travel costs, housing and living expenses for the students, tuition and other study costs, visa costs, or insurances. As a [government-funded](#) education pathway seems unlikely in the Dutch context, more flexibility and creativity are needed to cover all costs. This includes [scholarships](#) funded by universities, contributions from civil society organizations, [private donations](#) or funding by institutional donors, [employer-sponsored financing](#), or [loan-based financing](#) by the government.

Opportunities and challenges

During the symposium, some key challenges were identified and addressed to implement an education pathway to the Netherlands. Together, opportunities to overcome those challenges have been explored.

Language and the orientation year

Language proficiency has been identified as a significant challenge in the establishment of an education pathway. This concerns both English proficiency that is often required for study programmes, as well as the need to learn Dutch to be able to enter the job market. Refugees often have difficulties demonstrating their English language skills through official institutions, as IELTS or TOEFL are not available in their country of departure. One way educational institutions have addressed this challenge is by allowing some flexibility in deciding which moment in the application procedure students had to provide this proof, for instance, allowing them to take the test after travelling to the host country and taking some extra English courses when necessary.

Another challenge is faced once students complete their studies, as employers might be hesitant to hire graduates who do not speak the language of the host country. It is therefore crucial to mobilize and work together with those support structures that are already present for students to practice the Dutch language, such as inclusion and buddy programmes, UAF support, and the Samen Hier community support groups. Additionally, many organizations within the Netherlands already assist refugees in transitioning to the job market. By creating synergies between educational programmes, employers, and employment agencies, the challenges of language barriers and the complexities of the orientation year (zoekjaar) can be mitigated. This approach would not only support language learning but also increase the likelihood that students could remain in the Netherlands, as this synergy provides them with stronger pathways to employment and long-term integration.¹²

12. An insight on already existing support structures in the Netherlands for refugees was given during the panel Focus on the Netherlands: Building on what is already happening in which Ewing Amadi Salumu (Stichting UAF), Elise Priester (InclUision) and Yousef Al-Sallal (InclUision Community) took part.

Dutch political climate regarding migration and the internationalization of education

Dutch universities have long been at the forefront of internationalization, attracting students from all over the world. However, this focus has recently come under considerable strain. Policy changes and institutional pressures have pushed universities to scale back their English language programmes and reduce the number of international students they admit. These developments, coupled with widespread budget cuts in education, have a severe impact on the funding and operational opportunities of universities to welcome refugee students through an education pathway. Moreover, the political climate in the Netherlands has become increasingly hostile towards migration, with anti-refugee sentiments shaping policy decisions and leading to a more restrictive approach to refugee integration.

However, other European countries such as Belgium and Italy, which face similar political challenges, have successfully developed education pathways for refugees. Establishing such pathways in the Netherlands would not only provide refugees with a crucial opportunity to rebuild their lives, but also serve as a powerful counter-narrative to anti-immigration rhetoric. By opening their doors to displaced students, universities can foster a more diverse and inclusive learning environment for their students and society at large.

“Moving from a refugee camp, sometimes after many years, to settling in a new country is not easy. Community sponsorship programmes, alongside education and labour pathways, can provide vital support in helping refugees integrate and settle in their new communities, creating a more supportive ecosystem.”

María Belén Zanzuchi, Migration Policy Institute Europe





Looking ahead

Justice & Peace is committed to continuing its advocacy efforts in the establishment of an education pathway to the Netherlands. By coordinating these efforts, and supporting the process towards implementation, Justice & Peace will closely collaborate with existing and potential partners to ensure that refugees have access to safe and legal pathways to further their education ambitions without having to resort to dangerous routes.

“Educational institutions have long demonstrated their experience with welcoming international students to their institutions. Now, we invite them to apply this knowledge to support refugee students as well. By partnering with organizations like Justice & Peace, we can create a sustainable and human rights-centred approach to provide young people with the opportunity to rebuild their lives through education. Together, we can offer an alternative that upholds and promotes the dignity of those seeking international protection.”

Kirsten de Mik, Programme Coordinator at Justice & Peace

Universities, (local) governments, civil society actors, and local communities can and should work together to establish education pathways to showcase what sustainable, proactive and inclusive refugee policy looks like. International examples show that multistakeholder partnerships have led to innovative and flexible programmes that allow young people to successfully finish their education in the host country and rebuild their lives meaningfully. The lessons learned from these international examples are highly valuable, as they offer key insights into how an education pathway could be implemented in the Dutch context. Justice & Peace has the (inter)national alliances and expertise in mobilizing communities to further apply these effective approaches and contribute to establishing of education pathways in the Netherlands.

COMET website: www.cometnetwork.eu

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Programme

Day 1

November 7

Symposium on Education Pathways

Establishing safe pathways to the Netherlands for refugee students

Het Nutshuis, Riviervismarkt 5,
The Hague

Justice
& Peace 

12:30 - Walk-in

13:00 - 13:30

Welcoming remarks

Naeeda Aurangzeb

Moderator

Sebastiaan van der Zwaan

Justice & Peace

Giulia Gori

Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy

Luke Korlaar

UNHCR Nederland

On the goals of the symposium and results and challenges of the Complementary Pathways Network. Additionally, the Dutch migration context will be outlined.

13:30 - 14:30

*Setting the scene:
Education pathways from
different perspectives*

Gabriela Agatiello

*International Catholic Migration
Commission Europe-SHARE
Network*

Raf D'Haese

KU Leuven

Stephen Chan

Student KU Leuven

Addressing the different stakeholders within complementary pathways, highlighting the benefits of education pathways.

14:30 - Break

15:00 - 16:00

*Education
pathways in
practice: Learning
from experience*

Irene de Lorenzo-Caceres

Pathways International

Ludovica Raiola

*UNICORE/Diaconia Valdese
Italy*

Nina Staal

IOM Netherlands

Discussing the implementation of education pathways by looking at the Italian example. Legal and policy opportunities will be discussed and placed within the Dutch context by explaining the current ways of social inclusion and resettlement of refugees in the Netherlands.

16:00 - Break

16:15 - 17:30

*Focus on the
Netherlands: Building
on what is already
happening*

Elise Priester

InclUision

Yousef Al-Sallal

InclUision Community

Ewing Amadi Salumu

Stichting UAF

Highlighting the existing systems of support for refugee students to engage in Dutch education programmes, while addressing lessons learnt and success stories.

17:30 - 18:00

Interactive wrap-up

19:00 - 21:00

Dinner



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Programme

Day 2

November 8

Symposium on Education Pathways

Establishing safe pathways to the Netherlands for refugee students

Het Nutshuis, Riviervismarkt 5,
The Hague

Justice
& Peace 

09:30 - Walk-in

10:00 - 10:30

Opening & keynote

Naeeda Aurangzeb

Moderator

Fleur Bakker

The Refugee Company and A
Beautiful Mess

On how change can be accomplished if different stakeholders commit by drawing examples of The Refugee Company and A Beautiful Mess.

10:30 - 11:15

Getting personal: First-hand experience of participating in education pathways

Stephen Chan

Student KU Leuven

Mohamad Hussain Ghudei

Student KU Leuven

Leading conversation asking for the personal experiences of those who have been involved within the university and the importance of letting those with a refugee background access educational programs.

11:15 - Break

11:45 - 12:45

What does it take to establish education pathways in the Netherlands?

Sophie Schellens

Moderator

Ewing Amadi Salumu

Stichting UAF

Irene de Lorenzo-Caceres

Pathways International

Melissa Martino

UNHCR Belgium

Tihomir Sabchev

Tilburg University

An in-dept conversation on what building blocks need to be addressed to establish an education pathway within the Netherlands.

12:45 - 13:45 Lunch Break

13:45 - 14:45

The potential role of community sponsorship for education pathways

Kirsten de Mik

Justice & Peace

Belén Zanzuchi

Migration Policy Institute Europe

Jan Tolleneer

Community sponsorship group member from KU Leuven

Samen Hier group member

To be confirmed.

On the value of community sponsorship in the establishment of safe and legal pathways. A multi-stakeholder conversation on the role of the hosting community in the reception and resettlement of refugees.



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Programme

Day 2

November 8

Symposium on Education Pathways

Establishing safe pathways to the Netherlands for refugee students

Het Nutshuis, Riviervismarkt 5,
The Hague

Justice
& Peace 

14:45 - Break

15:15 - 15:30

Pre-arrival

Alessia Perricone
International Catholic
Migration Commission
Europe-SHARE Network

*On the pre-arrival process when
talking about education pathways.*

15:30 - 16:15

Break-out sessions
*Looking ahead:
Discussing
challenges and
opportunities*

*A moment to collectively discuss
the potential of education
pathways by addressing challenges
and opportunities.*

16:15 - 17:00

Closing remarks

Kirsten de Mik
Justice & Peace

*On what has been discussed the
last two days, and the next steps
towards education pathways.*

17:15 - 19:00

*Networking drinks at
Café Soof, Nutshuis*

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