

Academic Institutions's Commitment for Refugees

Following the 2015 migration wave to Europe, numerous French academic institutions organized themselves in order to welcome student refugees and researchers. As already witnessed in the past, initiatives coming from universities largely preceded national dispositions, which took place in a second phase and worked towards reinforcing them. These initiatives can also provide some experimental hint about the commitment of academic communities as a whole on crucial societal issues.

The way French academia responded to the 2015 migration wave echoes the situation that had already taken place in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Historians of this period often emphasized that universities and research centers indeed played a leading role in welcoming student refugees and researchers fleeing from Russia, and later from Germany. Originally “a European humanitarian matter that turned global”, student migrants became “strategic in international competition” over the 20th century.¹ Facilitated by pre-existing international networks, academic initiatives at the manageable scale of one given institution were still central to these policies. Furthermore, they often prompted governmental action. A somewhat similar pattern occurred in 2015. As European media dramatically reported² on more than 1 million migrants risking their lives to reach European shores, academic institutions organized and structured some initiatives from students and scholars, thus paving the way for more systematic public support.

Back in 2015, no specific public program seemed available to welcome academic refugees in France, but many institutions quickly committed. Paris' *Ecole normale supérieure* (ENS- PSL University), which I have been heading since 2012, mobilized its community. Our presidential team worked closely with a group of activist students, already individually involved in small structures, and we easily managed to convince a large part of the community (administrative services, academics, students and sponsors), to set up a welcome program on a pure voluntary basis. One of our first decisions was to name our project “Guest Students Program” (Programme d'Etudiants Invités: PEI). It was highly symbolic as it reversed the stigma, which was so pervasive in the media, by designating these migrants as guests – using the similar words as for our guest professors.

Language is key when dealing with such issues and describing refugees as “migrants” is sadly meaningful. If a “refugee” is someone who, for political reasons, seeks a legitimate shelter, in French the word “migrant” refers to the anonymous flows of people passing by, whereas “immigrants” refer to those who come in order to settle down. From its very start, our program focused on providing refugee students with both administrative status and full access to our services, (including free meals, mentoring and language classes meant to help them reintegrate regular French study programs as early as possible). The program is truly in the hands of our students, organized in the *MigrENS* association; the ENS only provides support and a high-level supervision. Early on, we decided to empower the students who run the program, while constantly triggering a reflexive examination of this collective experience. In this regard, the PEI proved to a remarkably bonding experience, further defining the whole institution through action

¹ Guillaume Tronchet, “L'accueil des étudiants réfugiés au XX^e siècle. Un chantier d'histoire globale” (*Monde(s)*, n°15, 2019) – <https://bit.ly/3a28hgT>

² Ivan Segré, “La ‘crise des migrants’ ” (*Lignes*, n°58, 2019) – <https://bit.ly/2Y9uZ0X>

and indeed asserting that “migrants are not a burden”³. For our students who are actively involved, it is an invaluable experience, recognized in their academic curriculum.

Since 2015, the PEI program supported approximately 200 “invited students”, (each class including about 40 of them). Each student gets the support of two dedicated tutors (one for administrative tasks and one for personal training in French). Thanks to those lecturing to small classes and those working in the bureau of *MigrENS*, we reach yearly a total of one hundred ENS students who volunteer in the program --a sizeable move for an institution which admits only 350 students in each class. Such figures are indeed telling: serious support must be found for those refugee students who intend to catch up with higher education in a foreign country.

MigrENS also played a key role in founding a network which brings together a great number of associations, professors and volunteers in several universities. The many initiatives that flourished all over French academia from 2015 onwards thus got organized into networks which are critical for those doing “fieldwork” to share advice and legal information on how to best support many undocumented refugees. After a few months, the authorities, initially reluctant, admitted the efficiency of such decentralized programs relying on academic communities and civil society. Various programs have emerged, sponsored by the government and the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, and a specific university degree has been created. We faced one of these many occasions where public action and legal regulations follow pioneer civilian mobilizations, when acts precede rules and determine structures.

The PAUSE program, launched by socialist minister Thierry Mandon in 2016, exemplifies the way public authorities appropriate specific initiatives –and manage to extend them to a broader scale. Organized by the *Collège de France*, one of the country’s most prestigious research establishments, this program aims at welcoming refugee academics through the sponsoring of higher-education institutions which offer them temporary positions and opportunities to settle in France, at least temporarily, and pursue their work. At the moment, the program welcomes about 220 academics in 80 universities and research centers. PAUSE also provides crucial initial help for colleagues who need to flee their country, but the whole international community should mobilize to help them further develop their career.

This commitment of the *Collège de France* is anchored in its very history as it welcomed numerous Jewish academics during the nineteen-thirties, alongside the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). The figures of physicist Fritz London or biochemist Louis Rapkhine played a major role.⁴ Many of the Jewish academic refugees who transited through France in the nineteen-thirties eventually settled in the US and actively contributed to its scientific excellence during the second half of the 20th century. The ENS also contributed to this transatlantic history by supporting European Jewish academic refugees in the nineteen-thirties through the commitment of its students community and internationalist Director Célestin Bouglé.⁵ Some of the scholarships delivered in those days came from major American sponsors, including the Rockefeller Foundation and Harvard University.

Through their commitment and action, from the nineteen-thirties to the 2015 PEI, academic communities have efficiently proved that welcoming refugees further transformed and enriched both our scientific world and our societies. This example leads us to further insist on the societal role of universities and their practical organization. Beyond teaching and researching, how will academia contribute to some of the most challenging migratory, human and climatic challenges

³ Marc Mézard, « Non, les migrants ne sont pas un fardeau », *Libération*, 2015

⁴ Sébastien Balibar, *Savant cherche refuge* (Paris : Odile Jacob, 2018), pp. 41-61.

⁵ Pierre Jeannin, *Deux siècles à Normale Sup’* (Paris : Larousse, 1994), p. 214.

of our time? How do we rise up to the expectations of minorities that look up to us for expertise and exemplarity? Our recent experience with refugees focuses on some key elements: empowering the students, creating the right conditions to help include the whole community (professors and staff as well), keeping a critical eye on the evolution of the program.