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Navigating educational hurdles: overview of the educational conditionalities of refugees in Romania

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Abstract

This paper presents findings derived from questionnaire-based research aimed at understanding the nuanced landscape of educational access for refugees in Romania. Focused on firsthand perspectives, the study utilizes structured questionnaires administered to refugees residing in various regions of Romania. Through quantitative analysis and thematic exploration of responses, the research identifies key barriers and enablers impacting refugees' access to education in the country.

The outcomes underscore multifaceted challenges, notably encompassing language barriers, bureaucratic complexities, and limited educational resources. Additionally, socio-economic disparities and cultural integration hurdles represent significant impediments. However, the research also illuminates promising aspects, highlighting the resilience of refugee communities, informal support networks, and aspirations for education as driving forces despite adversities.

These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders involved in refugee integration. They underscore the imperative need for tailored interventions, including language support programs, streamlined administrative procedures, and culturally sensitive educational initiatives.

Keywords: Refugees, Romania, education, integration, services.

Introduction

During the past years, Romania has become home to an increasing number of refugees. Similar to the situation in other countries, in Romania, refugees face multifaceted challenges accessing and engaging with education. This paper explores the educational hurdles encountered by refugees within Romania's borders, delving into systemic barriers and practical obstacles hindering their educational journey. Despite legal provisions granting access to education for all, refugees encounter formidable challenges integrating into the Romanian education system. Language barriers pose a significant hurdle, with limited provisions for language instruction tailored to the specific needs of refugee students. Additionally, administrative complexities, including issues related to documentation and recognition of prior education, further impede their enrolment and progression within the education system. Social integration and cultural adaptation also present significant challenges for refugee students. Furthermore, access to education represents the primary step towards building a professional path and at the same time is necessary in term of labor market access (Pogan, 2022).

Discrimination, social stigma, and a lack of inclusive environments in schools can exacerbate their feelings of isolation, affecting their academic performance and overall well-being. Limited access to specialized support services, such as counseling and trauma-informed care, adds another layer of complexity. Many refugee children have experienced traumatic events, necessitating tailored support within educational settings to address their emotional and psychological needs adequately. The lack of targeted policies and resources aimed at addressing the unique needs of refugee students further compounds these challenges. With education being a key element to social inclusion and labour market integration (Konle-Seidl, 2016; Andersen, Osland & Zhang, 2023; Cosciug, Porumbescu, Cosciug & Kyrychenko, 2023), this topic appears to be of main importance in addressing refugee challenges. Efforts to enhance inter-agency collaboration, provide specialized teacher training, and develop inclusive curricula are vital steps toward creating a more supportive educational environment for refugee children in Romania.

The researched is based on an exploratory survey aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the community of beneficiaries of international protection (BIP). It delved into various facets including their backgrounds, educational and professional standing, living conditions, and socio-demographic traits. By scrutinizing these elements, the survey intended to capture a complete and nuanced understanding of the community's diversity and circumstances. This type of holistic approach enables policymakers, organizations, and researchers to grasp the multifaceted needs and strengths within the BIP community for more informed and targeted interventions. For the analysis presented in the hereby paper, only the questions included in the education topic are discussed, concerning both the situation in Romania, and the one before the arrival in this country.

Research context

Students with refugee or migrant backgrounds often grapple with challenges when adapting to new learning environments. Recognizing this, the European Commission has actively supported EU Member States since 2016 (Porumbescu, 2015) in integrating migrants into education systems spanning from early childhood to higher education. The Commission's commitment materialized in the 2021-2027 Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (European Commission, 2020), promoting a comprehensive approach involving migrant communities, local entities, employers, and civil society. This strategy emphasizes targeted support across all integration stages. While national governments lead social policy creation and implementation, the EU complements these efforts by offering financial aid, guidance, and partnership development. By prioritizing inclusive education and facilitating faster qualification recognition and language learning, the EU is actively shaping an environment that supports the successful integration of refugees and migrants into educational settings across Europe.

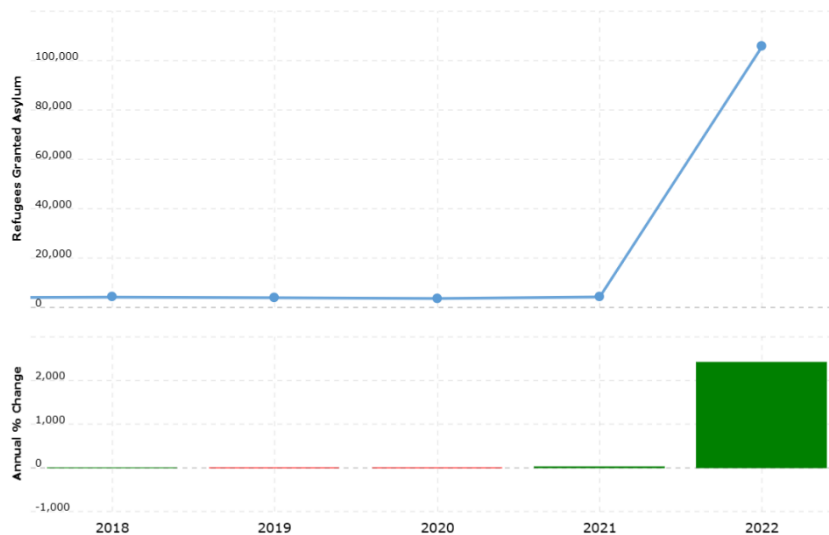


Fig. 1. Evolution of the number of refugees in Romania 2018-2022 (Refugee statistics macro trends - Romania)

With Romania witnessing a steady increase in the number of hosted refugees during the recent years (see Fig. 1 above), there is increasing interest in all the dimensions regarding the inclusion and long-term integration of refugees. In general, it is considered that education is one of the main dimensions and best approaches to integration (Cosciug, Porumbescu, Cosciug & Kyrychenko, 2023; Jørgensen, Hautz & Li, 2021), and, in this context, it is of crucial importance to assess the level of access to education of refugees, and to investigate their previous learning experiences and background.

Methodology

Between May and July of 2022, an extensive survey was conducted in Romania to profile individuals receiving international protection (BIPs). The aim was to understand their circumstances both prior to leaving their home country and their current situation in Romania. To ensure accurate responses, the survey was translated into various languages spoken by different BIP groups and administered by native-speaking field operators. This comprehensive questionnaire comprised 45 inquiries, encompassing both predefined and open-ended questions.

The exploratory survey sought to paint a holistic picture of the BIP community, delving into their backgrounds, educational and professional status, living conditions, and socio-demographic characteristics. Over 300 responses were initially collected. However, after careful verification and data cleansing, 233 responses were deemed reliable. These responses represented the primary BIP groups identified in the broader data provided by the General Inspectorate for Immigration (GII).

The research employed a meticulously designed sample methodology. A nationally representative telephone sample of 600 individuals was planned based on GII's database. This sample accounted for a margin of error of +/- 5% with a 95% confidence level. Stratification criteria included residence environment (urban-rural), age, education level, and geographic/immigration region. Additionally, 300 potential subjects were added via databases from organizations operating in the field.

The actual sample realized for the study comprised 233 respondents. Among these, 153 were part of the national sample, while 80 were included through the additional boost using NGOs' databases. The survey had a maximum application duration of 25 minutes, with an average completion time of 15 minutes. Notably, the questionnaire was available in multiple languages (English, French, Arabic, Romanian, Pashtu, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, etc.), catering to diverse linguistic backgrounds within the BIP community.

Crucially, data collection was conducted by trained questionnaire operators from the refugee communities themselves, ensuring a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach.

Demographics

The research project's framework facilitated the involvement of translators and questionnaire operators fluent in the primary languages spoken by the most populous groups of BIPs in Romania. This approach aimed to ensure that respondents fully grasped the questions, enabling a more precise description of their situations, whenever the answer format permitted. Interestingly, despite this provision, a substantial proportion of the BIPs opted to respond in Romanian (39%), citing their prolonged residence in Romania as the reason behind their familiarity with the language. This preference for the local language highlights how linguistic proficiency can serve as a meaningful indicator of integration within a community.

Notably, the Arabic-speaking respondents formed another significant linguistic group, aligning with the demographic reality where individuals with Arabic origins or hailing from Arabic-speaking nations constitute the largest faction among BIPs in Romania, as previously outlined. Correspondingly, 14% of responses were documented in English, reflecting its widespread usage as a lingua franca.

A crucial shift in the survey process occurred during its final phase, concentrating specifically on the Ukrainian group. This adjustment was prompted by the considerable influx of Ukrainians into Romania following the events of February 2022. To ensure effective communication and comprehension, an operator fluent in Ukrainian was engaged to facilitate the questionnaire among this demographic.

This tailored approach to language utilization brought to light intriguing dynamics within the surveyed BIP groups. The prevalent use of Romanian by a significant proportion underscores the language's role as a bridge to integration, reflecting the extended duration of stay and familiarity acquired over time. It also reveals a certain ease of communication with the host society and facilitates the exchange of messages, ideas, and positions between the refugees and the local community (Vladutescu & Voinea, 2016). Meanwhile, the prominence of Arabic and English responses aligns with the demographic composition and prevailing language competencies among the BIPs in Romania.

Throughout the data collection process, the importance of linguistic comprehension in ensuring accurate and insightful responses, especially in the wake of significant influxes of individuals from specific regions or events, was observed.

In essence, the multifaceted use of languages in survey responses not only mirrors the diverse linguistic landscape within the BIP community in Romania, but also underscores the nuanced interplay between language, duration of residence, and integration indicators among these groups. Such insights gleaned from language preferences enrich the understanding of BIPs' experiences and their integration trajectories within the Romanian context.

Education profiles

In the country of origin

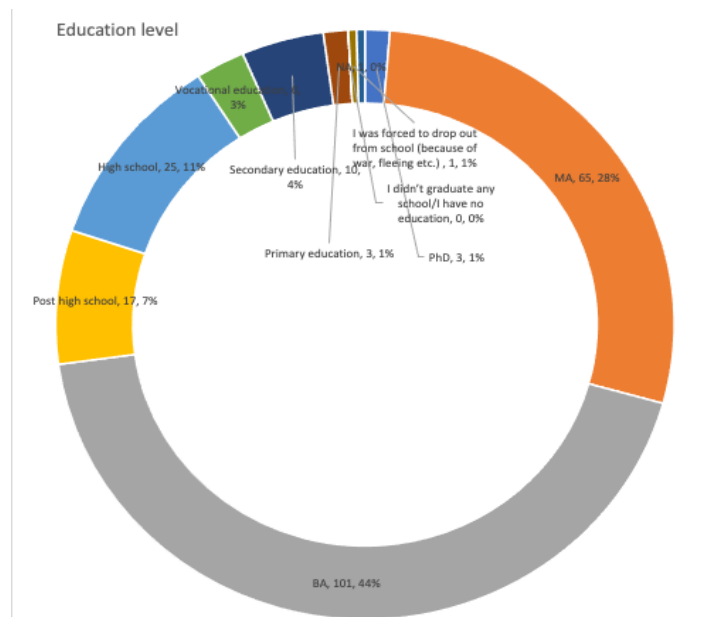


Fig. 2. Education level

Regarding the educational attainment among BIPs, the data indicates significant proportions across various levels: Bachelor's degree (44%), Master's degree (28%), High school completion (11%), and Post-high school training (7%). A smaller segment reported achieving lower educational levels: Secondary school (4%), Vocational school (3%), while a mere 1% each completed a PhD or Primary school. Additionally, 1% mentioned discontinuing education due to circumstances upon leaving their home country. Notably, 20% of respondents studied across multiple countries, with 6% having pursued education in Romania and 5% solely in countries other than their nation of origin. On the whole, the responses suggest a generally elevated level of education within the group, reflecting a diverse range of educational experiences and a substantial emphasis on higher education among BIPs in Romania.

The main domains where education was acquired by the respondents are medicine and exact sciences, each with approximately 14%. Other important fields, each with 9%, are theoretical and economics fields. Another medical related field (nursing) has a proportion of about 7% of the responses and respondents with technical education (such as electrician, driver, builder, etc.) have a similar share. Engineering and ITC make up about 6% of the responses each while other disciplines count less than 5 %.

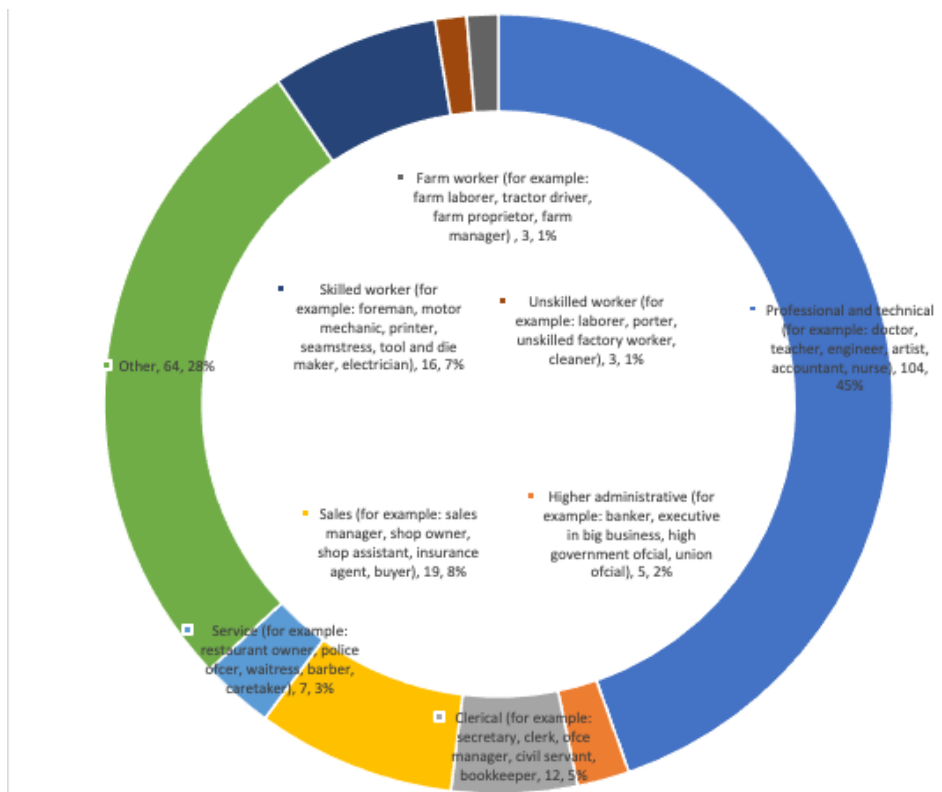


Fig. 3. Occupation in the country of origin

Figure 3 presents a very important aspect of the refugee experience: their occupations in their respective countries of origin. This data is pivotal in understanding the diverse skill sets and professional backgrounds that refugees bring with them when seeking asylum in Romania. By analysing the occupations held in their home countries, insights can be gained regarding the potential for skill utilization, integration into the local workforce, and areas where support or retraining may be needed. The information encapsulated in this figure offers a glimpse into the richness and diversity within the refugee population. It serves as a foundation for crafting targeted programs aimed at harnessing these skills, aligning them with local job markets, and facilitating smoother integration into the Romanian workforce. Moreover, it highlights the resilience and adaptability of refugees, showcasing their potential contributions to the economy and society. Understanding the occupations held in their countries of origin provides a holistic view that transcends mere statistics. It's a testament to the wealth of experiences and expertise refugees bring, underscoring the importance of creating inclusive pathways that leverage these skills, fostering not just their individual success, but also the enrichment of the broader societal fabric in Romania. The most important occupation (49%) the respondents had in the origin country was in the professional and technical field (for example: doctor, teacher, engineer, artist, accountant, nurse) which is in accordance with the education achieved by the respondents as mentioned in the previous figure.

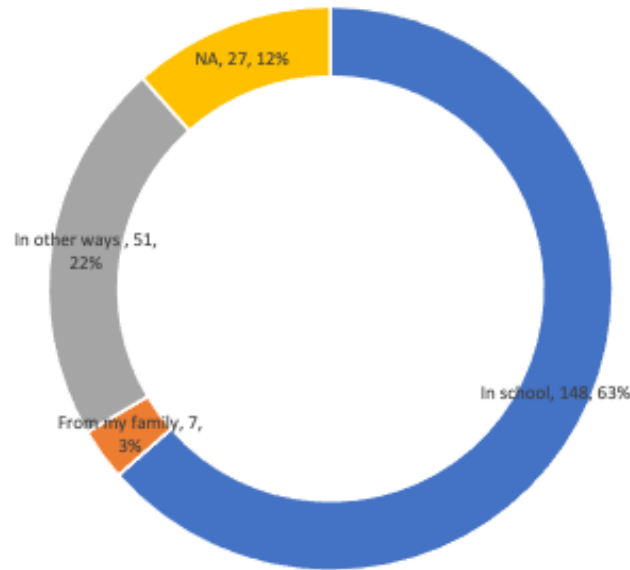


Fig. 4. Ways of learning the professions related to the previous working experiences

Figure 4 delves into the pathways through which refugees acquired the skills related to their previous professions. This data holds significant implications for understanding the educational and experiential backgrounds of this population in Romania. The fact that 63% acquired their professional skills through formal education underscores the value and relevance of their academic training from their home countries.

The noteworthy aspect lies in the 22% who gained their skills through alternative means, such as self-learning or on-the-job experiences. This signifies their adaptability and resilience, showcasing their capacity to learn outside traditional educational settings. Furthermore, the 3% who mentioned familial learning highlights the cultural transfer of knowledge within refugee communities, emphasizing the intergenerational transmission of skills.

This figure underscores the diverse avenues through which refugees have acquired their expertise. Recognizing these varied learning pathways is essential in designing inclusive educational programs and employment initiatives. It emphasizes the need for flexible learning approaches that accommodate different learning styles and experiences, ensuring that all refugees, regardless of their educational backgrounds, can contribute their skills effectively to the Romanian workforce and society.

Current situation in Romania

The following part of the survey was aimed to investigate the situation of the respondents after arriving in Romania, in terms of studies and access to education. Access to education facilitates integration into their host country's society, providing language skills, cultural understanding, and knowledge necessary for navigating new environments (Streitwieser, Loo, Ohorodnik & Jeong, 2019). Furthermore, education empowers refugees by providing opportunities for personal and professional growth, fostering independence and self-sufficiency.

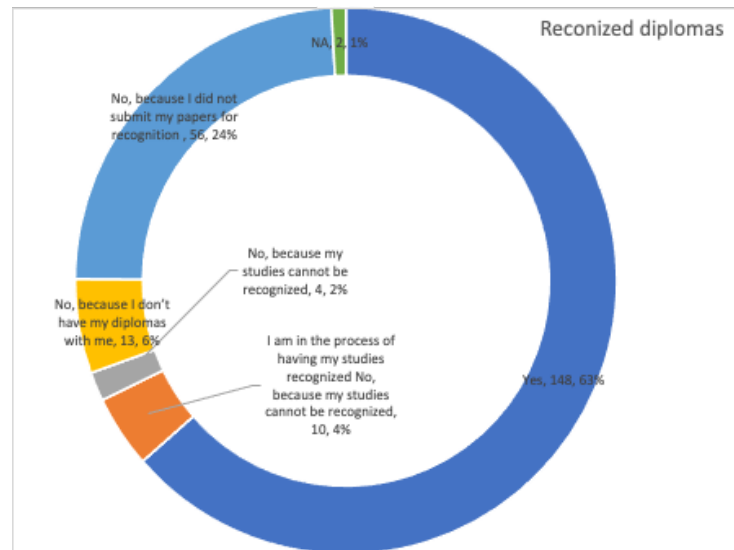


Fig. 5. Recognized diplomas

Figure 5 illustrates the recognition status of diplomas among respondents. It reveals that 63% have successfully had their diplomas recognized, indicating the value placed on their educational qualifications. However, approximately 30% faced barriers, with reasons ranging from not having original documents (6%) to not submitting papers for recognition (24%). Additionally, 4% are in the process of recognition, while 2% encounter obstacles preventing recognition. This data underscores the complexities refugees encounter in validating their educational credentials, emphasizing the need for streamlined recognition procedures to ensure equitable access to opportunities based on their qualifications.

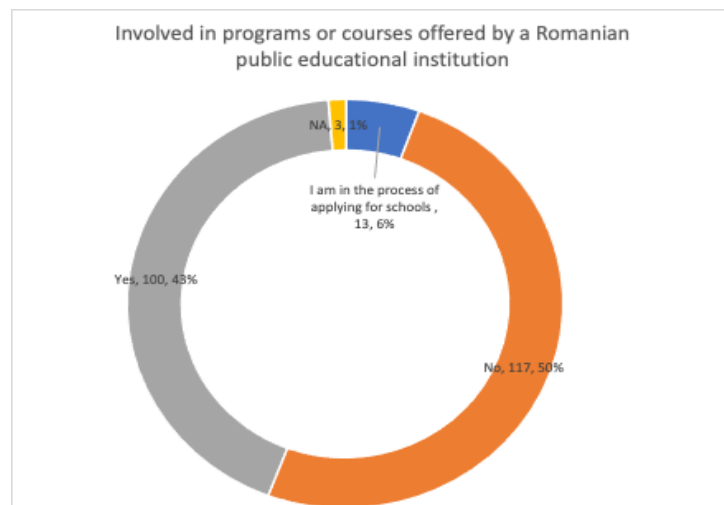


Fig. 6. Access to education

Figure 6 provides insights into the access of refugees to educational programs offered by Romanian public institutions. The data shows a significant gap, with 50% of respondents stating they haven't participated in these programs since arriving in Romania. While 6% were in the application process, only 43% had engaged with the Romanian education system. Remarkably, among the 43% involved in education or training programs, nearly 80% were enrolled in language courses. This highlights the pivotal role language plays in the integration process, as language proficiency is often the gateway to accessing other educational or professional opportunities.

The data underscores both the challenges and opportunities in enhancing refugee access to education in Romania. While a substantial number have accessed language programs, there's a sizable portion yet to engage with the broader educational system. This emphasizes the need for diversified educational offerings beyond language courses, facilitating access to a wider array of programs catering to various educational needs. Addressing these gaps can significantly contribute to the integration and empowerment of refugees within the Romanian educational landscape.

Table 1: Languages spoken by the respondents

Language	Level	No.	Share
1. English	Beginner	52	23.6%
	Advanced	165	75%
	Native speaker	3	1.4%
Total		220	100%
2. Arabic	Beginner	4	2.7%
	Advanced	7	4.8%
	Native speaker	135	92.5%
Total		146	100%
3. French	Beginner	12	60%
	Advanced	0	-
	Native speaker	8	40%
Total		20	100%
4. Romanian	Beginner	67	32.7%
	Advanced	134	65.4%
	Native speaker	4	1.9%
Total		205	100%

Table 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the languages spoken by the respondents, detailing their proficiency levels and the distribution within the surveyed population. English emerges as the most widely spoken language, with a significant proportion (75%) claiming advanced proficiency, followed by a smaller fraction at a beginner level (23.6%). Interestingly, Arabic displays a diverse distribution, with a vast majority (92.5%) being native speakers, while a minority exhibit advanced or beginner levels.

French, comparatively less prevalent among the respondents, showcases a dichotomy, with a majority (60%) at a beginner level and the remaining 40% as native speakers. Romanian, the native language of the host country, portrays a notable trend with 65.4% demonstrating advanced proficiency, while beginners account for 32.7%, indicating varying degrees of familiarity among refugees.

The data reflects the linguistic diversity within the refugee community, emphasizing their multilingual capabilities. While English and Arabic prevail as significant languages, proficiency in the host country's language (Romanian) remains a mix, with a considerable portion displaying advanced skills. Understanding this linguistic landscape is pivotal for designing inclusive programs that cater to diverse language needs, facilitating effective communication, integration, and access to resources for the refugee population.

Conclusions and discussion

The surveyed beneficiaries of international protection in Romania exhibit notable language proficiency, exemplified by the substantial 39% who responded in Romanian. This statistic hints at a potentially high level of integration within the host society. Language acts as a significant bridge for assimilation, and such a significant portion choosing to respond in Romanian suggests a commendable grasp of the local language, potentially reflecting their prolonged stay and familiarity with the linguistic landscape.

Moreover, the educational profile of these respondents reveals a remarkable emphasis on higher education. A substantial 44% reported holding Bachelor's and Master's degrees. This high educational attainment among the surveyed group showcases a dedication to academic pursuits and underscores the value placed on education despite their migration status. Furthermore, it is an indicator of a change in social behaviour (Porumbescu & Pogan, 2018) and reveals how the life of displaced persons can be adapted to the conditionalities and opportunities in the receiving country.

Another compelling aspect is the mobility and educational diversity within this population. A notable 20% of respondents studied in more than one country, showcasing an international educational background. Additionally, 6% pursued education in Romania before receiving refugee status, while 5% solely pursued education outside their country of origin. In the context of Romanian national population facing various types of hurdles related to education of vulnerable groups (Nita, Motoi & Goga, 2021), this educational mobility highlights their adaptability and exposure to diverse learning environments, suggesting a broader perspective and adaptability to varied educational systems.

Looking toward the future, 6% of the respondents express intentions to apply for an education program in Romania. This forward-thinking approach toward pursuing education in the host country signifies a desire for further integration and advancement within the local academic landscape. Furthermore, with the increasingly subjective portrayal of refugees and immigrants in the receiving societies (Ianoş Stănescu, 2015), these types of endeavours can contribute to a shift in attitudes and perception. Additionally, a significant 43% declare their active involvement in the Romanian education system since obtaining refugee status. This indicates a tangible commitment to continuing education within the Romanian framework, portraying a proactive engagement with the host country's educational opportunities. In addition, it is clear evidence of sustainable inclusion in the host community of this group of people and their intention to pursue medium- and long-term plans in Romania (Porumbescu, 2022).

In essence, these findings paint a vivid picture of a BIP cohort in Romania characterized by multifaceted integration efforts. Their demonstrated language proficiency, with a considerable percentage using Romanian in responses, signifies a potential for societal assimilation. Simultaneously, their robust educational backgrounds, penchant for higher education, and international learning experiences underscore their resilience, adaptability, and commitment to personal and professional growth despite the challenges of displacement. This inclination to engage with the local education system further solidifies their aspiration for integration and advancement within Romanian society.

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