

coLAB: refugees share their knowledge at university

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While the refugee crisis has regularly occupied the front pages of newspapers and news magazines in recent years, a Council of Europe report describes reactions of hostility and mistrust towards refugees and migrants, sometimes more pronounced in some European countries (*Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017*).

For many citizens, refugees are individuals in need. And of course, to a certain extent, they are, but their identity is far from being reduced to this situation. They also have skills and expertise that they can share with the host society.

It is in this context that with three other higher education institutions - the Institut des Hautes Études des Communications Sociales in Brussels (IHECS, Belgium), the London College of Communication in London (United Kingdom) and Libera Università Maria Ss. Assunta in Rome (Italy) - the University of Clermont Auvergne (UCA, France) has considered an original way to contribute to the integration of refugees into society.

A collective reflection

This is how the coLAB project was born, funded by the Council of Europe and the European Union's "Democratic and Inclusive School Culture in Operation" (DISCO) programme. To this end, the four partners set up an 18-month experiment that allow refugees to share their knowledge with students by teaching courses.

Initially, [the idea emerged from IHECS in Brussels](#), which contacted its international partners to consider a response to a call for European projects. He proposed to work more particularly on the inclusion of refugees in society and wanted to build a project to change the way of approaching the migration issue by reversing the current logic: the migrant person brings us added value through his or her knowledge and experience.

We discussed the project with four of us, refined it by crossing our teaching practices and adapting it to different regulatory contexts. From the selection of teachers to the evaluation protocol, the stages of the project were built together, in order to collectively reflect on how such a system could be developed in several European countries.

In the end, the creation of our consortium not only made it possible to benefit from financial support to deploy the system, but also contributed to giving it a wealth of approaches that it would not otherwise have had.

A variety of skills

At UCA, five refugees participate in the project by providing lectures and tutorials. Recruitment was based on several criteria: language skills, technical skills, motivation, past professional experience, etc. To find potential candidates, local and national actors from the socio-economic and voluntary sectors relayed the information in their networks and, at the end of June 2018, five people were selected.

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Before arriving in France, three of them had already taught - sociology, French as a foreign language and English - and two others held management positions in companies. At UCA, they would each give 30 to 60 hours of classes, on various themes corresponding to their expertise: marketing, communication strategies, intercultural communication, civilization, etc.

During the autumn of 2018, the preparation phase began, with most of the teaching scheduled to begin in January 2019. In addition to a follow-up for the construction of the course sequences, intercultural support has naturally been set up. The refugee teachers had many questions because it was important for them to understand the expectations of students in France, the university context and how to transmit their knowledge in this context.

In turn, as project coordinator, I listened, reassured, questioned, discussed with one another. I accompanied the process of reflexivity among refugees, which led them to ask questions about themselves and others, to reconsider their place in society. In doing so, I assumed the role of an intercultural mediator, which helped to create links between refugees and students and university staff.

Positive initial feedback

For integration to be successful, newcomers need proximity to members of the host society. This helps them to understand and adapt to their new framework, even though they are victims of several forms of distance (geographical, social, human, psychological) that lead to a loss of reference points, a loss of the cultural framework to which they were accustomed and may require identity reorganisation.

They need to communicate with members of the host society since integration requires reciprocity and is based on a dynamic of exchange. The concept of pluralist integration defined by Clanet (1990) perfectly illustrates this trajectory, which requires three conditions: common language, recognition of the right to cultural difference, reciprocity of exchanges and relations between different cultural subgroups.

And the first results obtained reveal that the coLAB project has participated in a form of pluralistic integration, which has benefited both refugees and students. First, it has fostered the openness and curiosity of the students who have taken part in the scheme. Thus, during the evaluations, they explained that beyond the course content, they had access to new knowledge spaces.

Participants particularly appreciate, among other things, the authentic and different character of the illustrations brought in during the class, as when a teacher explained what the elements of non-verbal communication are based on Syrian culture. Or when someone else talked about contemporary Arab civilization based on examples from Libya or Sudan.

Secondly, by providing access to higher education for refugees and promoting their knowledge, the coLAB project has contributed to better integration into society. In the face of the first positive results, coLAB is paving the way for the invention of original mechanisms involving higher education institutions.

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