



# The Ukrainian refugee crisis: Support for teachers in host countries

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## Key messages

- According to UNICEF, more than 50% of those fleeing Ukraine are children. To accommodate the large influx of Ukrainian students into host country schools, policies need to increase capacity and address the specific needs of the new refugee students.
- For refugee students to succeed academically, they may need holistic services that address physical and psychosocial needs. As a result, non-instructional support from professionals such as social workers and psychologists may be critical to their wellbeing.
- Countries and organisations have created online resources in the form of web links, videos, webinars and trainings to support host country teachers and Ukrainian refugee teachers as they work to address the needs of Ukrainian students.

## Background and key issues

**The current crisis in Ukraine has created the greatest refugee surge to OECD countries since World War II.** Since the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation began in February 2022, it led to over 5.3 million refugees across Europe (UNHCR, 2022<sup>[1]</sup>). In March 2022, the [United Nations](#) estimated that nearly one Ukrainian child per second had become a refugee.<sup>1</sup> This translated to over [two million children](#) by the end of March. This extraordinary number is creating major challenges for schools in countries receiving refugees, who in addition to needing ongoing education, are also likely to be suffering from war-induced trauma. In particular, the challenge of support falls on teachers in host countries, who may not have training to teach children who do not speak the language of instruction and who may require trauma counselling.

**To determine the skills that teachers require, it is important to understand the needs of refugee students.** Safety, shelter, nutrition and medical needs have long been recognised as essential needs of refugees. For students, the continuation of education is a critical need. It can provide a sense of routine and security in a time of uncertainty and chaos. Equally important, education is required to provide students with career opportunities as they reach adulthood. Challenges in this arena include the need for bilingual studies while they learn the host country language of instruction, and the need to adjust to a new school culture and curriculum at the same time that they are processing losses resulting from fleeing their home country.

**Academic support is often not sufficient** to provide refugee students with what they need to reach their potential. Given the highly traumatic experiences they may have encountered (OECD, 2019<sup>[2]</sup>), refugee students are likely in need of emotional support and may also benefit from trauma counselling. As many teachers have not had sufficient training in these areas, it is essential to provide them with opportunities for professional learning and to provide other professional resources so that teachers are not expected to deliver services for which they are not trained (such as psychological counselling). A holistic approach that involves regular classroom teachers, teachers who specialise in second language learning and psychological counsellors will provide strong support for both the students and those serving them. Recent meetings of international organisations and countries hosting displaced Ukrainians have indicated a great need for more psychologists who speak Ukrainian to support the students from Ukraine. Strategies to find and employ Ukrainian refugee mental health providers can assist with this process. Additionally, employing Ukrainian refugee teachers and other Ukrainian adults with needed skillsets can help to address these challenges. This is discussed in further detail below.

**Refugee students also need assistance to integrate into the host society,** as many may become permanent residents. Host country students play a role in fostering the inclusion of refugee students, but they may require guidance. Teachers can act as role models for both their refugee students and for host country students in learning how to engage effectively with one another. This involves the teaching of social and emotional skills in addition to academic learning. There are an increasing number of programmes available to assist teachers, many online and some targeted to working with refugees. The UNHCR offers an online guide called [“Teaching about Refugees”](#) that includes support for teachers working with refugee students. UNESCO provides course work and teacher training on social and emotional learning (SEL) through its [Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development](#) (MGIEP). The [World Bank’s Step by Step](#) programme is a free online package of lessons that includes teacher guides and student workbooks in English and Spanish. [Save the Children](#) provides audio and radio formats of SEL and support for teachers who are working with students from diverse cultures who are in need of psychosocial support.

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<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian policymakers prefer the term “temporarily displaced” over “refugee”, with the hope that Ukrainians will return to their home country when the war ends in order to rebuild Ukraine.

## What are the impacts?

**Ukrainian policy makers view the situation as temporary.** As a result, the Ministry of Education and Science stresses the need for Ukrainian students to continue their studies in Ukrainian language, culture and history instead of, or at least in addition to, attending schools in host countries. While some students in Grades 5-11 are able to access academic study from the [all-Ukrainian Online School Platform](#), which has been restored since mid-March, some do not have online capabilities. Additionally, the online instruction is not available for younger students. One way to ensure that students are able to continue their Ukrainian studies is to supplement the regular school week with Saturday classes that teach Ukrainian subject matter. Saturday classes can be provided by Ukrainian refugee teachers. Another strategy is to engage Ukrainian refugee teachers in host country schools. In the short-term, especially if these students may return to their home country within months, this practice makes sense, as the refugee teachers would be best equipped to know what is expected for academic success in their home country and can teach the refugee students in their native language.

**Teachers will need support in order to best respond to rapidly changing conditions and refugee students' needs.** Teachers will be addressing different student needs, dependent on refugee student ages and the stage at which they fled. Primary school teachers will face different developmental and academic issues than teachers of upper secondary, who are likely to encounter students hoping to qualify for university. Student needs will also vary based on how much of the war they experienced prior to fleeing, the kinds of losses they have suffered and the support they have at home. It will be necessary for teachers to work closely with school leadership and non-instructional support staff to provide comprehensive support to new refugees, which may include access to healthcare and food. The fast pace at which these changes to their work are occurring are likely to place considerable stress on teachers. As such, it is important that they are given the support and space needed to address their own needs, to enable them to work effectively and to avoid burnout. Teachers need to get adequate rest, healthy nourishment and breaks to relax. They may also need psychosocial support. There is a precedent for upscaling this kind of support from the [STRENGTHS Project](#), which was developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to provide mental health care to Syrian refugees. School administrators can be vigilant in overseeing that teachers are receiving what they need.

**Creating capacity to serve rapidly increasing student populations is a major challenge** for host countries, many of which had teacher shortages before the Ukrainian crisis. As such, engaging refugee teachers in host country schools, whether as regular teachers or as teaching assistants, can provide great support to Ukrainian students and help in addressing growing capacity needs. These teachers can provide a sense of familiarity to the refugee students in both language and curriculum as students transition to the host language and host country curriculum. Additionally, this strategy can be rewarding for the refugee teachers, providing them with a sense of purpose as well as financial stability. However, to serve as regular classroom teachers of both Ukrainian and host country students, teachers will need to know or learn the language of instruction and gain knowledge of the host country curriculum. A number of host countries are also creating pathways to help Ukrainian education professionals find employment. For example, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic has created an [online form](#) to help Ukrainian teachers and teaching assistants find a job.

## What is the outlook for teachers supporting Ukrainian students?

**Teachers need resources to support refugee students.** As it can be overwhelming for students to enter a school environment in which the language, subjects, environment and other students are unfamiliar, so too can teachers feel overwhelmed as they try to welcome and teach students with a diverse range of needs. Teachers can benefit from teams of support and programming that address the needs of their refugee students. Academic, social and emotional needs are shaped by: 1) individual factors, such as

language proficiencies and health; 2) interpersonal factors, such as family and social connections; and 3) school level factors, which include engagement at school, interactions with teachers and family involvement.

**Fortunately, there are numerous practical examples that can provide guidance for countries currently working to accommodate Ukrainian refugee students.** These examples include the following:

- The [French Ministry of Education](#) has created web pages with specific guidance to help teachers welcome students from Ukraine and talk about the war. Included are web links to videos by a child psychiatrist who is an expert in war-related trauma that children may experience, warning signs of trauma and how to respond. Numerous videos about the war in Ukraine that can be used in classrooms are listed as are sources to help Ukrainian students stay connected to Ukrainian studies.
- The Czech Republic's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports has created a [web page](#) that includes a publication on integrating Ukrainian students into local schools and a handbook on how to talk with students about sensitive current events and protect their mental health. Ministries of Education in several host countries are providing information on their websites to help teachers with bilingual education, learning basic Ukrainian, working with translation applications and including language games in class. Materials include professional trainings and webinars.
- [Erasmus](#) has created a web page with links to online resources in English and Ukrainian that includes information on refugee education, mental health issues, professional development and ways to interact with other teachers of refugees.
- [The Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies](#) has created a web page to help teachers and other professionals working with traumatised students as well as links to address the mental health of teachers, caregivers and others in languages that are relevant to the Ukrainian crisis. Other organisations have provided handbooks on classroom conflict prevention, mental health and discussing sensitive topics.
- The Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence (CIMEA) in Italy is a member of the Council of Europe's working group on recognising qualifications held by refugees and displaced persons. It has created a web page to help higher education professionals recognise and fast-track Ukrainian academic qualifications. Included on the page are a webinar and a Ukrainian qualifications database link.

**Ukrainian teachers can offer support in capacity building and addressing the needs of Ukrainian students.** A number of EU countries have taken measures to employ Ukrainian teachers to manage the increasing numbers of refugee students enrolling in host country schools. Many of the measures are short-term and temporary, including methods of identifying Ukrainian teachers, waiving or adjusting teacher registration requirements, recognising Ukrainian teacher qualifications and helping Ukrainian student teachers complete their credentials while acquiring host country language competencies. Policies vary by country. For example, [Latvia](#) recently passed a law allowing Ukrainian teachers the right to work as teachers for Ukrainian minors, though not in regular classrooms. [Slovakia](#) has temporarily waived its clean criminal record requirement and allowed Ukrainian teachers to be evaluated by an expert for employment as teachers. [Poland](#) has recently eased rules on teaching credentials to recognise Ukrainian teaching diplomas, and has also relaxed the requirements for becoming a teaching assistant, just requiring that Ukrainians have a good level of Polish language skills so that they can support the inclusion of Ukrainian students in classrooms.

## What are the key considerations for policy makers?

Implementing policies and allocating resources based on evidence from successful strategies can build capacity and provide teachers with needed support. Examples from OECD countries include the following:

- Mandatory coursework in multicultural education, second language learning and differentiated instruction in initial teacher training programmes, with incentivised professional learning in diversity training to manage heterogeneity and mixed abilities of students.
- Policies to reduce class sizes and increase resources for schools with large numbers of students whose first language is not the language of instruction.
- Recruitment of immigrant-origin and bilingual students to initial teacher preparation programmes; flexibility in credentialing immigrant-origin teachers through recognition of their training qualifications.
- Creation of full-service schools that provide for extra needs such as health care, counselling, study support, adult learning, language learning and childcare. Such schools may co-operate with community social services, immigrant/refugee agencies and non-governmental organisations to provide expertise in these areas.

## References

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