



TRANSFORMING REFUGEE INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

Report from the Policy Dialogue Event

BRUSSELS, 21–22 MAY 2025

Introduction

The two-day policy dialogue “*Transforming Refugee Inclusion in Education*”, co-organised by Professor Joanna McIntyre, who leads the University of Nottingham's Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE), and the SIRIUS Policy Network on Migrant Education, brought together researchers, civil society organisations, and advocacy actors to explore systemic barriers and enabling practices for the educational inclusion of refugee learners. Each day's discussions were framed around themed policy briefs, drawing on research evidence from HERE's scoping reports, ensuring that the dialogue was grounded in robust findings and aimed at influencing policy conversations directly informed by this research. The event was supported by the University of Nottingham's Research England Policy Support Fund, and designed to break down institutional silos and promote inclusive education systems across Europe.

Executive Summary

Over the course of two days, participants engaged in a series of discussions and exchanges that went **beyond traditional policy talk**, offering concrete insights into how inclusion for refugee learners can be meaningfully reimagined and enacted across Europe. Rather than treating inclusion as a static goal, the event framed it as a dynamic process, rooted in rights, relationships, and real-world practices, especially at the intersections of disability, early childhood, and non-formal education.

Grounded in the idea that **education is a human right and a key enabler of belonging and participation**, the dialogue highlighted the urgent need to bridge gaps between policy and practice, and to build systems that respond to the diverse realities of refugee learners and their communities.

Key takeaways included:

- **Inclusion starts with recognition:** refugee children, particularly those with disabilities or in early years, are often at the margins of fragmented policy frameworks. A shift toward holistic, whole-system approaches is essential.
- **Data matters:** the absence of robust, disaggregated data - especially on learners with disabilities - is itself a form of invisibilisation.
- **Non-formal learning is central:** learning happens in community, through play, relationships, and practice. Education systems must value and integrate this.
- **Families and educators are agents of change:** inclusion must be co-constructed with parents and frontline professionals, whose instincts and experiences often lead the way.
- **Policy must follow practice:** grassroots innovation is happening; EU and national systems should fund, support, and adapt to it without erasing local knowledge.

Day 1 - Disability, Displacement and Inclusive Systems

The opening panel explored the intersection of disability and migration, building on findings from HERE's policy brief. **Professor Joanna McIntyre** (University of Nottingham/HERE) highlighted the **compounded challenges faced by refugee learners with disabilities**, while **Michelle Proyer** (University of Luxembourg/HERE) and **Gareth Hughes** (EASNIE) underlined the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration and recognition of learners' diverse experiences.

The second session, *From Policy to Practice*, brought together EU-level organisations working on inclusive education. **Francesca Pisanu** (Eurochild), **Andrea Lapegna** (Lifelong Learning Platform), and Gareth Hughes stressed the need for whole-school approaches, cross-sector alignment, and adequate funding for inclusive systems. A key message was the **importance of recognising and supporting non-formal and informal learning environments**, especially for refugee learners who may struggle to access or succeed in formal settings.

In the evening working session, *Carrying the Work: DEI, Backlash & Solidarity*, **Mialy Dermish** (HERE) and **Wayne Veck** (University of Winchester/HERE) conducted a provocative and reflective exchange on how inclusion efforts are being challenged across Europe, and the strategies that actors can adopt to sustain solidarity and anti-discrimination practices within institutions and communities.



Day 2 - Early Childhood and Future Pathways

The second day focused on Early Childhood Education and Care, drawing on research by HERE and Refugee Education UK. Findings confirmed the critical benefits of early years education - especially in reducing inequalities and enabling parental agency - but also revealed systemic barriers: from eligibility restrictions and complex enrolment procedures to cultural insensitivity and poor information flows.

Catherine Gladwell and Alice Robinson (Refugee Education UK/ HERE), Francesca Colombo (ISSA), and Maya Haals Brosnan (Marino Institute) stressed that:

- Inclusion must involve both access and belonging within peer communities
- Educator autonomy and community support are key for child-centred pedagogies
- The definition of inclusion should be open to local interpretation and grounded in children's own needs and rhythms
- Inclusion for refugee children means being included in policymaking itself

A final participatory session encouraged participants to envision inclusive systems from multiple angles: practitioner, learner, policymaker, acknowledging that real transformation often begins in small, local actions backed by collective vision.



Brussels
21 - 22 May 2025

"If we think that policy is a solution to a problem, there is going to be a policy framing of the problem." - **Joanna McIntyre, University of Nottingham / HERE**

"The absence of data is not neutral - it says something. Not having data is itself a form of exclusion." - **Francesca Colombo, ISSA**

"Inclusion isn't something you do to people. It's a process of being and belonging - with others, not just among them." — **Mialy Dermish, HERE**

"When society is under pressure, children are often the first to be excluded. Slowing down can be an act of resistance." - **Maya Haals Brosnan, Marino Institute of Education**

"The classroom hasn't changed in centuries - but our understanding of learning has. Education must be transformative, or it's not really education." - **Andrea Lapegna, Lifelong Learning Platform**



LOOKING AHEAD

The event closed with a **shared sense of urgency and possibility**. Investing in inclusive education for refugees is not only a question of justice, but also of **building resilient, democratic societies**.

Moving forward will require:

- Stronger alignment between EU-level guidance and local realities
- Validation of informal learning and competence-based pathways
- Cross-sector partnerships that place families and educators at the heart of change
- A policy culture that values experimentation, flexibility and care

The SIRIUS Network and the HERE Hub will continue to foster these dialogues, amplifying the voices of learners and practitioners, and contributing to a more inclusive education landscape across Europe.

