

Commentary Note

Submitted to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

6th May 2022

Doras is an independent NGO that works to promote and protect the rights of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants through direct support and advocacy. Our work covers immigration, international protection, refugee resettlement, anti-trafficking, integration and anti-racism. We support over 1,500 people a year through our Advice & Information centre.

Since the end of February we have engaged with people of all ages who have fled Ukraine, many of whom have raised issues relevant to the Committee's deliberations. We have engaged with education service providers including Education and Training Boards (ETBs), Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), primary and secondary school management. We have liaised with other stakeholders including the English Language Support Teachers' Association of Ireland (ELSTA) and the University of Sanctuary Ireland (UoSI) committee. We are also assisting people with access to employment.

Our primary area of expertise in relation to education and supports provision for displaced Ukrainians is in online education and training provision. Prior to their arrival, we had just launched our online education platform for refugees and migrants called SaorEd. As of May 5th, 2022, 17% of our 1,416 registered learners (241) are from Ukraine. The majority of those are taking English language courses on the online platform.

We know from our work that many of the education related issues faced by people fleeing Ukraine apply in equal measure to international protection applicants and refugees from other parts of the world. We strongly encourage the Committee and the government to use this opportunity to strive for equality of access to education for all protection applicants and refugees, and to ensure that policy changes, additional resources and other measures adopted in response to the arrival of people fleeing Ukraine will apply to others. Education plays a positive role in social integration for students of all ages, and is one of the key determinants of labour market outcomes for adults. The importance of getting it right cannot be underestimated.

With that in mind, we welcome the positive initiatives taken by government and by the

Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in response to the arrival of displaced Ukrainian students. These include the National Student and Researcher Helpdesk hosted by Maynooth University. However, there are a number of areas we wish to highlight as needing further attention. We present these in line with the Committee's examination of key issues.

Curriculum Provision

- Online or blended education in the form of mobile apps, open educational resources, and open online courses such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) offer flexible language and other learning opportunities for displaced Ukrainians. Access to the formal education system may not be viable for many people, because of where they are located, lack of childcare, cost, or other reasons. In this case, curated collections of teaching resources offer relevant, high quality material that can be used in structured programmes of study or for self-directed study.

The SaorEd platform provided by Doras in partnership with New Horizon and Dignity Partnership provides MOOC-based course clusters for refugees and asylum seekers. It offers credit recognition for completed courses, and work is under way to use this to open pathways to university admission in Ireland.

Language Provision

- At present, the assessment of English language needs and the delivery of appropriate classes is inconsistent across the country. ETBs are providing English classes, but their capacity to meet the needs of Ukrainians in hotels, rest centres and other congregated settings in local communities varies widely. The limited capacity of many ETBs means that tuition is in some cases limited to three hours a week (initially at least), and is not matched to the level of English language proficiency of the individual. ETBs that already had waiting lists of international protection applicants and others for English classes are now looking to implement short-term and/or localized solutions to meet the needs of newly arrived Ukrainians.

To address this, a consistent and more structured programme of language provision is required across all ETBs. This should cover timely initial assessment, and a range of courses to meet the different needs identified.

- In addition, the language needs of individuals and the capacity to provide English classes must be taken into consideration when placing people in congregated accommodation.
- While ETB or volunteer-led English classes, including Fáilte Isteach programmes, may help people to prepare for the labour market, the needs of people who wish to progress to or

continue in higher education must also be addressed. This will require HEI bridging programmes to address gaps between students' existing English language proficiency and/or academic level and the level necessary for them to study through English.

Many higher education courses will require that students classified as international have a score of between 6 to 7 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). In addition to bridging programmes implemented by individual HEIs, we recommend making effective use of the resources of higher education institutions who offer these IELTS courses and testing systems to prepare students for successful transition to higher education courses.

Psychological Supports

While recognizing that everybody fleeing Ukraine does not require the same psychological supports, building local trauma response capacity is essential in order to achieve emotional stability and positive mental health outcomes for traumatized children and adults.

- Trauma informed training is required for school staff, starting at primary level, particularly for school staff who are providing English language support. Many schools that have Ukrainian children starting, particularly in rural areas, have not previously had students who experienced displacement of any form.

It is vital that teachers are able to identify and support vulnerable children.

- Funding is also required for training and mental health support at third level, as the HEIs are already under pressure in this respect.
- Access to appropriate schooling and education for children with additional education needs is another area requiring attention. An educational psychological assessment must be carried out for them to access suitable supports or schools. Normally such assessments are arranged through the child's school but for arriving Ukrainian children who have not yet started in a school, arranging an assessment and the ensuing waiting time are both problematic.

In order for children with additional educational needs to get timely access to suitable education, a mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure educational psychological assessments take place as early as possible.

Doras has previously highlighted the fact that refugee children in need of urgent psychological support have waited for years on the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) waiting lists. The only resort in many cases has been to cover the cost of private assessment in order to fill this gap.

Other Issues

- The establishment of Regional Education And Language Teams (REALT) across the country to

support the needs of Ukrainian children arriving here, and their initial focus on assisting families in securing school places is welcome. However, there are concerns that a small number of disadvantaged schools that have space to do so are accommodating large numbers of Ukrainian children. This places a strain on the schools' existing services. The Department of Education has been supportive in sanctioning additional staffing where required, although teacher shortage is impeding recruitment in many cases. Key challenges include the capacity of teachers in English as an Additional Language (EAL) teaching, language aware teaching methodologies, intercultural education, and anti-racism.

Local Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) based throughout the country also play a key role, as do the Túsla Education Support Service. In some parts of the country, EWOs are seeing acute demand.

REALT will also support schools to meet the needs of these children as they emerge, to advise and support the Department of Education in developing new capacity where required, and to co-ordinate the provision of education services to schools and families across their defined area. It is essential that they are adequately resourced to do this.

- Reports of racism in primary and secondary school is an ongoing concern, particularly where teachers and management don't know how to respond effectively. Many schools will face new challenges in this area. Taking a proactive approach that includes resources for training and the development of anti-racism policies and guidelines is important.
- The Department of Education encourages schools to provide the summer programme for primary and post-primary students with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage. If a school does not run a school based programme, they can apply for home based tuition. A commitment by the Minister to include newly arrived students in this scheme would be beneficial. EAL students were included last year, but not this year.

While many DEIS schools run Literacy or Numeracy Camps, many Ukrainian children will not attend such schools.

- A number of cost-related barriers exist in relation to displaced students access to higher education. The requirement of 3 out of the previous 5 years' residency in Ireland to qualify for the Free Fees Initiative or SUSI will make it difficult for many Ukrainian students to resume or begin their higher education in Ireland for the foreseeable future.

Ukrainian students wishing to enrol in higher education courses in 2022 will also be unable to avail of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) as they will not have spent the required 9 months on social welfare.

- While the ETBs are supporting Ukrainians in relation to a range of courses, job seeking, and

information about further and higher education, their VTOS courses require people to have been on social welfare for 6 months.

- Third country nationals studying in Ukraine (on student visas) who have fled to Ireland should be supported to continue their studies here, particularly in cases where they are unable to return to their countries of origin.
- HEIs can play an important role in responding to the education needs of displaced Ukrainian students as there is expertise, particularly in the teacher training colleges, that can help combat racism and prepare for inclusion in the classroom. This includes rolling out English language courses over the summer months and beyond, trauma informed counselling, and seminars to help the primary schools teaching community on inclusion and interculturalism in the classroom. However, no funds have been earmarked to support HEIs develop these activities.
- Finally, the disruption caused to students by moving them and/or their families should be a key consideration when it comes to placement in State provided accommodation. Moving a family after they have secured a place for their children at local school should be avoided where possible. Equally, flexibility will be required in relation to the provision of accommodation so that students can continue their studies in HEIs.

As noted already, many of the issues identified in our commentary note relate to Education and Supports Provision for people displaced from other parts of the world who have arrived in Ireland. We welcome the responses to date of the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to the emerging needs of people from Ukraine, and look forward to further positive developments to ensure access to education for all.

We are available to assist the Committee's work in any way we can.

To contact Doras:

Address: Central Buildings, 51a O'Connell Street, Limerick. V94 W275

Phone: 061 310328

Contact: John Lannon, CEO

Email : j.lannon@doras.org

Website : www.doras.org