International Conference From Emergency to Ecosystem

Designing Belonging for Learners from Crisis Contexts

Friday, 20 March 2026
Venue: University of Lisbon (Reitoria – Alameda da Universidade, 1649-004)

BACKGROUNDER

Context

Over the past decade, higher education institutions have made significant progress in expanding access for refugees and learners from crisis contexts. Scholarship programmes, bridging initiatives, and international partnerships have created opportunities for thousands of students who would otherwise have been excluded from higher education. Furthermore, this progress has been driven in part by the global **15by30 goal**, which aims to ensure that 15% of refugee youth **access higher education by 2030**.

However, as of 2024, enrolment remains at around 7% globally, revealing a persistent gap and significant challenges.

While access has expanded, many students continue to face barriers once admitted to higher education. These barriers include language integration, recognition of previous learning, mental health and well-being needs, financial insecurity, and limited access to professional networks and employment opportunities.

These challenges reveal an important lesson: **access is critical, but alone it is not enough**.

Students succeed when higher education systems create environments where they feel supported, recognised, and able to belong.

Belonging means feeling academically recognized, socially included, and supported throughout the educational journey.

It also means having pathways that connect education to meaningful employment and long-term opportunity.

From Programmes to Ecosystems

Many existing initiatives supporting learners from crisis contexts operate as **individual programmes** rather than as coordinated, holistic systems.

Scholarships, which are indeed critical, may exist without adequate academic support.

Mental health services may operate separately from integration programmes.

Employment pathways may be disconnected from educational opportunities.

As a result, students often navigate fragmented systems that are difficult to access and sustain.

The next phase of progress, therefore, requires a shift in approach.

Instead of focusing on isolated interventions, universities and partners must build **ecosystems of belonging**.

An ecosystem approach connects the different elements needed for student success, which the 6 labs in this Conference will seek to address, notably:

- flexible admissions and recognition of previous learning (Lab 1)
- language, academic integration support, student communities and participation (Lab 2)
- mental health and wellbeing services (Lab 3)
- pathways linking education to employment (Lab 4)
- sustainable financing models (Lab 5)
- using international cooperation, and the UN agenda and goals to do more and better (Lab 6)

When these elements work together, higher education institutions can create environments where learners from crisis contexts can succeed and contribute fully to society.

The Purpose of the Conference

The Lisbon conference brings together higher education institutions, students, policymakers, civil society organisations, employers, and international partners to explore how ecosystem approaches can be implemented in practice.

The conference combines:

- keynote reflections
- panel discussions
- and collaborative design labs.

While keynote sessions provide strategic perspectives, the design labs focus on **developing practical solutions**.

Participants will work together to identify challenges, map ecosystem gaps, and design pilot initiatives that could be implemented in the coming years.

The Design Labs

The design labs are the central participatory component of the conference.

Each lab focuses on a key dimension of the ecosystem, as listed above.

Participants will work collaboratively to develop proposals that strengthen ecosystems of support for learners from crisis contexts.

These proposals are intended to inspire new initiatives, partnerships, and pilot programmes.

Looking Forward

Achieving the **15by30 goal** will require sustained collaboration between higher education institutions, governments, civil society organisations, employers, and international partners.

The conversations and proposals emerging from this conference represent an important step toward building the ecosystems needed to support learners from crisis contexts.

By working together, institutions and partners can move beyond emergency responses and create higher education systems where learners from crisis contexts can not only access education but also truly **belong, succeed, and contribute to society**.

This conference explores how higher education institutions and partners can move beyond isolated initiatives and build **ecosystems of belonging** that support learners from crisis contexts throughout their educational journeys.

The conference also introduces **Ten Recommendations** to strengthen higher education pathways for learners from crisis contexts. These recommendations aim to ground the conversation, advance solutions for the problems that will be identified by the speakers and the participants in the Labs, and help everyone stay aligned throughout the Conference. They also provide a roadmap for institutions and partners seeking to expand opportunities while strengthening student success.

These **Ten Recommendations** are included in a booklet prepared by the Nexus 2.0 team on a the Galp scholarship programme for students from Ukraine, implemented in Portugal (available at the Conference).

Through keynote discussions, panel conversations, and collaborative design labs, participants will explore practical ways to strengthen these ecosystems and identify initiatives to develop in the coming years.

Ten Recommendations for Strengthening Higher Education Pathways

For Learners from Crisis and Displacement Contexts

These recommendations outline priority actions for universities, policymakers, and partners seeking to expand higher education opportunities and build ecosystems of belonging.

1. Ensure rapid educational continuity in times of crisis
Students affected by conflict should not lose years of education while waiting for systems to respond. Emergency mechanisms must enable higher education institutions to provide immediate pathways for academic continuity.

2. Create flexible admissions pathways
Displacement often interrupts documentation and academic records. Higher education

---

Institutions should develop alternative mechanisms for recognising prior learning and academic qualifications.

3. Combine scholarships with comprehensive support
Financial assistance alone is insufficient. Students benefit from mentoring, academic advising, language support, and administrative guidance.

4. Invest in language learning as a bridge to belonging
Language acquisition is not only an academic necessity. It is also a key factor in social integration, participation, and long-term opportunity.

5. Prioritise mental health and wellbeing
Students arriving from crisis contexts often carry psychological burdens related to displacement, uncertainty, and family separation. Accessible counselling and wellbeing support must be integral to educational programmes.

6. Foster communities of learning
Belonging plays a decisive role in student success. Higher education institutions should create opportunities for peer connection, dialogue, and shared experiences.

7. Strengthen partnerships across sectors
No single institution can address the complexity of educational displacement. Effective responses require collaboration between higher education institutions, governments, civil society organisations, foundations, and the private sector.

8. Build sustainable funding models
Emergency scholarships are valuable, but long-term pathways require stable, diversified funding mechanisms that involve both public and private actors.

9. Connect education to employment opportunities
Access to higher education must also lead to meaningful professional opportunities. Partnerships with employers, internships, and mentorship programmes help bridge the transition to the labour market.

10. Design ecosystems, not isolated initiatives
Supporting students from crisis contexts requires coordinated systems where admissions, academic support, wellbeing services, funding, and employment pathways work together.