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Barriers to Higher Education for Beneficiaries of International Protection: A Policy Perspective from the Czech Republic

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The Czech Republic provides international protection to a small number of individuals. This research aims to study the barriers that beneficiaries of international protection (BIPs) face in accessing higher education and to examine which policies affect the opportunities that are available to them. The findings are based on the experience of frontline workers. According to previous studies, most of these barriers are embedded in institutional policies, which may contribute to exclusion from higher education. The barriers which BIPs encounter in accessing higher education have not been investigated in the Czech Republic. This study's findings reveal many barriers to access to higher education and a lack of supportive policies. In addition to problems like a lack of language proficiency, the recognition of previous education and financing, BIPs have mental-health issues and face a lack of societal cooperation. These barriers make it difficult for them to pursue higher education. Frontline workers acknowledge all these barriers and agree that no strategies are in place at the national level or at higher education institutions to assist in the higher education of BIPs. To improve access, the government, higher education institutions and local stakeholders need to take action.

Keywords: beneficiaries of international protection, Czech Republic, higher education, barriers, access to education, policies, frontline workers

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Introduction

Since the 2015 refugee crisis, integrating refugees has been one of the main issues confronting host societies. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) considers higher education (HE) as an option for integrating refugees into host societies (Damaschke-Deitrick and Bruce 2019). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines higher education as encompassing all types of education provided by universities and technological institutes. It encompasses International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 5 to 8. Higher education (HE) is a central component of integration that promotes a sense of inclusion among refugees and allows them to better adjust to the host society. It enables refugees to increase their problem-solving skills and develop new competencies with which to reconstruct their lives in host societies (Kondakci, Kurtay, Kasikci, Senay and Kulakoglu 2023; Molla 2022). Refugees' access to HE is more limited than that to elementary and secondary schools (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010). According to UNHCR data (n.d.), as of 2023, only 7 per cent of refugees are enrolled in HE globally. This figure is less than the UNHCR's commitment to ensuring that 15 per cent of refugees globally have access to HE by 2030.

Additionally, over time, much research has been published to inform policy, examining the barriers (e.g., financial, lack of appropriate information and guidance) which refugees experience while accessing HE (Lambrechts 2020). In Europe, the development and implementation of appropriate policies for granting refugees access to HE have been insufficient and inconsistent (Eurydice 2019). We chose to study the barriers to access to HE in the Czech Republic because it is a country that relates its migration policies to security threats (especially since 2015). It perceives migration as a threat to the state and Czech culture, while failing to recognise the benefits of migration for the Czech economy (Jelínková 2019; Kušniráková and Čižinský 2011; Stojanov, Klvaňová, Seidlová and Bureš 2021; Zogata-Kusz 2020).

Furthermore, the Czech Republic has a limited number of asylum-seekers (in 2023, just 1,427 applications were received for international protection), most of whom are from Turkey, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries (Český Statistický Úřad 2025; CZSO 2022; Jelínková 2019). Asylum-seekers are individuals who seek international protection abroad and whose claims have not yet been decided (Pasetti and Conte 2021: 350). Most recently, the Czech Republic provided temporary protection to more than 394,985 Ukrainian refugees (European Commission 2025) but we are not focusing on temporary protection-holders in this study. We are studying only those granted international protection because gaining international protection is a more complex and time-consuming process. Generally speaking, only 0.3 per cent of the approximately 650,000 foreign residents of the Czech Republic are holders of international protection. For every 10,000 inhabitants, about 2 are under international protection. Despite their relatively small number, there are valid grounds to research the integration of international protection-holders **(**Andrle, Čechová and Novotný 2022). Although the integration system for international protection-holders has existed in the Czech Republic for nearly 33 years, it has never been organised in terms of priorities. Furthermore, given the current focus on Ukrainian refugees, the integration of international protection-holders has become less relevant for policy-makers (Andrle *et al*. 2022). In contrast, an assistance centre was established for Ukrainian refugees in each of the 14 regions of the Czech Republic to arrange documentation for residency, health insurance and employment-office registration. The Czech Republic has launched a separate strategy for integrating Ukrainian refugees, which involves the efforts of crisis teams, members of the public, volunteers, civil society groups and municipalities (Jelínková, Plaček and Ochrana 2023). Additionally, Ukrainian refugees have received

significant assistance from universities, such as admission to HE without tests, with scholarships and Czech language courses (Akbaş 2024)

Moreover, like other countries, the Czech Republic provides 2 types of international protection: asylum – which grants permanent residency in the Czech Republic – and subsidiary protection – which grants long-term residency there. A subsidiary protection-holder can apply for permanent residency after 5 years of stay but the same integration policies are used for both. Firstly, the Czech Republic provides asylum to those individuals who face persecution for practising their political rights and freedoms or who have a legitimate fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality or affiliation with a social group. Secondly, the Czech Republic provides subsidiary protection to those individuals who do not meet the asylum requirements but who could be in danger if they return to their country (MVCR 2024). The Czech Republic has a limited number of international protection-holders while applying an increasingly selective approach to them (CZSO 2022). We use the term 'beneficiaries of international protection' (BIPs) for those granted refugee status and subsidiary protection (Pasetti and Conte 2021).

In this article, we are interested in examining what kinds of barriers BIPs face in their access to HE and how integration policies help BIPs to overcome them. These barriers are studied based on the perceptions of those working with BIPs, such as social workers, a methodologist, a project leader, Czech language teachers and university employees. We call them frontline workers. The primary contribution of our study is that, at least to our knowledge, it is the first on the subject. Moreover, the HE of BIPs is not a significant concern for policy-makers at the national level because of the low number of BIPs and because policy-makers lack experience with the related policies. For this reason, we may assume that there will not be much effort made to integrate BIPs into HE in the near future. However, Czech policy-makers have not yet been the subject of research. It will be interesting to see whether frontline workers reflect on the barriers faced by BIPs and the lack of appropriate policies, because the former may be considered as the experts in the field. If they identify a lack of appropriate policies through which to remove the barriers which BIPs face in accessing HE, this could be the first step towards policy change as result of ideational change and policy learning.

The paper proceeds as follows: the first section reviews the literature on barriers to HE and related policies. It also describes the Czech Republic's perspective on BIPs. The second section explains the methods of research and analysis, while the third presents the findings, revealing the barriers to HE and analysing the relevant policies. The final section includes a discussion and conclusion and calls for action to reduce barriers to HE and provide equal opportunities for BIPs to access HE.

Literature review

Access to HE is critical to 'restoring hope in the lives of refugees through education' (Lenette 2016: 1313). HE can offer opportunities to become familiar with the language and sociocultural norms of the host country. Despite the documented benefits of HE, significant barriers often prevent BIPs from accessing it (Baker, Ramsay and Lenette 2019), most of which are embedded at the national level and in HE institutional policies, thus directly or indirectly contributing to excluding BIPs from HE. For instance, most host countries have policy measures in place to utilise BIP knowledge in the labour market; however, institutions that provide language instruction in the host country may structure their courses of study to meet labour-market requirements rather than always attracting students to HE (Koyama 2015).

Understanding the barriers to access to HE is necessary, practically guiding policymaking, as 'it contains its solution – the removal of the barriers' (Gorard, Adnett, May, Slack, Smith and Thomas 2007: 5). It is also essential to comprehend HE policies in order to determine whether or not they address these barriers. Since the 2015 refugee crisis, various national governments and HE institutions have launched initiatives to help BIPs to access HE (Abamosa 2023; Goastellec 2018; Stevenson and Baker 2018). To explain the barriers and policies revealed in previous research, we cluster the barriers into the following categories: language barriers, recognition of education, finance, inadequate education, misinformation, family responsibility, discrimination, gender and culture and bureaucracy.

BIPs may not always possess the language skills necessary to meet university admission requirements (Crea 2016; Lambrechts 2020; Saiti and Chletsos 2020; Streitwieser, Schmidt, Gläsener and Brück 2018). To address this issue, some countries have introduced policies and programmes that enable BIPs to gain the language proficiency required for HE (Abamosa 2023; Goastellec 2018; Kontowski and Leitsberger 2018; Streitwieser, Brueck, Moody and Taylor 2017). However, these language programmes often have limitations and are subject to specific criteria, such as meeting the university requirements for admission. BIPs can only attend these courses if they meet the criteria. Thus, universities restrict access to language courses (Abamosa 2023).

Another barrier is the difficulty in gaining recognition of previous education, especially for those BIPs who have completed all the academic requirements and earned degrees in the past but cannot continue HE. BIPs cannot directly continue their HE in host societies; they must first go through a lengthy process to get their previous degrees recognised (Berg 2018; Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010; Grüttner, Schröder, Berg and Otto 2018; Loo 2016; Morrice 2013; Saiti and Chletsos 2020). While some countries have introduced policies to facilitate the recognition of BIPs previous education, the process remains fragmented and insufficient, often failing to address their needs (Ashour 2022; Eurydice 2019; Jungblut, Vukasovic and Steinhardt 2020; Sontag 2019).

BIPs usually have insufficient funds to obtain HE in the host country and a lack of documentation, such as birth certificates, can make them ineligible for scholarships to support HE (Berg 2018; Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010; Lambrechts 2020; Loo 2016; Morrice 2013; Saiti and Chletsos 2020). Some countries offer scholarships and fee waivers to BIPs to help them overcome the significant financial barriers (Abamosa 2023; Eurydice 2019; Goastellec 2018).

Another barrier confronts BIPs when there is a gap in their educational biography. BIPs spend a significant portion of their time in refugee camps, which causes an interruption in their education (Massa 2023; Stevenson and Willott 2007). Attending HE can be challenging for BIPs because some camps only offer an inadequate level of elementary education (Crea 2016; Wright and Plasterer 2010), with HE institutions not usually recognising camp education at all (Zeus 2011). Few European universities recognise and address this barrier by providing bridging and academic courses (Abamosa 2023; Goastellec 2018; Streitwieser *et al.* 2017).

BIPs also face misinformation in their access to HE, due to which many cannot navigate their educational pathways and get professional support. Misinformation also affects the mental health of BIPs because they feel frustrated and confused about accessing accurate information (Bajwa, Couto, Kidd, Markoulakis, Abai and McKenzie 2017; Joyce, Earnest, Mori and Silvagni 2010; Morrice 2013; Shakya, Guruge, Hynie, Akbari, Malik, Htoo, Khogali, Mona, Murtaza and Alley 2012; Stevenson and Willott 2007; Stevenson and Baker 2018). According to Streitwieser *et al.* (2017), some HE institutions provide information about HE studies primarily in the national languages and in English for BIPs. However, many of these BIPs face challenges in accessing information in their native languages, thus limiting their access to HE opportunities (Abamosa 2023; Sontag 2019; Streitwieser *et al.* 2017).

Other barriers confronted by BIPs include family responsibilities, prejudice against them and challenges related to gender and culture (Shakya *et al.* 2012; Watkins, Razee and Richters 2012). While some universities host cultural events to lessen prejudice towards the different cultures, their policies do not consider family responsibilities (Jungblut *et al.* 2020; Sontag 2019).

Lastly, BIPs can encounter a bureaucratic barrier that affects access to HE. For instance, the time needed to fulfil the requirements for social benefits may conflict with the necessary preparatory classes to access HE (Berg 2018). However, we have not discovered an HE policy that addresses family responsibilities and bureaucratic barriers.

Only a few countries have implemented supportive measures, while most are trailing behind in facilitating access to HE. For example, Slovenia planned to develop HE policies for BIPs but the number of applications for HE is declining, resulting in a lack of policies (Beznec and Gombač 2023; Eurydice 2019). However, there are several reasons why governments and universities adopt measures to provide BIPs with access to HE. France has developed the measures based on human rights, while Germany focuses on creating measures that encourage peace and integrate BIPs into the labour market (Eurydice 2019; Goastellec 2018; Streitwieser *et al.* 2017). Many countries have no policies because the HE of BIPs is left to university initiatives and many BIPs have been resettled only in a few countries of the EU (Eurydice 2019). The studies mentioned above do not include detailed information about the Czech Republic, t**hus** our study contributes to the existing body of knowledge and provides an understanding of barriers and policies based on the experiences of frontline workers.

The Czech Republic's perspective on BIPs

During the 2015 refugee crisis, the Czech Republic made a significant effort to discourage BIPs from entering the country by portraying them as a security risk and an administrative burden assigned by the EU (Jelínková 2019; Stojanov *et al.* 2021). Though the country's Muslim population is approximately less than 1 per cent, the rapidly expanding Islamophobic movement and the opposing political message, which associated Islam with BIPs attracted a lot of media coverage and public support (Jelínková 2019; Vogel 2018). Further, strict Czech asylum policies also show the unwillingness to accept BIPs (Drbohlav and Valenta 2014). The country's asylum policies are as follows: asylum-seekers are prohibited from working for 6 months. If asylum applications are rejected, which happens in 91 per cent of cases (WorldData.info 2025), the courts do not have the authority to decide on these rejected asylum applications. During an appeal, the court evaluates the reasons for the rejection but the final decision remains with the Ministry of the Interior. Courts can request that the Ministry of the Interior review the asylum applications, the process for which starts over again after the decision returns from the court (Jelínková 2019).

The Czech Republic has different integration policies for BIPs and immigrants from non-EU countries. The integration policy for BIPs is called the State Integration Programme (SIP); the new SIP was introduced in 2015 and came into effect in 2016. The legislation defines the tools for integration. The Asylum Act (Act No. 325/1999, Coll., on Asylum) addresses integration in Chapter IX, titled 'SIP'. It is a brief regulation, including only 3 provisions (Sections 68–70). BIP participation in SIP is voluntary. The SIP applies to fewer than 500 people each year. SIP services are available for only 12 months and are provided based on individual integration plans. After 12 months, those implementing this programme ignore the integration of BIPs because the SIP has terminated assistance services except for language courses (Andrle *et al.* 2022; Dohnalová 2021). The SIP focuses on 5 major areas: health, education, social services, housing and employment. It assists BIPs in registering with the public health system and helps them to find doctors. Under the Ministry of Education,

the SIP provides 400 hours of language classes, though this is not the highest number in the EU (for example, it is 700 hours in Sweden). The classes are insufficient, particularly for those from different cultures. The SIP provides assistance with filling out an application for the recognition of education and the application of social benefits. Obtaining proof of lawful employment from their country of origin is challenging for senior BIPs, particularly regarding pension claims (Andrle *et al*. 2022). To qualify for a pension, they are required to provide evidence of their prior lawful employment. However, obtaining this documentation can be difficult, as they may be unable to return to their country of origin or contact their embassy for assistance (Icpraha 2025). While BIPs are entitled to the same social benefits as Czech citizens, many struggle to meet the eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits, especially those who have not worked in the Czech Republic and who worked illegally during the asylum process (Andrle *et al*. 2022). Unemployment benefits are only available to those who have worked for at least 12 months within the previous 24 months (Úrad Práce 2019). As a result, BIPs can rely solely on material-need benefits, which cannot be considered a fully-fledged solution to their life situation (Andrle *et al*. 2022). BIPs can be accommodated in the integration asylum centre (*Integrační azylové středisko*) for up to 18 months. The SIP assists in finding rental accommodation, covers the advance payment for flats, 2 months' rent and the real-estate company's commission (Dohnalová 2021). BIPs are impacted by insufficient housing and steadily rising rents, since they cannot afford expensive residences. Despite all the help provided, they still fall into the lower-income portion of the population long-term, being affected disproportionately. Although finding work is facilitated by the SIP, it is challenging for subsidiary protection holders to secure long-term jobs because they have only a 2-year resident permit – although an extension is possible (Andrle *et al*. 2022).

The services of this programme are given by a general provider known as the Refugee Facilities Administration of the Ministry of the Interior. This latter has social workers who work in the SIP. The general provider provides services to BIPs with the cooperation of other entities, such as municipalities, ministries and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which play an essential role in integrating BIPs and implementing this programme (Dohnalová 2021; Integracniprogramme 2017). The SIP language programme is provided by an NGO known as the Association of Teachers of Czech as a Foreign Language (*Asociace učitelů češtiny jako cizího jazyka).*

Additionally, HE policies exist for BIPs, according to which they can study in HE institutions (asylum-seekers can also study). This entitlement is primarily based on the right to education (UNHCR 2016). Access to HE is difficult for BIPs, as they must navigate a set of predefined admission procedures, with few exceptions and limited active support measures available to them. BIPs can gain university admission only if they have primary- and secondary-school certificates. Additionally, universities may require them to pass an entrance exam in Czech and pay an admission fee (Bačáková 2022). BIPs can choose between English- and Czech-language programmes; they must pay a tuition fee for the English-language programmes, while study in the Czech programme is free. BIPs need recognition of their previous education if they wish to enrol at university. They can apply to the regional office (*školský odbor krajského úřadu*) for recognition of their primary and secondary education. It is important to note that access to elementary and secondary schools poses a significant barrier for BIPs. BIPs older than 17 are not permitted to attend compulsory education and no separate programmes are available to assist them in completing it. They can access secondary schools only after completing compulsory education or obtaining recognition of their school certificates. Additionally, BIPs encounter other challenges when accessing secondary education, such as the requirement to pass entrance exams and attend interviews conducted in Czech. Furthermore, the rector's offices, faculties and the Ministry of Education can recognise applications for previous university education (Bačáková 2022). There are a few specific rules for BIPs – for instance, if they are missing any documents, they can replace them with a statutory certificate of

honour during the process of the recognition of previous education (UNHCR 2016). Additionally, Czech universities offer preparatory language courses but these are not free for BIPs (Bačáková 2022).

Compared to the previously discussed policies for BIPs, Ukrainian refugees with temporary protection have received tremendous support from universities. Numerous active support measures have been implemented to facilitate their access to HE. In 2022, many universities in the Czech Republic admitted Ukrainian refugee students during special admission periods outside the regular application times. This policy enables the refugees to enrol immediately upon arrival, without the need to take entrance exams or pay admission fees (Bačáková 2022; Muni 2025). Universities also offered free Czech language courses and scholarships funded by the Ministry of Education (Akbaş 2024). Additionally, they are exempt from any fee for the recognition of previous education (Bačáková 2022).

Moreover, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees has shown a remarkable turn in political and public attitudes. This change is evident in the integration policies introduced in response to their presence (Jelínková *et al.* 2023). They can stay in free state humanitarian housing for up to 90 days, receive social protection benefits and access additional assistance such as social counselling, language classes and integration activities (UNHCR 2024a, 2024b, 2025). Prior to their arrival, the government paid little attention to migrants' integration. Although this topic became important in 2015, it mainly raised negative perceptions of BIPs. In contrast, in response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, the government's approach shifted to a welcoming stance (Jelínková *et al.* 2023). The officials stated, 'There is no us or the Ukrainians. Ukrainians are welcome in the Czech Republic' (Rakušan 2022).

Methods

In this study, we build on grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). The data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Longhurst 2003) conducted between June and December 2023 in 5 Czech cities: Prague, Brno, Ústí nad Labem, Olomouc and Ostrava. The interviews involved 15 frontline workers who support the integration and HE of BIPs in the Czech Republic. These cities were selected because they host a significant number of BIPs and the frontline workers who support them are located there. While some BIPs live in remote areas, they are integrated by frontline workers from larger cities. For example, the Czech language teachers occasionally travel to remote areas to provide language instruction to BIPs. It is more practical for frontline workers to meet BIPs at the latter's residence rather than renting an office for language instruction. Few frontline workers are working with BIPs and for this reason we have a limited number of interviewees.

These interviewees were selected through purposive sampling (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim 2016) and snowball sampling (Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljaie 2017) techniques. Using purposive sampling, we selected those respondents who could provide relevant information about the problems under study based on their knowledge and experience. We identified these respondents using the SIP, universities and NGO websites. Using the snowballing technique, the already-selected participants helped us to contact others who were working with BIPs. The respondents were working in different positions and included 6 social workers, 4 university employees, 3 language teachers, 1 SIP methodologist and 1 SIP project leader. There were 12 women and 3 men. All respondents had some shared characteristics. They were working with BIPs, were engaged with state and local authorities about BIP integration and were aware of the policies, integration and HE.

In this study, we do not present the experiences of BIPs for 3 reasons. Firstly, we focused mainly on assessing the policies. Secondly, we wanted to gain insight into the barriers set by the representing institutions and who are responsible for implementing integration policies as the experts in the field.

Thirdly, we had difficulties reaching BIPs for interviews, despite efforts to contact them through existing research participants. Although 2 BIPs initially agreed to participate in the research, they withdrew their consent before the interviews. Several factors contribute to the lack of BIPs' participation, including trust issues and their insufficient representation within Czech society.

Before gathering data, we received ethical approval from the Ethical Committee at the affiliated university (Reference No. EKV-2023-012). In the invitation email for the interview, participants were made aware of the research's aim and were given the option to choose between an online and an offline interview. The approval from the ethics committee was attached to the email. Zoom was used for 3 online interviews, while in-person interviews were conducted with 12 respondents. Before starting the online and in-person interviews, we asked respondents to sign a document of consent to participate in the research and the processing of personal data. We obtained consent by email from those respondents who agreed to an online interview. Respondents were informed that their participation in the research was entirely voluntary and they had the right to withdraw their statements at any time without any consequences. All collected data were anonymised during transcription to protect the participants' identities. Only the researcher had access to the raw data, such as audio recordings; any personal information was removed or replaced with pseudonyms.

The interview schedule consisted of 15 open-ended questions designed to gather detailed information about the barriers faced by BIPs. These questions addressed various topics, such as respondents' working positions, their activities regarding BIPs, the barriers related to HE for BIPs, policies related to BIPs' access to HE, policies related to the HE and integration of BIPs and support from government and universities to enable BIPs to overcome the barriers in their access to HE. To encourage the respondents to provide more detailed information about the barriers, each open-ended question was followed by a probing question. For instance, one probing question was: Why are policies for BIPs insufficient at universities? It allows respondents to reflect on broader institutional and social barriers. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed. When no new information was generated and data saturation was complete, we stopped gathering data (Charmaz 2006; Hancock, Amankwaa, Revell and Mueller 2016).

Participants were also asked about their awareness of how similar barriers are addressed in other European countries. However, many were unable to provide a comparative analysis of HE policies. It highlights a lack of understanding, a limited transfer of knowledge from other countries and insufficient awareness and training on how to address the barriers to HE. While the study focused primarily on policy-level perspectives, respondents were not explicitly asked about the educational aspirations of BIPs or their efforts to seek information about HE. However, some participants noted that few BIPs had pursued HE as part of their initiatives. Since these comments were brief, we did not explore them further. Future research should investigate the educational aspirations of BIPs and assess how well current support systems meet those aspirations.

The data were analysed using grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). We used NVivo software for the analysis in order to ensure the process' credibility, speed, flexibility and transparency (Costa, de Sousa, Moreira and de Souza 2017). Three coding steps – initial, focused and axial – were followed to analyse the data. The data gathering and analysis followed a cyclical process, with categories that emerged from the data leading to more-focused data collection. We also sent transcripts to respondents for review before starting the analysis. It allowed them to provide additional information on specific issues. In the initial coding, we reviewed the interview recordings, examined the transcripts line by line and categorised the data based on themes that emerged from each interview and which were common among the research participants. The emergence of initial themes also prompted us to conduct a deep

data analysis and follow-up email conversations with respondents. Although only a few participants were available for follow-up interviews due to time constraints, many were willing to cooperate via email. This approach added greater depth and clarity to the study. In the focused coding, we selected the most common codes. By systematically examining the data, we revealed similarities and differences between codes. In the axial coding, we linked categories with subcategories, facilitating a deeper understanding of their relationships and structuring the findings (Charmaz 2006). During each coding step, we recorded our observations by adding annotations to the nodes. We also used mind maps to understand the deeper meanings, explore the connections between the data and group the identified barriers.

Both inductive and deductive reasoning were used to analyse the data, guided by grounded theory. While inductive analysis is emphasised in grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), our study also included deductive reasoning guided by the literature review, which identified several barriers that BIPs face when accessing HE, such as language proficiency and bureaucratic obstacles. These categories informed the initial coding stage. Additionally, they were useful in analysing the data, while we remained open to the emergence of new codes based on them. Inductive analysis enabled new themes to emerge directly from the data. For example, although language acquisition was expected to be central, new themes such as societal and community barriers, insufficient university policies and gaps in mental health care emerged strongly across the interviews.

The final categories reflected the 5 analytical foci of the study: (1) language, (2) recognition of previous education, (3) finance, (4) mental health and (5) society and community. These categories structured the presentation of our findings. The analysis resulted in 13 conceptual categories organised across 5 analytic domains, which correspond to the study's research questions:

1. Language (limited access to language programmes and classes; challenges with exam preparation; lack of community support);
2. Recognition of previous education (long and complicated recognition process; inadequate policies);
3. Finance (support restricted for SIP participants; personal finance to access HE; insufficient housing; insufficient scholarships and student loans);
4. Mental health (inadequate mental health services; insufficient institutional policies); and
5. Society and community (social exclusion; integration into cultural communities).

These categories are presented below and organised according to the 5 analytical foci. Each data quote will be referenced with an identifier (e.g., R1 for Respondent 1).

Findings

In this section, we explain the barriers which BIPs encounter in their access to HE, the policies available to them and, finally, an assessment of the policies based on the knowledge of frontline workers.

Language

All frontline workers highlighted that language is a critical barrier to BIPs accessing HE. However, several respondents (R1–10, R11, R13, R14) mentioned that the SIP language programme does not focus on teaching language for HE, which is at the B2 level, because participation in this programme is

voluntary. Frontline workers (R1, R3, R7, R8) mentioned that the purpose of the SIP language programme is to teach basic Czech and improve only by 1 level of Czech. For example, if someone has an A0 level at the start of the course, it should be at A1 at the end. The findings show that the many frontline workers (R1–R7, R9–R15) believe that BIPs can find a place in society with basic language skills. As explained by one frontline worker (R6): 'One woman now works at Kebab; she took 400 hours of language classes. She understands and communicates with people in the Czech (language)'.

Four respondents (R11, R15, R3, R9) noted that, if BIPs are interested in learning the Czech language for HE, they can study on paid university-intensive Czech language courses and paid language classes outside the university. This indicates that the available support for integration offers little opportunity for BIPs to gain the required language competency for HE.

Frontline workers (R2, R4, R8, R9, R11–R14) mentioned how challenging it is for BIPs to study for the exams required for the recognition of education (primary and secondary education) without language proficiency. Recognition of education through exams is necessary because, through these exams, BIPs can get the certificates required for admission to a Bachelor's degree programme. Four respondents (R1, R4, R11, R15) mentioned that the exam preparation materials and literature are usually in Czech. BIPs have the right to use a language interpreter for the exam. However, respondents R9 and R15 pointed out that finding one is challenging because language interpreters are not usually available in all cities. One respondent (R15) noted that there are only a few interpreters for some special languages, such as Burmese. As frontline worker R15 explained: 'We had refugees from Myanmar but there were only 2 interpreters of Burmese in the Czech Republic'.

Unsurprisingly, frontline workers (R1, R4, R11, R15) mentioned their lack of communication with BIPs due to the language barriers. Therefore, they stated that limited language proficiency prevents BIPs from obtaining the information required for HE.

Recognition of previous education

All frontline workers indicated that recognition of previous education is another barrier for BIPs because it is a complicated process and not many BIPs can easily go through it. BIPs must present education-related documents and take qualification tests in the Czech language. Several frontline workers (R1, R2, R4, R6–R9, R11–R14) mentioned various types of recognition of previous education: (a) BIPs need compulsory-education certificates from regional offices of the city; (b) they need secondary-school certificates from regional offices of the city; and (c) if BIPs have Bachelor's and Master's degrees, the university can recognise these degrees. Six respondents (R1, R7, R9, R12, R13, R15) explained that there are 2 types of recognition of university degrees: nostrification and verification. University rectors' offices can grant nostrification according to the rules provided by the Ministry of Education and university faculties authorised by the Ministry of Education can verify the documents. Four respondents (R1, R7, R9, R12) further clarified that faculties can also verify school certificates and degrees; this process is only for accepted students and enrolment in the faculty. The faculty recognition for enrolment cannot be used for other universities and work. The documents are recognised within 30 days but, in some cases, the process can take up to 60 days.

Twelve (R1–R9, R12–R14) respondents noted that no policy exists to grant admission without the recognition of previous education because universities have no specific guidelines for BIPs from the government. BIPs cannot access compulsory education after the age of 17. Those with a school certificate can get recognition for it, as confirmed by 2 respondents (R7, R15). These respondents also noted that BIPs can attend high schools beyond the ages of 18 or 19. Some private schools also allow

older students to enrol in secondary education and provide distance-learning options, which shows that there is no age limit for high school. The only barriers to enrolment are schools' certificates and language proficiency. Additionally, suppose a BIP loses some school certificates that indicate the holder's level of education. In that case, 6 respondents noted (R5, R6, R9, R12–R14) that they can replace documents with a declaration of honour because asylum policies do not allow them to contact the refugees' home countries for documents. They mentioned that a declaration of honour must include a detailed description of school education in terms of content and scope (e.g., hourly subsidy) and all documents should be submitted only in Czech. Six respondents (R4–R7, R13, R15) highlighted that, based on methodological requirements, the regional office may request additional documentation. Applications for the recognition of previous education applications will be rejected if the regional authority determines that the scope of education differs from that of Czech schools. If the authorities discover little difference, they may ask for further testing. The regional authority decides the specific subject of the examination.

Similarly, 4 respondents (R1, R7, R9, R12) noted that BIPs can replace documents with a declaration of honour if they do not have an original copy of their HE diploma, such as a Bachelor's degree. The declaration of honour must include a detailed description of the university degrees, the field of study, hours, credits gained and grades – and all the documents should be in Czech. Two respondents (R1, R12) highlighted that sometimes the university rector's office also requires the syllabus of the courses in the field of study because the recognition of HE entails comparing the scope and content of the education obtained abroad with a study plan provided by a Czech university. They further indicated that a Czech university will reject the application if it is determined that there are significant variations between the study programmes or if the diploma was awarded by an organisation that is not acknowledged as a university in the applicant's home country. Additionally, degrees and transcripts are required if they have study documents with them. If these documents are not notarised from the home country, BIPs could provide a decision on international protection with documents and there is a possibility of an exception to notarise. Four respondents (R1, R7, R9, R12) noted that the Czech Republic also has bilateral legal aid agreements with some countries, including Ukraine and Uzbekistan. In this case, BIPs can present documents without apostille and legislation. Moreover, 3 respondents (R1, R7, R12) highlighted that, if BIPs studied a subject that is not offered in Czech universities, they need to apply for a recognition of education at the Ministry of Education. Additionally, 8 respondents (R1–R4, R12–R15) noted that recognition of education is necessary for work and that the policy to replace some documents with declarations of honour has not necessarily been developed for HE. Two respondents (R4, R13) highlighted that the recognition of education based on a declaration of honour also depends on officials' willingness to verify the information and further work with it.

Finance

Thirteen frontline workers (R2–R11, R12–R14) brought up the financial concerns that gaining recognition of education and paying university tuition and language-course fees acted as barriers to HE. They mentioned that BIPs have to pay for the recognition of education. The state pays for those in SIP but not all BIPs join this programme. Payments become an issue for those not in SIP and who have already completed it. Ten respondents (R2–R11) explained that the amounts varied depending on the level: primary- and secondary-school certificate recognition from the regional office costs CZK 1,000 (per certificate), equal to EUR 40.44. The recognition of Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the

university rector's office costs CZK 3,000 (EUR 121.13) for each degree. Verification from university faculty costs CZK 150 to 500 (EUR 6.04 to EUR 20.04).

Further, frontline workers (R5–R9) mentioned that BIPs must pay admissions application fees for English and Czech programmes, which cost CZK 500 to 1,000 (EUR 20.22 to EUR 40.44). Two respondents (R13, R15) highlighted that BIPs also need an English-language certificate, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which costs CZK 6,600 (EUR 266.78) and a B2 Czech-language certificate, which costs CZK 4,000 (EUR 161.68). All respondents noted that BIPs must pay English-language programme fees because, in these programmes, they are considered as international students. Seven respondents (R1–R4, R10–R12) clarified that fees differ for each university faculty, ranging from EUR 2,500 to EUR 3,500 for an academic year. In some fields, such as medicine, pharmacy and data analytics, the fee is around EUR 7,000 to EUR 14,000 for an academic year. Therefore, all our respondents confirmed that those BIPs who do not have sufficient funding cannot afford the English-language programmes.

Additionally, 9 respondents (R4–R9, R11–R13) mentioned that many free basic-level language courses are available while many high-level language courses are expensive. These respondents reported that an individual lesson cost CZK 800 to 900 (EUR 32.34 to EUR 36.39) and a group lesson cost CZK 500 to 600 (EUR 20.22 to EUR 24.26). Four respondents (R1, R7, R9, R12) further noted that university-intensive Czech language courses typically last a year; tuition costs are about CZK 100,000 (EUR 4,043.40).

Consequently, all respondents confirmed that those BIPs who want to study on English-language programmes have to pay from their own finances. Due to these financial issues, some BIPs concentrate on getting any available job rather than HE studies. However, the 5 frontline workers (R6–R8, R13–R14) observed that only those BIPs who have lived in the Czech Republic for a long time are studying at universities. They are motivated and have earned or saved money for their studies. This indicates that BIPs know that they might not obtain exceptional support for their HE. As one frontline worker (R7) explained:

> *I know that we have some students who are already under international protection but, as I understood it, they have already been here for several years and I can understand that it is just because they submitted the document from the Czech Ministry of the Interior about international protection but they did not ask for any special process (…). They are on an English-language programme.*

The 6 frontline workers (R2, R5, R6, R8–R10) also mentioned that the state does not provide free housing for BIP families; even if they live in integration asylum centres (*Integrační azylové středisko*), they must pay rent (a fee); this is determined by the size of the apartment and the consumption of gas and electricity. Additionally, 4 respondents (R1, R7, R9, R12) further noted that BIPs also need to pay for accommodation in university dormitories if they stay there for their studies. They noted that accommodation scholarships are available at universities but the amount is limited, such as CZK 3,000 (EUR 120.21) per semester. With this scholarship, students cannot pay even 1 month's dormitory rent.

All respondents confirmed that there are no special scholarships, student loans or social benefits available for BIPs. The Czech Republic provides very limited material-needs benefits, such as CZK 4,470 (EUR 180.76) monthly for the first adult member in the family. Full-time students living with their parents are regarded as dependent family members and are not eligible for benefits. If the parents' income is insufficient (below the subsistence minimum threshold), they can get benefits but full-time students living with their parents cannot.

Unsurprisingly, 8 frontline workers (R1–R4, R7–R10) mentioned how financial issues in the SIP system create cooperation problems with BIPs. They indicated that their clients considered social workers to be responsible for funding. In reality, social workers receive funding and instructions from the SIP for each individual and they must follow strict rules on how to use the money. As a result, social workers occasionally cannot purchase items to meet BIPs' needs as they are not authorised to do so. These frontline workers also emphasised that 1 year is insufficient to address BIPs' needs for integration, as some of their needs fail to emerge during that time. Thus, the findings indicate that the people running this programme sometimes overlook the needs of BIPs. As one frontline worker (R4) explained:

> *There is always a specific list of things we can buy or provide and then you have students studying information technology and demanding laptops. The limit on buying a computer is CZK 13,000 (EUR 525.80) so, for this amount, you cannot buy a computer suitable for the needs of the students and you cannot change it.*

Mental health

All frontline workers stated that mental-health issues are hindering educational opportunities for BIPs in the Czech Republic. They also mentioned that it is not easy for BIPs to get psychological help. According to them, one difficulty BIPs have in accessing psychological help is their lack of knowledge of the Czech language because many psychologists cannot speak other languages. Psychologists do not allow interpreters during their sessions. As frontline worker R1 explained: 'BIPs need psychological counselling but it is problematic for them because, in the Czech Republic, there are not many psychologists who speak their languages'.

Additionally, 4 frontline workers (R5, R9, R10, R15) mentioned that no specific psychological programme is available for BIPs. Ministry of the Interior psychologists are available only in residential and reception centres for asylum-seekers. R1, R7, R9 and R12 noted that, while some Czech universities offer psychological help for their students, the service is not mainly for BIPs. All respondents confirm that many Czech psychologists do not have training in the mental health of BIPs and these issues are not discussed in Czech society. Thus, the findings indicate that many Czech psychologists are unaware of the experiences, issues and histories of BIPs.

Society and community

Most of the frontline workers (R1–R8, R10–R15) mentioned that BIPs have limited opportunities for integration into Czech society, particularly in HE and social participation. However, this integration is not the main emphasis of the SIP because the integration programme stands aside from the social system. Thus, Czech society does not assist BIPs in locating the information they need to participate in HE. As explained by R10: 'They do not have an opportunity to meet Czech people who help them integrate into HE, so they try to choose their community'.

Three respondents (R2, R11, R15) emphasised that BIPs are socially excluded due to a lack of societal integration; the majority of them prefer to stay at home, do everything online and choose to remain with members of their cultural community. These frontline workers also observed that different refugee community groups do not motivate BIPs to focus on language and HE. Refugee communities prevent families from integrating into Czech society and encourage BIPs to work in restaurants and stores.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study provide several key insights into barriers to BIPs accessing HE. Firstly, it is clear from the findings that the frontline workers acknowledged that the state has no measures, schemes or strategies for providing BIPs with access to HE. According to our respondents, the country's integration policy covers basic needs and prioritises labour-market integration by teaching basic language skills and making some exceptions for education recognition instead of focusing on HE. This is also apparent from legislation and policy documents. The drawback of the SIP is that it is based only on voluntary participation and is available for a period of 12 months, not more (except the language programme) – 1 year is too a short period for integration. Thus, the SIP does not fully address the needs of BIPs, such as providing scholarships for HE, teaching language for HE and making the admissions process more accessible. These findings may be explained by the restrictive and selective Czech asylum policy and the general aim of the government to grant international protection to few BIPs. The lack of integration policies characterises this restrictive immigration policy, including access to HE.

Secondly, the findings indicate that Czech HE institutions have no measures in place for BIPs and have no special government guidelines regarding them. Our results indicate that language and university policies are more important for HE studies than residence permits (asylum and subsidiary protection). BIPs can only apply for HE if they meet the admission requirements, such as language proficiency and a recognition of education; otherwise, admission is impossible. Those BIPs who study on English programmes must finance their own education because BIPs are considered international students.

Thirdly, mental-health problems influence language acquisition and HE and there are no special programmes supporting BIPs' mental health. However, Lenette (2016) mentions that focusing on the mental health of BIPs increases their socioeconomic opportunities and HE attainment. The findings reveal the chronic shortcomings of the Czech healthcare system, with a general lack of specialist doctors for BIPs, particularly in psychological and psychiatric care.

Fourthly, the lack of contacts and integrative activities with society and the refugee community are significant barriers to access to HE. There are no integration programmes that allow BIPs to interact with Czech society. Due to this, Czech society does not cooperate with BIPs in accessing HE and does not push the state and HE institutions to set policies to provide BIPs with access to HE. Streitwieser *et al.* (2017) mention that BIPs' access to education depends on state and institutional policies and is connected to the social fabric and their general presence in the host society. Social exclusion and an uncooperative society hamper learning and threaten the educational success of BIPs. Due to these boundaries between social groups, refugee communities motivate BIPs to work rather than focus on HE.

Additionally, when numerous barriers and insufficient policies exist for BIPs, all these barriers were removed for Ukrainian refugees, who benefit from special admission times, free language courses, scholarships, free housing and social benefits. Public and political attitudes have shifted positively towards Ukrainian refugees but similar changes have not occurred for BIPs.

The key limitation of this study is that it draws on the experiences of frontline workers, who offered valuable information about the barriers faced by BIPs during access to HE. The results are based on second-hand accounts and, therefore, may not accurately reflect BIPs' experiences. Consequently, the study excludes individual-level barriers that only BIPs can identify. Despite the limitations, the frontline workers highlighted numerous barriers and a lack of policies which could help BIPs to overcome the barriers. Without BIP participation, we cannot draw a general conclusion from the findings about what barriers exist in reality. However, the study findings are still relevant because frontline workers perceive barriers when working closely with BIPs and we consider them to be experts in the field. The frontline workers identified barriers that have

been recognised by many studies (as discussed in the literature review above). Most importantly, although frontline workers' assessments may not always be accurate, they acknowledge the barriers and explain why they exist. Consequently, we can interpret the findings as indicating a way forward for possible future policy progress. The knowledge of the frontline workers may help in implementing new measures and exerting pressure on the government and responsible bodies to provide more support for such measures. This first study on the access of BIPs to HE in the Czech Republic contains valuable information for the relevant agencies, policy-makers and institutions that could use this knowledge to make policy changes and develop new policies that could provide better access to HE. Additionally, there is a need for further studies on why neither the Czech state/ministries nor HE institutions consider BIP education to be their responsibility and how the other actors affect the policies.

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