In the autumn of 2015, 31-year-old Adnan came to Austria with his wife and two small children, full of hope and gratitude. Adnan had completed a master’s degree in banking and financial studies in Syria and had been working there as a senior financial reporting officer when he and his family were forced to leave their home.

Twenty-two-year-old Rouba was also forced to leave Syria with her family. She had been studying economics. In Syria, she had a normal life and told us that if she had not been forced to leave her home, she would probably have graduated from university and found a good job.

Adnan and Rouba are two of the nearly 500,000 people who have braved perilous trips across the Mediterranean to reach Europe and are also two of the 88,000 people who applied for asylum in Austria in 2015. Their stories are similar but that is not all they have in common. Along with six other refugees, they have been given the opportunity to take up an internship at Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU) because apart from such basic needs as shelter, food and medical care, refugees also require a chance to develop their prospects for the future.

This is especially true for young people who have lost access to schooling and (higher) education by fleeing their country – without support, they might grow up to be part of a lost generation. As a socially responsible university, WU believes in its duty to contribute to the successful integration of refugees in Austria by granting them opportunities to learn, to study and to be part of the academic community. WU also believes in refugees’ knowledge, skills and talents and the positive impact that they can have if successfully integrated into host societies.

Well before the current refugee situation, WU was one of the first universities in Austria to start an initiative to help socially disadvantaged children and teenagers. In 2010, it launched the “Lernen macht Schule” volunteer programme in co-operation with Caritas Vienna, an NGO, and the REWE Group. Each year, more than 150 WU students participate in this programme as “learning buddies”, providing support to about 220 individuals, including children living in refugee shelters, shared accommodations for unaccompanied refugee minors or being cared for by organisations that provide counselling, therapeutic and educational services to refugee families.

WU is convinced that all participants benefit from getting to know each other, both in their personal and educational development. Since 2010, more than 750 students have volunteered for the Volunteering@WU – Lernen macht Schule programme.

WU is a public university, with a strong sense of social responsibility and social commitment. To live up this role, WU works to send a message of solidarity in difficult times. Since the summer of 2015, when the number of asylum seekers increased dramatically, WU has offered German courses for refugees in addition to its student volunteer programme. The courses are available to asylum seekers with no prior knowledge of
Refugees welcome

Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger

WU believes in refugees’ knowledge, skills and talents and the positive impact that they can have if successfully integrated into host societies.
Another initiative, POWER 2 HELP, is the result of volunteer work by André Martinuzzi, head of WU’s Institute for Managing Sustainability, Christian Schober, head of WU’s Competence Center for Nonprofit Organizations and Social Entrepreneurship, and social counsellor Sabine Eichinger. The initiative supports volunteers and teaches them to work effectively while staying healthy.

Universities Austria (uniko), the voice of Austria’s public universities, established the initiative “MORE” in autumn 2015. Its goal is to provide support and assistance to refugees who are considering a degree programme or are looking to improve their German skills. Twenty-one universities throughout Austria offer a certain number of courses to MORE students; some of the courses are specially tailored German. In addition, faculty members at the Department of Foreign Language Business Communication volunteer their time to offer complementary conversation classes, providing a highly effective learning experience through intensive practice in a small group setting.

WU is continuously expanding its activities in support of refugees. Our most recent initiative, as mentioned above, is the creation of academic internships for people who have been granted asylum in Austria, especially refugees who had begun or completed education in the fields of economics, business or the social sciences before being forced to leave their home country. All of the internship positions have now been awarded to highly motivated applicants: seven men and one woman from Syria, Iraq, Gambia and Afghanistan.

The interns are assigned to work on various projects at WU’s academic units. WU sees it as a moral obligation to help these newly arrived people and to give them the opportunity to show their potential. The internships at WU are intended to help refugees build on their previous education and gain a foothold in the job market more quickly. At the same time, the internships are also meant to help with integration into Austrian society and to give them better prospects for the future.

WU’s faculty members are highly committed to helping. They teach German classes and IT courses for refugees, supervise the interns and are dedicated to volunteer work.

Giving refugees the opportunity to stay active is very helpful to their integration in society and the programme also gives participants insight into the Austrian university system and the process of studying here.
for refugees, others are regular degree programme classes. Refugees can enrol as non-degree programme students to attend these classes.

At WU Vienna over 50 students were admitted to the MORE programme in the 2015/16 academic year. Throughout Austria about 1,160 students have attended the programme. The participants were young people with an academic background or at least a school-leaving certificate, mainly refugees from Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Giving refugees the opportunity to stay active is very helpful to their integration in society and the programme also gives participants insight into the Austrian university system and the process of studying here.

MORE courses offer refugees an opportunity for reflection, to help them decide whether pursuing an academic degree is an option for the future. Students can experience various fields of academic and artistic study and take language courses. MORE students can sign up for existing courses and seminars and also for courses specifically designed for them. The language of instruction is either German or English.

At WU Vienna, approximately 80 degree programme courses were made available to MORE students in the 2015/16 academic year and three courses were organised exclusively for MORE students.

MORE co-operates with the Austrian Students’ Union ÖH to find volunteers to support MORE students in their day-to-day life at the university.

This is an essential part of the programme since it goes beyond taking courses together but also helps MORE students become integrated into the student body. In addition, WU offers its MORE students an introductory orientation session, access to the Language Resource Center and the library and PC labs, and the use of all student facilities on campus. Within the scope of the MORE initiative a platform for scientist and artists who were forced to flee their countries has been established. The goal is to share the knowledge and experiences of refugees with an interested public.

As a responsible university we care greatly about those who need our help, particularly those forced to leave their countries, their families and their communities because of war. We encourage our faculty, students and staff to help refugee students and colleagues join in academic life – not only because nobody should be forced to leave education and intellectual development behind but also because refugees and their talents can make a valuable contribution to the enhancement of academic excellence.

We will be happy to consult with colleagues interested in becoming active members of the “Refugees Welcome” movement in academia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger is President, Vienna University of Economics and Business and Vice-President of the Austrian Universities’ Association. She is also Professor for Gender and Diversity in Organizations.
https://short.wu.ac.at/ezowu

Nearly 500,000 people have braved perilous trips across the Mediterranean to reach Europe and 88,000 people have applied for asylum in Austria in 2015.