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*Review on International Documents on Adult Migrants’
Education and Learning: Lessons for Ukraine*

Przegląd międzynarodowych dokumentów dotyczących edukacji i nauki migrantów: lekcje dla Ukrainy

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ABSTRACT

In this article, a systematic review of international strategic and normative documents governing the education and lifelong learning of adult migrants is presented. The evolution of global educational standards is evaluated through a qualitative documentary analysis of pivotal instruments issued by the UN, UNESCO, and UNHCR between 2011 and 2023. A paradigm shift from immediate humanitarian protection toward sustainable socio-professional integration is identified. Specific strategic benchmarks, including the “15% enrollment target” in higher education and the implementation of flexible recognition of prior learning frameworks, are analyzed. Particular attention is devoted to the alignment of national legislation with global mandates such as SDG 4 and the Global Compact on Refugees. The removal of educational barriers within a three-month window and the expansion of vocational education and training are emphasized as critical factors for resilience. These international findings are contextualized to provide a roadmap for the reform of educational policy in Ukraine. It is concluded that the promotion of functional literacy and transferable skills among adult migrants serves as a strategic investment in human capital, essential for post-war reconstruction and long-term social stability.

Keywords: adult migrants; lifelong learning; educational integration; recommendations; Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

In the third decade of the 21st century, global migration has transformed from a regional phenomenon into a defining characteristic of the modern era. Driven by an unprecedented convergence of armed conflicts, systemic human rights violations, and socio-political instability, the number of forcibly displaced persons has reached historic peaks, from 70 million migrants in 2019 to 108.4 million individuals by 2022 (UNHCR, 2023). While initial international responses typically focus on immediate physical security and material survival – provisioning food, shelter, and medical aid, long-term societal stability hinges on a more complex factor: the effective integration of migrants through education.

The topicality of this issue is rooted in the realization that education is not merely a peripheral humanitarian service, but a fundamental protection tool. For host nations the challenge lies in transitioning from “emergency” educational measures to sustainable, inclusive systems (Pyshchulina, Yurchyshyn, 2023). This transition requires a robust legal and normative foundation. However, many national policies still prioritize short-term economic gains or security risks, often leaving educational integration as a secondary concern to be addressed “later.” Consequently, there is a critical need for a systematic review of the international legal architecture that governs migrant learning.

This article aims to analyze pivotal international documents to identify the strategic benchmarks necessary for national governments. By examining the shift toward inclusive national education systems and the emphasis on lifelong learning, this review seeks to provide a roadmap for developing localized legislation that ensures migrants, regardless of status, age, or gender, can contribute to the resilient and peaceful future of their host societies.

The relevance of this review is further amplified by the current geopolitical reality facing Ukraine. As a nation simultaneously managing a massive internal displacement crisis and the potential for future returnee reintegration, Ukraine stands at a critical juncture in its educational policy development. While the immediate response to the 2022 escalation focused on emergency humanitarian aid, the long-term resilience of the Ukrainian state depends on its ability to align national legislation with the rigorous standards set by the UNHCR Refugee Education 2030 strategy and SDG 4 (UN, 2026). By internalizing these international “lessons,” specifically those regarding the transition from “segregated” emergency education to “inclusive” national systems, Ukraine can transform its current challenges into a sustainable model for social cohesion. This alignment is not merely a matter of international compliance; it is a strategic necessity for ensuring that displaced populations are not “lost generations” but are instead empowered with the transferable skills required for the post-war reconstruction of the country.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study utilizes a qualitative documentary analysis framework to evaluate the evolution of global educational standards for displaced populations. The research was conducted in three systematic stages:

1. Selection of materials. The primary sources consist of eight key international normative and strategic documents (2011–2023) issued by the UN, UNESCO, and UNHCR. Selection criteria focused on frameworks that explicitly define educational rights and integration strategies for refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs).
2. Analytical procedure. A comparative content analysis was applied to identify recurring strategic benchmarks, including the transition from emergency parallel schooling to inclusive national systems, gender-sensitive pedagogy, and the expansion of technical and vocational training.
3. Synthesis and application. Data were synthesized to track the longitudinal shift from immediate protection to long-term sustainable inclusion. These findings were then mapped against the current socio-political context of Ukraine to derive actionable legislative recommendations for the reintegration of displaced populations.

In this article, the term “migrants” is used as the most comprehensive umbrella term covering refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, stateless persons, displaced persons, and other vulnerable categories. However, many international documents most frequently use the term “refugee,” referring to a person forced to leave their permanent place of residence due to a series of adverse objective factors: war, violence, persecution, etc.

THE 2030 AGENDA: LIFELONG LEARNING AS A GLOBAL MANDATE

The contemporary landscape of global educational policy is governed by the UN General Assembly Resolution, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (2015). This framework establishes a strategic roadmap for resilient development, centered on 17 interconnected goals. Of critical importance for the adult population is SDG 4, which mandates the provision of inclusive, equitable quality education and, pivotally, the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2015).

Within this global mandate, the education of adult migrants, including refugees and internally displaced persons, has emerged as a strategic priority for the UNHCR. For the adults, the focus shifts from foundational schooling to the acquisition of transferable professional competencies and functional literacy. These educational interventions are not merely academic; they are essential mechanisms

for rebuilding socio-economic foundations, enhancing employability in host labor markets, and strengthening the collective resilience of migrant communities within their new societies. By prioritizing adult education, international frameworks aim to ensure that displaced professionals can contribute meaningfully to the stability of their host countries.

THE UNHCR EDUCATION STRATEGY 2012–2016: FORMALIZING ADULT LEARNING

A pivotal instrument in the global educational framework is the Education Strategy 2012–2016, developed under the auspices of the UNHCR. Grounded in the 1951 Refugee Convention (UN Refugee Agency, 2026) and fundamental human rights instruments, this strategy redefines post-primary education and vocational training as indispensable tools for the protection and holistic well-being of displaced adult populations.

Crucially, the Strategy shifts the perception of adult education from a peripheral humanitarian service to a core mandate component essential for achieving durable solutions. Quality education for adults is positioned as a catalyst for socio-economic self-reliance, enabling migrants to acquire the professional competencies and “transferable skills” necessary for productive lives in host societies. The document specifically highlights the systemic barriers faced by marginalized adult groups, including those with physical or cognitive disabilities and “over-age” learners whose career development was interrupted by displacement. It further acknowledges that marginalization among adults is often compounded by intersecting factors such as gender, ethnicity, language barriers, and acute poverty (UNHCR Division of International Protection, 2011).

To address these disparities in adult populations, the UNHCR established rigorous quantitative benchmarks for the 2012–2016 period, aiming to:

- expand tertiary and vocational access by increasing the number of higher education students by 100% and provide non-formal education and technical training opportunities to 40% of young men and women;
- professionalize instruction by ensuring that pedagogical personnel working with adult learners receive professional qualifications, targeting an 89% certification rate for teaching staff;
- promote functional literacy by increasing functional literacy rates among adult refugee-migrants by 50%, recognizing literacy as the foundational gatekeeper to legal and social integration;
- foster safe learning environments by ensuring that adult learning centers provide secure environments that accommodate the specific psychosocial needs of displaced persons (UNHCR Division of International Protection, 2011).

Implementation of these objectives for adult learners relies on a multi-stakeholder partnership model. The UNHCR focuses on fostering robust cooperation with national ministries of education and labor to integrate adult migrants into existing technical and vocational education and training systems. Additionally, the strategy emphasizes the innovative application of information and communication technologies (ICT) to expand distance learning and digital literacy, which are critical for the modern labor market.

Ultimately, the 2012–2016 Strategy serves as a blueprint for viewing adult education not as an elective benefit, but as a proactive protection mechanism that safeguards the fundamental right to work and social participation for migrant populations.

THE INCHEON DECLARATION AND EDUCATION 2030: FROM EMERGENCY TO RESILIENCE

The Incheon Declaration and the Education 2030: Framework for Action represent a fundamental shift in how the international community approaches adult education in crisis contexts. Moving beyond the traditional focus on primary education, these documents identify Lifelong Learning as a core pillar for achieving global stability.

For adult migrants, the Incheon Declaration serves as a political commitment to develop more inclusive, responsive, and resilient education systems (UNESCO, 2015). All targets mentioned in the Framework for Action relate to education in emergencies and, consequently, to refugee-migrants. However, Target 4.5 directly addresses equity and measures to ensure education for vulnerable groups irrespective of their “sex, age, race, color, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property or birth, as well as persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations or other status” (UNESCO, 2016, p. 13).

REFUGEE EDUCATION 2030 AND THE 2018 GLOBAL COMPACT: INCLUSION IN NATIONAL SYSTEMS

The aforementioned documents served as the foundation for another global document “Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion” (UNHCR, 2019). This was adopted by the UNHCR in 2019 after years of collaboration with stakeholders: UNHCR partners, UN agencies, international organizations, governments, educational networks, the private sector, and refugee communities.

As global migration processes intensify, the engagement of such diverse stakeholders resulted in an exchange of practical experience reflected in the Strategy. Thus, this document is living, adapted, reinforced, and scalable

(UNHCR, 2019). The Strategy's vision is inclusion in equitable quality education within national systems, fostering resilience and preparing children and youth to participate in society. This is considered the best policy option for refugee-migrants, displaced persons, stateless persons, and host communities.

In the context of SDG implementation, the mission is to foster conditions, partnerships, and approaches that provide all refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons access to equitable quality education. This enables them to learn, thrive, develop their potential, build resilience, and contribute to peaceful coexistence and civil society (UNHCR, 2019).

By 2030, countries are expected to report on specific indicators regarding pre-school, primary, and secondary education in host communities. Indicators will be disaggregated by gender and age (e.g., girls and young women; children and youth with disabilities). This approach allows the UNHCR and partners to track trends in a population whose numbers have shifted significantly.

Regarding higher education, the Strategy aims for a 15% enrollment rate of eligible refugees in higher, technical, and vocational education or programs offered by host or third countries by 2030, ensuring equitable gender representation (UNHCR, 2019).

In the context of adult migrants, the analysis identified three priority goals:

- to facilitate the equitable and sustainable inclusion of refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, stateless persons, and IDPs into national education systems. In particular, the benchmark includes a specific commitment to achieving a 15% enrollment rate for eligible refugees in higher education, technical institutes, and professional training programs;
- to create safe, enabling environments that support learning for all, regardless of legal status, gender, or disability. As an example, it was stated that adult women have equal access to upskilling opportunities, addressing the specific barriers they face in displacement;
- to enable learners to use their education for a sustainable future. It was emphasized on the need for frameworks that validate the existing qualifications and professional experience that adult migrants bring from their home countries (UNHCR, 2019).

The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (UNHRC, 2018) provides the legislative blueprint for these educational goals. Paragraphs 68–69 are particularly relevant for adult learners, as they call for national laws that facilitate access to technical and professional training on par with the host community's youth and adults. It emphasizes the need for direct financial support and efforts to minimize the time migrant children spend out of school, recommending they start learning no later than three months after arrival (UNHRC, 2018).

The document also identifies types of additional support, such as expanding technical/vocational training, additional teacher training for working with

refugee-migrants, meeting specific needs through “bridging courses,” and overcoming enrollment barriers through flexible certified programs, especially for girls, young women, and persons with disabilities or psychosocial trauma (UNHRC, 2018).

RESULTS: SYSTEMATIZATION OF INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC BENCHMARKS

The above allowed for the systematization of international documents covering migrant education and the tasks for its provision (Table 1).

Table 1. Systematization of international strategic and normative documents on the education and lifelong learning of adult migrants (2011–2023)

Name of the document	Date of issue	Key mission	Strategic tasks
Education Strategy 2012–2016	January 1, 2012	education as a core protection tool and a durable solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> professional training for 89% of teachers 100% increase in higher education enrollment
Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	September 25, 2015	inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to ensure equal access for vulnerable groups to eliminate gender disparities by 2030 to build resilient and sustainable education systems
Incheon Declaration/ Education 2030: Framework for Action	May 19–22, 2015	political commitment to implement SDG 4 in crisis contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to develop responsive systems for IDPs and refugees to ensure equity for vulnerable populations and those in “fragile” situations (Target 4.5)
2018 Global Compact on Refugees	2018	burden-sharing and national integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> integration into national systems within 3 months of arrival legislative regulation of resources for inclusive education
Refuge Education 2030: a Strategy for Refugee Inclusion	2019	full inclusion in national systems and fostering resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15% enrollment in higher/vocational education equitable gender representation in post-secondary learning data-driven monitoring of quality and inclusivity

Source: Adapted after (Babushko, 2024).

The systematic review of international normative frameworks (from the UNHCR Education Strategy 2012–2016 to the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees and the Refugee Education 2030 Strategy) reveals a significant evolution in the

global approach to adult learners. Education is no longer viewed as a peripheral humanitarian gesture, but as a foundational protection mechanism that ensures the socio-economic resilience of displaced populations.

LESSONS FOR UKRAINE: REFORMING POLICY FOR ADULT MIGRANT INTEGRATION

For Ukraine, which is currently navigating an unprecedented internal and external displacement crisis, these international standards offer several critical “lessons” for the reform of national legislation and educational policy:

1. *Transition to Systematic Inclusion.* Following “The Refugee Education 2030 Strategy,” Ukraine must prioritize the full integration of adult migrants into national Vocational Education and Training and higher education systems. Moving away from “parallel” emergency programs toward inclusive national structures is essential for long-term social cohesion.
2. *Recognition of Prior Learning.* A major hurdle for adult migrants is the lack of documentation or recognition for their existing professional qualifications. Implementing flexible recognition of prior learning frameworks is vital to prevent “brain waste” and allow displaced professionals to contribute to the national economy immediately.
3. *Legislative Agility and the “3-Month Window.”* As advocated by “The 2018 Global Compact,” educational barriers should be removed within a three-month timeframe. For Ukraine, this necessitates legislative simplified procedures for enrollment and the adoption of flexible, certified learning programs, including blended and online formats that allow adults to balance education with employment.
4. *Focus on Transferable Competencies.* Educational programs for adult migrants should focus on “transferable skills” and functional literacy (including digital and language skills). This ensures that individuals remain resilient and employable, regardless of future shifts in their legal status or location.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In summary, aligning Ukrainian legislation with international benchmarks is not merely an act of compliance; it is a strategic investment in the country’s human capital. By viewing adult migrants as assets with existing skills to be honed – rather than burdens to be managed – Ukraine can develop a resilient educational model that serves as a cornerstone for post-war reconstruction and social stability.

Future research in this context should transition from the analysis of international normative theory to the empirical evaluation of national implementation, specifically focusing on the comparative study of legislative mechanisms in host countries that successfully facilitate the recognition of prior learning and the socio-professional integration of adult migrants. This will provide the necessary evidence-based framework to refine Ukrainian educational policy, ensuring it not only aligns with global standards like SDG 4 but also effectively harnesses the human capital of adult migrants for the country's post-war reconstruction and social stability.

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ABSTRAKT

W artykule przedstawiono systematyczny przegląd międzynarodowych dokumentów strategicznych i normatywnych regulujących edukację i uczenie się dorosłych migrantów przez całe życie.

Ewolucja globalnych standardów edukacyjnych została poddana ocenie poprzez jakościową analizę dokumentacyjną kluczowych instrumentów wydanych przez ONZ, UNESCO i UNHCR w latach 2011–2023. Zidentyfikowano zmianę paradygmatu – od doraźnej ochrony humanitarnej w kierunku trwałej integracji społeczno-zawodowej. Przeanalizowano konkretne wskaźniki strategiczne, w tym cel 15-procentowego wskaźnika zapisów na studia wyższe oraz wdrożenie elastycznych ram uznawania wcześniejszego kształcenia. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono dostosowaniu krajowego ustawodawstwa do globalnych mandatów, takich jak Cel Zrównoważonego Rozwoju 4 (SDG 4) oraz Globalny Pakt w sprawie Uchodźców. Jako kluczowe czynniki budowania odporności podkreślono usunięcie barier edukacyjnych w ciągu trzech miesięcy oraz rozwój kształcenia i szkolenia zawodowego. Międzynarodowe wnioski zostały sformułowane w sposób umożliwiający opracowanie mapy drogowej dla reformy polityki edukacyjnej na Ukrainie. Stwierdzono, że promowanie umiejętności funkcjonalnych i kompetencji przekrojowych wśród dorosłych migrantów stanowi strategiczną inwestycję w kapitał ludzki, niezbędną dla powojennej odbudowy i stabilności społecznej.

Słowa kluczowe: dorośli migranci; uczenie się przez całe życie; integracja edukacyjna; rekomendacje; Ukraina